

HYPERALLERGIC



Installation view of *Ghada Amer* at Cheim & Read (photo by Brian Buckley courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York)

How Ghada Amer Uses Seduction to Expose Sexism

By: Seph Rodney
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Ghada Amer, in her current exhibition at Cheim and Read, does something that formidable artists do: makes a proposal that is, in essence, unanswerable. In her 2016 painting “Women in White,” she combines outlines of women’s bodies made in acrylic with embroidery that hangs over the figures to make them washy and vague. Only when I get closer to the work do I see that all over the background she has stenciled in the repeating phrase: “I never thought it was fair that anatomy decided what my brain was fit for.” Here, the female figures are mostly naked, rendered in the style of idealized fashion sketches articulated with minimalist lines, a style that has long blurred the distinction between female and feminine.

Like most of the rest of the paintings and images imprinted on ceramic sculptures Amer has here, the figures in “Women in White” are seductively posed, hips jutting and breasts bared as they look toward the viewer in poses that seem like they could be inviting or challenging. In the ironically titled 2017 pieces “Landscape with Black Mountains-RFGA,” and “Girl with Garden Carnation,” the invitation is made more explicit by having the figure’s vulva exposed to the viewer’s gaze. This work is an iron fist in a velvet glove.

The combination of drawing and dangling thread that hangs over the portraits like a forest of vines or a cage of hair makes the work even more visually seductive. The tendrils slightly obscure the female figure and make her more desirable because she can’t be fully visually possessed. After all, we pursue that which flees from us. But here is the rub: it’s not the fault of anatomy. A woman’s body does not make the decisions regarding how she is represented nor seen. Rather, the culture around her body does this — a culture that makes her body into a territory to be conquered, a chance to be wooed, a citadel to be protected, a prize to be revered — all ways of diminishing the person to the mere status of an object of desire.

I think of an old science fiction story, in which the main character is a woman who is also one of the rare successful scientists in her field. She has hatched a plan for more intelligent women to find places of greater social and political prominence in her society's rigidly patriarchal culture (not unlike our own). For those who are very attractive and also have the potential to be leaders in their fields, the main character attacks them and disfigures their faces. She has concluded that for most other people (ie. men) to stop treating these women as sexual objects and give them the tools to fully bloom into the practitioners and thinkers they can be, they have to stop being beautiful. Her putative solution is as hideous as the problem it means to address. It's typical for us to concoct a commensurately brutalist set of policies to punish the body in response to being checked, limited, and prosecuted for others' desire for that body.



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Amer is artfully calling forth one of the underlying and fundamental complications of our genderist and sexist culture: the crucial need to recognize our desires as our own and resist projecting them onto others and thus start a cycle of blame, recrimination, punishment, reprisal, self-hatred, and the inevitable curtailing of someone else's life chances. But I do wonder about her strategy of foregrounding the widely desired, voluptuous, feminine form as a means of questioning the role that anatomy plays in our conception of the human. I wonder whether this tactic is about shaming us into recognition.

It's particularly potent to now bring these questions to bear in a time when women in the US and beyond are publicly confronting and speaking out about the ways in which their bodies are treated as entities separate from the intellects and wills that inhabit them. It's a distinct possibility that what Amer proposes about the body as the dangling thread that sometimes unravels our ideologies and principles lies beyond our ability to answer right now. I suspect we need to grow toward the place where neither desire nor the body are imagined to be that which needs to be discarded.