WRITING THE BODY: THE ART OF GHADA AMER
BY MAURA REILLY

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Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.

—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"[1]

1 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875.

Over the past twenty years, Ghada Amer has gained international acclaim by producing multimedia works that are profoundly linked by her personal quest for an aesthetic language specific to women. Born in Cairo in 1963 and having moved to France at age eleven, Amer's travels between cultures allowed her to witness women's cross-cultural subjugation, whether from increasing religious conservatism in Egypt, or in more subtle ways by commodity culture in Europe and then America, where she relocated in 1995. While studying at the École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche in Nice, she was informed that her art school's painting classes were reserved for male students, at which point she became committed to finding her own feminine artistic language with which to speak about women, as a woman. Amer's approach to mediums and subjects from an emphatically female perspective manifests itself throughout her career. Her most prominent and signature formal strategy is embroidery, a medium taken up by feminist artists since the 1970s as a political tool. In Amer's hands, embroidery is used to dramatic and subversive effects, allowing her to express herself using a formal language that has been traditionally associated with "women's work" for centuries, while at the same time penetrating the male space of the painted canvas that had been ostensibly forbidden to her. Her subject is most often women—their sexuality, the myths and gender clichés associated with them, and the historical suppression of the female voice. Finding that women are spoken of and for, but very rarely allowed to speak themselves, her strategy is to find those women silenced through master narratives and give them a chance to talk back. Examining everything from fashion magazines, children's fairy tales, pornography, dictionaries, the Qur'an, and medieval Arabic manuscripts to the art historical canon, Amer challenges their authority, highlighting their exclusions and countering with a powerfully asserted, activated female subject. That her work reaches its full maturity and power when it combines her analysis of prevailing cultural forms with a deep affirmation of women's capacity for and right to boundless sexual pleasure makes Amer's project an artistic manifestation of the theory of *écriture féminine*.

In 1975, the French theorist Hélène Cixous wrote a feminist manifesto titled "The Laugh of the Medusa" that demanded that women "write themselves" in order that their bodies be heard. Along with her contemporaries in France, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig, who were responding to the works of Freud and Lacan, Cixous was at the forefront of revealing the systemic masculinist stronghold over language. Taking on the literary canons, Cixous's essay challenged them for their exclusion of women's voices and proposed the practice of feminine writing, or *écriture féminine*, as a strategy of resistance against female repression in cultural production and society in general.

This theory of écriture féminine was one among many feminist responses to the growing awareness that a dominant masculinist position structured all disciplines of knowledge, from history, psychoanalysis, political theory, and art history to less conspicuously significant areas, such as mythology and fairy tales. Responding to Freud's structuring of human psychology around the Oedipal complex, feminists argued that Man, possessor of the phallus, is placed at the center of meaning and Woman is always the Other, and therefore has meaning only in relation to, and as given to her by, Man. Man is presented as the privileged Subject, producer of knowledge and creator of History. Woman, on the other hand, is always considered the passive Object or the obliging prop in the enactment of male fantasies. As feminist theory developed, it became clear that in order to disrupt this hierarchy, hidden structures of mastery needed to be addressed as well as overt forms of sexism. Cixous and her contemporaries identified language as one of these primary sites of historical exclusion. To speak and especially to write assumed a dominant position that had historically only been occupied by men.

In seeking to resist this exclusion, the French feminists identified *jouissance*, or sexual pleasure, as the key to ending the linguistic repression of the feminine. Steeped in psychoanalysis, they were acutely aware of Freud's famous assertion that "Woman wants nothing," which by extension made her silence throughout culture seem natural. Rather than acknowledging that she had been denied the power to speak for herself, Freud decided she simply had no personal desires that would drive her to speak in the first place. Cixous in particular argued, then, that if Woman could be reconnected with her own capacity for pleasure and therefore her well of repressed desires, it would counteract her enforced alienation from both her body and from her voice. Experiencing *jouissance* would give her a reason to speak and something to say. But since writing had always been explicitly male, Woman would also have to discover a new mode of expression capable of

communicating that uniquely female experience. This was simultaneously the goal and definition of Cixous's *écriture féminine*—first, that Woman must decide to speak; next, that she must speak about women, their desires, their experiences, their pleasures; and finally, in articulating this new language specifically suited to speaking the female experience, she will move from a passive Object to an active Subject.

In all of her texts on feminine writing, Cixous wrestles with the difficulty of women speaking in a society structured by her exclusion. What would it mean for women to demand a voice if she refused to be silent anymore? What would it sound like? What would she say? What would the literature and art look like that emerged from her—she who has no voice and nothing to say? As if in answer to Cixous's questions, Ghada Amer's artistic practice concerns itself with the suppression of women's voices, the prevalence of men speaking for women, and the resulting dynamic of the absent-present female who is referred to but remains a mystery. Because of this, her oeuvre is particularly illuminated in relation to Cixous's writings about *écriture féminine*. From her first calculated decision to use embroidery within the masculine field of painting to her appropriation of pornography to reclaim female sexuality, Amer has successfully translated Cixous's ideas into an artistic practice. That she was unaware of Cixous's theory makes the parallels between Amer's exploration of female forms and content and Cixous's analytical writings all the more startling.

These affinities begin from Amer's very first decision to place her gender identity at the center of her artistic project. As early as the late 1980s, one sees Amer struggling to find her own artistic language as a woman in the historically male-dominated field of painting, using embroidery and later gardens as her feminine tools. Her next move—to address both women as subjects, including a series of works dealing with domestic roles, and also gender clichés of love and romance—matches Cixous's insistence on speaking *about* women. Even Amer's particular penchant for analyzing fairy tales for their gendered and psycho-sexual subtexts is paralleled by Cixous's extensive writings on the very same stories. Amer's strategy of reinscribing master texts in order to destabilize their authority emphasizes the same exclusion from language that Cixous railed against in her writings. And finally, her signature strategy of embroidered pornography realizes Cixous's utopian notion of writing the body, insofar as *jouissance* is the critical starting point for female self-consciousness and, indeed, revolution.

DECIDING TO SPEAK

What interests me . . . is the idea of a 'model to be followed' and in life, we are confronted with these everywhere; from birth, one is shown how one must live; one is educated this way, one grows up and follows the model imposed on us. All my work revolves around the idea of a 'model.'

—Ghada Amer[2]

Despite current Western stereotypes, the Islamic household Amer grew up in was modern and progressive. Practicing Muslims, the Amers were also socially moderate and encouraged their four daughters to pursue higher education or seek careers in addition to traditional domestic roles. When the time came for Amer to apply to university her parents proposed that she enroll in mathematics, a subject at which she excelled. Nevertheless Amer became immediately depressed, bed-ridden and later professed that all she could or wanted to do was draw. She instead proposed to her parents that she enter art school. Though they worried that art would not provide Amer with the secure future they wanted for her, her parents finally acquiesced when they recognized the quality of her drawings, her determination and her devotion to her craft. In 1984, Amer enrolled in a BFA/MFA program in the École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche in Nice, from which she graduated in 1989.

Despite her fight to pursue her artistic studies, the art school she attended, known as the Villa Arson, was a difficult environment for Amer. Upon arrival, she was informed not only that "painting was dead," but that, even if she wanted to study painting, "the teacher would teach only to the male students, as if the activity of painting was an exclusively male activity."[3] Moreover, she found the Art Program chauvinistic at times and often competitive. Indeed periodically students were asked to leave if their work was not considered of a high enough caliber. Fortunately for Amer, she made the cut—as did other now reputable artists who graduated from the same program and became her fast friends, including Tatiana Trouvé and Reza Farkhondeh. The programming at Villa Arson was daunting, experimental and, in Amer's opinion, catered to male students with an almost "all-male parade of artists"[4] brought in for exhibitions and lectures, like Martin Kippenberger, Albert and Markus Oehlen, Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren, British Petroleum, and Alighiero e Boetti.

Working in this environment, her early experimentations drew from the valorized artists of the day, including small, mixed media cardboard constructions based on Joseph Beuys's cross iconography, and drawings with collage elements reminiscent of David Salle's divided compositions (Fig.01 and Fig.02). She also quoted images from a range of art historical sources such as Kasimir

2 Amer as quoted in *Ghada Amer*, exh. cat., Bretigny-sur-Orge, France: L'Espace Jules Verne, 1994.

3 "[T]he first thing I was told was 'painting is dead'. I have never believed that. I wanted to study painting but the teacher would teach only to the male students as if the activity of painting was an exclusively male activity." Marilu Knode, "Interview with Ghada Amer," *New Art Examiner* 27, no. 4 (2001/2002): 38.

4 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author.

1. Ghada Amer, *Untitled*, 1988

2. Ghada Amer, *Untitled*, 1988

Malevich, Diane Arbus, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, and other modernist masters, and appropriated illustrations from leading French art magazines, such as *Art Press*. In other words, having been denied a chance to participate in the academic tradition of painting as a painter herself, Amer began conceptualizing other ways of creating a formal language, as an artist and as a woman, while continuing to relate to this history. Intent on inserting herself into the "masculine" space of painting from which she was ostensibly prohibited, she sensed that she would have to find alternative methods and tools associated with "women's work" to form her own artistic language. It would take a few more years and a trip to Egypt before she arrived at a solution.

Amer's parents moved back to Egypt in 1984, at which point she began making annual visits. During these trips, she was surprised by the huge sociopolitical shift that had occurred in the country in the intervening years. A conservative movement had erupted in the wake of President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, resulting in a retreat from the relatively liberal attitudes of the 1970s. Each year Amer returned she noticed that an increasing number of women were wearing the veil, including her mother, and that there was a visible regression from women's civil rights and liberties.[5] This was not the Egypt of her childhood, she recalls. In the 1960s and 1970s, many women chose not to wear the veil, but with the socio-cultural and religious backlash of the 1980s, women's freedom and the control of their bodies were being vigorously policed.

5 Knoda, 38.

It was during one of these trips, in the summer of 1988, that Amer experienced a breakthrough moment that would have an irreversible impact on her artistic practice. Walking along a market street in Cairo with her mother one day, she came across a special edition of a women's fashion magazine titled *Venus* that featured images of Western models wearing fashionable outfits, with lengthened sleeves and hemlines, and veils that had been photo-montaged onto the designs (Fig.03 and Fig.04). "It was a . . . sort of Vogue for the veiled woman," she explains, one that combined the Western look with the Muslim tradition.[6] "It had this weird feeling of a society looking for an identity . . . . I was quite sensitive to that, since at that time I was looking for an identity, and I did not know if I was French or Egyptian."[7]

The back of the magazine contained sewing patterns that demonstrated to readers how they could create the illustrated fashions themselves. Amer began immediately working with these patterns in a self-confessedly "obsessive" way. She made collages, cut out patterns based on the inserts over and over again, and created playful designs in spiral notebooks (Fig. – no images yet – I am trying to get these from Ghada). These notebooks led to a series of large-scale works in wood, including *Self-Portrait with Cleopatra*, 1989, upon which a plastic portrait bust of the Egyptian Queen is pasted (Fig.05). That same year she produced a series of large, two by two meter works that were re-presentations of the magazine spreads painted in the style of photo-realism.[8] Amer also began executing a series of works that year with life-sized dress patterns, including one in which she cut the same pattern in different colors fifty times and stacked it on a pedestal (Fig.06).

It was during this experimentation in the wake of discovering the *Venus* magazine that Amer began to realize that sewing could function as an expressive medium in and of itself. Around 1990 she began replacing her pencil with needle and thread. Doing so was an easy transition for Amer since she had grown up in a household in which all the women sewed and, therefore, she considered embroidery to be the women's tool *par excellence*, "tedious, time-consuming, and fragile."[9] Painting, on the other hand, she felt was "a male tool: it was invented by men and has been used by them for centuries."[10] By putting both aesthetic languages together—embroidery and painting—she realized that she was on the path toward the formal solution she had been seeking. Combining the two mediums allowed her entrée into the masculine territory that she believed was being denied to her as a woman painter. As Amer explains, "It was during this time [1991] that I refused the traditional 'artistic' medium, replacing it, or even opposing it, with a 'traditional' women's medium to make sure that the representation was coming from a female point of view."[11]

Over the next few years Amer strove to reconcile the two languages, taking sewing patterns and literally stitching and tacking them onto raw canvases or plywood, sometimes leaving short threads on the front of the canvas in an effort to reference the labor involved and to mimic a painterly effect. In *Untitled (Baby Dress)*, 1990, for instance, she used strands of red thread to stitch a baby dress pattern to the small raw canvas and then applied rabbit glue to the whole surface (Fig.07). One can see, in *Untitled*, 1990, how Amer also took ideas from her compositions in the spiral notebooks as models for large-scale constructions, equally based on a sewing pattern (Fig.08). Choosing a mini-skirt pattern cut out of tracing paper, she embellished it by piercing the paper with long strands of gold thread and then gingerly stitching the whole pattern to the canvas. This delicate assemblage was then adhered to a piece of plywood, combining in a different way the feminine, through sewing and the use of fragile materials, with the masculine, through sculpture and the use of construction materials. This was also the first time that Amer used what might be called "threaded drips," in which she allows the long strands of thread to cascade down the surface of the work. This technique will surface with increased frequency and significance in her later works on canvas.

8 These works are unfortunately no longer extant. They were destroyed by the artist after receiving a negative graduate student studio critique. (Amer in a conversation with the author.)

9 Amer as quoted in Valencia, 32; see also Knoda, 38.

10 Valencia, 32.

11 Amer as quoted in interview with Valerie Cassel, "Unscripted Desire," *Ghada Amer: Reading Between the Threads*, exh. cat., Dusseldorf: BildMuseet, 2002: 36.

6 Barbara Pollack, "The New Look of Feminism," *ArtNews*, Vol. 100, No. 8 (September 2001): 134.

7 Teresa Millet, ed., *Ghada Amer*, exh. cat., Valencia: Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, 2004: 31.

3 and 4. *Venus* cover and spreads

5. Ghada Amer, *Self Portrait with Cleopatra*, 1989

6. Ghada Amer, *Untitled*, 1990

7. Ghada Amer, *Untitled (Baby Dress)*, 1990

8. Ghada Amer, *Untitled (Mini Jupe)*, 1990

TO SPEAK ABOUT WOMEN . . .

Your kind of love is a death for us . . . What lies beyond is downfall: the both of us enslaved, domesticated, imprisoned in the family, in a social role.

—Hélène Cixous, "La Jeune Née"[12]

Pushing this new technique of using the embroidered line as a feminine artistic language in and of itself, Amer decided that she also wanted the content of her work to address specifically feminist concerns. Moving away from dress patterns that only formally reference women's work, she began using her needle and thread to depict scenes taken from the cultural models and feminine stereotypes showcased in women's magazines and popular advertisements. *Cinq Femmes au Travail (Five Women at Work)*, 1991, is a quad-diptych that depicts women shopping, cooking, cleaning, and, in the final image, looking after a child—the fifth woman mentioned in the title is missing; it references Amer, the artist, in the act of sewing the work itself (Figs.09). Exemplifying this new style, the four scenes are constructed not with sewing patterns but as neatly stitched line drawings on unprimed canvases. It is these that Amer identifies as her first fully embroidered "paintings," with her "paint," in fact, being actual strands of thread stitched into the canvas. Melding form and content into a self-fashioned language that is all hers, these works infiltrate the masculine spaces of painting and speak or *write* with a different gender. At the same time, they focus their content on what feminist scholar Griselda Pollock would call "spaces of femininity," domestic interiors that are associated with the private sphere and related to women's duties in the home, including sewing.[13]

Notably, Amer's decision to both represent women and place herself within the narrative of women's work also deepens her unconscious dialogue with the ideals of *écriture féminine*. In Cixous's first explication of what women's writing must be, she declared, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing . . . . She must put herself into the text."[14] By entwining her formal strategy of embroidery with the representation of social roles prescribed for women, Amer enacts the unison that Cixous imagined. At the same time, by including herself as the fifth woman in *Five Women at Work*, she writes herself into the text and illustrates her own personal investment in the limited economy of gender roles. Challenging the values assigned to artistic mediums, she raises the question of whether her embroidered work will be assigned to the sphere of domestic labor despite her high-art training and intentions.

12 Hélène Cixous, "La Jeune Née: An Excerpt," *Diacritics*, Vol. 7, No. 2. (Summer 1977): 67.

13 Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art* (Routledge: New York and London, 2003), 70–127.

14 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.

Five Women at Work begins a series of narrative works that present women performing daily chores or quotidian activities, demonstrating Amer's continued interest in the theme of placid domesticity, or, as she characterizes it, images of "bored women."[15] *La Femme Qui Repasse (The Woman Who Irons)*, 1992, shows an idealized housewife, long-haired and primly dressed, in the act of ironing; above her, painted in red acrylic, floats a pattern-like potted plant, a formal tie-over from the *Venus* experiments (Fig.10). *Au Supermarché (At the Supermarket)*, 1992, is an embroidered line painting showing two women side-by-side with a shopping cart at the supermarket (Fig.11). Despite the fact that the original sources of these appropriated images most likely intended them as either seductive or docile, for Amer, they embody something darker: "Rather than represent women in a comfortable environment, I wanted these images to reflect the melancholy of this so-called comfort."[16]

Amer's effort to disrupt the rarified field of fine art by introducing the unrecognized labor of women's (house)work resonates with much early feminist work from the 1970s. Artists such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago had returned to traditional mediums such as embroidery, crocheting, and ceramics in an attempt to challenge the age-old aesthetic hierarchy that privileges certain forms of art over others based on gender associations. Others, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Mary Kelley, introduced domestic and maternal labor as content and as subjects worthy of artistic contemplation, while feminist artists like Martha Rosler uncovered the underbelly of stereotypical female roles, in such works as *Semiotics of the Kitchen* from 1975 (Fig.12).

While Amer was unaware of this history of 1970s feminist work at the time, her practice was influenced by the next generation of artists who were themselves in dialogue with that earlier generation, most importantly Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Rosemarie Trockel. In these artists, she found affinities with her own agenda of integrating women's work, text, appropriation, and gendered scripts. Holzer re-presents the language of authority in an effort to undermine its power, while Kruger's juxtaposition of magazine images and text functions in a similarly subversive manner. In *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)*, 1987, Kruger shows how women's existence within capitalism is sadly defined by their role as a consumer rather than as a thinking, active subject (Fig.13). An authoritative god-like hand commands the viewer to take, and take on, this self-definition, and yet the gesture is an enticement, not only to accept but to embrace this limiting concept of women. Like Amer's domestic series, the ostensibly happy surface of women as comfortable in their domestic role of shopping and primping is suffused with an unavoidable melancholy.

15 Amer as quoted in Knode, 38.

16 Amer as quoted in interview with Cassel, 36.

9. Ghada Amer,
Cinq Femmes Au Travail, 1991

10. Ghada Amer,
La Femme Qui Repasse, 1992

11. Ghada Amer,
Au Supermarche, 1992

12. Martha Rosler,
Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975

13. Barbara Kruger,
Untitled (I shop therefore I am), 1987)

At the same time, Rosemarie Trockel's multimedia oeuvre clearly impressed Amer, who cites her as one of her major artistic influences. In her numerous textile works, such as her "knitting pictures," which she began producing in 1985, Trockel reverses the hand-sewn feminine association of knitting by using machines to depict serialized icons appropriated from corporations and political institutions. Sometimes these take the form of painting-like wall pieces, while other times the patterns are re-transcribed into the feminine realms of clothing design and interior decoration, such as sweaters and rugs. Other times Trockel explicitly quotes from the modernist and high modernist "masters" of art, as in her *Untitled*, 2004, a knitted wall painting, which is a playful dialogue with Mondrian's late work in the style of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* from 1942-3 (Fig.14).

Amer combined many of these influences and strategies in early works like *Conseils de beauté du mois d'août: Votre corps, vos cheveux, vos ongles et votre peau (Beauty Tips for the Month of August: Your Body, Your Hair, Nails and Skin)*, 1993, which appropriates text from women's magazines but disrupts their authority with her use of embroidery and repetition (Fig.15).[17] After studying magazines such as *Elle* and *Vogue* that offered endless beauty advice to women, Amer produced this small sculpture consisting of four handkerchiefs, each hand-embroidered with lines of French texts about proper grooming techniques. The one devoted to hair care instructs: "The cream . . . treats, moisturizes and styles . . . apply it and forget about it. Reapply a small amount every two or three hours." Such inane directives are just some of the many that are given to and taken up by women to keep them busy in their boredom all day long. These models of feminine behavior—that it is one's *duty* to maintain youth and beauty—are taught through women's magazines, as well as other cultural scripts, and function to perpetuate a mythical ideal of feminine beauty—a lie that *Conseils de beauté* aims to trump. Just as Amer was continuing to examine women's magazines as "training manuals" in passive behavior, she was simultaneously expanding her areas of interest, looking at the inscription of gender roles in fairy tales and children's stories as earlier examples of this preparation for idealized femininity.

17 Amer chose August, she says, since women's care and maintenance of their bodies is most intense during the hot summer season and because summer is generally considered the season for love and romance. (Amer in a conversation with the author.)

14. Rosemarie Trockel, *Untitled*, 2004

15. Ghada Amer, *Conseils de beauté du mois D'Aout*, 1993

ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

When we were young girls, fairy tales made us believe that we were all princesses who were going to meet a prince one day and live happily ever after.

—Ghada Amer[18]

18 Amer as quoted in an email to the author.

Once upon a time . . . and still another time . . . The beauties are sleeping, waiting for princes to come to awaken them. In their beds, in their glass coffins . . . .

—Hélène Cixous, "La Jeune Née"[19]

19 Cixous, "La Jeune Née," 66.

Fairy tales, such as those written by Charles Perrault in the seventeenth century and the Grimm Brothers in the nineteenth century, were intended to impart moral lessons to children. As early as the 1950s, feminist theorists and philosophers began positing that these popular stories are also particularly critical tools in indoctrinating girls and boys into socially constructed gender roles. Narratives like those found in Cinderella and Snow White, the Grimms' two most popular tales, and Perrault's Sleeping Beauty, for instance, were meant to instruct young women on how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner.[20] Recent studies that have examined fairy tales for their gender biases have also noted the maintenance of the female protagonists' "feminine beauty ideal," which is described as young, white, economically privileged, and virtuous. Studies of cultural products for children—books, toys, television, and films—have come to the same conclusions. As early as 1949 in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argued that dolls teach young girls how to become caring, maternal, and passive.

20 See, for instance, Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz's essay, "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales," *Gender & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5 (October 2003): 711–726.

This early childhood training not only teaches generic gender roles but also structures ideals about courtship rituals, conventions of marriage, and the all-important place of romantic love as the defining goal in the life of young women. In seeking to articulate why women must inscribe themselves into culture, Hélène Cixous often returns to fairy tales and mythology to showcase how the dominant narrative has cast and constrained women through language. Written by men and mostly directed toward young girls, she questions whose fantasies are being supported by these tales of all-consuming love. Whose desires are articulated? It is not always the male's, she posits: "Then he will kiss her. In such a way that when she opens her eyes she will see only him; him, taking up all the space, him-as-all."[21] In these age-old myths of love and romance, Cixous shows how the narratives teach an obsessive love that places the man at the center of the woman's life,

21 Cixous, "La Jeune Née," 66.

around which she defines herself and without which she is nothing. This dialectical opposition in which a Subject needs an Other to know itself works both ways, however, and Cixous makes clear that Man needs woman to play this role in order for him to know himself to be dominant: "she is the repressed element which assures that the system will function."[22] The irony, of course, is that this narrative of happily ever after, with its binary version of romantic love, makes deriving actual happiness from relationships modeled on it a near impossibility.

22 Cixous, "La Jeune Née," 67.

As a child, Amer read Western fairy tale romances like Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, among others. She was also introduced to more "oriental" stories such as Sinbad and Majnun Leila, as well as the stories of One Thousand and One Nights.[23] For additional enjoyment, she also remembers repeatedly copying and drawing images of sentimental, romantic postcards and illustrations, with her favorite theme being idyllic images of women in love. During graduate school and into the early 1990s, she explored this theme with numerous drawings such as *Untitled (Nous Deux)*, 1991, and *Untitled (Le baiser avec paysage)*, 1992, mostly featuring kissing couples seemingly quite sincere in their optimism about achieving this romantic ideal (Fig.16 and Fig.17). Beginning in 1992, as Amer sought to appropriate content that would be in sync with her embroidered paintings, she returned to these models as the youthful counterparts of, and the ideological groundwork for, the bored women found in her domestic series.

23 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author: "I was brought up with Biblical stories (do not forget that Islam has exactly the same stories as the Bible: Moses, Adam, Eve, Jesus, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.), as well as the stories of One Thousand and One Nights (Ali Baba, Scheherazade, etc...), and Western tales (Cinderella, Snow White, etc.)."

From the early 1990s onward, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, countless princesses, and more modern embodiments of these ideals, such as Barbie, became popular subjects of Amer's drawings, sculptures, and paintings. Amer was fascinated by how female stereotypes of submission and passivity are perpetuated in fairy tales, myths, and children's storybook characters, and how they also function in the formation of children's identities from a young age, especially girls'. Two colored pencil drawings from 1992 demonstrate Amer's interest in the ways that girls and boys assimilate gender codes through cultural products like Barbie dolls and toy guns (Fig.18 and Fig.19). Another, an embroidered line drawing titled *Cinderella* from 1992, shows a classic moment of the fairy tale narrative when the female protagonist is readying herself for the ball before the mirror (Fig.20). Young, blond, rich, and virtuous—Cinderella appears to represent the beauty ideal after which all young girls are meant to model themselves.

In a related installation, *La Belle au Bois Dormant (Sleeping Beauty)*, 1995, a red dress is seen draped over an old-fashioned chair, while an embroidered white dress spins on a platform nearby (Fig.21). An antique phonograph plays Johann Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" as the fairy tale wedding dress waltzes all by itself. Upon closer inspection, one finds that the dress is embroidered with the complete narrative text of Sleeping Beauty in French, covering the entire surface in white-colored thread. With the haunting music interrupted regularly, as if played by a music box being opened and closed, and the loneliness of the animated but empty dress, Amer questions the very possibility of the "happily ever after" fairy tale ending that she, as most girls, have been taught to dream of since childhood. If the whole narrative of the tale culminates in the final kiss, then what happens next? Is there a sequel to Sleeping Beauty? Or, once married, will she be forever confined to bed, as Cixous explains in her analysis of the same tale: "She is lifted up by the man who will lay her in her next bed so that she may be confined to bed ever after, just as the fairy tales say."[24] Sleeping Beauty, a constant theme in Cixous's indictment of masculinist literature, will become a recurring reference throughout Amer's work from this point onward, in particular as images appropriated from Disney's popular film depiction of the story (Fig.22 and Fig.23).

24 Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1981): 43.

While the subject of love itself had always been of interest to Amer, it is at this more mature stage in her work and in her personal life that she seems more inclined to interrogate love's potentially destructive power. Just as Cixous's own analysis explains, Amer sees fairy tales as important in developing fantasies of love's deferral, its relationship to unattainability and mystery, and its central role in women's lives and self-definitions. Amer realizes that, as lovely as these stories may appear, they never address what comes after the first kiss, what exists beyond "happily ever after." They do not model relationships, only the unattainable striving for love. They do not consider what the relationship, once achieved, would look like. They do not prepare us for love's loss, its decline, or its inability to guarantee the happiness promised.

Barbie and Ken—the dolls introduced by Mattel in 1959 and 1961, respectively—are a modern day equivalent of such inseparable romantic duos as Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty or Romeo and Juliet. The internationally known toy couple is tied together for time immemorial after decades of advertising campaigns, branding, record sales, and countless hours of children's play. As a nod to the destructive and confining nature of their eternal bond, in *Barbie Loves Ken, Ken Loves Barbie*, 1995, Amer chose to represent the two toys as life-size straitjackets hanging side by side on a wall (Fig.24). The declarative title suggests that Barbie and Ken's love is unwavering and absolute. Emphasizing this, Amer embroidered the title sentence "obsessively, like a punishment," over the entire surface of each straightjacket. She has explained that she thought of the repetition of the phrase as mimicking

16. Ghada Amer, *Nous Deux*, 1991

17. Ghada Amer, *Le Baiser avec Paysage*, 1992

18. Ghada Amer, *Two Barbies*, 1992

19. Ghada Amer, *Boy and Elephant*, 1992

20. Ghada Amer, *Cinderella (Cendrillon)*, 1992

21. Ghada Amer, *Sleeping Beauty (La belle au bois dormant)*, 1995

22. Ghada Amer, *Sleeping Beauty*, 2002

those sentences assigned to be written over and over again by the child who has misbehaved, "like 'I must brush my teeth before going to bed' or 'I must be polite to the teacher' and so on."[25] Showing how this ideal is enforced by mantra-like cultural repetition, Amer subverts its power by making it nearly illegible through her loose threadwork and run-on lettering. The sculpture begs such questions as: Is such an eternal love possible? If attainable in real life, would it necessarily be positive? Is the work's title a declarative or an imperative statement? Does Barbie love Ken or *must* she love Ken?

Such obsessive love has left women little room to ask, "What do I want?" In order to answer such a question, however, one would have to know who she was without Him. Who is Barbie without Ken? Who is the Princess without her Prince Charming? In this body of work, Amer's tendency, begun in the domestic series, to almost totally exclude male characters from her figurative work gains significance within her feminist project. By excavating only the female protagonist from these famous fairy tales, she attempts to liberate the hidden woman from the confines of the master narrative. She attempts to figure forth the silenced, passive, or love-consumed woman, thereby offering her room to articulate and command her own desires. Amer's critical decision in 1992 to introduce into her work pornographic images of women pleasuring themselves or other women, always outside the company of men, can be understood as a natural progression from this question of unspoken female desire. This act of giving women a space for their sexuality is an act of empowerment that also offers them an opportunity for self-discovery. In asking the question, "what do women want?", Amer comes to focus, as did Cixous, on desire, and finds the answer to be pleasure, or *jouissance* without end.

25 Amer as quoted in an email to the author: "I wrote obsessively those sentences like a punishment, you know when you have to write many times stupid things so that you begin to believe in them, like 'I must brush my teeth before going to bed' or 'I must be polite to the teacher,' and so on."

JOUISSANCE WITHOUT END

Let the priests tremble; we will show them our sexts*!*
—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"[26]

Amer's appropriation of women from pornographic magazines into her work was an artistic breakthrough. While the images of "bored women" performing daily chores, as well as Amer's works about fairy tale characters and cliches about love, romance and beauty, were directly related to her fascination with the ways in which individuals internalize and adopt "gender scripts" unknowingly, neither of these directions in content or technique seemed to satisfy her completely, as innovative as they were. In her continued quest for a universal language and subjects that could "speak to all women in the world,"[27] she felt that she needed a subject other than the domestic that would contrast more radically with the embroidery, yet still communicate with *all* women. So she began exploring porn as another form of cross-cultural "women's work," copying images directly from racy magazines, tracing and stitching them into and across her canvases.

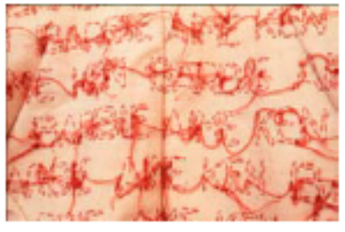
Amer's first painting to explore porn imagery is titled, tellingly, *Untitled (La Première)* 1992. It presents a horizontal frieze of the same naked woman repeated five times; legs splayed, masturbating (Fig.25). Like her earlier non-erotic paintings from that year, it is a simple line drawing of sorts, the contours of which are embroidered into the raw canvas with short pale-colored threads. But unlike the women in those earlier works, this one is not a passive, bored object but a lively, lusty subject shown pleasuring herself before the viewer. This content shift was a radical departure for Amer. Whereas the domestic series represented women confined by daily chores in interior spaces, the subject of sexuality provided Amer with a vehicle to empower women and to flip the proscribed version of woman's role as an obliging prop for male desire into one of active producer of her own pleasure. To depict these women using the feminine tool of embroidering within the masculinist field of painting was, for Amer, a way of addressing both the fact that all women are repressed at the site of sexuality and also that sexuality can be a universalizing site of empowerment.

At the same time, rather than providing a neat match between content and form, as was the case with the domestic woman created by the act of sewing, Amer's embroidered pornstars illustrate a tension that has in fact always been present in the traditional models of ideal womanhood. While women on one hand are trained to become the mother/wife, learning housekeeping and pressured to retain and uphold proper moral values that they will

26 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 885.

27 Valencia, 31.

23. Ghada Amer,
Sleeping Beauty Without The Castles, 2002



24. Ghada Amer,
Barbie loves Ken, Ken loves Barbie, 1995

25. Ghada Amer,
Untitled (la première), 1992

in turn instill in their children, the sexual fantasies of men often desire another kind of woman. The whore/mistress is the wife's inverse, sexually adventurous and available. Devoid of morals, household responsibilities, or skills, her only role is an erotic one. The man wants both, but culturally they are defined as mutually exclusive, since the wife is too pure to perform the sexual acts of the whore and the mistress is too vulgar to be allowed to raise children. By using the mother's tool to represent the whore, Amer problematizes this enforced social split and the implicit message that woman is doomed to failure in meeting society's dual demands.

While her initial interest in pornography was formal and artistic, this working out of societal expectations also led to a deeply personal consideration of her own sexuality and assisted Amer in exorcising the negativity she experienced as a Muslim woman in relation to her own body.[28] "Religious people—my family, my culture—" she explains, "do not present the woman's body as something beautiful. By looking at pornography over and over again, it's a way to exorcise that negativity."[29] In this cultural context, expressions of sexuality were taboo.[30] Her paintings, Amer continues, "are a way to say it's fine, it's not bad . . . . I can do it, even if my mother doesn't like it."[31] Pornography, then, for Amer is a form of rebellion against all forces that attempt to police the body and desire. These forces include, but are not limited to, the Islamic prohibitions of her Egyptian childhood, during which time dating and sexual experimentation were out of the question. While she acknowledges the limitations of her own upbringing, she sees pornography as a purgative release from repressive cultural constraints, whether Muslim or Western.

28 Carly Berwick, "Behind the Veil," *ArtNews* (September 2006): 124.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

The images in these works are taken from magazines like *Hustler*, which Amer peruses for images that she finds sexy. She specifically looks for women who are posing erotically and/or are involved in explicit pornographic acts, whether masturbating or in lesbian contexts. Once selected, she traces the women onto vellum paper for future use, when she eventually transfers them onto the canvas or uses them as source material for works on paper. Amer's figures are predominantly high-heeled, garter-belt-wearing, dildo-wielding, self-pleasuring subjects with long hair, parted, pouty lips, and big heavy-lidded eyes. Despite displaying such stereotypes of fetishized female sexuality, as critic Hillary Sheets observed, "the lusty, vivacious women in these images seem hardly victimized or dirty; somewhere in her process Ms. Amer reclaims a sense of their strength and sexuality."[32] Porn, traditionally made by and for men, is transformed via Amer's intervention. By selecting these particular women, freeing them from an objectifying context, resituating them into an all-female space, and depicting them through the feminine form of embroidery, Amer transforms them into the basis for her *écriture féminine*.

32 Hillary Sheets, "Stitch by Stitch, a Daughter of Islam Takes On Taboos," *New York Times* (November 25, 2001).

This combination of form and content, with its tension between the domestic and the erotic, the male site of painting and the female cast of characters, and appropriated male fantasies and explicitly self-sufficient female *jouissance*, was the artistic language that Amer had been searching for: a perfect *écriture féminine*. Amer had found a way to "write the body" successfully, as Cixous had outlined so emphatically in her canonical text "Castration or Decapitation?" Insisting that women must first recognize and then assert their *jouissance* in order to subvert phallocentric oppression at its deepest level, Cixous declared: "First she would have to *speak*, start speaking, stop saying she has nothing to say! . . . Speak of her pleasure and, God knows, she has something to say about that."[33] Women's bodies and sexual pleasure are offered as a starting point for female self-consciousness because they have been absent or misrepresented in male discourse. If woman can articulate her *jouissance* without end in new languages (or "sexts"), then she can establish a point of view, a site of *différence*, from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be deconstructed. Moreover, in discovering her own language and pleasure, she can transition from the position of passive, silent object to active, speaking subject—a move that Cixous predicts could alter history and the entire structure of human relations.

33 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 50–51.

Amer, like Cixous, views her message as a universal one: all women must reclaim their bodies, their sexuality. Hence the women one encounters in Amer's paintings and drawings are meant to be archetypal representations of a universal "she." Rather than try to represent the Everywoman through diversity, Amer has chosen to follow the format of her sources and allow the uniformity of stereotypes to stand in for the universal through the consistency of the enforced sexual ideal. Just as in the *Hustler* magazines she utilizes, each of her figures is almost identical: skinny, blonde, white. When asked about this, the artist explains that this is, of course, a practical result of the recurring clichés encountered in porn magazines where this "type" of women predominates. "I never wanted," she continues, "to speak about one race of women in particular so I represent Western white women as the dominant group to speak about women in general."[34]

34 Amer as quoted in an email to the author.

The self-conscious exploration of a shared, and traditionally unexpressed, female sexuality places Amer in the context of other artists reclaiming pleasure and even porn as a feminist statement, such as Annie Sprinkle and Tracey Emin, among many others. As members of what is often termed "third wave feminism," these artists assert the potential of porn as a site of female empowerment. As Amer said in an interview in 2000, "I don't see [pornography] in a harsh light, in terms of exploitation or critique. Rather I see it as something beautiful and warm, a source of pleasure. Feminism can

be empowered by seduction."[35] This stance on eroticism is very closely aligned with her contemporary, Tracey Emin, who is known for her works with explicit and unapologetic sexual content, including an aptly named work, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995*, 1995, a tent with appliqued names covering the interior (Fig.26). Likewise, post-porn performance artist Annie Sprinkle inspires women to become the active producers of their own pleasure through her public presentations of masturbation and female ejaculation, as well as her staging of and participation in sex workshops.

Once Amer discovered this new language with which to speak about and for all women, her embroidery style also changed, moving decisively away from the neat outlines of the domestic series. Whereas prior to 1992 she had "replaced the pencil with needle and thread," now she would begin to conceptualize the *thread as paint*. Theorist and artist Olu Oguibe noted this qualitative shift in his thoughtful essay on Amer's work from 2001, and likened the shift to writing: "as if the artist has abandoned the metered poetry of her earlier work in favor of free verse."[36] Oguibe cites Amer's *A Happy End*, 1992, as an example of the artist's new technique and describes, in particular, the increasingly erratic lines encountered within its construction (Fig.27).

By 1993, Amer's threaded drips had become even more expressive and a new texturality emerged, despite the fact that very little paint was being applied to the canvas, only colored thread. As Amer explains, "From 1993 to 1995, I did not want to paint at all. I only wanted to paint with embroidery."[37] During that three-year period, she produced a large series of untitled paintings in which her "free verse" threadwork became heavier, looser, and gained compositional prominence. As a result, the work became more painterly, with the embroidery mimicking the dripping, flowing liquidity of paint. In many of the works, long loops and strands are left dangling from the carefully sewn lines, often obscuring the erotic images depicted beneath—a breast, a hand, a face would emerge from behind the threads but rarely coalesce into a coherent image. This is visible in *Untitled (Les ronds)* and *Untitled (Green Elizabeth)*, both from 1996, in which excess thread is pulled over the embroidered line drawings and secured with a gel medium, semi-obscuring the self-pleasuring female forms (Fig.28 and Fig.29). Once developed, this technique of "hide and seek," or flickering absence-presence, became a staple in Amer's paintings.

This new more painterly use of embroidery and strings eventually grows more explicit in its quotation of Jackson Pollock's famous drip technique, as is perhaps best epitomized in his *Autumn Rhythm (No. 30)* from 1950 (Fig.30). That this dialogue with the tradition of Abstract Expressionism begins at the same time as her introduction of porn images is striking, and indicates the confidence that Amer found in her new combination of form and content, such that she felt prepared to engage with high-modernist painting and the implicit masculinity of its history. Having discovered her *écriture féminine*, she was now ready to occupy that territory and insert herself into the lineage from which she felt she had been excluded. Indeed, in a 2002 interview with curator Rosa Martinez, when Amer was asked whether there is a political position behind her choice of abstract painting, and the language of Abstract Expressionism, in particular, she responded at length, emphasizing the significance she places on gender in this act:

The history of art has been written by men in practice and in theory. Painting has a symbolic and dominant place inside that history, and in the twentieth century it has become the major expression of masculinity, especially through abstraction. The geometric abstraction of Mondrian, Albers, Stella, or the Minimal art movement reflect the geometrical organization of the world as a paradigm of the rational qualities attributed to men. Pollock and Abstract Expressionism . . . are also a big metaphor of masculine energy and power.

For me, to defend the choice of being a painter and to use the codes of abstract painting, as they have been defined historically, is not only an artistic challenge: its main meaning is occupying a territory that has been denied to women historically. I occupy this territory aesthetically and politically because I create materially abstract paintings, but I integrate into this field a feminine universe: that of sewing and embroidery. By hybridizing those worlds, the canvas becomes a new territory where the feminine has its own place in a field dominated by men, and from where, I hope, we won't be removed again. In those abstract surfaces I inscribe figures of women taken from pornographic magazines where male fantasies are represented, and in this way I do a double re-appropriation.[38]

Amer's deliberate quotation of Pollock's drips places her in the direct art historical lineage of other artists interested in evoking the gestural style of Abstract Expressionism or debunking the hyper-masculinity of its "ejaculatory drip." Because of his position as the mythic "genius" of post-war painting, Pollock was viewed by artists who came after him as *the* critical figure with whom they must contend. After Pollock's death in 1956, artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Robert Morris, and numerous others wrestled with the implications of the mythology of Abstract Expressionism, and its "macho" Action Painting branch, in particular. But Amer's playful mockery of Pollock's drip appears more aligned with feminist artists such as Shigeko Kubota, Carolee Schneemann, Louise

35 Amer as quoted in *Elle Décor* (February–March 2000): 65.

36 Olu Oguibe, "Love and Desire: The Art of Ghada Amer," *Third Text*, Vol. 55 (Summer 2001): 68.

37 Valencia, 32.

38 Amer in interview with Rosa Martinez in *Make* (July 2002): 73.

26. Tracey Emin,
everyone I have ever slept with 1963-1995, 1995

27. Ghada Amer,
A happy end, 1992

28. Ghada Amer,
Les Ronds, 1996

29. Ghada Amer,
Untitled (Green Elizabeth)
1996

30. Jackson Pollock,
Autumn Rhythm No. 30, 1950

Fishman, Karen Finley, Mona Hatoum, Janine Antoni, and Elaine Reichek, who have focused their critique on the gendered sexual implications of its "masculine energy and power."[39] Whereas Lichtenstein's *Little Big Painting (No. 6)* of 1965 offers a deadpan response to the obsessive subjectivity and emotional excess of Abstract Expressionism by presenting a magnified view of a gestural brushstroke, complete with the signature Pollock drips in the style of a cartoon strip, and set against a grid of benday dots, Schneemann's performance, *Up to and Including Her Limits* of 1973, by contrast, presents a direct commentary on the sexualized nature of Pollock's physicalized painting (Fig.31 and Fig.32). Suspended naked above her canvas, Schneemann manually raised and lowered herself while "stroking" the surrounding floor and walls with crayons, accumulating a web of colored marks, vestiges of the body's energy in motion. In a related performance, Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* from 1965, the squatting artist painted a canvas with a brush that she had inserted into her vagina, presenting the analogous female gesture to what could be considered Pollock's "penis paintings" (Fig.33).

Like Schneemann and Kubota, Amer provokes questions about the mythology of Pollock's "drip," and in her transgressive usurption of it she does not merely reproduce it but turns it on its head and challenges the sexual mastery upon which it is based. That she began to adapt this style to her thread-work at approximately the same time as her introduction of porn as content, seems, then, not incidental but to have come out of a natural understanding that, in addition to painting in general as a masculine space, the psycho-sexual expression of Pollock's technique in particular could be a powerful site for a feminist reclamation of sexuality. Because Amer's drips are literally bursting forth from embroidered figures of masturbating or otherwise eroticized women, she is making explicit the drips' connection not only to the bodily action that produced Pollock's painted drip, but the psychological and sexual position of mastery that it implied—Pollock's admired technique, after all, required standing over the canvas, dominating it, ejaculating onto it, in perfect control of one's "materials," while the passive recipient of that "expression" was positioned beneath.[40] In her transgressive mimicry of this effect, the relationship between the source of the sexualized gesture and its meaning is playfully problematized. Having been wrongfully assumed to be passive sexual objects, do the masturbating women in Amer's paintings finally have the means to ejaculate back? Or has Amer uncovered the hidden women that Pollock imagined lurked behind his canvases, as he moved or "performed" his technique above them? In this light, the fact that *her* drips are produced by the violent penetration of the canvas by her needle is not without significance either. Is she herself claiming the position of mastery, and violating the site of painting, which she has repeatedly ascribed as masculine, with her own mini-phallus?

Beginning in 1995, Amer's dialogue with American painting opened up to include other high modernist masters besides Pollock, such as Joseph Albers, Frank Stella, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Andy Warhol, among others. Always using her stable of appropriated porn women as her figurative base, Amer modulates color and compositional structure to take on the recognizable form of famous paintings or produce works "in the style of" these icons of art history. *La Ligne*, 1996, is a raw canvas cut vertically by a Barnett Newman "zip" of embroidered nude females; *The Grid*, from the same year, quotes from Joseph Albers's series, "Homage to the Square" (Figs. 34 and 35). Her interest in American painting, which first peaked in 1983 when she visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York, became a central concern once she moved from France to America, first for an artist's residency in North Carolina in 1996 and then to New York later that year, when her work in this style began gaining worldwide recognition.

Up until the late 1990s, Amer's works in dialogue with the so-called "masters" were compositional and rarely involved applying any actual paint to the canvas. However, by 1997, Amer began to feel artistically trapped and was worried that her art was turning into "a system."[41] So, instead of merely painting with embroidery, she decided to combine painting and embroidery more fully. Talking about this stage of her artistic development, Amer notes, "To me painting is a male tool . . . . (That is OK, I love painting!!) And embroidery as I said is a woman's tool . . . . So I wanted to put both languages together."[42] This critical decision to combine these two tools allowed Amer to claim a unique artistic language and to produce stunning and entirely original effects in her subsequent work on canvas.

From this point forward, Amer began to dialogue overtly with high modernist American painting *as painting*. Whereas beginning in 1992 Amer's thread-work had taken on a new texturality that mimicked the painterliness of Abstract Expressionist drips a la Pollock and by the mid-1990s had begun *compositionally* dialoguing with some high modernist American painters, from 1997 onward, the paint itself was beginning to mimic the painterliness of Abstract Expressionism in combination with the gestural threading to increasingly dramatic effects. *Big Drips*, 1999, unites the colorful, painted, waterfall-like drips of post-painterly abstract painter Morris Louis with five embroidered horizontal friezes of a serially repeated self-pleasuring female (Fig.36). *Black Stripes*, completed a year later in 2000, quotes the big, black, horizontal gesture of Action Painter Franz Kline, replete with painted drips, intersected by four vertical rows of masturbating female figures embroidered into the

39 Ibid.

40 For more information on the gendered implications of Pollock's drips, see Amelia Jones, "The 'Pollockian Performative' and the Revision of the Modernist Subject," in *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998: 53–102; and Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in Helaine Posner, ed., *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, exh. cat., Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1995: 31–42.

41 Valencia, 32.

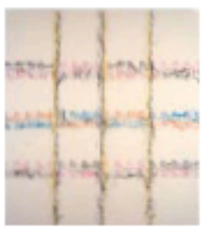
42 Valencia, 32.

31. Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Big Painting*, 1965

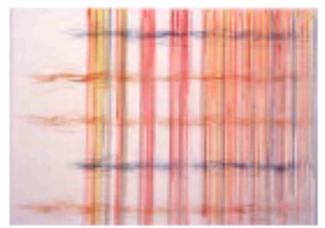
32. Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and including her limits*, 1973

33. Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, 1965

34. Ghada Amer, *La Ligne*, 1996



35. Ghada Amer, *The Grid*, 1996



36. Ghada Amer, *Big drips*, 1999

canvas and topped off with Amer's own signature threaded drips (Fig.37).

It is important to understand, however, that despite their initial similarity to the familiar masterpieces of the abstract canon, her works are not simple rehearsals of the writhing lines of post-war abstraction. Amer's works in dialogue function as *ambivalent homages*, neatly paralleling Amer's own ambivalence about her relation to this history and the tug she feels between her veneration of these "great" artists and her frustration with the sense of exclusion enforced through the canonization of the white, Western male's point of view. Her studied compositions express this tension by simultaneously copying and mocking their source material, revealing that the repressed female point of view is literally their foundational structure—both in the figural content of the naked women and the formal medium of embroidery. This tension between admiration and critique marks Amer's work as a transgressive versus a reproductive mimicry, as an *almost the same but not quite*. Not simply interested in acknowledging or building off of art historical paradigms, she wants to insert her embroidered medium into the aesthetic of inherently masculinist practices—such as modernism, Abstract Expressionism, and high modernism—violate their rational and presumptively abstract worlds, and challenge their claims to authority. Like Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine before her, Amer uses the deconstructivist strategy of postmodern appropriation precisely to de-mythologize the masculinist territory of post-war art.

Considering Amer's determined search for a specifically feminine artistic language and her intentional carving out of an all-female space within the masculine sphere of painting, the sudden appearance of collaborative works with artist and one-time boyfriend Reza Farkhondeh would seem to be an inexplicable detour from that project. Appearing in the title of many of Amer's works from 2000 on, the acronym "RFGA" indicates this change but does little to explain its significance. The visual style of the work remains indelibly Amer's and yet, one must ask, how does authorship, specifically an *écriture féminine*, function when a man's brushmarks are added to the conversation? In navigating a complex new element of the creative process, Amer again unknowingly aligns herself with Cixous.

Farkhondeh and Amer had met as art students in Nice in the late 1980s, where they were both attending art school. They dated between 1988 and 1995. After moving to New York together as friends in 1996, Farkhondeh suffered from ongoing bouts of depression. During one of these periods in 2000, he found himself inspired to add to one of Amer's paintings-in-progress. When Amer returned from a trip to find that Farkhondeh had applied the grounds to several of her paintings, rather than being angry at this intrusion, she was delighted. She nurtured his emotional return and made space for him within her artistic project. Over time, Farkhondeh grew more confident in his own mark-making—formally, he was a shape-maker and she a line-maker. Amer, in turn, felt that the elements he added were pushing her paintings in a new direction through a kind of "unspoken correspondence."[43] And so began their *pas de deux*, a dance that continues today, with hundreds of collaborative works, including paintings, drawings, prints, and video. Demonstrating an alternative to the dominant models that emphasize individual success and, therefore, competition, Amer was unthreatened by the sudden entrée of Farkhondeh into her artistic space. As Amer explains, "In the RFGA paintings, Reza is working *within* my language, always contributing to it. He has become my muse, in a way."[44]

This potential for a different kind of partnership was anticipated by Cixous in her writings on *écriture féminine*. Cixous used psychoanalysis to show how the zero-sum game of the masculine economy has been based on the young male's Oedipal struggle within the family. For the little boy, owing his life to his parents is always a debt that he wants repaid, so he can be free from obligation (and presumably the guilt of wanting to kill the Father and possess the Mother to whom his life is owed). Explaining this fear further, Cixous writes: "Obligation is submission to the enormous weight of the other's generosity . . . and a blessing is always evil when it comes from someone else. For the moment you receive something, you are effectively open to the other, and if you are a man you have only one wish and that is to hastily return the gift, to break the circuit of an exchange that can have no end."[45] The male psyche experiences this debt as an inequality, and this difference in strength is perceived as a threat, making all exchange a site of competition with an inevitable winner and a loser. A female economy, Cixous argued, would overturn this state of perpetual competition. The female child does not suffer from the castration anxiety, because she is instead defined by her "lack" of the phallus. Because of this, for her, loss, debt, or difference do not equal self-annihilation; her identity is not centered in one symbolic site of power, the phallus, so she is less afraid of giving herself away. Emanating from this "lack of lack," the either/or binary of the male economy could be replaced by an economy of plenty, one that would engender a form of giving that is not diminished by the gift itself.[46] This endless potential for giving is parallel, for Cixous, to women's libido that has the potential for endless pleasure, and can come and come again, without fear of being spent or destroyed by the partner. In opening her creative process to Farkhondeh's interventions, Amer seems to be operating in this mode of giving without fear of loss or self-annihilation, while her own content is an illustration of the coming without end that forms the basis for just such an economy.

43 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author.

44 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author.

45 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 48.

46 Cixous, "Laugh of the Medusa," 888.

37. Ghada Amer,
Black stripes, 2000

This can be seen in one of their most striking collaborations, *Big Black Kansas City Painting—RFGA* from 2005 (Fig.38). Farkhondeh's ground of black and blue tonal modulations is partnered with Amer's signature embroidered women, which are barely discernable behind the incredibly long, white looping strings adhered as vertical and sideswiped drips to the canvas. A large work, the overall impression is an expressionistic dance, indisputably inspired by Pollock, but entirely Amer's own, without fear of debt or loss in the exchange between male and female artist. Her formal language is not affected by Farkhondeh's intervention of the fluctuating painted background, but reacts and plays off it in its verticality and the loose, open brushstrokes that guide both the painted surface and the glued drips. There is room here for both; if anything, the white thread pops more vibrantly, Amer's voice more prominent than ever.

Around the same time that Amer began her collaborative work with Farkhondeh, she also started to introduce larger-than-life, monumental female figures into her paintings. Typically first outlined, cartoon-like, in colored watercolor pencils, and then embroidered over in matching tones, the dominant presence of these massive women contrasts with the hide-and-seek style of much of the previous work and moves the pornographic subject matter to the fore. The figures' size and the heightened clarity of the sexual content can have a variety of effects, depending on how Amer chooses to use them, but is also dependent on the viewer's subjective position. One critic, Germano Celant, argues that, from 2000 on "all of [Amer's] works assert themselves as an act of life, flaunting female power. . . ."[47] For others, perhaps uncomfortable with such overt female power, the larger-than-lifesize erotic figures may appear threatening, overpowering the gaze that would seek to control and contain them. These monumental females certainly dominate the canvas, moving outward in a show of force that impresses itself onto anyone who approaches.

In *Femme Salle de Bain*, 1998, one sees the painted blue silhouette of the kneeling legs of an oversized woman in high heels with five vertical threaded drips of flowers (Fig.39). In *KSKC*, 2005, the painted silhouettes of the same naked, crouched woman repeated several times dominate the large canvas and are supplemented by long gestural strands of thread (Fig.40). The central figure's thick-thighed legs are opened toward the viewer, revealing her sex through spread fingers, while behind and around her other figures masturbate. These new gigantic females overwhelm each canvas spatially, often barely confined by the picture frame, and are unlike Amer's other images in which women are arranged serially in cookie-cutter-like repetition, obscured within the tangle of threads and abstract painted undertones. In these and other paintings like them with oversized women, Amer's aim is clear: to demonstrate that these women are not imprisoned in their bodies, but actively possess and joyously inhabit them.

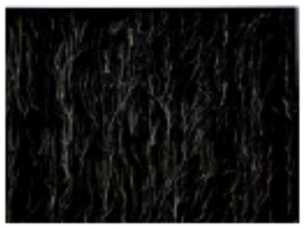
More recently, Amer has combined these monumental female figures with her longstanding interest in fairytale characters. *Knotty But Nice*, 2005, is an orgiastic painting of several large women masturbating amidst giggling dwarves from Disney's Snow White pictured in colorful silhouette (Fig.41). The dwarves look around, seemingly startled at the availability of such sexual pleasure, perhaps more accustomed to the company of a woman who dusts the house while singing of how happy she is to clean up after them. The women, for their part, appear quite blissfully unaware of the little men. One of Amer's most striking works in this vein, *And the Beast*, 2004, juxtaposes two line drawings of the presumably innocent Belle from Disney's Beauty and the Beast with two full-frontal standing porn models in washed-out green and pink, respectively (Fig.42). Meanwhile, the entire canvas is dominated by the black outline of a reclining woman, head thrown back, receiving oral sex. Rather than provide an impossible contrast, the two spheres of female ideals infect each other here—Belle's flowing hair, wide-eyes and slightly open lips are too close to those of the porn women for the similarities to be missed. The forward incline of Belle's unnecessarily voluptuous breasts and receding, impossibly-small waist create the same gesture of offering that the standing figures have combined with the act of reaching down towards their own genitals. Why do children's images of princesses look so much like the male erotic ideal? How innocent are these fairytale images to begin with?

In combining female fairytale characters with images from pornographic magazines, Amer exploits the latent sexual content within children's stories and tales to demonstrate her conviction that "children have sexuality that we do not want to see. . . . [It] is an element that we are born with, not something that we acquire."[48] This notion of infantile sexuality is certainly not new, having been most famously articulated by Freud in his writings. In his 1905 essay "Infantile Sexuality," Freud first put forth his thesis that from their earliest entry into the world infants exhibit signs of having erotic drives that they satisfy through dispersed sensory pleasures such as breastfeeding, thumb-sucking, playing with their mother's ear, and so forth.[49] Rather than seeing children as innocents who are later corrupted, Freud believed that infants begin with this latent sexuality that is later differentiated, through identification with either the mother or father, and then socialized into normal or abnormal behavior later in life. Amer picks up on this thinking by literally merging the expressions of this later behavior with one of the key social mechanisms by which its nature is formed.

47 Germano Celant, "Self-embroidery," *Ghada Amer*, exh. cat., Milan: MACRO, 2007: 62.

48 Amer as quoted in an email to the author.

49 Sigmund Freud, "Infantile Sexuality," *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000: 39–72.



38. Ghada Amer,
The big black Kansas City painting RFGA, 2005

39. Ghada Amer,
Femme salle de bain, 1998

40. Ghada Amer,
KSKC, 2005

41. Ghada Amer,
Knotty but nice, 2005

42. Ghada Amer,
And the beast, 2004

Numerous works on paper by Amer from this period also demonstrate this strong visual juxtaposition between childhood imagery and adult subject matter. *Souvenirs d'Enfance (Memories of Childhood)*, 2000, for instance, shows a happy young boy and girl, running toward the viewer; juxtaposed over that image is a silhouette of a woman masturbating (Fig.43). In another, *Tinkerbell*, 2004, the mischievous winged character of the famous Peter Pan novel happily flits around two images of women performing oral sex (Fig.44). Like her contemporaries Kiki Smith, Paula Rego, and Miwa Yanagi, Amer is interested in the psychological and mythic side of fairytales and children's stories. Yet she juxtaposes her images with X-rated motifs, making her specific address the sexual content and messaging of these tales. Whereas Kiki Smith's lithograph of Little Red Riding Hood depicts the grandmother and child in a sweet embrace standing atop the wolf's bloody carcass (Fig.45), Amer's work of the same theme (produced with Reza Farkhondeh) shows a red threaded silhouette of a kissing female couple with two grandmothers, standing atop wolves, arms upraised, running toward each other as if they too will kiss (Fig.46). While Smith impresses upon the viewer the violence of the story, Amer's work aligns with an analysis of the story provided by Cixous, which identifies Little Red Riding Hood's journey off the path as a parable of a young girl's exploration of forbidden sexuality.[50]

50 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 43–44.

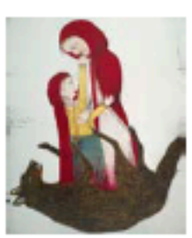
Amer's pornographic and at times slightly humorous fairy tale scenes share more with the work of Nicole Eisenman than the previously mentioned artists. Both Amer and Eisenman have taken female characters, like Alice in Wonderland, and sexually empowered them. In Amer's drawing, *Alice*, 2003, the title character is depicted, multiple times, in crayola-crayon-like colors, lifting up her dress skirt; around her are embroidered masturbating females (Fig.47). In this context, via juxtaposition, Amer's Alice becomes the naughty Lolita, quite aware of her ability to tempt and tease. Similarly, Eisenman's drawing, from 1996, shows Alice in a cutesy little dress, standing below and between the legs of a monstrously huge, thick-thighed figure of Wonder Woman whose arms are thrown up in a gesture of defiance (Fig.48). Below, Alice is performing oral sex on Wonder Woman, her face hidden beneath her mistress's panties. Like Amer, Eisenman has taken a supposedly innocent young fairy tale character and revealed her as a pleasure-seeking sex kitten.

The important difference between these works by Amer and Eisenman is the narrative, or lack thereof. As in all of Amer's work in this vein, she de-contextualizes the appropriated, fairy tale imagery, pulls her characters from their original narrative scenes, and deposits them into a free-floating pictorial space, with the only frame of reference being the work's title and/or the recognition of the character herself. In *Snow White Without the Dwarves*, 2008, five enormous female figures are depicted in day-glo colors in a horizontal frieze format, two of whom are a clothed Snow White with her signature hat, while the others are a naked porn star repeated three times (Fig.49). The five figures tilt their heads identically, in unison, while another oversized figure, in silhouette, splays her legs to reveal her hairy orange vagina to the viewer, and ostensibly to them. As in earlier compositions, body parts begin to blend into visual puns, as figures overlap and one person's arm becomes the curve of another's breast. However, despite the characters' apparent interaction in these paintings, there is no awareness between them. They remain decontextualized from their prior story—a porn or fairytale scene—as well as their current surrounding, never coalescing into a new narrative.

In all of these works, whether in dialogue with childhood myths, fairytales, pornography, or the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, Amer has successfully challenged the dynamics of hetero-normative and masculinist texts. She has activated the suppressed female *jouissance* and demonstrated that all cultural scripts need to be examined for their masculinist foundations and erotic subtexts. While best known for these visually provocative, painterly works, this feminist analysis is also the basis for the other most prolific area of Amer's production: text-based works that literally examine the written word and the suppressed feminine within.

43. Ghada Amer, *Souvenirs d'Enfance*, 2000

44. Ghada Amer, *Tinkerbell*, 2005

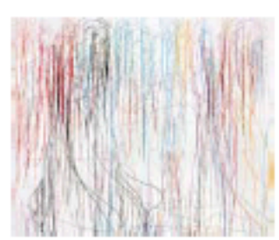


45. Kiki Smith, *Born*, 2000

46. Reza Farkhondeh and Ghada Amer, *Grandma*, 2006

47. Ghada Amer, *Alice*, 2003

48. Nicola Eisenman, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1996



49. Ghada Amer, *Snow White without the dwarves*, 2008

TEXT-BASED WORKS

With my written works I always take the "masculine" language or language of "authority" and copy it as if women (especially me) do not have a language of their own. That is why I copy texts, definitions, quotations, etc. This is also why I use porn magazines.

—Ghada Amer[51]

51 Amer as quoted in an email to the author.

Since the late 1980s, Amer has produced text-based works that have challenged the masculinist "language of authority" by literally appropriating the male voice and combining it with the feminine language of either embroidery or gardening, its sculptural equivalent. She appropriates and re-presents texts from multiple sources where men have spoken for women, about their qualities and desires, and where the woman has gone missing. The first and most consistent sources of these works have been dictionary definitions of words, the second, myths of love and romance, and the third, fairy tales and historical texts. Amer speaks three languages—Arabic, French, and English—and has strategically used this ability to select between them for each work. This multilingual background has given her an appreciation for the differences between languages and, at the same time, a cross-cultural awareness of the power their usage exerts over forms of knowledge, and what can and cannot be articulated.

One of her first known text works, *Untitled (Le Lys)*, 1989, was a small construction upon which she transcribed with stencil and pen the dictionary definition of the word lily, which includes its status as "a symbol of purity," above a plastic heart adhered to the surface (Fig.50). This collage of drawn text and found object predates Amer's use of embroidery, but initiates her interest in the dictionary's power to privilege certain interpretations, such as the lily's association with purity, that have gendered implications. Amer focuses on dictionaries that are assumed to present the "universal" definitions of words, but in fact have always been written by men, and, by extension, highlights the absence of women's experiences from the very foundation of language. Since men have defined all the words that are at one's disposal, she wonders how can one even conceive of, let alone articulate, an experience outside of that system of masculinist thought. Once Amer consciously decides to use embroidery as a feminine artistic language, she combines it with an interest in undercutting this masculine authority of language. *The Dictionary Definition of Love According to the Petit Robert*, 1992, challenges the expertise of the Petit Robert (the French equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary) with her re-presentation of its definition in loose, multicolored threads, while also questioning whether women's experience of love is subsumed or proscribed by that definition (Fig.51). The illegibility of this and many of her later definition-works, through the tangle of threaded drips and run-on lettering, thwarts the communication and authority of the text. This critical visual disruption disallows the presumed clarity of written language and blurs the delineation of this word to one confining, and controlled, meaning. At the same time, the feminist tool of embroidery foregrounds the issue of gender, asking who is to say what love is, man or woman? Why is love, on the one hand, taught to be the central concern of women, and yet is never hers to define? Amer goes on similarly to question the gendered associations of such words as pain, desire, and torment, consistently asking why women's perception of these words is suppressed at the level of so-called textual knowledge.

Moving beyond the fundamental control of words, Amer looks at other defining texts such as myths, fairytales, historical records, and religious sources. In 1997, she produced an embroidered sculptural installation titled *Majnun Leila*, which means "driven mad by Leila" in Arabic (Fig.52). Based on the Arabian fairytale of the same name, which is widely recognized as the Romeo and Juliet of the Islamic world, the story tells of the moon-princess, Leila, who was married off by her father to someone other than Qays, a man who was desperately in love with her, resulting in his madness. For the work, Amer embroidered seven storage closets with the poetic declarations that love-stricken Qays wrote to his beloved Leila. In appropriating this story, Amer is particularly interested to point out the critical absence of Leila's desires from the narrative. According to Amer: "Even in the story about the romantic love that Majnun had for Leila—a story told so that every Arabic woman can dream of being loved like this—Leila never expresses her love for Majnun. We are simply told that she loved him. Majnun was written by a man, but unfortunately, the way we love and expect to be loved is directly taken from this experience."[52] To emphasize this absence, Amer consciously used the type of garment bags that would typically fill a woman's closet, that most private and interior of all her domestic spaces, as the site in which to inscribe Majnun's words. Even here, she has no voice of her own and yet her presence is undeniable as the words hang literally in her domain, having become hers through Amer's transcription.

52 Amer as quoted in interview with Cassel, 37.

The concept of the absent-present female and men speaking for and about women is also examined in another installation, *Private Rooms*, 1997 (Fig.53). In this work Amer chose to navigate the complex terrain of representations of women in the Qur'an, the Islamic book of divine guidance, which was orally relayed to Muhammed by the angel Gabriel, and then recorded by

50. Ghada Amer, *Lys*, 1989

51. Ghada Amer, *The definition of love in the dictionary*, 1992

52. Ghada Amer, *Majnun*, 1997

53. Ghada Amer, *Private Rooms*, 1998

his male companions. Throughout the Qur'an's 114 chapters, some references to women are laudatory and loving; others are violent and repressive, while others still are quotidian. As an ensemble, then, they expose the multiplicity of attitudes toward women found in the religious text. The *sourates* (verses), however, are written mostly as directives to men, not women—the "you" pronoun is theirs—and set up more as instructions to them about how to treat women in the specific situations delineated, e.g. on matters relating to modesty, marriage, inheritance, polygamy, dowries, servitude, incest, and slaves of war. The woman functions in the Qur'an, then, as an Other; He is the privileged Subject who speaks for and about the woman, her qualities and desires.

Amer's installation highlights this point brilliantly. The work consists of fifteen suspended brightly–colored storage units upon which Amer embroidered all of the Qur'anic verses that reference women. She inscribed the text in French rather than the original Arabic because the words of the Qur'an are sacred when written in Arabic and there are strict rules about copying, excerpting, and taking sections of it out of context. The material used throughout the work, a soft-colored satin, was chosen by the artist because it was reminiscent of a bride's bed used in the Arabic countries, and the title of the work refers to the fact that the Prophet Mohammad had a "private room" for each wife. Looking to historical text, here the most sacred in her culture, in *Private Rooms* Amer has isolated and then figured forth the woman within, literally cataloguing the ways in which Islamic religious tradition has outlined her role therein.

In addition to excavating woman from dominant texts like the Qu'ran, Amer is also interested in discovering historical writings that included women speaking for themselves but that have been repressed in their entirety. Uncovering an Arabic text from the twelfth century titled *Gawami al Lada*, or *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, Amer found that while women's pleasure has traditionally been the most forbidden of subjects, there have been transgressions of this prohibition throughout history and across cultures. Written during a flourishing intellectual period in Islam, *Gawami al Lada* was intended as a moral and ethical guide and was considered a highly sophisticated document that combined the literary, philosophical, and medical knowledge of the time. Though accepted during the time of its creation, the manual was later suppressed by an increasingly conservative society. In 2001, Amer produced a large-scale installation that addressed this complex terrain of Muslim female sexuality (Fig.54). For her sculptural installation, Amer purposefully chose to copy excerpts that pertain to issues of female sexual pleasure, beauty, and virginity, including passages from chapters such as, "On praiseworthy aesthetic qualities of women" and "On the advantages of a non-virgin over a virgin," both of which pertain to issues of female sexual pleasure, beauty, and virginity that were historically censored. Working with a team of women and men in Egypt, the excerpted texts were sewn in calligraphic script, in English (because Amer was not able to find an Arabic copy of the text at that time), using a traditional machine-made embroidery technique of Indian origin known as *sirma*, onto the slipcovers that wrap around a total of 57 boxes, which Amer designed in the shape of traveling trunks. One fragment reads:

> A woman's orgasm comes down from her head whereas a man's orgasm comes down from his back. Consequently, the fact that she has less liquid and is slower in ejaculation can be attributed to the fact that the distance between the head and the vulva is longer than that between the back and the penis. Bunyan Dakht was asked which finds greater pleasure in sexual union: a man or woman? And she answered: We, women, find such pleasure in sexual union that when God created. . . .

As the above transcription demonstrates, the passages were quite sexually explicit. Yet what is most enlightening about Katib's *Gawami al Lada* as a manuscript is that women were asked at the time for their opinions on matters of love and sex—as is made evident in the quotation above because, when Bunyan Dakht is questioned, she clearly states that women achieve greater pleasure in sexual union than men. In this excerpt and others chosen by Amer for the sculptural installation, it is clear that women in medieval Muslim society were far from being sexually repressed. Indeed, while Amer's initial interest in the manuscript stemmed from a curiosity about its disappearance, the more she studied it, the more she realized how open-minded literature had been at one time and how, centuries later, it had become increasingly conservative. *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure* seeks to call attention to that contradiction. It also aims to reaffirm Islamic women's sexuality and explore the possibility of attributing a new sense of cultural and social agency to women by demonstrating their once historical ownership of their bodies and their celebration of *jouissance*.

Another installation addressing historical texts, this time literary ones which take as their subject romantic love, is *Love Park*, produced for the 1999 Site Santa Fe in New Mexico (Fig.55). Drawing from a wide range of famous Eastern and Western sources, such as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Schopenhauer, Shakespeare, and Sheikh Nefzawi's *The Perfumed Garden* (a fifteenth-century erotic handbook for men), among others, Amer created a public project that foregrounded the contradictory nature of descriptions of love. Amer conceived of a promenade in an abandoned lot with a series of

54. Ghada Amer,
Encyclopedia of Pleasure
(installation view), 2001

55. Ghada Amer,
Love Park, 1999

ten wooden, anti-loveseats, reconfigured so that the partners were seated in opposite directions. She installed each seat between two trees like a Romantic tableau from the nineteenth century and in front of each placed a sign with a quotation on the contradictory nature of love from one of these "authoritative" sources. "In love, only conquest and breaking-up are interesting; the rest is filler," one sign reads. "Experience shows us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but looking at the same direction," reads another. Amer's stated intention was for people to walk along the promenade "not quite grasping the meaning of love."[53] Hence the work's ironic title.

53 Martinez, 74.

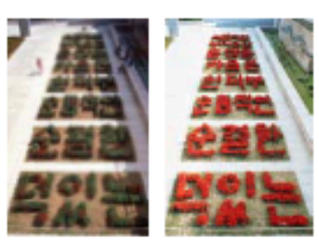
Amer considers *Love Park* one of her garden projects, a series of outdoor installations she began as an attempt to translate her idea of "women's work" from embroidery on canvas to an outdoor, sculptural equivalent. As she explained in an interview with Teresa Millet in 2004, when she was first asked to do an outdoor project in the South of France in 1997, she was searching for a visual language that could be an equivalent for her painting but in the out-of-doors. "I thought that I could find some translation, something I could do instead of embroidery, but something that had the same idea that it would work well. So I thought, 'What can a woman do outside?' Gardening was a woman's activity like embroidery. This is how I decided to create gardens."[54] The garden, with its multiple associations with fecundity, femininity, seduction, and private enjoyment, also provides an ideal vehicle for the extension of Amer's commentaries on love, eroticism, and gender clichés.

54 Valencia, 32.

These commentaries can be seen in her garden project made for the Metropolitan Museum in Pusan, Korea, a work related to "feminine" stereotypes within local culture. For *Women's Qualities*, 2000, by means of an informal questionnaire, Amer asked men and women participating in the exhibition to explain what "qualities" they attributed to women (Fig.56). "Virgin," "submissive," "intelligent," "sexy," "long eyelashes," "rich," and "good at presenting food" were qualities that Amer discovered the Koreans whom she interviewed most associated with females. Taking these phrases and words, she then transcribed them in Korean script into seven flowerbeds on the grounds of the museum using a red flower that blossomed only two months of the year. While the qualities presented may in some cases be locally specific, the universality of the need to conform to an ideal fits in with Amer's strategy from her porn paintings of using the ubiquity of enforced female stereotypes to make work that addresses the cross-cultural subjugation of women.

Continuing her alignment with the *écriture féminine* project, Amer conceives the gardens as feminine writing within the public sphere. Still part of a self-consciously feminist project, she not only identifies the garden as an outdoor domestic space, but uses that space to speak of and for women. In Amer's hands, however, a garden is never conceived of as paradise on earth. It is always a site for protest and contestation—against gender clichés, love's incomprehensibility, and later, war and politics. A prime example of this is a 2001 project in Barcelona that highlighted the economic plight of women around the world (Fig.57). Along the Rambla del Raval, Amer created a gigantic outdoor installation in oversized, red plant pots filled with sand that were shaped like individual, capital letters to spell out the phrase, "Hoy el 70% de los pobres en el mundo son mujeres (Today 70% of the poor in the world are women)." It was a sentence that she had found in a book of statistics while conducting research for the project. She chose to install the work in the Rambla del Raval because it is a socially depressed part of the city with a high immigrant population, poor people, and prostitutes. Its long Rambla, or thoroughfare, is a recent urban project meant to help clean up the zone and to regenerate it socially and architecturally. Amer's use of a phrase that focused specifically on women, therefore, was a particularly strong statement in that context. While global economic inequalities are generally evaluated geopolitically, concentrating on differences between the North and the South and between the developed countries and the Third World, Amer decided instead to highlight the discrepancies between the sexes in the social distribution of wealth, calling attention to the fact that we are also far away from achieving sexual equality. As Amer explains, "This . . . garden had a clear political message and it was transformed into a sand garden where children could play under their mothers' eyes on such a disturbing quote."[55] Moreover, the fact that the sentence could only be read in its entirety from a distance or from the air—it was 70 meters long—alluded to the need for perspective or critical distance in order to comprehend the reality of this global problem.

55 Martinez, 74.



56. Ghada Amer,
Womens Qualities, 2000

57. Ghada Amer,
Today, 70% of the Poor In the World Are Women, 2001

The unconscious is always cultural and when it talks it tells you your old stories, it tells you the old stories you've heard before because it consists of the repressed of culture. But it's also always shaped by . . . what is strange, what is outside culture, by a language which is a savage tongue. . . .

—Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?"[56]

Amer's longstanding focus on gender as her primary concern changed, as did so much else, after September 11, 2001. Her work, which had always engaged with gender politics, became increasingly attuned to other issues in the aftermath of that tragic event. As an Egyptian-born Muslim living in New York City, her life was irrevocably altered by that day's ongoing impact: "From 1996 when I moved to New York until September 11th, I was so happy. In the United States, no one knew I was a Muslim. It was a vacation for my spirit. I never had anything to justify, be shameful of, or hide from anyone. . . . Well, now, the vacation is finished. Back to the beginning and now it's even worse!"[57] "Before," she continues, "Americans thought Islam was some kind of tribal religion but now it's related to Al Qaeda and terrorism."[58]

While this shift in her lived experience has recently inspired Amer to create a series of highly charged works about world politics, terrorism, and the wars in the Middle East, works on Muslim identity have never been absent from her oeuvre. From her earliest experiments in art school combining her self-portrait with appropriated images of Cleopatra (Fig.05), Amer has not shied away from working with her Egyptian heritage as part of her artistic project. Her obsession with *Venus*, a magazine for the veiled woman, expanded to other works related to veiling, including *I © Paris*, 1991, and *Borqa'*, 1997. After a wave of terrorist bombings linked to Islamic militants shook Paris in 1990 and 1991, Amer and her Iranian artist-friend Ladan S. Naderi performed a piece involving their attendance at art openings while fully veiled, as mandated by some Islamic countries, but not by Islam itself. Their intention was to expand the Parisian public's perception of conservative Muslims to include individuals who, like average Parisians, were interested in cultural events. Amer and Naderi then staged the *I © Paris* series of photographs, which feature the two artists and a third woman posed as fully veiled tourists in front of quintessentially Parisian tourist spots, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, Sacré Coeur, and the Jardin de Tuileries (Figs. 58, 59 and 60).

Also inspired by growing anti-Muslim sentiments in the 1990s, *Borqa'* represents Amer's first use of Arabic language and script in her work (Fig.61). Despite the work's title, the article of clothing presented in the piece is not the *borqa'* used to swath the entire body but only the head covering, referred to as *naqqab* in Amer's birthplace of Egypt. The artist stated in 2007, "I made *Borqa'* in 1997 for myself. It is my own borqa' in case I was forced to wear it."[59] Choosing a style that appealed to her own taste, Amer commissioned a skilled lacemaker to sew a short definition of the word "fear" in Arabic into the transparent area meant to cover the nose and mouth—"fear, to be afraid of someone, to be afraid of something. . . . " The beautiful embroidered calligraphy, in lace and pearls, alludes to a voice that is silenced by the veil. The presence of lace also challenges the conservative associations of veiling by virtue of its own association with women's lingerie.

A marked difference in Amer's artistic production emerges post–September 11, however, as her concern clearly broadens from a gendered investigation of cultural differences and misunderstandings to a critique of the violence and hatred that emerge from these failures of cross-cultural communication. These works use strategies from across the spectrum of Amer's previous productions as well as engage new mediums, such as video and performance.

The first to address directly the new "war on terror," *Peace Garden*, was installed at the Miami Beach Botanical Garden in 2002, a few months before the U.S. invaded Iraq (Fig.62). For this work, Amer planted a monumental "make love not war" peace sign, ironically alluding to the anti-war movement of the 1960s that many world leaders, and war-makers, of today took part in. Amer's peaceful garden, though, was not what it appeared. During the opening cocktail reception, the artist and two assistants in waitress uniforms invited guests to feed live worms and crickets to the three varieties of carnivorous plants that made up the garden. In other words, *Peace Garden* may have looked inviting and calm from afar, but up close it was deadly—a metaphor, she says, for the hypocrisy evidenced in contemporary politics, one that would allow pacifists of yesterday to become warmongers of today.[60] The following year, Amer produced another anti-war garden, *Love Grave*, 2003, for the Indianapolis Museum of Art (Fig.63). Again referencing hippie symbols, such as Robert Indiana's iconic sculpture, this was a simple yet powerful work for which she dug the word "LOVE" into the earth six feet deep. Like an open tomb, this inversion of typical memorials that try to suppress the reality of death was dedicated by the artist "to everyone who died because of this stupid situation the world is in today."[61]

More recently, Amer has tackled the difficult subject of terrorism itself. In 2005, she created a site-specific installation titled *The Reign of Terror* for the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College in which she investigated definitions of "terror," "terrorist," and "terrorism" derived from

56 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 52.

57 Amer as quoted in an interview with Catherine Millet, "La Broderie, Outil Politique?" in *Art Press*, no. 25, 2004: third page. (Translated into English by Amy Brandt.)

58 Amer as quoted in an email to the author.

59 Amer as quoted in an email to the author: "I made *Borqa'* in 1997 for myself. It is my own borqa' in case I was forced to wear it. There is a square in the area of the mouth and nose where I asked a lace maker (a very sophisticated one) to make handmade lace and Jade pearls of the definition (a very short one) of the word 'fear' in Arabic. This is the first time I used Arabic in my work. The definition starts like this: 'fear, to be afraid of someone, to be afraid of something, etc . . . .'"

60 Valencia, 33: "I was thinking that the sixties generation was completely hypocritical and had now returned to a conservatism greater than their parents. All of those beautiful ideas were nothing, they evaporated, and now history repeats itself stupidly!"

61 Valencia, 33.

58, 59, 60. Ghada Amer, *I Love Paris* (in collaboration with Ladan S. Naderi), 1991

61. Ghada Amer, *Borqa*, 1997

62. Ghada Amer, *Peace Garden*, 2002

63. Ghada Amer, *Love Grave*, 2003

American, English, French and Arabic dictionaries over the past few centuries (Fig.64). Working with a group of students, Amer traced the root, history, and definition of the word with the intention of trying to understand why this powerful word, in its current overuse by the press, has lost its meaning. During her research she discovered that one of the several English definitions was derived from a translation of a French word, from the period during the French Revolution (1793–94), when Robespierre instituted a "reign of terror" in which all citizens suspected of being counter-revolutionaries were sent to the guillotine. In Arabic dictionaries, however, she found that there was no official definition for "terrorism." For the final project, which took over the cafeteria and lobby, she installed bright rose-colored wallpaper resembling British colonial décor upon which she inscribed the numerous English dictionary definitions of "terrorism." She also created cups, bowls, plates, and paper tray liners for the Center's cafeteria with the phrase "Terrorism is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries."

Amer expanded on these ideas in a recent project at the Francesca Minini Gallery in Milan in 2007. For her installation there, titled *Le Salon Courbé*, the artist created an ostentatious, wallpapered sitting room, replete with two bergères, a canapé, and a handmade wool and silk carpet (Fig.65). She patterned her salon after the upscale ones encountered in the homes of wealthy families across Egypt in which romantic, post-colonial, "courtly" furniture—known colloquially as Courbé—is prominently featured.[62] However, as with all of Amer's works, a pleasurable exterior contains hidden thorns. The traditional carpet was inscribed in Arabic with the single Arabic definition of "terrorism;" the two bergères and the canapé were delicately and exquisitely embroidered in soft pinks and rose-colored threads with the same definitions, even more obscured by thread; and the whole room was wallpapered in the same bright rose-colored wallpaper used in the installation at Wellesley College. Like the viewers of her *Peace Garden* who are shocked into realizing that all is not what it appears to be at first glance—when peace signs become carnivorous and pacifists become warmongers—the viewers of *Le Salon Courbé* are stunned that the plush decorations and seemingly decadent lounge quickly become a potent political statement.[63]

It was at this same exhibition that Amer first presented the collaborative video, *An Indigestible Dessert*, 2007, documenting a performance conceived and scripted by artist Reza Farkhondeh and produced jointly by Amer and Farkondeh (Fig.66). The catalyst for this new work came in the form of a commission from American Patrons of Tate, who asked her to prepare a dessert for their second annual dinner in a New York City restaurant.[64] With the help of a pastry chef, Amer and Farkhondeh designed edible effigies of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, notoriously recognized as allies in the "war on terror" in the Middle East, after which Farkhondeh proposed a performance around the consumption of these cakes.[65] The ten and a half-minute, single-channel video is scripted in three sections: the creation of the effigies, the performance, and the destruction and consumption of the cakes. After the bodies of Bush and Blair had been made—using white chocolate for the head, hands and feet, while the remaining parts of the bodies were filled with strawberry and raspberry mouse, which suggested blood—a performance began with Amer dressed in black standing before the cakes while two masked actors entered the scene in the guise of Bush and Blair; the two actors circulate arrogantly around the tables and, arriving at Amer's side, then kneel down and deliver a half-hearted apology for forgiveness. An Angel of Death enters the scene and declares that "via the power of attorney" their apologies cannot be accepted. Amer then unwraps a mallet from a white cloth and proceeds to smash the heads of Bush and Blair, after which the audience is invited to consume the destroyed but still tasty dessert, turning the political action into a carnivorous experience.

Also included in the Milan installation were six paintings embroidered with the dictionary definitions for related words—a diptych with the definitions for "fear" in English and Arabic and paintings with definitions for "security," "peace," "freedom," and "love" in Arabic (Figs.67,68,69,70,71, and 72). By choosing four words with optimistic, non-violent associations for the Arabic paintings, Amer hoped to remind viewers (and herself) that Arabic, her first language, should not only be linked to fear and terror as is being perpetually broadcast by the media. The fact that the panels for "fear"—and in the sitting room the word "terrorism"—are inscribed in Arabic *and* English reminds viewers that languages from many countries are associated with these politically and emotionally loaded terms. The artist titled these works in English but gave the definitions in the paintings in Arabic. In so doing, she dramatizes the disconnect between Eastern and Western cultures by simultaneously highlighting linguistic barriers and blurring positive and negative associations within each of these cultural contexts.

While this work may seem farther removed from the feminist project of *écriture féminine*, it is a sign both of Amer's growing confidence in her own artistic language and also of her right to speak of and for herself. Here, she demonstrates that she is able to take her multiple artistic techniques for mining the tension between gendered cultural codes and apply them to cross-cultural tensions as well. The works use embroidery to undermine the authority of texts, in particular, definitions of terror that are not compatible and may actually be mutually exclusive. The outdoor projects take the safety of the manicured,

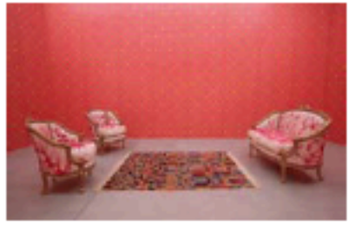
62 For an excellent analysis of *Le Salon Courbé*, see Laurie Ann Farrell, "Out of Darkness to the Light: Meaning, Context and Movement in the works of Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh," *Ghada Amer: Le Salon Courbé*, exh. cat., Milan: Francesca Minini Gallery, 2007: 33–36.

63 "My idea behind *Le Salon Courbé* is that you need to understand both languages to understand the piece totally. When you understand English you will not necessarily understand the Arabic definition and you will wonder what it would mean, and vice versa. The same with the four definitions in the paintings." (Amer in a conversation with the author.)

64 The event was organized as a fundraiser, for which Amer and two other invited artists, Teresita Fernández and Vik Muniz, were individually commissioned to design a dessert with the help of pastry chef Guido Mogni.

65 The performance was held on September 28, 2006.

64. Ghada Amer,
The Reign of Terror, 2005



65. Ghada Amer,
Le Salon Courbe, 2007

66. Ghada Amer,
An Indigestible desert, 2007
(with Reza Farkhondeh)

67. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Security in Arabic, 2007

68. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Fear in Arabic, 2007

feminized garden and use that assumed security to indict our cultural penchant for violence. And while the prominent bodies of her painted pornographic ladies may be absent among these works, the right of the body to pleasure—that is, the pleasure of living free from pain, fear, terror, or death—is in fact at the heart of Amer's implicit plea in her post–9/11 works. Having moved through the body and found feminine *jouissance*, she is now empowered to use her voice to speak of anything that concerns her and demand pleasure for not only for herself, or womankind, but for the world at large.

ON AND ON . . .

Woman is that who is always hidden.
—Ghada Amer[66]

A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over.
—Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?"[67]

In spite of this essay's attempt to map Ghada Amer's artistic journey across a span of twenty years, her working style is not one that easily lends itself toward this end. While her technical approach and range of outlets have developed over time, there is a diversity of techniques combined with a recurring interest in similar subject matter that makes her artistic project look more like multiple ellipses churning forward and back in order to move forward anew. While she is always adding strategies to her toolkit, she does not reject earlier possibilities and ideas and often comes back to them with renewed energy. This recirculation allows for the maintenance of her signature style without staleness and has helped keep her from getting trapped into any one "system," as she was once concerned would happen. Her most consistent subject over the course of the last twenty years has been women, and her choices of form and structure are ones that seek to include a feminine sensibility—whether embroidery or gardening or wallpaper or lace-making. This combination of subject and sensibility, in the hands of such an intellectually curious and visually inventive artist, has proved capable of achieving limitless variations. Amer continues to raise the question of women's visibility in relation to everything from art history to pornography, fairytales to religious texts, and has constantly reinvented ways of representing and analyzing this core idea.

Looking at her most recent works, one sees her returning to a theme from years ago with an advanced technique, or exploring an innovative subject with a familiar technique, and, of course, expanding outward from her central theme to incorporate diverse source materials and cultural references. One new artistic frontier is her exploration in prints and drawings, including many which are now attributed to her and Reza Farkhondeh and credited by their full names, rather than as the acronym RFGA, marking the further development of that collaboration as well. In one such series, Amer's familiar porn ladies and Disney characters are paired with never-before-seen iconographic references. In *Apple Picking for Adults*, 2007, repetitions of the same pair of Hindu deities, in the traditional marriage pose, are stenciled across the drawing, submitting another cultural mythology to Amer's examination of ideologies of love (Fig.73). These couples are surrounded by an embroidered

66 Amer as quoted in interview with Millet, third page. (Translated into English by Amy Brandt.)

67 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 53.

69. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Peace in Arabic, 2007

70. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Freedom in Arabic, 2007

71. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Love in Arabic, 2007

72. Ghada Amer,
The Definition of the Word Fear in English, 2007

73. Ghada Amer,
Apple Picking for Adults, 2007

outline of a masturbating female and a Disney-esque girl plucking an apple, invoking the narrative of lost innocence from the Garden of Eden. In *We Are Destroying Planet Earth*, 2007, another work produced with Farkhondeh, one sees them addressing the increasingly serious danger of global climate change, further broadening Amer's political critique (Fig.74).

In a quite different experiment in printmaking, *"Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe" Devant La Forêt*, 2007, Amer, again collaborating with Farkhondeh, has taken her ongoing dialogue with the "big boys" of art history in a new direction as well (Fig.75). Having previously focused exclusively on the abstract tradition of twentieth-century high modernism, this work applies her analytical eye to one of the "masterpieces" of the nineteenth century, Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe* from 1863. In the aquatint and etching, the two artists deconstruct Manet's famous painting, separating its elements into two sections. On the left, they present a natural landscape, echoing the forest setting of the original; however, on the right, they have replaced the famed trio of figures—the unexpressive, naked woman flanked by two clothed gentleman—with a figure from Amer's stable of porn stars. Freed from any male company, this coquettish woman is rather self-consciously enjoying her sexual prowess. Having turned Manet's genteel scene into one of Amer's signature porn compositions, she and Farkhondeh have gone even further, in fact emphasizing that it was always already an explicitly erotic painting, once again exposing the relationship between the supposedly refined history of art and the porn-like objectification of female bodies.

New explorations are visible in Amer's latest paintings as well. A recently begun canvas hanging in her studio is exemplary: a centrally–placed, naked pubescent girl, one arm raised over her head, looks coquettishly out at the viewer; around her flits an array of woodland animals, including a big-toothed, ogling rabbit, flying birds and chipmunks; to the right is a perky Snow White whose raised hand seems about to pinch the young girl's nipple. The background scene is appropriated directly from the iconic Disney film, depicting the critical moment in the story when the lost princess is found and comforted by the forest animals, who then lead her to the house of the Seven Dwarves. The composition is in its embryonic stages of development, meaning that Amer has just outlined the figures with her watercolor pencils and begun smudging and bleeding the lines with water to add a painterly effect. From here she may or may not add more layers of form before embroidering and possibly gelling the threads. Despite its unfinished nature, the work represents a few major departures for Amer. The inclusion of an actual scene from Snow White is a new movement towards narrative in her work, and represents a groundbreaking moment in her oeuvre that Amer is self-consciously making.

74. Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh, *We are destroying planet earth*, 2007

75. Reza Farkhondeh & Ghada Amer, *"Dejuner sur l'herbe" devant la foret*, 2008

While it is hard at this point to know how visible the full *mise en scène* will be because the painting is still a work-in-progress, the inclusion of a forest setting and a plethora of characters resists the previously decontextualized nature of her painted princesses and brings the specificity of the plot under scrutiny, examining it for its underlying psychological subtexts. Like Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White has ventured into the dark, forbidden forest alone. She must find her way out, and for the first time is alone. This storyline resonates with the narrative of a young woman's sexual coming of age—leaving the childhood safe haven to explore the unknown. In juxtaposing a specific scene from Snow White with the pubescent porn girl, Amer uncovers not only the latent sexuality of the story's protagonist, as she does in other works like *Snow White Without the Dwarves*, 2008, but she is also now figuring forth the hidden psycho-sexual subtexts of her journey through the narrative itself. She underscores this subtext by having the two main characters, taken from different sources, interact in a sexually explicit way. While singing to her animal friends, Snow White faces the seductive youth, and her elevated index finger, which traditionally supports a singing bird, now deleted, seems about to tweak the girl's nipple. By the simple act of removing the signature bird, Amer has turned Snow White's innocent gesture into an act of foreplay.

Furthermore, the prominent placement of a naked pubescent girl is unusual for Amer's paintings; though she has used this figure in other densely layered works, she has always kept her hidden in the mix. This placement, along with the narrative, indicates that she is now intentionally seeking to highlight something that she was merely comfortable hinting at before—whether in drawings such as *Alice* from 2003, which she considers to be diaristic, or in an obscured fashion in her paintings: the development of childhood sexuality and society's conflicted ways of addressing it. On the one hand, the central girl with her come-hither look is (shockingly) appropriated from *Hustler* as well, raising the question of men's desires and fetishization of under-aged girls. However, girls themselves at this age are already aware of their sexuality and have desires and drives of their own that society does not like to acknowledge. This simultaneous repression and encouragement of girlhood sexuality can be seen in the very characterization of fairytale heroines. Amer has commented specifically on the childlike qualities of characters presented as young women, stating that the female characters in fairytales, especially as they are represented by Disney, "are all little girls," the artist explains. "Especially when I draw them," she continues, "I notice that their expressions, clothes, and the size of their bodies are those of a little girl."[68] This representation is contrasted, however, with their low-cut blouses and tight-fitting dresses over voluptuous breasts that send mixed messages about

68 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author.

the age at which sexuality begins. Amer exploits this "barely legal" status of the *Hustler* girl to expose this aspect of the Disney heroines and, vice versa, shows how this strategic age confusion (in which an 18 year–old model is made to look like a pre-teen and a fairytale princess is the size of small girl with ample breasts) allows these figures to cater to what are considered unacceptable desires.

Discussing the introduction of a new narrative framework, Amer is already excitedly planning paintings that incorporate villainesses—Cruella de Vil, Snow White's stepmother, and so on—and a potentially amusing (and also degrading) scene of Snow White cleaning the dwarves' socks (as an almost absurd return to the domestic series from 1991–92), again spiraling backwards and forwards in an endless play through a myriad of old and new concepts.

At the same time that Amer is exploring new paths with her Disney characters, another 2008 painting points in a different, more personal direction. In *The Woman Who Failed to Be Scheherazade*, two monumental, big-bosomed women frame a black-and-white composition of jumbled naked bodies; the long strands of black thread have been horizontally gelled and the watercolor pencil with which Amer initially draws the figures has been dramatically bled across the canvas (Fig.76). While composed of monumental figures like her other recent works, there is something about the modulated coloring and shading around and within these statuesque women that has added a new three-dimensionality to the cartoon outlines. That this technique should appear in a work about Scheherazade has interesting implications—Amer has identified Scheherazade as one of her idols since childhood and admits to using her as a stand–in for herself within this new autobiographical work. Amer admires the legendary Persian queen from *One Thousand and One Nights* for her brilliant use of her intellect and storytelling, two assets that ultimately stayed her execution, and sees her story as an example of a woman who "controlled her body through her mind."[69] However, as the work's title references, this painting is about Amer's struggle *to be Scheherazade* during a difficult relationship when she wishes she had had more self-restraint. Despite the close affinity Amer feels for the story, this is the first time she has made a work directly invoking Scheherazade. It also inaugurates the first time that the artist has produced a porn painting that is so overtly characterized as a self–portrait.

These explorations in prints, drawings and paintings are just hints of what the future holds, initial experiments with innovative ideas that may or may not become major elements in the next phase of Amer's work. At the same time, an embroidered porn painting from 2007, *1,004 Nights to Forget*, is almost indiscernible from some of her earliest works in this style, such as *Untitled* from 1996 and *A Missed Kiss* from 2002 with their use of serial repetition, all–over composition, and soft-color palette (Figs.77, 78, and 79). And yet, the multicolored threads are a little longer, a little lusher, and the control of the gel as it swishes the threads a little freer. The work's title refers to a painful period in the artist's life when, after almost three years of no contact, an ex-lover telephones her, at which point she obsessively counts back the number of nights since she had last seen him, 1,004, hoping to forget them. One can imagine that coming back to the comfort zone of this initial format of her porn paintings with the mantra-like repetition of bodies might have provided cathartic familiarity during an emotional time. At the same time, comparing these tiny serial ladies to monumental fairytale figures or to the Scheherazade composition, one would think that *1,004 Nights to Forget* was a work from years' ago in a style she had left behind. Yet Amer is making these works simultaneously, and is not according a hierarchy to one style or another. Amer is unafraid of coming back to earlier ideas, as when her porn paintings looped back to her fascination with fairytales, and continues to experiment with all her accumulated techniques and variations of form, without insisting on a trajectory that marks later innovations as more accomplished.

In this final and critical way she embodies the shape and open-ended narrative structure that Cixous believed would be the ultimate mark of a successful *écriture féminine*. Producing texts without a beginning, middle, and end, feminine writing would remain forever open, never closing itself off or coming to a full stop; it would loop through time and overflow its borders. Precisely because Amer's project is so linked to the overflowing pleasures and desires of the female body, it makes absolute sense that her artistic project would itself be full of endless possibilities. Foreseeing the difficulty of mapping this kind of creative work, Cixous wrote, "A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending; there is no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read . . . a feminine text goes on and on and at some point the volume comes to an end but the writing continues . . . .."[70] So it is with Amer's artistic output.

Never wanting to become static, Amer is clearly now confident in her mastery of her own artistic language, such that she is able to experiment freely in multiple directions without losing her way, and thus, having found her voice, Amer is comfortable asserting her right to address whatever subject she wishes, ultimately fulfilling Cixous' utopian ideal of *écriture féminine*. Writing with exuberance and confidence, speaking of women and as a woman, generating texts that overflow their boundaries and producing an artistic project that defies conclusion, she continues to write the body successfully.

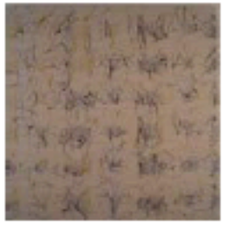
69 Amer as quoted in a conversation with the author.

70 Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 53.

MISSING IMAGE

76. Ghada Amer,
The Woman Who Failed to be Scheherazade, 2008

77. Ghada Amer,
1,004 Nights to Forget, 2007



78. Ghada Amer,
Untitled, 1996

79. Ghada Amer,
A missed kiss, 2002