



Ghada Amer's work spans painting, embroidery, sculpture, ceramics and applique.
Photo: Dirimart

GHADA AMER: 'I WILL TACKLE THE ERASURE OF WOMEN FROM ART HISTORY UNTIL MY LAST BREATH'

By Robert McKelvey
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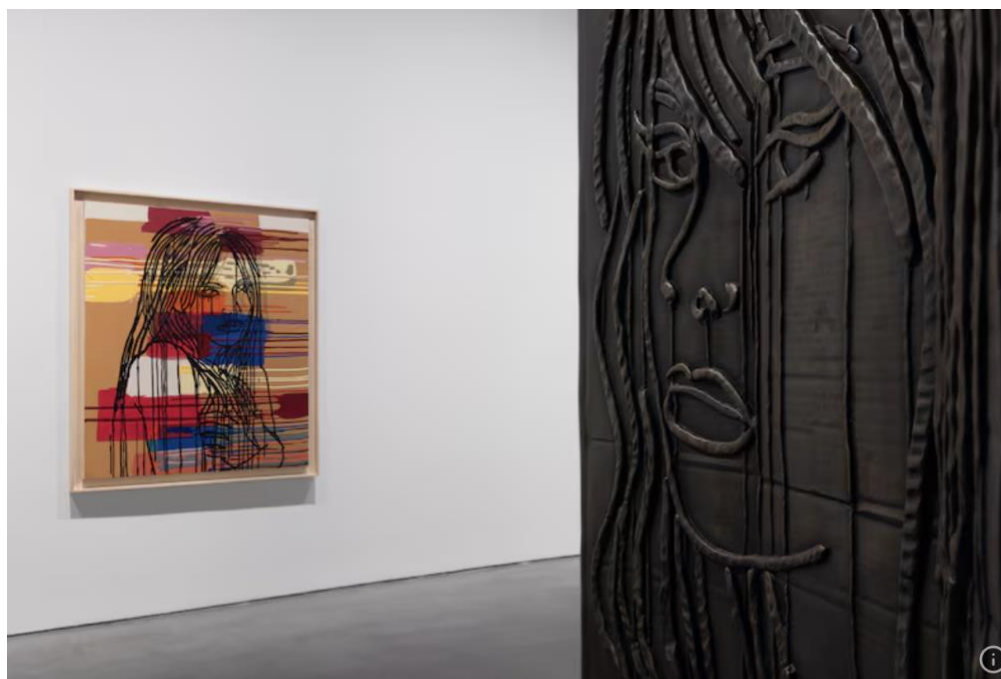
The creative practice of multimedia [artist Ghada Amer](#) has evolved across several decades. What began as a practice rooted in painting and embroidery now spans bronze and ceramic sculptures, traditional Egyptian appliqué and, most recently, painting on wooden panels. Yet her subject has remained strikingly consistent, even as the methods she uses to approach it continue to change.

Amer is often associated with her use of nude imagery, particularly of women's bodies, but she does not see her work as a commentary on sensuality. That reading, she believes, has long obscured the deeper concerns of her practice.

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“There is no question that I like to paint women’s bodies,” Amer tells *The National*, “but a lot of people are missing the point when they focus only on women’s bodies in my production. The reason that I use the feminine figure – and the naked feminine figure in particular – is that throughout art history the muse has always been female. Women were painted and represented everywhere, yet they were never acknowledged for their own talents or artistic contributions.

“I have always been and will forever be a staunch feminist,” she says. “The struggle to inscribe women in art history – to rewrite both women’s history and the history of art – remains an issue that I will tackle until my last breath.”



Amer’s early interest in embroidery emerged from a painful experience while a student at Villa Arson in France. After completing the first two years of her studies, she wanted to specialise in painting, but says her teachers refused to allow her into the class because she was a woman.

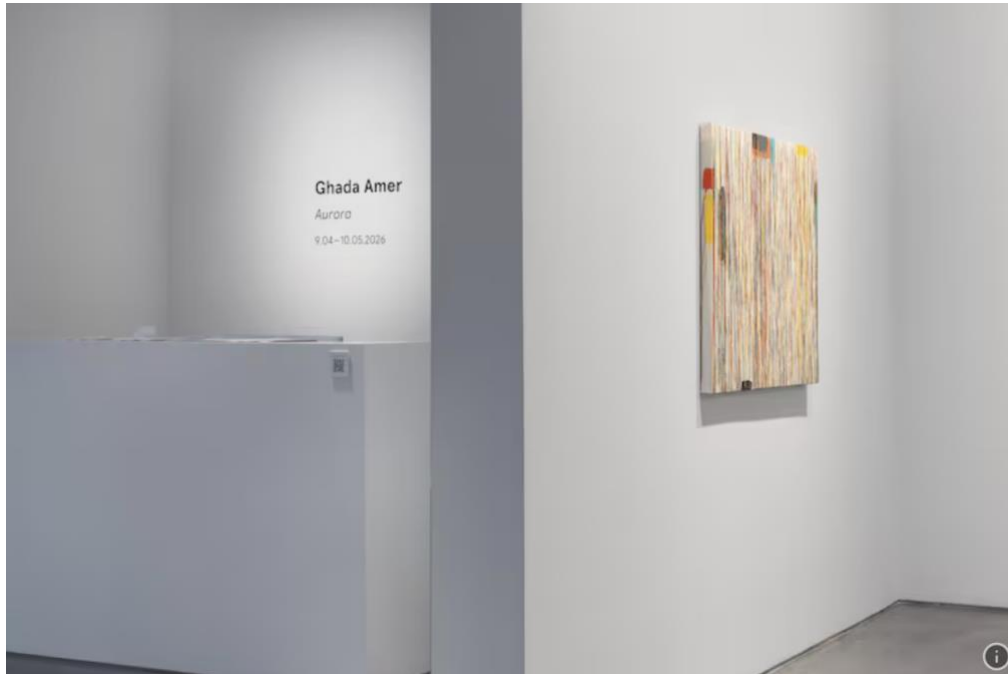
“I was completely shocked,” says Amer. “It was then that I realised that the history of art – as it was being written and taught – had in fact erased women artists from the history of painting. These experiences are what led me to use embroidery as a means of addressing the erasure of women, both from the history of art in general and the history of painting in particular.”

Amer’s most recent painting series, shown in [Istanbul](#) at the CI Bloom art fair and in her solo exhibition *Aurora* at Dirimart Gallery, returns to that formative moment in her artistic life. Earlier in her career, textile and sewing techniques – traditionally dismissed as “women’s work” – allowed her to challenge the masculine dominance of painting and the canvas. Her new works on wooden panels offer a

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different kind of liberation, giving her a surface that feels solid enough to move beyond the weight of that history.

“I am very excited about these works, because they have liberated me and allowed me to go past the trauma and painful experience,” Amer explains. “With my paintings on wood, I feel free to actually paint. It marks a new dawn in my overall artistic production.”



Other turns in Amer’s career came more unexpectedly. In 2010, when she was invited to take part in the inaugural exhibition at Mathaf in Doha, she was given a stipend to explore “something new”, as her more erotic paintings could not be shown because of local censorship restrictions. The invitation pushed her towards metalwork, particularly bronze, and later ceramics.

“I like to use different mediums,” says Amer. “I guess one could say that I like the challenge, but I also like playing and exploring, just like children do. Once one masters one medium, one risks becoming less creative and more repetitive, or perhaps even boring. To avoid this, I like to put myself in the recurrent state of a student: to see things in a new, fresh way.

“I had never done or studied sculpture, let alone bronze,” she adds, “but I quickly fell in love with the medium. In order to improve my sculpture skills, I decided to go back to school to study ceramics as a means to make my own prototypes. When I also fell in love with ceramics, I began to make ceramic artworks.”

In 2023, Amer took another unexpected path when she began working with Egyptian appliqué, or tent-making, a traditional hand-sewed craft said to date back to the time of the pharaohs. The decorated

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tents were once common at celebrations, covered with carefully stitched figures, patterns and symbols. In recent decades, however, the craft has declined as cheaper foreign reproductions and printed alternatives have become more widespread.



“I never used to view this craft as important to Egyptian art until I began to work with some of the few remaining appliqué makers,” says Amer. “The craft touched me in a much deeper way than I anticipated.”

“Interestingly, in Egypt appliqué is not a female-associated art form,” she says. “In fact, it is a craft primarily associated with men. At first, I was not interested in the tradition for its gendered dimension, though now I am delighted to once again be able to blur conceptions of what is considered ‘male’ and what is ‘female’.”

Amer’s work has always moved this way: from painting to embroidery, from bronze to ceramics, from canvas to wood, from one tradition to another. The materials change, but the questions remain. How are women seen? Who is allowed into the history of art? And what happens when the tools once used to exclude or diminish women are taken back, reworked and made to speak in a different voice?