

# Breaking new ground in the Persian Gulf

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Monique Todd



GCC is compiled of nine multidisciplinary artists scattered across the world. They often use voting apps to reach consensus over the artworks they craft Courtesy of GCC

Western perspectives of the Middle East have been skewed beyond belief, with perceptions often jumping off inaccurate binaries (it's all 'war-ridden desert and political turmoil' vs 'shiny exuberance and unflinching decadence'.) Within the past few years, however, artistic voices from the Gulf have peppered exhibition calendars globally, providing nuanced views of the region's landscape, politics and cultural language. With [Sharjah Biennial 12](#) and [Art Dubai](#) both underway, we celebrate the emerging artists making experimental and multifaceted work from, in and around the Persian Gulf.

## **FARAH AI-QASIMI**

The ghost of McDonald's golden arches, faint and barely legible, stain a bare wall. An array of fake fruit floats on the surface of a pool. The remnants of a demolished caterpillar-shaped cake sit on a neglected foiled platter. Such is the work of Farah Al-Qasimi – a photographic obsession with commodities, status, relationships, and money (or lack thereof). It's the banality of day-to-day life that inspires the 23-year-old Emirati, allowing for stills that capture the intimate and strangely familiar, those moments that far too often escape a second glance. Al-Qasimi will be exhibiting some of her most recent photos as part of [Fotofest](#) – held at the Abu Dhabi Festival – till 20 April.

"Old McDonald's", 2014 – Farah Al-Qasimi's work details her photographic obsession with commodities, status, relationships, and money (or lack thereof) Photography by Farah Al-Qasimi

## **LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN**

Abu Hamdan isn't confined to any one medium (audio-visual installations, performances, sculptures and documentaries are part of his repertoire) but it's his DIY approach, a remnant from his past life as a band member, which threads everything together. Fleeting between London and Beirut, the Jordanian artist is fixated with the politics of sound and its constructs, with his work often entering governmental and legal spheres such as the UK asylum tribunal and Defence for Children International. Abu Hamdan's sound installation inspired by Cairo's city noise, [Tape Echo](#), is currently showing work as part of the [New Museum Triennial](#), on until 25 May.

"Hypocrisy" (2013) – the exhibition attempts to employ the technological artifacts of the city as a means to document, inhabit and map Cairo's complex acoustic topography Courtesy of Lawrence Abu Hamdan

## **RAJA'A KHALID**

Who knew scent was so political. Raja'a Khalid's recent work excavates the social and cultural layers embedded within perfumes specific to Dubai, opening up discussion around notions of authenticity and what it means to recreate 'the natural'. Her 2015 work,



"Oud Aura", took the form of a diffuser spritzing fragrance imitating Agarwood resin (Agarwood being the most expensive wood in the world allegedly). A comment on the constructive forces behind space and ambience, the Dubai-based artist reveals how nothing – not even scent – is exempt from ideological influence.

"Oud Aura" (2015) – Khalid challenges assertions of authenticity with her scent diffuser that smells like a Middle Eastern perfumery Courtesy of Raka'a Khalid

#### SARAH ABU ABDALLAH

It was Abdallah's 2011 work, "[Saudi Automobile](#)," that put her on the map. Responding to the ban enforced in Saudi Arabia denying women the right to drive; the-24-year old filmed herself applying pink paint onto a defunct car, an attempt to reclaim a sense of freedom, autonomy and ownership. It's this type of freeform documentary and spontaneous performance that Abdallah primarily

uses to dissect the social and cultural landscape in Saudi Arabia, wielding enough flair and subtlety as to avoid any sort of cringey sermonising.

### SLAVS AND TATARS

Here is what we know about Slavs and Tartars: they started as a duo before expanding into a collective – initiated by a Moscow-based Iranian raised in Texas and a Polish Londoner. They explore cultural landscapes between the area "east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia". They've exhibited all over the place, having shown in New York, Berlin, Vienna, LA and Dubai, with their work taking the form of installation and printed material. However, one thing we don't know is who they actually are. Having formed in 2006, Slavs and Tartars still remain largely anonymous; their output isolated from personal identities and individual celebrity, all the better for fully drinking in their geopolitical works and extensive research. Their current exhibition, *Mirrors for Princes: Both Sides of the Tongue*, is showing at the NYUAD Art Gallery in Abu Dhabi until 30 May.



*Mirrors for Princes: Both Sides of the Tongue*, 2015 – The exhibition traces the contemporary obsession with self-help to a medieval genre of political science Courtesy of Slavs and Tartars

### GHADA DA

Any tangible matter that comes out of the body is sure to disgust. Still, for Ghada Da, these sticky, smelly, slimy substances provide fertile ground for cultural enquiry. She once covered her own shit with Swarovski crystals, aptly naming it "For the Love of Poo" (inspired by Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull, "For the Love of God"). She also used menstrual blood and urine as painting material. Based in Dubai, the Saudi Arabian artist is unafraid of the gooey sack we inhabit, using biology as a means to interrogate ideas of normalcy, taboo and repulsion. Her solo exhibition, *CuneiForm*, is currently on show at Satellite space in Dubai until 28 March.

"For the Love of Poo" – The St Martins graduate aims to investigate of the visible landscape presented by the body and the spatial area in which the body exists as well as the psyche. Courtesy of Ghada Da

### GCC

GCC is compiled of nine multidisciplinary artists scattered across the world, so it only makes sense that they regularly convene and create via mobile phone. In fact, they often use voting apps to reach consensus over the artworks they craft. Having formalised themselves as a collective at Art Dubai two years ago, the group (Fatima Al Qadiri, Abdullah Al-Mutairi, Amal Khalaf, Aziz Al



[Qatami](#), [Barrak Alzaid](#), [Khalid al Gharaballi](#), [Monira Al Qadiri](#), [Nanu Al-Hamad](#) and [Sophia Al-Maria](#)) have secured the attention of the art scene with their nuanced examination of the Gulf's political, social and aesthetic cultures. Video, photography, sculpture and installation are the primary vehicles through which they explore regional and national identities in the Middle East, a perspective largely omitted from exhibition circuits till recently. GCC is currently showing [A Wonderful World Under Construction](#) at [The Sultan Gallery](#) until 2 April.

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#### **LANTIAN XE**

Xie once described his work as an exploration of the "post-Diaspora experience of a thirded other living between the United States, China, and the United Arab Emirates." It's this multiplicity of identity and belonging that forms the basis of Xie's multifaceted work. Encompassing found objects, film and sound, the Chinese artist plays with context and appropriative techniques with the aim of uncovering the silenced voices hidden beneath copied histories and replicated cultures.

#### **HAZEM HARB**

It was Hazem's fashion stylist mother who first introduced him to art, her sketches catalysing a desire to attend art classes at Gaza City's YMCA. The Palestinian artist has since used artistic eye, sharpened at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and The European Institute of Design, to tackle issues related to war, trauma and loss. An insatiable hunger for material freedom has led to creations made of stainless steel, polystyrene, cement, mattresses and concrete, all in a bid to survey complex emotions through the hyper-tangible. His current solo exhibition, [The Invisible Landscape and Concrete Futures](#), will be on show at the [Salsali Private Museum](#),



Dubai, until 1 June.



Video still from Hazem Harb's 2012 video installation *Impossible Travel* which explores the state of division and displacement in Gaza Courtesy of Athr Gallery and the artist

#### **MOREHSHIN ALLAHYARI**

morehshina (01:28:52 AM): r u there?!

morehshina (01:29:44 AM): have u ever wished if u could delete some parts of ur life?!

johnson619 (01:30:03 AM): no, have you?!

This conversation, an excerpt from an online exchange that lasted four years, is part of Moreshin Allhyari's latest work. [Mere Spaces All Things Are Side By Side I](#) presents the messages exchanged between Allahyari and a male friend, sustained against a poor and disrupted Internet connection. Having spent her childhood in Iran, before moving to the US in 07, Allahyari has an acute understanding of the different technological landscape in both regions, often using this as a springboard for her new media work.