

ArtReview



But We Cannot See Them: Tracing a UAE Art Community, 1988–2008

Murtaza Vali | Reviews | 09 June 2017 | ArtReview Asia



Hussain Sharif, Installation, 1995. ARA Summer 17 Review

NYUAD Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, 2 March – 2 September

A mythical narrative of the development of contemporary art in the UAE has emerged over the last decade. It focuses on a small group of male artists who gathered around Hassan Sharif (who passed away last year), first as students and then as peers, in the years following his return from art school in London in 1984.

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This group, which came to be known as ‘the five’, included his younger brother Hussain Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Abdullah Al Saadi. Shunned by the mainstream for their arch conceptualism, they continued to work in relative obscurity for over two decades, until they finally gained recognition during the late 2000s, as a growing arts infrastructure brought the international artworld to the UAE. History, however, is always richer and more complicated than myth, and while Sharif’s singular importance and influence is undeniable, much else about this time has been or is being forgotten. *But We Cannot See Them...* revisits this period, bolstering key artworks and archival material with oral histories that begin to recoup the lost texture of the recent past.

Many of these artists engaged with their changing environments by collecting material traces of it, as objects or in images

These interviews (shown as videos in the entry gallery) recount a heady time, when information and resources were limited but generously shared, ideas and texts were actively translated, discussed and debated, and visual artists formed a loose creative community with likeminded peers in other disciplines – most notably poets and writers such as Nujoom Alghanem, Khalid Albudoor and Ahmed Rashid Thani, a Sharif-like figure in literary circles – which helped sustain their avant-garde practices in the face of outright rejection by the establishment. They reveal that ‘the five’ was an external designation, and reintroduce two forgotten key members – Dutch painter Jos Clevers and Indian sculptor Vivek Vilasini – into the narrative.

In the exhibition, each artist occupies enough space to reveal their distinct approach, while thoughtful juxtapositions bring their shared sensibilities into view. A selection of Sharif’s signature ‘objects’, nondescript sculptures made up of cheap consumer goods and discarded cardboard sheets, is followed by Ibrahim’s experiments in different media, from early abstract paintings and a papier-mâché sculpture, to *Lines* (1992), pages filled with short vertical lines in India ink of varying heights, widths and opacities that seem to mark the passage of time. Though Sharif and Ibrahim sometimes deployed similar forms – piles of smaller units, repeated lines – their juxtaposition demonstrates the latter’s abiding interest in the symbolic potential of mark and form. Similarly, the tangled copper tubes of Sharif’s *Ginkgo* (2008) riffs nicely with the energetic scribbles in Clevers’s expressionistic paintings, while Vilasini’s *Brides of Seven Climes* (1996/2008), seven pots enmeshed in a serpentine net of coir rope, introduce an overt iconography missing from the work of the others.

Many of these artists engaged with their changing environments by collecting material traces of it, as objects or in images. Hussain Sharif’s seminal *Installation* (1995) staged a dramatic encounter between urban development and consumer culture, as an orderly grid of small concrete cubes is gradually inundated by urban detritus. Al Saadi’s *I am In Japan (Iwakura Handscroll)* (1995–6), an accordion book of drawings of rural vistas, reveals the influence of his Japanese sojourn, the subject and format then adapted after his return to represent the local surroundings in *Mountain Tops, February 3–4* (1999). Rounding out the exhibition are Kazem and his student Ebtisam Abdulaziz, the only female member of the group, who shared a dry, analytical, almost scientific approach not entirely devoid of play.

With the imminent opening of major museums in the Emirati capital, and as canons are established and art histories written, this unruly art community risks being retrospectively tamed to fit neat nationalist and disciplinary narratives. Though preliminary, through careful historical research this exhibition, and the oral histories supporting it, retrieve the interdisciplinary and multicultural, or as the curators put it, ‘kaleidoscopic’ ethos of this formative period.

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