



K. G. Subramanyan,
Ageless Combat I,
1998, watercolor and
oil on acrylic sheet,
74 3/4 × 50 3/4".

sectarian strife are a common thread in Subramanyan's art. But he preferred to describe himself as an artist-activist rather than an activist-artist. Though his works carry a political charge, they are couched in the language of allegory and satire and laced with playfulness, spontaneity, sly humor, and even eroticism. He drew on folklore, myth, and fable to comment on political and social circumstances without slipping into didacticism.

Subramanyan was adept at using the properties of various media as metaphors for his concerns, as evident in his suite of terra-cotta works *Anatomy Lesson 1–5*, 2008. His handling of clay—kneading, tearing, and folding—could produce works that took on ominous overtones, suggesting flesh being ripped apart or bodies being butchered. As the artist once said, “I do terra-cotta reliefs because clay has the quality that comes closer to human flesh; when handled in a certain way, it folds, fissures, warps, bends like

flesh does.” Similarly, his works in watercolor and oil on acrylic sheets depicting fractured or fragmented planes evoke the ruptures in society created by identitarian politics.

At the far end of the gallery a series of forty-three striking black-and-white drawings, “The Tale of the Talking Face,” 1989, was mounted on a crimson wall. Started in 1975 during the Emergency declared by the country's then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, it was published much later as a book. The satirical tale of an autocratic princess whose political ambitions inflicted misery on her people, the work was meant as a warning on the pitfalls of democracy and the dangers of authoritarianism. It also summoned memories of Subramanyan's illustrated children's book *When God First Made the Animals, He Made Them All Alike* (1969), a response to the first major communal riots in post-independence India. It is significant that this exhibition was mounted at a time when many in India were commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the destruction of the sixteenth-century mosque Babri Masjid by right-wing Hindu nationalists in 1992.

—Meera Menezes

MUMBAI

Munem Wasif

PROJECT 88

There is nothing new about science fiction containing an underlying social message. An exhibition of photographs, prints, and video art that evokes a sci-fi aesthetic and sounds a warning siren for urgent social, political, and ecological issues in South Asia does, however, give one pause for thought. Bangladesh-born Munem Wasif's solo exhibition “Jomin o Joban—a tale of the land” opened with a series of monochrome, light-gray landscapes of barren mountain passes and scree that brought to mind an extraterrestrial terrain such as the desolate moonscape of Anarres in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*.

Save for the occasional trace of movement or activity, for instance a leftover industrial pipe, tire tracks in the gravel, or a rare human figure, still and indifferent to the bleak surroundings, the photographs appeared to depict a timeless realm. And not only timeless, but placeless, as the series title, “Land of Undefined Territory,” 2016, suggests. In reality, they were taken in the no-man's-land between India and Bangladesh, where farmers sometimes work on a temporary and illegal basis as low-wage laborers between harvests.

Equally upending any clichéd understanding of Bangladesh as a place of natural ecosystems was the series of cyanotype prints “Seeds Shall Set Us Free,” 2016–. What appear to be fragments of a meteorite, glowing fish tendrils, or neon insect wings are set among images of carefully arranged rice grains. In contrast to the apparent otherworldliness of “Land of Undefined Territory,” the triangulation of land, labor, and rice more clearly directed the viewer's attention toward key moments in the region's history. This was backed up by the industrial tools, photographs of mills, and balls of jute in an anthropological-looking installation, *Untitled*, 2017, which seemed otherwise somewhat out of key with the rest of the work on view. As one of the main exports of the British Empire, jute was often grown in place of rice. This was one of the contributing factors to the Bengal famine of 1943, which killed between one million and three million people. Likewise, the Neel Bidroho, or Indigo Revolt, took place in 1859 after British traders forced farmers to grow indigo (evoked in this exhibition by the blue of the cyanotypes) instead of rice. Through his largely abstracted and alien-looking artworks, the artist thus asks us to reconsider the enduring legacies of colonialism, from the creation of borders and the exploitation of workers to the destabilizing of traditional agriculture and the loss of indigenous knowledge systems.

The video installation *Machine Matter*, 2017, updated such issues with carefully choreographed imagery of a recently closed jute factory. After partition of the Indian subcontinent, much of the revenue generated in East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) from jute exports was used to develop West Pakistan's economy. The resulting economic disparity, among several other factors, led to the Bangladesh Liberation War and the country's creation in 1971. With the rise of synthetic materials in the 1980s and 1990s, however, many of the jute mills ceased to be commercially viable. Wasif showed us poetic black-and-white stills of leftover industrial machines as sculptural bodies, and the contours of a human body in close-up, as another alien terrain. Man, machine, and

Munem Wasif,
*Land of Undefined
Territory 12*, 2014–15,
ink-jet print, 8 × 12".



society come together as one. The overlaid sounds of scratchy transmissions and rumbling bass vibrations further amplify the feeling of a deep-space encounter. As in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, an alternative reality is presented to us, making the familiar strange and our encounter with it off-kilter. This oblique treatment allows the problems of modern-day Bangladesh—including the failure of industry, social inequality, and ecological devastation—to implant themselves in the viewer's psyche.

—Jyoti Dhar

SHARJAH

Hassan Sharif

SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

Hassan Sharif, who died in September 2016, is broadly credited with bringing international art idioms such as Conceptualism to the United Arab Emirates; he was, by all accounts, the center of the generation of Emirati avant-garde artists of the 1980s and '90s who broke with traditional art forms. Coming a year after his death, this retrospective is situated somewhere between an homage to the artist and an attempt to come to grips with his vastly productive, unruly practice.

"Hassan Sharif: I Am the Single Work Artist" is curated by the Sharjah Art Foundation's president and director, Hoor Al Qasimi, and includes about four hundred of his thirty-five hundred works. Organized thematically rather than chronologically, the exhibition shows Sharif working through a consistent set of concerns (repetition, systems, chance, consumer detritus, material transformation) from his performances in the '80s to the "Objects" series, 1982–2016, for which he is best known. It also contains his early work in painting, which he stopped in the '80s and resumed in the 2000s, as well as the caricatures he drew for local papers before he attended art school.

For his "Objects," Sharif collected cheap, plentifully available items from the Sharjah souk or local shops—plastic combs, flip-flops, brooms, metal spoons and dishware, wire, nail clippers—and transformed them. He folded aluminum trays and bound them in wire, took cotton wool and glued it into balls, wrapped items in cloth, wove together zip fasteners and the soft tendrils of mops. His urban archaeology, as he termed it, reflects the excess of consumerism, and his work is often read as a response to the rapid changes to life post-oil in the UAE, bringing the labor-intensive, handicraft techniques of Bedouin tradition into contact with the quickly bought and discarded items of mass consumerism.

This exhibition, in focusing on Sharif's early performance works and systems notations, underlines the more formal aspects of his practice, substantially adding to the understanding of his work and bringing Sharif farther away from the rubric of Emirati artist. His early work was heavily influenced by the systems-centric art of figures in Britain at the time (he studied at London's Byam Shaw School of Art in the early '80s), and his performances evince a Fluxus delight in pointlessness as an organizing heuristic. *Nylon Rope*, 1983, shows him tying together plants in the desert with lengths of cord. *Barrel*, 1985, entailed Sharif moving an oil drum around Sharjah, taking notes of people's reactions.

The influence of Marcel Duchamp is palpable throughout, both in Sharif's seriousness about the possibilities of art and in his idea that it should be, above all, seriously irreverent. Duchamp also informs Sharif's interest in what the latter called "semi-systems," grids that he plotted out in ink on paper and undercut with elements of chance or impulse. The exhibition's thematic organization helps connect these gridded explorations to his "Objects" series via reiteration. Here, his repeated acts of wrapping or soaking or bending are tools of transformation, obviating the object's original function and instead teasing out its inherent material properties. They also functioned, for Sharif, as some-

thing close to meditation. He said that he kept rehearsing these actions until he lost himself in the process, and then he was finished.

Though the performative aspect of his "Objects" is crucial, the exhibition also highlights how aesthetically resolved these works are—more beautiful, more attentively made, more colorful than one might expect given his rudimentary methodology. An enormous sculpture made of metal spoons retains the soft curve of the utensil's depression, while the wide, flat brooms used here are displayed as geometry against the wall. Emotions and moods are also perceptible. Later in life Sharif often wrapped everyday objects in wire, performing a violent take, perhaps, on traditional Emirati embroidery, which involves wrapping thread around a bolster, and in which sharp objects—nail clippers, wires, scissors—proliferate.



Part of the Sharif myth is that he lived art, putting it above all other concerns. The exhibition begins with his studio, included as if it were an artwork, and one of the venue's themes is "Things in My Room." This aspect of the show borders on hagiography, but also functions as a reminder of his perseverance in the face of strong opposition from the local Sharjah arts community. There is poetic justice in the very fact of such a monumental exhibition taking place here; but the show should be taken as an opportunity to look at the wild, angry, tender, sly work, and not just at the man.

—Melissa Gronlund

View of "Hassan Sharif," 2017–18. From left: *Towel 3*, 2013; *Slippers and Wire*, 2009; *Rug 6*, 2014.

TOKYO

Moon Kyungwon & Jeon Joonho

SCAI THE BATHHOUSE

Since teaming up in 2009, the Korean artists Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho have created a number of multimedia projects for high-profile venues such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale, dealing with utopia and dystopia in a nebular and speculative mode. Their recent exhibition, "Freedom Village," engaged more concretely with history and the vagaries of memory. The visual centerpiece of the installation was an eponymous twelve-minute movie (all works 2017). Enigmatic and well-crafted, it opens inside a 1950s-style mad-scientist laboratory, where a frizzy-haired man is busy constructing miniature buildings upon a rocky diorama, which he then zaps with Dr. Frankenstein-type Tesla coils. Cut to shots of a similar-looking man meditatively sweeping a gravel yard in front of a temple, images of lush rice paddies, and