

ARTNEWS

ARTISTS

WHEN NATIONS BECOME BRANDS: GCC ON TACKLING THE GULF REGION'S VALUES, AND GAZING INTO THE AREA'S FUTURE

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 11/10/16 12:51 PM



GCC, *Gestures I*, 2016, Thermoformed styrene with flocking.

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When the nine-person collective GCC opened its first show, at Sultan Gallery in Kuwait City, in 2013, some of the artists' friends didn't attend their opening. The reason was some very understandable confusion: visitors thought GCC referred to the Gulf Cooperation Council, the governmental body that aims to unite Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The show wasn't government-sponsored, though it certainly appeared to be. There was a conference table, a backdrop, and a series called "Congratulants," sculptures that resembled trophies commemorating important events. The show was gleaming and pristine, as though it had been transported in from a luxury office building in Dubai. It prompted one visitor to tell GCC, "This is my life, every day."

If you google GCC, which now has eight members, chances are you will find yourself looking at search results for the Gulf Cooperation Council, not the

multinational art collective. That feels right for GCC, whose work acts as a mirror for the Gulf region, offering videos and installations that play into the culture's obsession with branding and nation-building, usually without any explicit commentary. Their work shows how nationhood is fundamentally a brand—something that can be compiled and edited, not unlike a Twitter feed.

“We're interested in this global movement of images, cultures, and rituals, and how they manifest, especially in the Gulf, which is such a major receptacle for all that,” the collective told me in an interview on a recent Saturday afternoon. “We utilize this global capitalist aesthetics. The Gulf is kind of a drag act.”

A few days earlier, GCC's eight members had traveled to New York from Germany, Kuwait, Bahrain, and elsewhere to install a show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in Chelsea. The afternoon I met them, they were at Anthology Film Archives in the East Village, where, after showing some of their videos, the members sprawled out in the lobby for a group interview, as though they were a band, or maybe a delegation of jet-lagged politicians.



GCC, *Positive Pathways (+) (Version II)*, 2016, reinforced plaster, sand, rubber, spray paint.

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The group's members—Nanu Al-Hamad, Khalid Al Gharaballi, Abdullah Al-Matairi, Fatima Al Qadiri, Monira Al Qadiri, Aziz Al Qatami, Barrak Alzaid, and Amal Khalaf—took turns telling me about GCC's work, but they asked to be quoted as a group. (Admittedly, this is an unusual format for an interview, but as many people who know GCC will tell you, the members speak with a surprisingly cohesive voice and the request fits their model, so I agreed.)

With its Mitchell-Innes & Nash show, GCC has become like a healer, drawing on the healthy living and positive lifestyle trends currently taking the Gulf region by storm. *Positive Pathways (+) (Version II)*, 2016, an installation similar to one that debuted at this year's DIS-curated Berlin Biennale, features a sculpture performing the Quantum Touch technique, a form of non-contact touch therapy. (A few days earlier, the members could be seen putting down

sand around the sculpture, which, when it was shown in Berlin, was at the center of a teardrop-shaped racetrack.) Nearby is a series of relief works based on stills from YouTube videos that, with their velvety red surfaces, recall fabrics in Titian paintings and over-decorated homes.

“There’s an interesting power play with digital technology,” GCC told me. “It’s a superficially democratic medium that established a democratic aesthetic. But then again, aesthetics can be used by anyone or anything, for whatever means.” For instance, the positive-energy trend, initially a form of self-help, was co-opted by Gulf politicians. The group said, “Not to whittle any artistic choices to one flat meaning, but it’s compelling that the method we used to create the reliefs”—Thermoforming, a process used in factories to shape plastic—“is far from the ‘do it yourself’ mantra.”

These positive lifestyle techniques have been appropriated by politicians and leaders, and they have become symbols for the Gulf, both in the business world and in everyday life. “This business lingo is now the country lingo,” GCC said. After pausing for a second, GCC added, with a hearty laugh, “But it wouldn’t be so absurd, if you realize that America is the world’s biggest nation brand.”



GCC, *CO-OP*, 2014, video.

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Before they first came together in a VIP lounge at the fair Art Dubai in 2013, the original nine members had moved in the same social circles. Some were artists, some worked in design, some worked in fashion-related fields, one was even an up-and-coming musician, but they all shared similar ideas. After a

proposed state-sponsored project fell through, the nine members officially became a collective. (Sophia Al Maria, who recently had a solo show at the Whitney Museum, later left the group to pursue her own art practice.)

GCC's members are rarely ever in the same country at once—they coordinate their art projects mainly via a WhatsApp channel. Once a year, though, they get together for what they call “summits,” to discuss concepts for future work. In 2013, the group gathered in Morschach, Switzerland, and created a photo series to commemorate the gathering. With the cold, contrasty look of stock photography, the series showed the group's members discussing matters over tea and then, in extreme close-up, shaking hands, as if to congratulate themselves on forming a union.

“There's a homogenized, very bland bank of images that PR companies use to reflect a future,” GCC said. “[Stock photography is] sort of similar to what we're talking about—how there are certain PR companies that are paid to show something. That doesn't necessarily reflect the region or the people of the region, but it reflects an image.”

From there, GCC went on to look at various rituals and customs that define the Gulf region. Ribbon-cutting ceremonies, for example, have been staged in the Gulf at grand openings and political events, but according to GCC, it's an “empty ritualistic gesture” imported from the West. To reflect that, for a video called *Ceremonial Achievements* (2013), they culled low-quality images of ribbon-cutting ceremonies from the internet and edited them together with cheesy effects, like digital wipes and fades. Though celebratory in tone, the video is hollow—in a purposeful way.

Since then, GCC's work has been tinged with irony. A 2014 video called *CO-OP* depicts Dubai as a computer-generated theme park (“Dubailand,” GCC suggested to me), while other sound works blur the line between political speeches and ad campaigns. For the most part, however, GCC rarely ever takes a political stance on their subject matter. “There's a certain acceptance of how things are being marketed or sold, or [how] language is being used,” Christopher Y. Lew, who curated GCC's 2014 show at MoMA PS1, said. “It's kind of like a mirror. In a sense, it's not ironic at the same time.”



GCC, *Inaugural Summit, Morschach 2013* 3, 2013, digital C-print photograph.

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Every so often, a hidden darkness emanates from GCC's work, and that's the case with its 2015 video installation *L'air de temps*. Projected onto an oversize sphere, the video is set in a *hôtel particulier* in Paris that was sold to a Qatari prince. The camera slithers around corners like a killer stalking his victim, and it feels as though a creature lurks somewhere in this Versailles-like palace. Nothing living is ever shown, but instead we see boxes and exercise machines that appear to breathe, thanks to digital effects. Although it sounds like a person is moving around off-screen, every room is empty—the prince, a stand-in for the Gulf as a whole, seems to have completely disappeared in the West. The Gulf appears now as a ghost or a monster—something which can't be spoken about, or even seen, because it seems too much at odds with the West. Or is it?

“It's interesting to see that dynamic between the cultures, and how they dance around each other,” GCC said of the work. “It's also a reflection of post-colonial anxieties. What are they doing? Who's buying our culture? Who's buying our palazzos and renovating them?”

“It is sort of a Western horror story,” the group continued. “We've created a monster!”