

# Art: From Brooklyn to Abu Dhabi, With 'Love'

BY BLAKE GOPNIK 1/23/11 AT 12:00 AM

Brooklyn artists Jennifer and Kevin McCoy come off as the quintessential hipsters: he has 1970s shaggy hair, she wears mod-cool outfits. The McCoy's art, which gets shown around the world, is also very Brooklyn: ultra-low-tech videos and installations about movie culture, childhood fears, even the couple's first date—always packaged with a laugh and a wink.

You have to wonder how that Brooklyn vibe is going over in Abu Dhabi, now that the couple has moved there for a year while Kevin launches the art program at the new Persian Gulf campus of New York University. Judging by their latest works from Abu Dhabi, now on view at Postmasters Gallery in New York, it's clear the McCoy's, who are in their early 40s, are having culture shock. Their show, *Abu Dhabi Is Love Forever*, has a perfect subtitle—*One Step Past the Airport*—that captures both the state of affairs in this Arabian capitalist mecca and the couple's state of mind. “We wanted to make work out of that moment of arriving in new places,” Jennifer says.

Driving downtown from the Abu Dhabi airport for the first time, the McCoy's encountered mile after mile of construction, every site wrapped in temporary fences covered with giant photos of the “best” of Western culture. Gleaming high-rises. Bellhops carrying bags for a blonde. A businessman working from home on his laptop. But behind those fences was nothing more than empty desert, or half-finished buildings hammered at by guest workers imported from all sorts of places, none of them depicted in the photos out front.

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Those fences, and the emptiness behind them, are the inspiration for the piece at the heart of the Postmasters show. It is a huge box, 10 feet high by 13 feet wide by 25 feet long, entirely covered in huge blowups of photos the McCoy's shot in Abu Dhabi of those same utopian construction billboards. In the photos, you think you're seeing real skyscrapers, worthy of Dallas, but then you realize they're just flat printed images, rearing up above a desert foreground. A gorgeous redhead lolls in a green park—and dry red earth runs up against the image of her on the fence. It's hard to tell what's real and what's image, what's actual and what's fantasy.

The piece mirrors the dichotomy the McCoy's have experienced ever since they arrived in Abu Dhabi last August. They landed in 125-degree desert heat (the reality) but never had to breathe it, thanks to the U.S.-style air-conditioning comfort found everywhere (the fantasy). It was Ramadan, and the city was shut down for the entire day—an *Arabian Nights* fantasy almost inconceivable in America. But then, at nightfall, the mobs hit the malls.

If the billboard piece shows the contradictions right there on the surface of Abu Dhabi, another piece in the show—maybe the best—reveals a contradiction that does its best to stay hidden. In a 44-minute video titled *Mussafah*, the McCoy's show the dark verso to Abu Dhabi's gloss. *Mussafah*, it turns out, is the name of a neighborhood of overflowing Dumpsters and the crudest industry—the kind of place where men saw metal and eat lunch among the shavings. The McCoy's video reveals this place slowly, luxuriantly, in the smoothest, longest tracking shot you've ever seen. The video's Hollywood polish makes the scenes feel like pure fantasy. But you know that what you're seeing is real.

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