

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review | Ghada Amer

Veiled or Naked: Scrutinizing Women's Roles

By Karen Rosenberg

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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 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.



Courtesy of Ghada Amer and Ladan S. Naderi

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

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 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 nestled 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 paintbrush.

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.

"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.