

# the africa report



Ghada Amer in front of the MUCEM in Marseille, which is hosting her retrospective exhibition 'A Woman's Voice is Revolution'.  
Photo: Solene de Bony

## EGYPT – FRANCE: GHADA AMER IN MARSEILLE: ART DEDICATED TO THE FEMINIST CAUSE

BY NICOLAS MICHEL

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In Marseille, a vast retrospective showcases the work of this French artist of Egyptian origin, known for her commitment to feminism and her embroidered paintings.

An Arabic phrase forged in steel welcomes visitors to the gardens of Marseille's Fort Saint-Jean, overlooking the Mediterranean. The letters are filled with coal and are surrounded by bushes of Corsican helichrysum – the famous "immortal" plant with healing properties.

The phrase reads: "*Sawt al-mar'ati thawrd*" ("The woman's voice is revolution"). This is a deliberate corruption of a controversial hadith, "*Sawt al-mar'ati 'awrd*" ("The woman's voice is a source of shame"). This garden sculpture by the Franco-Egyptian artist Ghada Amer is a good introduction to her major retrospective in Marseille, *A Woman's Voice Is Revolution*, which runs through 16 April 2023.

"This work produced for the retrospective marks the entry of the Arabic language into Ghada Amer's garden sculptures," explains Hélia Paukner, co-curator of the exhibition with the academic and journalist Philippe Dagen.

"It is designed to appeal to a wide audience and was born of the artist's attention to the feminist demands of the Arab movements. The chosen phrase, where the modification of a single letter leads to a complete transformation of meaning, comes from a banner displayed during the 2011 demonstrations. The coal used inside the Corten steel letters is a reference to both the fire of the revolt and the pyres on which women considered witches were burned alive. But the immortal bush brings a soothing element to the entire work..."

Three locations for one body of work

In Marseille, in the south of France, the retrospective is spread across three different locations, a few hundred metres apart: at the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM), with *Ghada Amer, Orient-Occident*; at the FRAC Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, with *Ghada Amer, Witches and Bitches*; and at the chapel of the Centre de la Vieille Charité with *Ghada Amer, Sculpteure*.

This division, even if the places are close and it is very pleasant to walk in this part of the city, does not really make sense scientifically, as Amer's works have the capacity to engage each other in dialogue without repeating themselves – each time deepening, in a different manner, the questions related to femininity.



Ghada Amer, 'Curvy lounge', 2008. Wooden armchairs and sofa upholstered in embroidered fabric, carpet, printed wallpaper. 749.9 x 560.1 cm.

"I didn't want to have a thesis or thematic tour," says co-curator Paukner. "I wanted to place all the works in the situations in which they were created. They complement each other."

The scattering of the works among three spaces will undoubtedly put off some potential visitors, but those who are curious enough to wander through the different locations will be able to get a complete picture of the tenacious approach that has guided the artist since the beginning.

"My artistic work is **concerned with women**; not French women or Arab women, but all women, because it is a universal cause and struggle. The question of equal rights is a universal one. And it is not limited to the issue of the veil," maintains the woman who knows both how to conceal as well as to unveil herself.

### Veiling and unveiling

Born in 1963 in Cairo, Amer has lived in France since 1974 – her parents having moved to Nice to finish their studies. She herself trained first at the Villa Arson, then at the Institut des hautes études en arts plastiques. Academic coursework provided her with technical tools, but struck her most of all by what it did not offer: very few **women represented in Western art**, very few artists from the Near and Middle East... and the impossibility for the young artist to take painting classes "because of the small chances a woman painter in the 1980s and 1990s had of making a career".

"[Ghada Amer] deconstructs [...] the binary and schematic notions of "the East" and "the West" and has asserted herself as a major voice in the post-colonial and feminist issues of contemporary creation," the curators write today.

### Silhouettes and visible threads

For some years now, Amer has been best known in the art world for her embroidery work. Her canvases, sometimes partially painted, are mostly decorated with embroidered female figures. The coloured threads used to delimit their silhouettes are not cut, sometimes partially and sometimes completely obscuring the bodies represented.

In the exhibition catalogue, Émilie Bouvard writes in her essay *'Le corps, le cœur, sur un fil* (The body, the heart, on a thread): "Since the early 1990s, Ghada Amer has been depicting young, naked, Western women on large canvases, who look us straight in the eye while masturbating, legs spread, vulva exposed. Some duos are kissing or pleasuring each other. These women are embroidered with coloured threads. [...] The bodies are not full but drawn".



'Girls in White', Ghada Amer, 2004

While embroidery has become a frequent feature of contemporary art in recent years, it was not at all the case when Ghada Amer, in the late 1980s, took an interest in a magazine sold on the streets of Cairo, *Venus*, which offered patterns and models of Western dress "adapted" to the "modesty" of the Cairo population – at a time when the weight of taboos was becoming heavier and heavier.

"Amer used this material to create new collages," writes Bouvard. Some two years later, she made a creative leap: she transposed what was a subject (fashion magazine patterns) into a medium and chose to embroider rather than paint. This leap was supported by a fertile family context: as was the case everywhere in the world at the time, the mothers, aunts and grandmothers who formed the young woman's entourage sewed.

*"In a single pictorial gesture, Amer attacks both the prohibitions on women's bodies and their commodification in pornography."*

After having embroidered women at work with a simple outline of red thread, **Amer would constantly choose pin-up models from pornographic magazines**, more or less hiding them in the interlacing of sewing threads. Leaving the threads visible was a decision she made in 1992 with the painting *Mini-Jupe* (Mini-Skirt).

The right to pleasure

"While simultaneously attenuating their pornographic character, the scrambling processes dialectically increase their charm and seduction," writes Paukner. "They stir up the spectator's scopic impulse, in a tension that restores erotic power to each of the figures seen behind the skeins of thread. In the same way, the fragmentation of the clearly sexed bodies allows, through its uninhibited framing, a strong visual and emotional impact, denoting the **sexual power of the women** represented and the affirmation of their right to pleasure".

And this is one of the great strengths of Amer's paintings: in a single pictorial gesture, she attacks both the prohibitions on women's bodies and their commodification in pornography. At the entrance to the *Witches and Bitches* exhibition at the FRAC, an explanatory label reminds us, incidentally, that "Housewives, pin-ups and witches run through her work, just like the many women who have been demeaned, objectified, humiliated or hunted down, and who must be rehabilitated".

Monet, Ingres, Jaspers, Matisse...

If this aspect of Amer's work is the most striking, the three Marseille exhibitions also allow us to understand its ramifications and developments. Notably in the creative world, since the artist doesn't hold back from paying homage to her male muses... while strongly criticising the long "invisibilisation" of women in the history of art. Some of her embroidered and feminist works take up paintings by classical artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *The Turkish Bath* and *The Little Odalisque* or Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*.



'Portrait of the Revolutionary Woman', Ghada Amer, 2017

She is also interested in more contemporary painters, such as Germany's Josef Albers (1888-1976), who worked for a long time on the form of the square. By enclosing her embroidered pin-ups in concentric squares, Amer seeks to "pay homage to an admired painter", but also to "impose women in the history of abstraction and, more broadly, in that of artistic modernity", as the curators write.

Embroidery, writing, painting, sculpting

There is but a step between embroidery and writing, and many of the works presented at MUCEM also show more abstract works in which the artist takes on texts, aphorisms, and definitions...

With the installation *Encyclopaedia of Pleasure*, on fabric-covered cardboard, she embroiders extracts from the oldest erotic treatise in the Arabic language, written by Abul Hasan Ali Ibn Nasr al-Katib around the 11th century, from which she has specifically chosen **extracts dealing with feminine pleasure!**

With a certain amount of humour, she has also embroidered feminist quotes from Simone de Beauvoir as well as from none other than Saddam Hussein, taken extracts from the Koran or repeated the definition of the word "peace" in Arabic.

Finally, following the example of a Matisse – whom she admires – or a Picasso, in recent years Amer has tried her hand at ceramics and bronze sculpture. Her pin-ups are always there, often **challenging the viewer with their eyes.**

If the coloured clusters “made with the left hand” leave one a little perplexed, even doubtful, the porcelain stoneware and the massive bronzes taking the form of the screen exhibited at la Vieille Charité open up new horizons. Upon closer inspection, the screens with women’s faces are in fact unfolded cardboard boxes: boxes finally open to freedom.