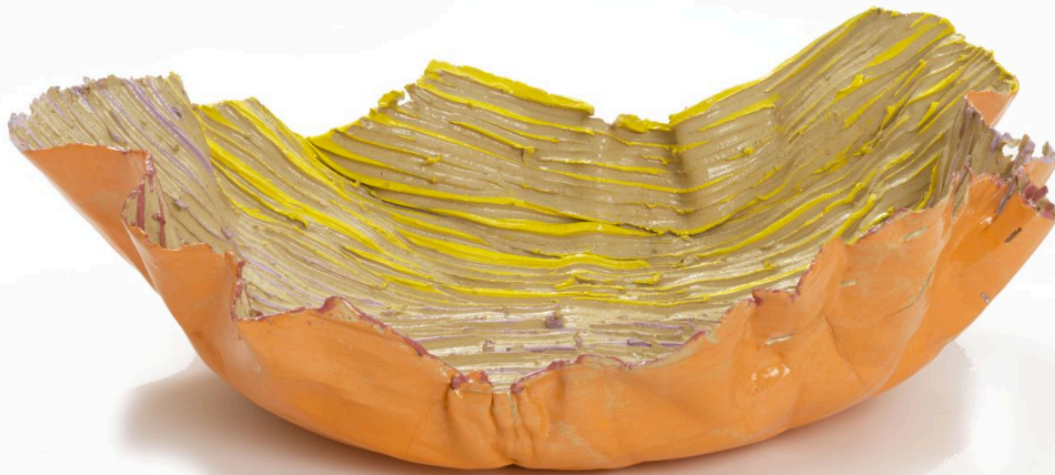


# Independent



## IN THE STUDIO WITH GHADA AMER

Staff  
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“All my work is about painting and history of painting,” explains multi-disciplinary artist Ghada Amer. Color is a signifier of paint and the act of painting, and across any medium that Amer works in, she ultimately spins into a painterly expression. This has not stopped Amer from expanding her practice to sculpture: in resin, bronze and now ceramics.

Typical of Amer’s development as an artist, “I came to ceramics as an accident, like always.” Amer was initially attracted to sculpture because “it’s such a great medium. It’s expensive and it’s permanent.” Undaunted, Amer produced a variety of large-scale works, but had frustrations with the limited color of the metallic medium; as she observes, “we cannot paint with bronze!” From these experiences, Amer realized the need to work sculpturally, while maintaining the color, expression and soul of her paintings. At the suggestion of her bronzer caster, she took a class at Greenwich House Pottery studio. Through her determination and connection to her teacher, ceramicist Adam Welch, the famed studio asked her to stay for a two-year residency that lasted until 2017.

That residency produced countless pieces—in fact, Amer hasn’t yet had the opportunity to exhibit the majority of her new collection. The 2020 edition of Independent New York has presented this opportunity. For her first showing with new representation, Marianne Boesky Gallery, the gallery will stage near twenty ceramics for its presentation at the curatorially-focused fair. Beyond a few glimpses of Amer’s recent work, Boesky’s showing of the spectrum of these pieces will be a first for Amer in her adopted hometown, New York. Last year, Cheim & Read, before its Chelsea-space shuttering, exhibited a few of Amer’s painted plates; and the following fall, Dallas Contemporary dedicated a room to these portraits of beautiful women washed on earthy clay. “I’m excited for Independent,” Amer says, “because I don’t need other pieces to explain these. In the beginning, people would ask me: what are you doing with those?” Amer would resolutely explain these new ceramics: “They are my thoughts.”



Ghada Amer, *The Gypsy Girl*, 2017, Glazed ceramic, 25 x 35 inches 63.5 x 88.9 cm, courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

Those familiar to Amer's works will know her thoughts have always been challenging ones. Her technically mesmerizing canvases—embroidered portraits of women, often naked and brazenly revealing the parts of their bodies that have delighted and terrified men for centuries—have flipped the script for form and subject in painting. "Everyone's so focused on the sexuality," Amer says, "I'm not even going to enter into this conversation anymore because my question is something else. My painting is more asking questions that don't have answers." Can a naked woman ever not be sexual? Can a portrayal of women engaged in sexual activity not be pornographic? These disruptions of perceptions and judgements are what Amer's work confronts. "Women are a subject that's been treated over art history only by men, through the gaze of men," she explains, "so I want them to dialogue with other male painters in a historical conversation. That's mainly what my work is and what my women are doing."

The ceramics feature some women kissing each other, others in deliberately provocative stances, but they also take on new forms, including technically precarious boxes and other gravity-defying 3D forms. Of course, these clay works are also awash with color. "In my ceramics, I paint—which you're not supposed to paint," she says, "I don't give a shit! It's a release for me." Because for Amer, her painting is political. Rather than responding to specific events or policy, the works explore politics and protest on a fundamental level.



Ghada Amer, *A Hidden Kiss*, 2014, Ceramic, 26 x 12 inches 66.04 x 30.48 cm, courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

Amer herself is an example of layered identity. Egyptian by blood, French raised, and for many years a New Yorker in residence, Amer's own background has invited the sort of demographic profiling, and reductionism, that can accompany complexity. "I've always been caged in my demographic," she explains. "I've been considered a 'woman artist', and even religious or 'Muslim', which is the worst because my work has nothing to do religion!" But has she seen a shift? "Now there are artists who look like me—woman, North African, whatever—and now we are just labelled 'artist'," she says, instead of the qualifying labels previously placed on anyone other than a white Western male, like 'African-American painter,' or 'woman artist'. The conversation may have slowly shifted to be more inclusive, with institutions following suit by staging shows more regularly that exhibit artists across all demographic backgrounds.





Ghada Amer, *The Black Knot*, 2014, Ceramic, 11 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches 29.2 x 31.8 cm, courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

There is still one area that, for Amer, demonstrates the needle hasn't moved too far from when she first started out. "The value of art is the value of the market," she says, "and this market is only for [white men]. ...It doesn't mean that women [artists] are less valuable than male [artists]". Although her list of accomplishments would belie that sentiment—representation now with Boesky, solo shows at the Brooklyn Museum, participation in the Venice Biennale and many others—a frank survey of the last decade shows that her accomplishments have not been as widely acknowledged as her male, market-making counterparts. But with the showing of these new pieces at Independent, alongside some very exciting opportunities in 2021 (wait for those announcements), Amer's work is firmly on the way to its rightful position in history. Ever-growing recognition for the artist and her multidisciplinary practice begs the question, who are the masters now?