



GHADA AMER RECLAIMS POWER WITH NEEDLE AND THREAD

BY NADINE TAG
October 04, 2025

In art school, Ghada Amer found out a truth that would later become the pulse of her artistic rebellion. The history of art, and especially painting, had long been told by men, for men, she discovered. The realization shaped her life's work and inspired her to begin embroidering, using thread as her medium of painting.

"I am a painter above all. Thread and needles are my brush," Amer wrote.

As a child, Amer would go with her mother to buy patterns and materials to make clothes. Her mother, a PhD holder and an engineer, liked to sew and make clothes, taught her patterning, and she taught herself how to thread.

Amer, an Egyptian-American artist of international acclaim, has built a career that stretches across mediums and continents. Her practice encompasses bronze sculpture, clay ceramics, printmaking, installations, video works, and even outdoor gardens.

Represented by leading galleries in New York, London, Seoul, and Cape Town, Amer's art has found a home in both private collections and major museums worldwide.

Her works are part of the permanent collections at institutions such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Guggenheim Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Arab Museum of Modern Art, among others.

Born in Egypt in 1963, Amer lived in Cairo until 1974, often traveling to Morocco and Libya on account of her father's job as a diplomat, before moving to France.

In France, she earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting in 1986, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in Painting in 1989 from Villa Arson, an art school and research institution in Nice, during which she also studied abroad at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the United States, in 1987.

Amer's artistic journey began with two formative events. While studying at Villa Arson, a professor denied her access to the painting department because of her gender. This rejection forged in her a resolve to confront the patriarchal lineage of art history head-on.

"I thought, if men invented painting, I'm not going to touch it. I have to invent something that will look like their paint, but be different," she recalled, which led her to embrace embroidery, a craft long associated with femininity, a source of strength for her.

Shortly after, a visit to her family in Egypt introduced her to Venus magazine, a publication she describes as "Vogue for the veiled woman," which used photomontage to alter Western fashion imagery modestly.

Venus magazine sparked her initial experiments with pattern, collage. Amer began to meld the traditionally feminine craft of embroidery with the masculine domain of painting.

In the 1990s, she started incorporating stitched and drawn imagery of women from pornographic magazines and Disney cartoons, reclaiming and repurposing two patriarchal visual traditions.

By rendering explicit scenes in delicate thread, she anonymized the figures and transformed their representation, giving them a new identity. To the loose, colorful threads in her work, she would add acrylic or gel to create swirling, abstract shapes in a deliberate way of reinterpreting the male-dominated style of Abstract Expressionism.

"It freed me, the more I looked and drew," Amer noted. "It empowered me and I empowered them."

Her exploration of control over women's bodies extends beyond the canvas. Her photographic series "I ♥ Paris" (1991), which featured the artist and her friends wearing the veil in front of Parisian monuments, such as Eiffel Tower, critiqued France's attempts to legislate women's attire.

Amer moved to New York City in 1996, where she currently lives, marking a turning point both personally and artistically. Never one to confine herself to a single medium, Amer expanded into sculpture and ceramics in the 2010s, approaching this new field with characteristic wordplay.

The title of her sculptural exhibition, "Ghada Amer – Sculpteure," intentionally uses a grammatically incorrect, feminized French word for sculptor, marking a linguistic rebellion against a tradition that has often excluded women. While her practice is rooted in feminist critique, its reach extends further, as seen in works like "Reign of Terror" (2005), which confronts broader human rights issues and the post 9/11 stereotyping of Muslim communities.

The installation at Wellesley College in Massachusetts features a room covered in bright pink wallpaper inscribed with dictionary entries, along with paper plates, cups, and napkins printed with the phrase, "'Terrorism' is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries."

Across more than four decades, Amer has built a body of work that speaks boldly to questions of gender, power, and representations, using the language of art to confront restrictive ideas about women's bodies and sexuality.

Often working with techniques traditionally labeled as feminine, she turns these methods into tools of resistance and reclamation.

Rising from a once-rejected painting student to being awarded the rank of Officer in the Order of Arts and Letters in 2024, Amer's art continues to challenge conventions and perspectives to this day.