

'Abu Dhabi Bodega' Inspires Chelsea Gallery Exhibit

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MANHATTAN — How does a grocery store in the United Arab Emirates differ from a favored bodega in Chelsea, Greenwich Village or Greenpoint?

More canned meats, skin whitening creams and Chinese food snack packs offering an Arabic-spiced twist, according to one New York University art professor. In August, Kevin McCoy and his wife Jennifer temporarily relocated from Brooklyn to Abu Dhabi for a stint at the school's sand-swept satellite campus.

The McCoy's first impressions of the city, which is the UAE's capitol, are now on view in a new exhibit called "Abu Dhabi is Love Forever," (<http://www.postmastersart.com/>) at Chelsea's Postmasters Gallery at 459 W. 19th Street.

Paper collages created from the aforementioned meat, snack and beauty product packages are one highlight of the show. After picking up these items at Al Safa Grocery, which Kevin McCoy called a sort of "Abu Dhabi bodega," the couple took X-Acto knives to the packages and pieced them together in a pattern inspired by the mosaic tiling popular throughout the Middle East.

Creating that series of images, called "Halal" after the Arabic word for lawful, helped the McCoy's process their early reactions to their new environment, according to Kevin.

"The first thing you're struck by is the ambition and scale," said Kevin McCoy, who arrived in New York for the show's Saturday opening on Friday, and then flew back to Abu Dhabi on Sunday.

While McCoy said that sections of the city consist largely of dusty, 1970s buildings that are "beat down in a way," the emirate is also flooded with miles upon miles of fence-lined construction sites.

Driving past those construction sites — for high profile projects such as the Louvre (<http://www.designbuild-network.com/projects/louvre-abu-dhabi/>) and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (<http://www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/architecture/abu-dhabi>) as well as countless luxury resorts and housing complexes — inspired the McCoy's to create their own massive 18 by 30 foot fence and art project.

The McCoy's fence, which is visible at the exhibit in photographs, are culled from thousands of snapshots the couple took of billboards lining the sites of actual construction projects in Abu Dhabi.

The pictures on those billboards, of gleaming skylines, golf courses, hotel bellhops, computer terminals, and businessmen and women in Western attire as well as hijabs and thobes (the white robe worn by men in the Gulf region) represent, in McCoy's view "a fairly generic idea of what the good life is ... writ-large against a very large, empty and sandy landscape."

After taking the pictures, the McCoy's raised their own fence by working with one of the company's that does much of the construction site fencing in Abu Dhabi, creating a self-referential that McCoy said he hopes would capture "a microcosm of a much larger visual language that's going on...what kind of world are they creating?"

From his own perspective, McCoy said that seeing these ubiquitous, idealized images of luxury and happiness, in a place where skyscrapers only in the past few decades began to shoot up from the desert, left him torn between a pair of emotions.

"You're between these two conflicting impressions," McCoy said, "of skepticism and unabashed amazement."



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