

GHADA AMER

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Curatorial text. David Barro and Clara Garau

Ghada Amer is an artist whose reflections have led her to places only later reached by others following trends. She is acclaimed as a pioneer in the distinctive way she approaches painting and ceramic sculpture. Born in Cairo, raised in Nice and based for several decades now in New York, Amer works in a way that recalls the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly his assertion that perception doesn't exist in isolation. Her art reminds us that we don't simply look at an artwork in itself; we can also use it as a way of seeing the world. For Amer, the ability to recognise ambiguity is a revolutionary position. Her work is not didactic, but she believes that beauty and insight can expose injustice, and in this sense her art is political, although its message is rarely direct; instead, she creates space for reflection and critical awareness. As in dreams and memories, some images and ideas remain encrypted while others emerge or flow. The overlapping personal, cultural, political and social spheres make every painted, embroidered or sculpted detail meaningful.

Ghada Amer is best known for paintings in which she stitches erotic or pornographic images onto the canvas, blurring their appearance and redirecting pleasure away from the sensual charge of the iconography towards the visual delight of the thread. Everything becomes less clear without ever disappearing, like a *mise en abyme* drawing us into a conceptual paradox. The image tumbles into and becomes encrypted within a kind of enigmatic abyss. For the message in Amer's work is never delivered literally: it comes from a site of contradiction, or what Jacques Rancière called the "in-between space", the space between extremes. It is precisely this in-between quality that makes it so compelling: the in-between as a space of difference, a passage between something and something else. It is a path between two images, two genders, two ways of facing the world, between different territories and ways of seeing or between different artistic disciplines such as sculpture and painting. The in-between is the space in which definitions are formed and where experience shapes our view of the world. Amer's vision is closely connected to transculturalism and the importance of cultural exchange. She deconstructs existing constructs in order to relate East and West and empower the condition of existing between two worlds. Her own life, informed by very different places and customs, is one clear example. Her choice of techniques and materials offers another: her stitched paintings remind us that weaving has long since moved beyond the domestic sphere to become a political tool against forgetting; her ceramic sculptures are uncontrollable and liberating; her bronzes are as stable as many of the convictions the artist seeks to dismantle.

Amer's work takes shape at boundaries and creates a feeling of suspended time and expanded sensation—something always remains outside the scene. Since her pieces cannot be fully apprehended at once, the viewer's gaze is in constant motion, like the water flowing from the fountains she has produced in collaboration with Pere Coll's pottery workshop in Mallorca. This is her way of fracturing the image, while sheltering its mystery and reinforcing its density. The same approach can be seen in the layout of her exhibition at Es Baluard Museu, where her

paravents, or folding screens, act as solid barriers that both protect and contain the images. They compel us to move closer and embrace the unabashedly explicit figures, created upfront in relief, boldly visible in a form of empowerment of pornography. Their obscenity is direct yet difficult to see, since desire is never quite clear and the sense of awareness is disconcerting: what was originally conceived to conceal becomes a means of revelation.

Amer continually draws the viewer's gaze inwards. Her figures merge with the physical substance of the painting and often seem to disintegrate, like classical sculptures shaped by erosion. This ambiguity makes her sculpted paintings or painted sculptures feel radically contemporary. Yet behind all this, as is paradoxically apparent in her ceramic sculptures, her works are grounded in the act of painting itself. Where her embroidered paintings opened up a space for reflection on painting as a medium and on what painting could become, her pictorial approach to ceramics, together with the unpredictability of its forms and colours, allows her to pursue an even greater poetic intensity. Amer was a pioneer in embroidering images onto canvas and has for many years produced sculptures with a strong painterly character and striking chromatic appeal. This is hardly new when we recall that the sculptures of Greek and Roman antiquity, followed in turn by Romanesque and Gothic sculpture, were all painted, not to mention the polychrome sculptures of ancient Egypt, which have reached us with their colours still visible, though worn by the passage of time. Ceramics allow Amer to remain both delicate and politically poetic, with clay serving here as her vehicle. Her choice of embroidery, ceramics and gardens is a deliberate means to foreground crafts historically associated with women—including women artists—because they were regarded as less significant.

Her position is therefore one of producing work committed to life through the flow of poetry and beauty. She frequently uses earth or water in her installations, as in the fountains presented on the terrace of Es Baluard Museu. Here she combines the challenge of ceramic practice, which is always more frustrating than painting, with a freer component connected to femininity and the nature and fertility of the soil, as well as the act of painting itself. In the fountains, Amer connects the development of her *Thoughts* sculptures with the form and movement of water. *Fuente negra*, *Fuente verde y roja* and *Fuente blanca* become tools against amnesia, just like her stitched paintings. These three site-specific outdoor fountains are closely connected both to Mallorca and the artist's childhood. The idea that "without water there is no life" underpins her decision to work with water as an essential element and reminds us that femininity is also associated with the fertility of the soil and the cycle of life. But these works also evoke the memory of the artist's father, who loved fountains and would gather with her and her sisters beside a huge fountain in Rabat, filled with light and constant movement. Water, like memory, always returns. It suggests a return to one's origins and recalls Egyptians' fondness for their fountains, although they are rarer in Egypt and are used above all for drinking.

Water symbolises both life and change. It is also linked to environmental care, food sovereignty and the gardens that form part of Amer's work. From Bernini's fountains in Rome to Olafur Eliasson's waterfalls in Manhattan, water has played many roles in the history of art. Yet in Amer's practice—always expansive and in search of new forms of expression—it runs in parallel alongside her own body of work. She shapes fragments of clay as if seeking to accompany her thoughts with the act of painting or writing. It is no surprise that her process has been compared to the automatic drawing of the Surrealists. Forms develop through a disobedient and expressive process that explores the possibilities of painting through sculpture, while always striving to challenge the predominantly male canon of art history.

Once again, the space between concealment and revelation is central. In her fountains, she plunges us into a game of concealment and visibility, and in her *Paravent Girls* series she upends the mysterious sensuality of screens in the theatre and the cinema—where, half-public, half-private, they are traditionally associated with seductive silhouettes and secrecy—by turning them into enormous bronze sculptures that can neither be seen through nor easily moved. Opened out, they can be viewed from both sides, leaving nothing hidden. In *Suzy Playing* (2021) and *Jennifer and Barbara*

(2023), empowered female figures from pornographic magazines openly display their bodies through a series of suggestive gestures. Repressed desire and the fleeting quality of eroticism take on the weight of something built to endure, since bronze sculptures capture the idea of power more effectively than any other medium.

Amer's work disrupts our expectations around gender by moving material such as pornographic images of women from the private space of the male gaze into the public sphere. It is no coincidence that throughout her career she has made numerous works in collaboration with artist Reza Farkhondeh, revealing the in-between spaces that can emerge between artists working together. Female and male universes are brought into conjunction: Amer's drawings of women, taken directly from the language of pornography and reworked through her own female perspective, overlap with Farkhondeh's gardens and marks. The images coexist on the same canvas, creating veils and shifts in meaning. Private and public space merge, while assumptions about who made what become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Ultimately, in Amer's conceptual works, the sense of the political loses its clear outlines and surrenders to the babbling language of painting. Her figures seem to vibrate through a kind of tactile impressionism, reinforcing our perception of what she seeks to communicate in the same way she twists her *Thoughts*, compressing and contorting colour in a manner reminiscent of John Chamberlain and his sculptures made from crushed car bodies. The apparent lack of technical refinement is actually a deliberate reflection of Amer's interest in fluidity and in the idea that an artwork may never be fully finished, while yet also, in a sense, being always complete. As the avant-garde movements taught us, the infinity of colour is also the infinity of time. Many of Amer's works can therefore be read as palimpsests, since they always retain traces of earlier images, memories or forms of writing beneath the surface.

This can be seen in *Salon Courbé*, where the artist embroiders the definition of the word terrorism in Arabic on every piece of furniture. Dictionary definitions of the same word in English are printed on the wallpaper. For her embroidery, she devised a technique in which drip-like threads evoke spilled blood or allude to violence. This is a particularly resonant gesture given that the West has long associated Muslims with terrorism and extreme violence, although, intriguingly, the word did not appear in Arabic dictionaries until the 1970s, and the artist uses the only definition of *terrorism* she was able to find. On the wallpaper, she employs English motifs as a reference to colonial powers and the different definitions the word has acquired since it was coined during the French Revolution.

As Sahar Amer has noted, the artist strategically layers political, artistic and transcultural meanings within this multilingual installation. The wordplay connecting the sinuous form of the *courbé* style of furniture—which first became popular among the French upper classes during the Rococo period, was later adopted by the Egyptian middle classes and eventually became a common part of bridal trousseaux—with the clear references to Gustave Courbet's controversial painting *L'Origine du monde* reveals the two-way paths between West and East. The same exchange in reverse can be seen in the way Egyptian motifs became fashionable in the wallpapers of British and French homes. For Sahar Amer, the artistic importance of the installation lies in the way Ghada Amer uses embroidery and text to repoliticise everyday objects (living-room furniture) and reinscribe them within their colonial (and revolutionary) history. The result is deliberately unsettling, particularly because the word *terrorism* is now commonly associated with Muslims, Arabs and people from the Middle East, despite the fact that the term originally referred to the enemies of Robespierre. Once again, her work folds and unfolds like a Möbius strip, becoming a surface with a single side and a single edge, with no beginning or end.

This can also be seen in *The Blue Bra Girls*, where the erotic image of the female body is endlessly twisted and encrypted. Light and shadow interweave, transferring the characteristics of embroidery into stainless-steel sculpture and making it difficult to distinguish the various parts of the women's bodies and figures. As in *Salon Courbé*, Amer builds a narrative that deconstructs cultural

hegemonies and invites us to look differently, on the basis that, echoing Pasolini, even a slight shift in the angle of vision can produce a radically different image of the world. The title was inspired by a photograph of a female demonstrator who was beaten and trampled by the police in Cairo following the Egyptian Revolution and whose image became a global symbol of resistance to police violence. Once again, the densely political dimension of Amer's work leads us through memory, between the intimate and the fictional, between trapped voices and eloquent silences.

Ultimately, the entire process through which Ghada Amer constructs her work gives meaning to Justine Ludwig's comparison between her ceramic sculptures and dressing-table mirrors. The resemblance lies not only in their scale and form but also in the lustrous finish of their glazes. As she notes, Amer's ceramic subjects reflect and refract the society that produced them. As in her paintings, the lines in these ceramic plates are layered over painted backgrounds. They gain volume and become sculptural forms in their own right, almost like skeletons, giving texture a physical presence and intensifying the interplay between line and colour. Colour defines; lines express; space becomes blurred, as though the act of construction were an attempt to evade the image. The actual size of the ceramic works matters less than their visual weight, always oscillating with monumental vibrations, maintaining a consistent temperature while never fully fixing its contours. The figures float like hazy images that persist in our memory; we cannot tell whether they are emerging or disappearing, and therein lies their most compelling tension.

It is clear that Ghada Amer never ceases to see painting as both an end and a means of development. Her *Thoughts* bring her closer towards abstraction in a distinctive, almost primitive, manner. The process of making the work allows her to accompany her thoughts and thus feel physically inside the act of painting, which, through ceramics, loses its central position and begins to dissolve. There is no single organising principle; instead, we encounter a record of distorted sensory experience that seeks to assert itself as painting even though it is resolved as sculpture. As Paul Gauguin observed, art is a form of abstraction, and artists may distort reality when the result is expressive or beautiful. In this sense, the emergence of abstraction in art history should be understood not as a planned development but as the consequence of a gradual struggle to make art independent from the external world. Consider how Kandinsky, who acknowledged Monet as an early inspiration, pursued the physical effect of colour as sound and came to embrace abstraction as something natural, appearing as a resonance as organic forms withdrew from the picture. Art therefore becomes a way of speculating and constructing vision. Our understanding of space has expanded to previously unimaginable limits, particularly when, like Ghada Amer, we attempt to apprehend our thoughts through painting.

This is why everything in her *Thoughts* expands out into a more expressionist, neo-baroque and instinctive drift, with thought triggering a new chromatic reality that welcomes the unexpected. Ghada Amer continues to explore contradictions, changes and atmospheres as though every apparent certainty prompted us to question life and painting itself. Her painting empowers itself by moving beyond the conventional limits of the canvas. Through painting and sculpture, Ghada Amer seeks to make the viewer more sensitive and aware, and by veiling and blurring the image, she emphasises how difficult it can be to understand what we see in the contemporary world. She imbues her images and gestures with enormous elasticity, connecting political and historical events, everyday and sexual scenes, the objective and subjective, the individual and social, the political and poetic. She does so without ever abandoning the idea that art can take shape slowly through the body, acquiring immense conceptual weight while retaining an undeniable visual assurance.

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