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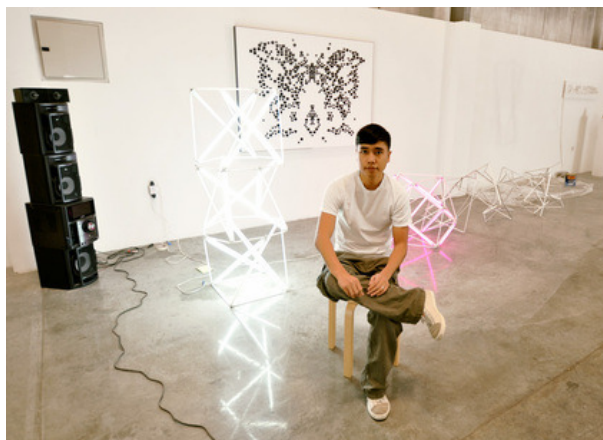
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James Clar at his studio in al-Quoz, Dubai, 2011. Photo by Angelle Siyang Le for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

WHERE I WORK JAMES CLAR

PROJECTS BY ISABELLA E. HUGHES FROM SEPT/OCT 2011

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Nestled within Dubai's trendy industrial warehouse arts district al-Quoz, American mixed-media artist James Clar's studio space, which he calls "Satellite," is a few steps away from some of the Emirates' newest and largest commercial galleries. Come to think of it, the studio is indeed a satellite outpost of something commonplace in most major cities, but unheard of in Dubai—an open studio. When I ask Clar why he named his studio Satellite, he explains that he sees himself as being like one—"observing and relaying information"—and that, in the future, he might establish a "satellite" studio in another city. It is easy to imagine an international artist such as Clar trailblazing new horizons in a yet-to-be discovered arts hub.

Presently, Clar is happily based full-time in Dubai, but his reach has moved beyond the local scene. When we meet in June, he has just come back from Art HK, where he had his second international solo show at a major art fair with his Dubai-based gallery, Traffic, selling to Chinese and American collectors. This year, he will also exhibit in the group show "West End?" at the Museum on the Seam in Jerusalem.

The increase in new galleries in Dubai attests to the nature of the United Arab Emirates' art scene, which veers toward the commoditized product and has few noncommercial, experimental spaces. Clar established his studio in March of 2011 and has hosted film screenings there. Starting this September, Clar will host one-night events featuring a particular artist or collective creating installations and performances. Clar hopes that the new venture will kindle discussion about art and society. "Many of my pieces are actually inspired by conversations that I've had with Rami [Rami Farook, owner of Traffic Gallery], who is a very open-minded, thoughtful guy," Clar says. "These conversations should be encouraged."

Metal-clad, low-lit and industrial in scale, Clar's spacious, high-ceilinged studio is a welcome respite from the heat outside, a perfect setting for his signature light pieces and large, mixed-media sculptures. Sparsely decorated, the studio appears to be a place for serious work, the comfortable couch and ping-pong table notwithstanding.

Clar's studio practice begins with social issues in Dubai but which are global in nature, including the loss of indigenous languages, as in *Global English* (2010), a neon sign that spells out the title phonetically in Arabic; Clar plans to clone the piece in additional languages. Commenting on the world's dependent, love-hate relationship with energy, Clar's *Ball and Chain* (2009–10) is a gigantic ball consisting of 24 car headlights with LED lighting and attached to a thick metal chain. Wit is an important element in Clar's artworks, and thoughtfully chosen titles add an often ironic dimension.

Clar, who arrived in the UAE in 2007 with his Japanese wife Kanae,

whom he affectionately refers to as “my rock,” is one of the few Western-born artists active in the country. When he first moved to Dubai, Clar spent one frustrating year working as a commercial lighting architect. On the verge of leaving the UAE for good, he presented his work at one of the first Pecha Kucha nights run by the Third Line gallery. Later that evening, Clar met Farook, his soon-to-be friend, patron and gallerist, who helped him gain the confidence to become a full-time working artist.

Clar is an anomaly in Dubai: an American artist of Filipino ancestry, represented by an Emirati-owned gallery. He is fascinated by the city but frank about the challenges of being a foreign artist in Dubai. He recalls his early days in the emirate, when numerous galleries, though impressed by his work, would decline to show it because of his ethnicity. Most auctions and major art prizes, such as the Abraaj Capital Prize, are open only to local and regional artists. He sees the emphasis on supporting only Middle Eastern and South Asian artists as problematic in the Emirates’ ambitious arts development program. He also believes that the lack of a larger internationalism limits the potential reach of the art scene. Despite these difficulties, Clar hopes his pioneering ways will encourage more artists to live and work in the UAE, gradually enhancing its diversity.

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