

Interview with Ghada Amer

Conducted and translated by Estelle Taraud
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

March 30, 1999

E.T.: Ghada Amer, you were born in Egypt, you lived in France for a few years, and now you divide your time between Paris and New York. So when you sign your paintings, who actually signs? Is it Ghada the Egyptian, Ghada the French, or Ghada the American?

G.A.: It's simply Ghada the artist.

E.T.: So, you mean it is Ghada without any specific nationality?

G.A.: No. The notion of identity is complex. It grows richer, evolves, and thus cannot be limited to the notion of "nationality."

E.T.: However, your art undeniably exhibits numerous cultural influences, and it is thus very tempting to try to identify which culture predominates in your art.

G.A.: Yes, I understand this desire to identify, but when I sign, I do not sign as Ghada belonging to a well-defined nationality; I do not value any culture in particular, but rather what life brings to me with its experiences. I am not trying to claim one single identity, based on one single culture, because I consider that, above all, life experiences are responsible for enriching my art and for making me who I am today. These experiences weave themselves with one another and show through my art.

E.T.: Yes, of course, and these experiences are important for all artists.

G.A.: Yes, and this on top of the fact that nowadays, one moves and travels more than ever. Today's world is characterized by its ability to more easily reveal these displacements of people, with its cultural moves and encounters. It is important to recognize these cross-cultural encounters, to understand these economic shifts and to think about our ways of talking about these different cultures.

E.T.: So, as a woman of the world, a woman from beyond international borders, it seems that very early on in your artistic career, you became interested in the themes of freedom, human rights, the question of gender identity, love and woman.

G.A.: I am not aiming at answering any specific set of themes. I certainly talk more about love, about women, but not necessarily about freedom. Although I raise these notions, I would not qualify them as my main themes. For me, it is not so much the theme or the topic that is of great importance. I want to talk above all about painting; I want to talk about what the act of painting means and about everything it can imply. It is for that reason that I avoid the term "theme," because I would not want people to think that I deal with one topic in particular.

E.T.: Then we can say that you work for the sake of art; you work with the matter above all.

G.A.: Yes, and at the same time facing one's anxieties, certain questions are raised while one confronts expression. Most of the time, for me, all these questions are more concerned with issues of representation, of painting, of sculpture, than with a specific set of themes.

E.T.: However, without knowing your artistic intentions, and before evoking this self-reflection on artistic expression, it is very tempting, at first sight, to qualify your art as a committed art.

What do you think about this notion? Should artists perform committed art?

G.A.: No, I do not perform committed art, and not that I have anything against it, but I do not believe in committed art. I believe in political commitment, but I do not think that art – be it a painting or a book – can change society. It can certainly awaken certain things, certain values, and speak about humanity in general, but if I consider that committed art would be an art committed to changing society, I do not believe in it. Only revolutions and wars can change society.

E.T.: Yes, and one cannot deny the fact that literature and the fine arts remain quite reserved for a certain intellectual elite, as far as interpretation is concerned. Your art is what one can call figurative. Some of the women performances can sometimes shock. Is it conscious or not, to essentially represent women?

G.A.: What do you mean by “women performances”?

E.T.: I mean to have women pose and then represent them in situations that, *a priori*, were manipulated for artistic representations, to put them, in the end, at the core of your representations.

G.A.: It is of course very conscious, and a personal choice, since it is obviously recurrent in my art.

E.T.: Is it because it is easier to talk about women, as a woman yourself? Is there an autobiographical component to some of these “performances”?

G.A.: Yes, there is really an autobiographical part in this. Everyone is inevitably drawn to one topic in particular and elaborates upon it. For me, it was women and love. I have always been interested in women. From the beginning, as soon as I arrived at the Beaux-Arts School, and even before that, in fact. In my readings, I had always been attracted to everything spiritual and to women. In my art, female activities always interested me.

E.T.: So, from your first work of art on, you have dealt with women?

G.A.: No, not at all. The first time I expressed myself artistically, I did not think about women. At first, one often has ideas, but rarely the means to express them the way one would like to express them. Therefore, the first time that I performed art, I played at copying cartoons, such as *Lucky Luke*, and *Sarah Kay*. And later, when I prepared the Beaux-Arts School entrance examination, I presented a sewing work and patchwork. It did not work at all. Standing back (with hindsight), I can admit that I did not master this work, and in addition, I was also reminded that sewing was the traditional type of work for women, and that it had no place in the Beaux-Arts School. Then, it was only after failing my entrance examination for the Beaux-Arts Program, and only after going back to work to prepare the examination that I discovered the female nude and that I really got interested in it. The female nude fascinated me at once.

E.T.: In your embroidered painting, what is fascinating and what has surprised the public, is the contrast between the female medium *par excellence*, that embodies embroidery, and the extremely erotic motif where female pleasure is set up and unveiled in a very audacious and paradoxical way. Of course, one cannot avoid seeing all sorts of symbolized concepts, among which is the attempt at subverting the female role and its traditional activities. The cliché is manipulated, emancipated in such a way that all attempts at interpretation have been blurred. There is, however, one thing that comes out of it: the representation of female pleasure. As you have already mentioned, you became interested in female pleasure early on. Why is that?

G.A.: I was not just interested in pleasure, but also in the kiss.

E.T.: And why sexuality and pornography?

G.A.: Sexuality has always been on my mind because one should not forget that I come from a society where sexuality is a complete taboo, and never mentioned. And since everything forbidden is always desired, I have always been attracted to this notion. Therefore, talking about love in my art always implied a very sexual aspect. Very often, I was jokingly asked why I did not ex-

plicitly talk about sexuality. I think it says a lot about the fact that my work was definitely unconsciously impregnated with sexuality.

It was only then that I started questioning myself, and that I finally admitted that, after all, those people may have been right: I did talk about sexuality without completely taking it upon myself, or without being fully aware of it. I realized that the more I veiled this sexuality, the more unruly and less sensual it became; furthermore, I hated psychoanalytic readings of my work.

E.T.: Yes, it is true that what is so fascinating in your art is this very paradox to have used a model—or rather a pornographic basis—to obtain an extremely sensual expression. That is, by unveiling female sexuality and by exposing it to any sight, you have managed to make it extremely sensual. It is quite remarkable, for it seems that most of the time, quite the opposite happens. One would have the tendency to think that the more one unveils, the less sensual it becomes. However, in fact, here it is the opposite that happens.

G.A.: After school, in 1988, I discovered a magazine that spoke about veiled women and that is when I started my work. That magazine really shattered me, and for two years after that, I explored all possibilities concerning women, including veiled and unveiled women.

E.T.: Up to now, we have mainly talked about your embroidered painting, because you are actually still working with this medium and form of expression. Could you tell us why you have chosen this means of expression rather than another one? Is it a very common means of expression?

G.A.: No, it is not very common. Embroidery has been used in the arts, but not embroidered painting. By using this means, I want to directly refer to painting in my art. What I do is to deconstruct abstract painting. It is the reason why I insist on the term “embroidered painting.”

E.T.: So then, why have you chosen this means rather than another one? Is it to deconstruct the myth of painting?

G.A.: No, it is a global work, and not necessarily anchored in any specific strategy. Once, I discovered that one could sew strings directly on the canvas, thereby imitating painting. This discovery amused and pleased me a lot. The idea of painting with something besides paint, in an artistic period when we were constantly told that painting was dead, that we ought to move on to something else, really appealed to me. Artistically, I was born into a problematic period that in a way forbade painting; thus, this new method was definitely a new attempt. I could, in a way, prove the opposite and push the artistic expression even further.

E.T.: What is surprising in your embroidered paintings is both the rather uniform use of color, and the motif repetition. Why have you decided to use the repetitive mode in some of your embroidered paintings?

G.A.: Because it allows me to create a background from which I can begin an abstract composition. It is as if these repetitive elements created the background; in a way, the background and the motif become one and the thread then becomes color.

E.T.: You play with the traditional definition of background and motif concepts, and also with what we understand by matter and form. Female pleasure and eroticism spring up from the canvas, merge and fade in the threads. Why have you preferred to keep this incomplete in nature, using linear fragmentation, hanging thread, and a canvas background where the woman finds herself prisoner to these threads?

G.A.: I paint as if I were drawing, in an ambivalent way, in between painting and drawing.

There is in fact something I insist on clarifying, because this notion is important to me: I do not illustrate, I paint. Illustration and painting are two separate worlds. I do not want the public to see in my work an illustration of eroticism. I let my expression run free, experiment with it and look at the different artistic re-

When I have a conference on my art, I explain the different steps in the creation of a work of art, and I show how easy it is to contradict oneself. For me, what is the most important is the way we construct a work of art and the way we can deconstruct it. That is what a work of art is all about: it is a totality, a unity sometimes made up of contradictions and that grows with experience.

E.T.: How does or did the public receive your art? Would a viewer have the tendency to feel like a voyeur of these women and thus as if he or she were violating their female privacy? One could almost have the impression of penetrating a forbidden and private universe. How did the artistic world receive your work in general?

G.A.: The first reactions were in France, and I have to say that they were not necessarily very good, not for reasons linked to this voyeurism, but because I had dared to represent and I dared to paint. That went against the state of mind at that time. It is only much later that they understood, and then, reactions were very good. French people were not shocked by its eroticism or by its voyeurism. It seems that they need more than that to be shocked. Americans seem to have been more moderate in their reactions. In Egypt, some considered me as a heroine, because they wondered how I had managed to dare to create these representations, for it had often been considered as pornography. However, after my exhibit, it seems that some of the Egyptian artists who also painted nudes asserted themselves. My experience in Egypt was really very interesting. At first, I did not want to exhibit in Egypt, and it took me five years to convince myself to do it. Arabic newspapers did not write anything about my exhibit, but I did not mind; I am glad now to have done it.

E.T.: How was your art received in the rest of the world?

G.A.: Well, I have never had any problems. I must say that I do not read all local presses, for linguistic reasons, of course. I have been censored only once—in the UN context—when I was denied one of my painting exhibitions. In one of their previous art exhibitions, an Indian artist had represented a woman who had her period, which had shocked people and had thus been censored. So

when the UN exhibition manager discovered my paintings, she got scared and decided to cancel my painting exhibition. The censorship occurred before the public reaction. But in fact, this censorship did not bother me because I am not terribly interested in this type of environment for the exhibition of art.

E.T.: In some of your sculptures, you use writing. Why have you chosen to include words in your art? Isn't it essentially the same thing to tell a story with words or painting? Should we see an analogy between the use of words that comes off the white page and the thread that also comes out of the canvas like writing on a piece of fabric?

G.A.: I do not tell stories with my painting or with my sculpture. I use some text, stories like *Sleeping Beauty*, poetry, definitions, excerpts of all kinds, but I do not write those texts. I write texts about my work and others that I do not show anyone, and that I keep just for myself.

E.T.: For example, you use a flat, repetitive and indeed even sometimes quite robotic writing in your Barbie and Ken sculpture. Do you also experiment with writing here?

G.A.: Writing becomes matter; and I have always been attracted to the use of writing. Writing becomes matter, as painting becomes matter.

E.T.: To use writing with painting is nothing new, is it?

G.A.: Oh, no, and in Nice, France, there is in fact a great exhibit entitled "Writing in Painting." It has been very common since the beginning of the Surrealist movement and even earlier with the Cubists. Well, in fact, since the church beginnings, one has always used writing in painting, even if the purposes were completely different, of course.

E.T.: So one can say that your artistic perception and representation have succeeded in diverting traditional representation. By dint of manipulating clichés and concepts, you have managed to

give a whole new perspective to the notion of painting. One can say that your gaze has succeeded in emancipating itself from both form and background, thereby imposing a whole new interpretation. Do you remember your first artistic interpretation?

G.A.: In fact, it started very early, as soon as I arrived in France. I had two experiences which left a great impact on my youth. The first one entailed drawing: I had to sketch a representation of two three-dimensional cubes. I could not represent the volume; I could only see the lines that joined each other. Even if I was aware of these volumes, I could not represent them.

The second experience occurred at the same time: I had to listen to *L'Apprenti Sorcier*, and to think of each instrument in terms of an animal. Not only did I experience a cultural shock, as I had never listened to classical music with this perspective, but I was also exposed for the first time to occidental concepts that were beyond me.

These concepts were imposed upon me, a way of looking, feeling, and interpreting that, in the end, taught me that we all have our own perception.

E.T.: One can thus conclude that your artistic progression and your desire to construct abstract painting already had its roots in this cultural gap that had been imposed on your youth. It is true that the detachment of some of your paintings from the clichéd image—such as the ones based on the pornographic pictures—towards a more refined and sensual image, perfectly illustrates the opening up of any representation. Each representation is nothing but a great potential for variations, as long as there is the desire to emancipate one's self from these pictures that are imposed through a very rigid system of values. Therefore, in some way, your art illustrates this progression towards a certain emancipation from preconceived and dominating ideas. Here one can admit that you are teaching a great lesson of life: to know how to emancipate yourself from your environment. Could we say that you feel emancipated as a female artist?

G.A.: Well, in fact, as a woman, I must admit that it is not always easy because I feel that women must talk above all about them-

selves. In order for female artists to be recognized and to succeed, they must represent women. Moreover, it is more or less the fashion these days to be interested in the Other, the stranger, the minority. Therefore, to talk about oneself as a woman and as a foreigner means raising issues and topics that suit today's fashion, all the while remembering that women must fight against the majority. Once again, women are forced to fight against the mainstream, and this fight is far from being over.

E.T.: So your status as a female artist reflects your art: the one that must fight, that must go against pre-conceived mainstream ideas, to better emancipate itself as well as prove itself. One can also say that you have succeeded in demonstrating that a female artist is above all an artist and not just a woman. By representing women through clichés, you have paradoxically freed them from their traditional role, as well as succeeded in freeing the concept of painting by using embroidery. In achieving these two tasks, you have finally affirmed your female artist identity.

Three emancipations in one artwork are quite a *tour de force*. It is very admirable and respectful. Thank you, Ghada Amer.



Fig. 1. Ghada Amer, "Johanna's grid," 1999: acrylic, embroidery, and gel on canvas. Printed with permission by Deitch Projects, New York.
Published by New Prairie Press

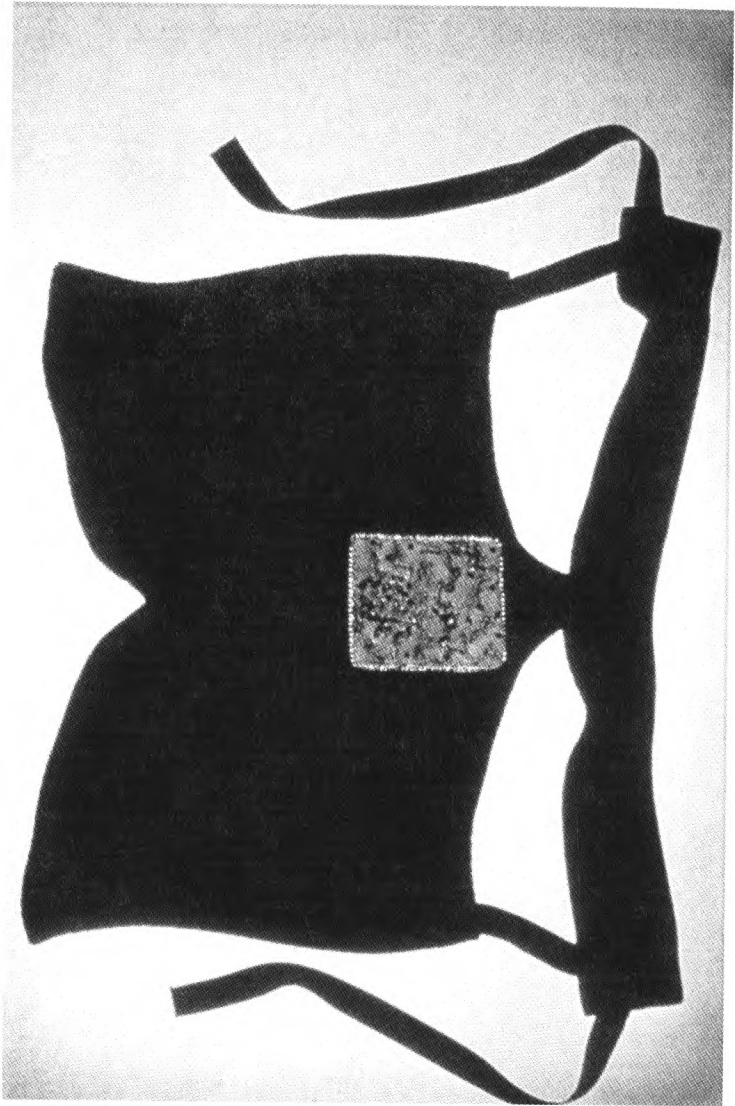


Fig. 2. Ghada Amer, *Borgà*, 1997. Dentelle de Bayeux, 43x40 cm.
<https://www.pearlproject.org/stcl/vol26/iss1/DeitchProjects>, New York.
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1530