

# CRASH



## CRASH ARCHIVES: AN INTERVIEW FOR GHADA AMER'S FIRST MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE IN MARSEILLE

BY LISE GUÉHENNEUX  
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From December 2022 to April 2023, the first retrospective of Ghada Amer in France opened its doors in three places in Marseille: the Mucem, the Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and the chapel of the Centre de la Vieille Charité/Musées de Marseille. These three places have made it possible to articulate in three complementary parts this exhibition conceived by the Mucem under the curatorship of Hélia Paukner and Philippe Dagen.

Ghada Amer belongs to a generation of artists who arrived in the early 1990s in an art ecosystem where feminism was no longer in vogue. Decolonial and feminist studies were not yet on the agenda. I discovered her work during an exhibition at the Hôpital Éphémère in 1992, where she presented a set of canvases embroidered with female representations from the media and magazines. Her "translation" of the found and chosen images did not allow viewers to accurately date the situations represented, but only to glimpse a vision of the modern woman as it was put in place during "les trente glorieuses" in France, that is, after the end of the post-war restrictions from the 1960s onwards. The raw canvas played an important role in the balance of the compositions and evoked a construction based on a sort of frame delineated by the threads. The modern woman in a daily life which recalled, without the accumulation of household electric appliances, "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?" (1956), a work of manifest pop art, but with a conceptual side in order to deconstruct the codes of representations of women.

**LISE GUÉHENNEUX** You participated in one of the rare feminist exhibitions of the 1990s, "Vraiment. Féminisme et art" (Magasin de Grenoble, 1997), curated by Laura Cottingham and I. This exhibition broke away from the French academic theses studying the status of women artists, while the event seemed like an orphan in a country where no exhibition had yet dealt with these issues. It was during this period that you went to the United States for a residency in North Carolina, where your sister was already living. Why did you stay in the United States?



*Portrait Of The Revolutionary Woman, 2017. Stoneware with porcelain inlays and porcelain slip.  
Private collection, Munich, Germany © Ghada Amer, photo: Christopher Burke Studios*

**GHADA AMER** I felt I had a chance there. In France, I didn't have French citizenship, which I only acquired in 2021, so I couldn't apply for a teaching position. It was very difficult.

**LG** What was it like to join your family in Nice at the age of 11? When did your family come to France?

**GA** My parents came to France in order to pursue their studies and get a doctorate. My father, who was a diplomat, did his doctorate in international law and my mother, an agricultural engineer, did a doctorate in chemistry. It was my father's dream to do a doctorate. We came to France in 1974, one year after the Yom Kippur war. The country was very impoverished and bruised. Nice was like a haven of peace for me. I didn't speak French very well... It was fine until I realized that some students hated me for the simple reason that I was Arab. But others defended me, and I've stayed friend with some to this day.

**LG** Do you have memories of your early childhood in Egypt, especially in Cairo? Smells, lights, memories rooted in and transmitted by your family, the language...

**GA** I speak, write and read Arabic because my parents did not want us to lose our language. They didn't want us to remain immigrants in France. And I have always loved the Arabic language. We used to go to Cairo and Alexandria where I have a very large family. We also ate a lot of Egyptian food at home. Food is something that is very important if you want to maintain a connection with the motherland.

**LG** You studied art at the Villa Arson in Nice, where you say that despite a palpable misogyny, especially in painting classes, you acquired the "tools to think and to fight." What exactly do you mean by that?

**GA** At the time when I began my studies, the Villa Arson had a very great director: Christian Bernard. He wanted to train artists, and he did. He quickly took over the direction of the art center, and also placed his personal library at our disposal. He invited some impressive artists to visit: Kippenberger, Oehlen, Sandback, Armajani, Buren... And us students, he asked us to help them so we could learn and talk with them. It was an incredible time. I also had a professor of aesthetics who was very important to me: Joseph Mouton. For me, those two individuals, though often at odds with each other, gave me the tools I needed to think.

**LG** Did the presence of an art center in the school, directed by Christian Bernard, facilitate the development of a teaching methodology focused on hanging and taking up space with visual experiments?

**GA** Not only hanging but also the assembly of exhibitions, mediation, assistance for artists, etc... We were confronted with the reality of artistic practice.

**LG** What was the atmosphere like at the art school? The ties and important friendships, like Tatiana Trouvé, etc.

**GA** It was an incredible class full of laughter and strong emotions.

**LG** In your artistic career, how important was your relationship with Reza Farkhondeh, with whom you have collaborated in the past?

**GA** Meeting Reza Farkhondeh was very important for me because it was really with him that I was able to discuss the role and status of non-Western art. Questions like the center and periphery were at the heart of our interests, since we both come from the so-called "Periphery". We traveled together to the United States and always shared a studio.



Salon Courbé, 2008. Wooden armchairs and sofa upholstered with embroidered canvas, rug, printed wallpaper. 749.9 x 560.1 cm. edition 2 (GHA.16115). Courtesy of the artist & Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen © Ghada Amer

**LG** What did you gain from your time at the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques, created by Pontus Hulten, Daniel Buren and Sarkis?

**GA** It enabled me to produce my first embroidered canvases because I finally had a workshop. I also met Ladan Shahrokh Naderi, with whom I also collaborated (I HEART PARIS), and Anne Ferrer, with whom I shared a workshop.

**LG** You were featured at the "prestigious" Gagosian Gallery in New York, but why did you leave?

**GA** Since Gagosian Gallery has several locations in New York, I was shown in their less prominent branches because my work was not expensive enough. Only once was I allowed to exhibit my practice in the Chelsea space, which is not open to all the artists in the gallery, especially not the young ones. I quickly realized that my approach to art practice did not fit into Gagosian's economic system.

**LG** What is your impression of France today in relation to your current experience and the preparation of your retrospective exhibition in Marseille?

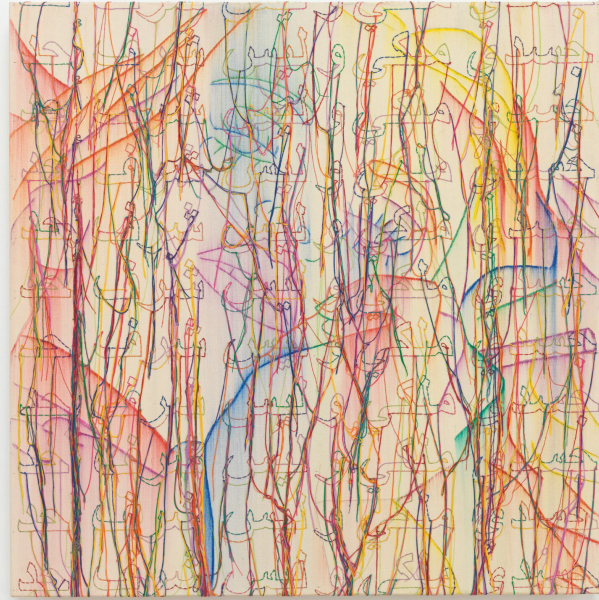
**GA** In 2018, Alain-Julien Laferrrière invited me to participate in one of his last exhibitions as the director of the CCC in Tours, but the returns were slim and very few people saw it. He chose to show paintings from the previous ten years and not the whole of my work, which now includes sculptures, ceramics and gardens. Since Philippe Dagen appreciated my work, he started to look for partners for an exhibition in France. I've always wanted to be present in France. I know that my works have now become too expensive to be bought by public institutions such as the FRAC, for example. I have a painting in the Centre Pompidou collection, another at the art museum in Nantes and finally one between the FRAC PACA and the FNAC.

**LG** Do you prefer Marseille over Paris?

**GA** My situation is very comfortable here. It's the first time I've worked with three institutions at the same time, the Mucem, the Vieille Charité and the FRAC, which each have slightly different audiences. And taken together, this creates a special kind of dynamic. For this retrospective, there were works transported from the USA and from Germany. With Mucem and Vieille Charité, I worked with a scenographer for the first time. After the call for proposals, I chose the simplest and least theatrical from among three different submissions. The scenographer listens and offers solutions without ever imposing them on you. I learned a lot. And because my works can be challenging at times, I notably discovered the work of plinth makers. But for the most part it's simple, except for the first piece at Mucem on terrorism, which is a curved lounge I produced in



2007. At FRAC, the installation is based mainly on picture rails that do not require a scenographer. I've been working with the curators for three and a half years on the exhibition.



Test #7 [study #7], 2013. Acrylic paint, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas.  
Collection of the artist, New York, USA © Ghada Amer, photo: Cheim & Read, New York