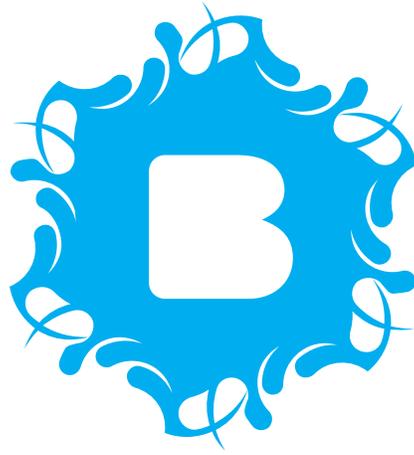


Exhibition Reviews:

***Ghada Amer: Love Had No End*, Curated by Maura Reilly,
Brooklyn Museum, February – October, 2008**

- 1. Press Release, Brooklyn Museum**
- 2. Karen Rosenberg, “Veiled or Naked: Scrutinizing Women’s Roles,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 2008.**
- 3. Alix Finkelstein, “Reinventing the Painted Veil,” *The New York Sun*, February 21, 2008.**
- 4. Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, Sonia. “Ghada Amer: Defusing the Power of Erotic Images.” *The International Herald Tribune*, March 12, 2007.**



December 2007

First Major Retrospective in U.S. of the Work of Ghada Amer to Open at Brooklyn Museum February 16, 2008

Ghada Amer: Love Has No End, the first major U.S. retrospective of the renowned artist's work, will feature some fifty pieces from every aspect of Amer's career as a painter, sculptor, illustrator, performer, garden designer, and installation artist. These include the iconic *Barbie Loves Ken*, *Ken Loves Barbie* (1995/2002), *The Reign of Terror* (2005), and *Big Black Kansas City Painting—RFGA* (2005), as well as a generous selection of works never before exhibited in this country. The exhibition will be on view February 16 through October 19, 2008.

While she describes herself as a painter and has won international recognition for her abstract canvases embroidered with erotic motifs, Ghada Amer is a multimedia artist whose entire body of work is infused with the same ideological and aesthetic concerns. The submission of women to the tyranny of domestic life, the celebration of female sexuality and pleasure, the incomprehensibility of love, the foolishness of war and violence, and an overall quest for formal beauty, constitute the territory that she explores and expresses in her art.

Organized in a chronological and thematic manner that reflects the stages of Amer's career over the past two decades, *Love Has No End* commences with her earliest sketchbooks that illustrate the genesis of her ideas about patterning and embroidery. The exhibition continues with a series of works from the artist's early "domestic series," followed by works examining fairy tales and other clichés about gender. In addition to the more iconic erotic paintings for which she is most famous, numerous works devoted to world politics are exhibited, including some of her more recent antiwar pieces.

Ghada Amer was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1963, and moved to France at age eleven. She earned a B.F.A. in 1986 and an M.F.A. in 1989 from École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche, Villa Arson, Nice, France. She now lives and works in New York City. These relocations are reflected in Amer's work. Her painting is influenced by the idea of shifting meanings and the appropriation of the languages of abstraction and expressionism. Her prints, drawings, and sculptures question clichéd roles imposed on women; her garden projects connect embroidery and gardening as specifically "feminine" activities; and her recent installations address the current tumultuous political climate. Despite the differences between her Islamic upbringing and Western models of behavior, Amer's work addresses universal problems, such as the oppression of women, which are prevalent in all cultures.

Brooklyn Museum

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Ghada Amer: Love Has No End is organized for the Brooklyn Museum by Maura Reilly, Ph.D., Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

A variety of education programs will be presented in conjunction with the exhibition. Visit www.brooklynmuseum.org for information.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$8; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$4. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

Veiled or Naked: Scrutinizing Women's Roles

Lost in the festival of branding that is the Brooklyn Museum's "©Murakami" exhibition, a retrospective of Ghada Amer opened quietly at the museum in

**ART
REVIEW**
**KAREN
ROSENBERG**

February. "Love Has No End," Ms. Amer's first retrospective in the United States, has plenty of glamour, sex and multicultural baggage, but no logos.

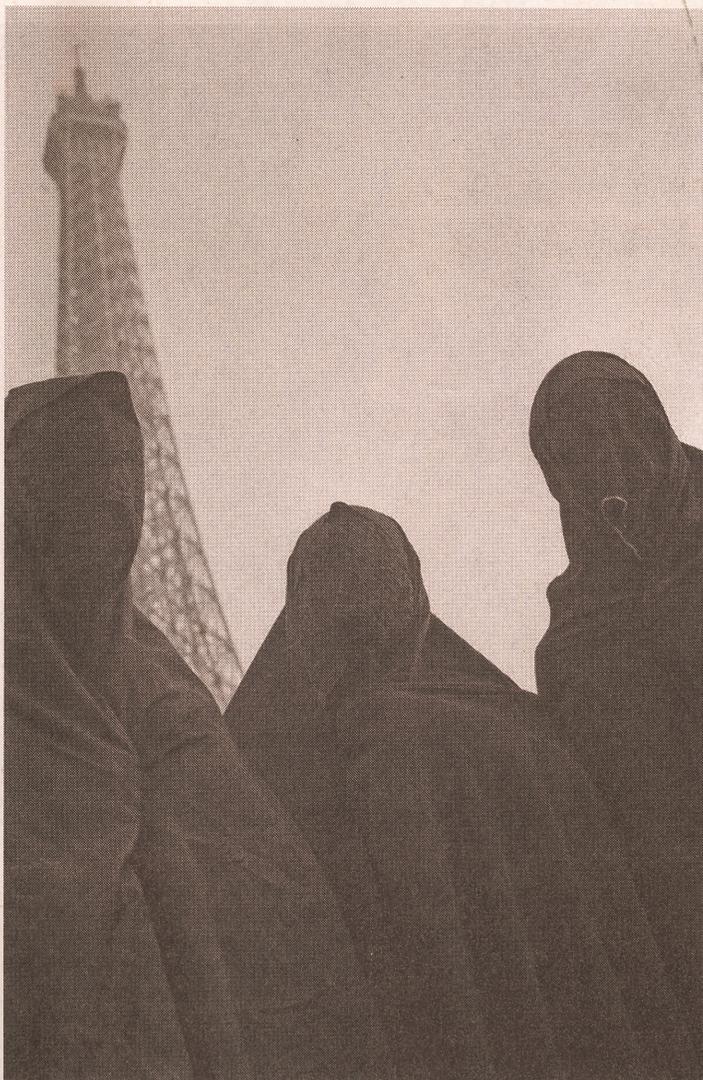
Shown in the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and organized by the center's curator, Maura Reilly, Ms. Amer's exhibition runs along the perimeter of Judy Chicago's installation "The Dinner Party." The location speaks to the way Ms. Amer dutifully internalizes an earlier generation of Western feminist art even as she flirts with the male gaze and collaborates, on occasion, with a man (the artist Reza Farkhondeh).

Ms. Amer was born in Cairo and educated in France from the age of 11 through graduate school; she currently lives and works in New York. Her art has been included in numerous group exhibitions on various themes: art about the Muslim world, feminist art, textile and fiber art. (Ms. Reilly included Ms. Amer in the recent survey "Global Feminisms.") Depending on the context, Ms. Amer's appropriation of images from pornography can come across as a scolding or a celebration. Ms. Reilly, to her credit, makes room for both interpretations.

Ms. Amer hit on her signature style of stitched canvases with dangling threads fairly early in her career; these paintings make up most of the retrospective, but a small selection of early works is illuminating. They show Ms. Amer taking tentative, coded steps to protest restrictions on women's fashion and role in professional society.

In late-1980s Cairo, Ms. Amer became fascinated with a fashion magazine, *Venus*, that used photomontage to give Western fashions a more modest appearance. (She has described it as "Vogue for the veiled woman.") Ms. Amer incorporated dress patterns from the back of *Venus* in a

"Ghada Amer: Love Has No End" runs through Oct. 19 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.



COURTESY OF GHADA AMER AND LADAN S. NADERI

"I ♥ Paris" (1991) is a photograph in the Ghada Amer show.

series of sketchbooks and mixed-media constructions. An untitled piece from 1990 displays two miniskirt patterns embroidered with gold thread; its frayed clusters bring to mind the subversive sensuality of Meret Oppenheim's fur teacup.

As did feminist artists of the 1970s, Ms. Amer fixated on sewing as an equivalent to male labor. "Five Women at Work," a series of small drawings from 1991, shows four women shopping, cooking, cleaning and mothering; Ms. Amer is an implied fifth.

The erotic and autoerotic imagery that figures in Ms. Amer's better-known paintings makes its first appearance in drawings from the early '90s, where it is often juxtaposed with renderings of doe-eyed Disney characters. There is something a little too pat

about these works, but they show Ms. Amer experimenting with the figure and forging a connection between drawing and embroidery.

As with the Disney drawings, Ms. Amer's embroidered canvases can seem too idea-driven — particularly when she refers to famous examples of abstract painting by male artists. "La Ligne" (1996) invokes Barnett Newman's zips with a loose vertical band of embroidery; "The New Albers" (2002) performs the same trick with Josef Albers's nested squares of color. A Twombly-inspired canvas with slanted scribbles of white on a black background feels less forced, perhaps because Ms. Amer's stitchwork is closer to line drawing and handwriting than to the splashes of a paint-

Ghada Amer

Love Has No End
Brooklyn Museum

brush.

Just when the revisionist formalism becomes tiresome, the exhibition detours into Ms. Amer's lesser-known sculptures and performances. These works share an affinity with the conceptual-political statements of Emily Jacir, a young Palestinian artist, as well as the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat's photographs and videos of veiled women.

In the performance series "I ♥ Paris" (1991), Ms. Amer and two friends posed for pictures in front of Parisian monuments while wearing head-to-toe veils — a simple but provocative stunt. The women are present but not quite there, as if their figures had been cut out of the photographs.

Works made since September 2001 are more overtly critical of the West's perception of the Muslim world. One such project, "The Reign of Terror" (2005), hinges on dictionary definitions of terrorism in various cultures. This site-specific installation originally at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College took the form of pink, green and yellow wallpaper bearing definitions of terror and terrorism, as well as disposable cups, plates and napkins printed with the words "Terrorism" is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries."

Dictionary definitions have found their way into Ms. Amer's stitched canvases, as in a quartet of pastel-colored paintings from 2007 that expound on the Arabic words for security, peace, freedom and love. The writing is in Arabic script, although the works are titled in English. These paintings smartly update the form of the embroidered sampler, substituting post-9/11 anxieties for Victorian homilies.

In other recent works, like "Heather's Degrade" (2006), Ms. Amer seems to have hit a plateau: pornographic images of women stitched onto paint-washed canvas, overlapped and obscured by loose threads so as to place erotic titillation just out of reach. Here her divergent interests — in female empowerment, Western abstraction and the veil — are woven into an impenetrable fabric.



A CHAT WITH THE ARTIST

Reinventing The Painted Veil

By ALIX FINKELSTEIN

Artist Ghada Amer had not seen a drawing of the human figure until she was 11 years old. But Ms. Amer, a Muslim born in Cairo, Egypt, quickly made up for lost time, studying life drawing with a passionate commitment to the female form at the École Pilote Internationale d'Art et de Recherche in Nice after her family moved to France.

Today, the results of Ms. Amer's efforts are on vivid display at the Brooklyn Museum, where the artist is enjoying her first major retrospective in America, "Ghada Amer: Love Has No End."

Ms. Amer has been the subject of several solo exhibitions in America, Europe, and Israel, as well as a participant in the Venice and Whitney biennials. Her sensuous paintings, patterned with delicate embroidery, juxtapose the ideals of high art against the realities of women's work. "I was looking for a medium," Ms. Amer explained, "that was associated with women, but could produce painterly effects." The artist remembers herself as a young Muslim art student who, though sheltered, did not hesitate to challenge the dictates of her teachers or enlist her art-making as a means of rebelling against her restrictive upbringing. When a male professor failed her in his painting class, she began to experiment with the medium of thread.

The works on view at the Brooklyn Museum, which included Ms. Amer in its 2007 blockbuster survey, "Global Feminisms," range from her first forays into the use of thread as a painterly medium to her more recent politically charged paintings. Also included are Ms. Amer's works on paper and photographs of her performance pieces and installations.

"Red Diagonales," on loan from Yoko Ono, exemplifies Ms. Amer's particular talents for transforming the visual pleasures of fine art into a titillating peep show. Broad brushes of black and red acrylic paint cascade down the canvas, while long-tangled strands of brightly colored threads partially obscure the hand-stitched outlines of nubile young women. "It's very much about myself — this work," Ms. Amer said. "I first began making these embroidered pictures be-

cause I wanted to learn about sex," she said, laughing. "My interest may have been related to my Muslim background, but I could have been Christian or Jewish. Everybody has problems with their sexuality."

Critics tend to interpret Ms. Amer's cross-disciplinary approach as a power struggle pitting the masculine muscularity of abstract painting against the feminine wiles of embroidery. But Ms. Amer admires the grand gestural brushwork of Abstract Expressionists such as Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock and views the unpredictability of the painting process as a necessary complement to the linear precision of embroidery. "Painting, for

Critics tend to interpret Amer's cross-disciplinary approach as a power struggle pitting the masculine muscularity of abstract painting against the feminine wiles of embroidery.

me, is expressionist," she said. "It's a moment. You don't know when it will end. It's not something you think about. It's just that you are upset, happy, or whatever you are. You have a very strong feeling and you go with this. It's messy and undefined. The thread is the total opposite of the paint. It's extremely structured and meticulous and repetitive. I like the tension between the two mediums."

Early in her career, Ms. Amer deployed thread as a means of accentuating the subjugated roles of women in society, depicting everything from porn stars to Disney princesses and demure housewives. But during her frequent returns to Egypt to see her family, both during and after her schooling, her attention shifted to the rising influence of religious fundamentalism and its encroaching influence on her own



FORM AND FUNCTION Ghada Amer at her show at the Brooklyn Museum.

family. Ms. Amer was baffled that some of her closest female relatives, educated women like herself, would choose to veil themselves. "Every time I returned, I noticed more and more veiled women. I felt that something was going wrong, and it was very scary," she recalled. The activity of her loosely hanging threads and the relentless drips of paint took on new critical significance. What was once a playful boudoir game of hide-and-seek became something more menacing with



HEUNGCHUL KIM

overtone of captivity and repression. "Barbie Loves Ken, Ken Loves Barbie," one of the most powerful works in Ms. Amer's retrospective, reflects the artist's increasingly pessimistic attitude. Ms. Amer repeatedly embroidered the childish refrain onto the stiff canvas surfaces of two full-body straitjackets, one female and one male, transforming the two archetypes of heterosexual bonding into a scene of human bondage.

Text has taken a pivotal role in

Ms. Amer's most recent work. For her "The Definition of the Word..." series, Ms. Amer embroidered four square canvases with the Arabic words for "security," "love," "peace," and "freedom." "I wanted to make sure for myself that they still existed in my mother tongue," Ms. Amer said. Like her earlier paintings, long strands of embroidery threads hang loosely over the stretched canvas, forcing the viewer to seek out the text and contemplate the possible meaning of the antique calli-

graphic forms.

But despite the politically provocative nature of some of her more recent work, Ms. Amer insists that the identity politics that preoccupy the art world were never a motivating factor for her. "I am a painter," she said simply. Yet she acknowledges that her desire to transcend her social status as an Arab woman in the Western world is, like the threads she sews into her canvases, inextricably woven into the fabric of her art.

Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, Sonia. "Ghada Amer: Defusing the Power of Erotic Images." *The International Herald Tribune*, Monday, March 12, 2007.

SINGAPORE — In 1996, the then-struggling Egyptian artist Ghada Amer made an unusual deal with an American lawyer: one of her paintings for a green card. In retrospect it was a good deal for both parties. Her permanent move to New York launched her career internationally and the "visa" painting, worth \$4,000 at the time, is now estimated at \$125,000.

Amer has made a name for herself with controversial work of exquisitely embroidered pieces exploring female sexuality. She is working on an ambitious set of 13 prints at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, pursuing a collaboration started in 2001 with the Iranian artist Reza Farkhondeh. She said she enjoys collaborating with this longtime friend because she feels their works complement each other. "He sees things in shapes and I see things in lines," she said. "My work also tends to be systematic. By working with someone else it give me the possibility of breaking the system and going further."

Given their explicit sexual nature, it remains to be seen whether the prints will be shown publicly in Singapore. At the end of the year, however, Amer is planning to show them at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul.

In the meantime, two of her pieces, "Checkers" (2006) and "The Encyclopedia of Pleasure" (2001), will be presented on March 23 as part of Global Feminism, the first show celebrating the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.

Afterward she will go to Rennes, France, to work on the installation of her first permanent garden — metal rods covered with roses spelling out, "Once upon a time in a far away land."

In May, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome will put on a mini-retrospective of Amer's work, and she will have a separate show at the Francesca Minini gallery in Milan, with a new installation work as well as a video on another collaborative work with Reza, "Indigestible desert," featuring the smashing of a 1.8-meter-long, or 6-foot-long, cake of George Bush and Tony Blair effigies lying side by side.

Amer's current work in Singapore continues the erotic themes she's been exploring for the last 14 years — images "lifted" from pornographic magazines, but blurred by the embroidery technique she uses on her canvas. Stitching in small point, she leaves the long, loose threads after knotting them on the front of the canvas, then uses a transparent gel to glue the threads on the surface. The effect is similar to paint dripping, a mass of abstract lines from far away that only reveals her erotic figures on closer inspection.

"She is one of the most important contemporary feminist artists today," Maura Reilly, curator of the Sackler Center, said in an e-mail. "She has taken the medium of painting, with its long history of masculine prerogative, and upended it by occupying its territory, and integrating into its field a feminine universe — that of sewing and embroidery. By re-appropriating pornographic images for her own means, she disassembles their power to arouse, hidden as they are beneath the veils of threaded drips."

While the artist sees herself as a feminist, she says she doesn't have a feminist agenda. "Actually, it's not easy for me to do this kind of work. It's not like I enjoy going to the porn shop. I am actually a prude," she said in an interview in the Tyler Institute studio. "I started doing it for myself. I wanted to break my own barrier, not the barriers of the West or the Muslim world. Everybody loves to see me as a Muslim, but they don't see it's not about Islam, it's about something else. I'm not trying to shock, it's not perverse, I'm not doing this with a political agenda. It just happens that I'm Muslim and a woman."

Amer started to use embroidery in her work early on. "I liked the idea of representing women through the medium of thread because it is so identified with femininity. I wanted to 'paint' a woman with embroidery, too," she said.

It can take up to three months for Amer to complete a piece,

so her body of work is limited. For her current work, she is confronted with the additional challenge of trying to use thread on paper, which is proving extremely difficult as the natural fiber breaks. "I do some embroidery on paper. But it is impossible to have it as intense as my canvas, and I am limited by the size of the paper," she said. "I still want to use thread, so we're experimenting with the paper to make it stronger."