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Seeing Old and New: Two Shows in the United Arab Emirates Looked at the Past and Present of Emirati Art

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Abdullah Al Saadi (<https://www.artnews.com/t/abdullah-al-saadi/>), *Circle and Line*, 1999, mixed media, 15" x 121¼" x 4¾". "But We Cannot See Them."

COURTESY THE ARTIST

In 1979, Emirati artist **Hassan Sharif** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/hassan-sharif/>) (ca. 1951–2016) won a scholarship to study art in England. After getting a thorough grounding in British Constructionism and other contemporary practices at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London, he returned to Dubai in 1984. At the time, modern art in the UAE was largely confined to either calligraphic abstraction or populist representational painting. Sharif's translations of Fluxus texts and John Cage's lectures into Arabic, and his own performance, conceptual, and assemblage art quickly made him a galvanizing figure for experimentally minded artists, writers, and filmmakers in Sharjah and Dubai.

An early gathering place for these artists was the **Emirates Fine Arts Society** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/emirates-fine-arts-society/>), an exhibition venue, educational site, and general social club founded in Sharjah in 1980. In the early 2000s, Dubai supplanted Sharjah as the capital of the UAE art scene, and in 2007, Sharif and

others established the **Flying House** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/flying-house/>) in Dubai to promote Emirati contemporary artists.

The exhibition “**But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008**,” at the **NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/nyu-abu-dhabi-art-gallery/>), focused on work by a loosely knit group of artists of the time. At the group’s center was a small cohort sometimes known as the “Five”: Sharif, his brother **Hussain Sharif** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/hussain-sharif/>), Abdullah Al Saadi, **Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/mohamed-ahmed-ibrahim/>), and **Mohammed Kazem** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/mohammed-kazem/>). But the size and makeup of the community varied over the decades, and the show included other important members of the UAE art scene.

The exhibition came at a crucial juncture in Emirati culture. On the one hand, there is at last considerable interest in what is now recognized as a key period of artistic production in the UAE, one long ignored by the country’s cultural establishment. On the other hand, this interest comes at a time when UAE art is strikingly internationalist. And so, even as “But We Cannot See Them” broadened and complicated the history of contemporary art in the UAE, the show “**Is Old Gold?** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/is-old-gold/>),” which ran concurrently in Dubai, questioned whether the present must necessarily follow from the past.



Hassan Sharif, Toftbo – Ikea – Made in India, 2007, bathroom mat, copper tube and wire, plastic combs, cloth, double-sided tape, and wooden door with glass, 80" x 35⁷/₈" x 2". "But We Cannot See Them."

COURTESY THE ESTATE OF HASSAN SHARIF AND GALLERY ISABELLE VAN DEN EYNDE, DUBAI

It is becoming clear that setting forth an art history of the Emirates serves an important function in establishing a cultural identity for this relatively young nation. "But We Cannot See Them" followed a number of recent shows of artists from this period: a 2011 exhibition at the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, curated by Catherine David and Kazem, devoted to 40 years of Hassan Sharif's work, as well as Reem Fadda's "Emirati Expressions: Realised" at Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi (2013), and Sheikha Hoor al Qasimi's "1980–Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates" at the UAE Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015).

“But We Cannot See Them” adds to the reading of this history through its archival approach. Founding NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery director and chief curator **Maya Allison** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/maya-allison/>), working with NYUAD’s **Bana Kattan** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/bana-kattan/>) and **Alaa Edris** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/ala-edris/>), conducted hours of interviews with participants in the UAE art scene of the 1980s and ’90s; they painstakingly put together a wildly complicated but wonderfully comprehensive timeline of who showed work when, where, and with whom; and, in a medium-size exhibition, they chose a representative selection of work from several watershed shows of the period.

They also gathered what the artists were reading and listening to at the time, emphasizing the scene’s lively exchange between disciplines. The poet **Adel Khozam** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/adel-khozam/>), who was part of the community in its early days, loaned the gallery his personal book collection, ranging from Agatha Christie to Heidegger, as well as his music cassettes, which visitors can pop into a tape player and listen to while thumbing through the books and magazines.

The show set aside the rubric of the “Five,” which comes from the “5 UAE” exhibition held at the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen, Germany, in 2002, and has long been disputed by the artists themselves. It’s important that, in light of the fact that the UAE, while an Arab nation, is populated overwhelmingly by foreigners, it also included work by two non-Arab artists who became part of the Emirates Fine Arts Society community: **Jos Clevers** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/jos-clevers/>), a Dutch installation artist and bohemian who made his way to the UAE in the 1990s, and Keralan artist **Vivek Vilasini** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/vivek-vilasini/>).

The inclusion of these last two artists served to trouble the conventional origin story of contemporary art in the UAE—Sharif goes to London and returns home enlightened—with its colonialist overtones, showing that there was input from both East and West at various points in these artists’ development. In addition, the exhibition brought in two female artists: **Ebtisam Abdulaziz** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/ebtisam-abdulaziz/>), the first woman to join the community, represented here by a wall piece, and filmmaker **Nujoom Alghanem** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/nujoom-alghanem/>)—in a screening program that ran alongside the exhibition—whose intimate, perceptive videos study Emirati life and its personalities and rituals, such as the Sufi-style celebrations by which some mark al Mawlid, the Prophet’s birthday.

Ebtisam Abdulaziz, *Line*, 2004, vinyl on wall, dimensions variable. “But We Cannot See Them.”

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Many of the artworks in the show, while all influenced by Conceptualist idioms, similarly drew from the realities of life in the UAE, whether its landscape, its society, or its economy. In Al Saadi’s poignant *Circle and Line* (1999), the artist strung on a wire various items that his mother, who was illiterate, would leave to mark her presence in his apartment if she visited and he was not there: a matchbox, an animal’s horn, a picture of the artist as a young boy. Hussain Sharif’s *Installation* (1995), an army of minute sculptures made of junk and found material that march across a grid of cement blocks, seemed to map Dubai as the city expanded across the desert. Kazem showed a tall bookshelf-like sculpture, *Wooden Box* (1996/2016), in which he placed photographs of himself in various positions, each mimicking the posture of the viewer who must bend down or over to see the work.

Anchoring the exhibition was a selection of pieces by Hassan Sharif, who has attained titanic status in the UAE and is the best-known of these artists internationally. His *Toftbo – Ikea – Made in India* and *Slippers and Wire* (both 2007) each comprise a door, taken from the Flying House, that holds between its glass panels sundry objects—Ikea bathmats and cheap, circular plastic combs in the former; rubber flip-flops in the latter. To make *Cardboard and Coir* (1999), Sharif tied small bundles of found cardboard together with rough twine and piled them in a heap; for *Cloth and Paper 2* (2005), he wrapped bits of cloth in brightly colored tissue paper. Though these pieces outwardly borrow from other assemblage art and artists—Arte Povera, Nouveau Réalisme, and Robert Rauschenberg come to mind—they are closely attuned to the particulars of Emirati culture; they focus on the swift transition of this society from a nomadic Bedouin tradition, in which everything was saved and reused, to today’s

mounting mass consumerism supported by the labor of migrants from other countries whose meager existence forces them to reuse discarded items.

Other, more performative works entail Sharif's setting rules for himself and then documenting how he follows them, or—and here the Fluxus influence on his work is most clear—just completing a simple task, as in *Sandpaper, Pencil, Sharpener* (1982–2007); in this exercise he measured what is left over from shaving a pencil with a sharpener versus rubbing it down with sandpaper. Such performances involving useless activities comment obliquely on consumer society while honoring and ritualizing the act of artistic labor.

The exhibition traced the connections between artists, bringing to life the era's communal spirit. Some links were explicit: Ibrahim fashioned a mixed-media sculpture of a fanciful animal, *Animal No. 1*, which Hassan Sharif then depicted in paint in *M. A. Ibrahim's Sculpture no. 2* (both 2008). Others were more general: a common interest in reclamation and reuse, and often an attention (though less so in Sharif's work) to the natural habitat of the UAE, from its rocky mountains to the desert to the sea and the fishing industry it supports. In *Brides of Seven Climes* (1996/2008), a re-creation of a work originally made in 1996, Vilasini wrapped large fiberglass jars in coir, a material often used to make fishing nets.

Hind Mezaina (<https://www.artnews.com/t/hind-mezaina/>), *Dubai Hills*, 2017, two ink-jet prints on archival paper, dimensions variable. "Is Old Gold?"

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'But We Cannot See Them' sidesteps a verdict on these artists' legacy. But coincidentally, the idea of teleology was tackled head-on by "**Is Old Gold?**" at the **Dubai Community Theatre and Arts Centre** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/dubai-community-theatre-and-arts-centre/>) (DUCTAC), a gallery and theater space tucked on the side of Dubai's gargantuan Mall of the Emirates (the one that boasts a ski slope). Together by curators **Cristiana de Marchi**

(<https://www.artnews.com/t/cristiana-de-marchi/>) and **Muhanad Ali** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/muhanad-ali/>), the exhibition tested the link between the storied artists of the 1990s and younger artists in the UAE today.

De Marchi and Ali argue that there is a unique disconnect between the generations of artists in the UAE, which they suggest—perhaps ironically—comes from the fact that the scene is now more developed, with more galleries and art programs. In a sense, they contend, these institutions obviate the need for the committed collaboration that marked the earlier generation of artists; infrastructure has supplanted a once organic community.

Their show paired older artists with younger ones (for the older artists, they chose those who made up the “Five”), asking the younger artist to create work in response to the elder’s; the idea was to re-create the spirit of exchange that marked the Emirates Fine Arts Society and the Flying House. The conceit, though slightly programmatic, yielded sympathetic reworkings of the older artists’ ideas. One standout was **Amal Al Khaja** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/amal-al-khaja/>)’s *Slithering Inks* (2017), in which the young Emirati artist inserted ink into layers of transparent tape, making small, painterly squares that she slotted daily into a grid over the course of two months, in answer, she said, to the compulsion to repeat what she saw in Hassan Sharif’s and Ibrahim’s work. In a photographic diptych, Hind Mezaina documented the heaps of rubble generated from Dubai’s ubiquitous construction, in response to Al Saadi’s depictions of the rocky mountains of his native Khorfakkan.

The exhibition also hosted a succession of lectures and panel discussions in which participants from both generations queried the very idea of relevancy of the past to the present. The evening program suggested that the Dubai art scene of today exists on a geographical and financial plane connected via the art market to New York, Berlin, and London, rather than to the Sharjah scene of an earlier era—a shift many saw as marked by loss. A presentation by the Dubai-based critic **Kevin Jones** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/kevin-jones/>) demonstrated, for example, how the Emirates Fine Arts Society and Flying House shows were extensively covered in the Arab press with aggressive questioning of whether the work could be understood as art. He compared this to the current critical infrastructure surrounding art in the UAE, which is simply, as he put it, a process of ratification, in which reviews serve to show that the right artists are appearing in the right contexts.

But while there is a general consensus on the importance of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, opinions differ on its connection to work being made now. While “Is Old Gold?” paid close attention to the idiosyncratic way in which the UAE art scene developed, the current dynamics it identified are relevant to most art centers, particularly those in the postcolonial Middle East: a tug of war between local and international practices and agency. In thinking back to the UAE’s art history, for some, the Society’s members are easily forgotten by current artists, sidelined in the march toward global market norms.

For others, Hassan Sharif and his peers laid the groundwork for a new art language, allowing today's sophisticated understanding of art to take root in the UAE.

Which view is better justified? Probably both. The art scene of 1988–2008 did indeed lack institutional support and public visibility in the Emirates, but the many recent acts of curatorial reclamation of this period show that it is gaining new influence and importance, in a pendulum-swing shift of support for local practices.

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