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Full Moon Kiss. 2015. Ceramic. 63.5
x 81.3 x 26.7 cm.

Ghada Amer works the kiln and has her first show in the Arab world in two decades at Leila Heller's new Dubai gallery, reports

Laura van Straaten

earth. love. fire.



Cairo-born artist Ghada Amer's main studio is on West 151st Street just off Broadway, in the part of Manhattan's Harlem known as Sugar Hill. The large, spare, florescent-lit room is in a building whose marbled former elegance is likely not remembered by anyone who is still alive. The beat up wooden floors are strewn with bits of coloured thread, which has for many years been the go-to medium for Amer's characteristic embroidered "paintings

on canvas. Such paintings, in various stages of completion, line the walls.

But over the last few years, Amer — whose artwork has been featured in the Venice, Sydney and Whitney biennials — has spent countless hours working in a different studio and with clay — a medium that was new to her until relatively recently. And it is in this second studio, on a charming tree-lined street in New York's West Village, where Amer has created most of the work for her first solo show in the Arab world in 20 years.

As last summer drew to a close, Amer completed a special two-year residency in a private studio amidst the dusty downtown rooms of Greenwich House Pottery, which has been introducing New Yorkers to clay since 1909. The storied ceramics school has offered residencies to established ceramic artists since the 1970s, says its director Adam Welch. But Amer's residency was the first for an artist not yet established as a ceramicist; the opportunity was created just for her after she showed some promise in a few private ceramics classes.

"I almost gave up at one point!" recalls Amer, laughing and tossing her wavy black hair. "For months, every single piece I made was cracked!" Even with its steep learning curve the world of ceramics is a "wonderland" for her: "I am jazzed!" she says.

Earth. Love. Fire. is the title of Amer's show, referencing both the process of ceramic making itself and Amer's newfound passion for it. The exhibition is on view through December at gallerist Leila Heller's new eponymous exhibition space in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue arts district.

"Ceramics are at once a real departure and also a seemingly natural extension of her previous body of work," says Shiva Balaghi, the curator of the Dubai show. "She is pushing the boundaries between high art and craft, creating new spaces in the gendered terrain of the art world, and extending her vision into entirely new forms," she adds.

As with the work for which Amer is best known, in many of the more than 30 new pieces on view in Dubai, she employs images drawn mostly from popular culture to tackle the traditionally



oppositional dichotomies of feminine vs. masculine, art vs. craft, east vs. west. Known for drawing on literary texts in her work, this new body of work is inspired in part by the feminist Egyptian author, Nawal El Saadawi, whose writing is featured in a central painting in the exhibition. The Dubai show includes several new embroidered paintings and metal sculptures that provide a needed contrast and context for her work in ceramics, on view publicly for the first time.

Clay appealed to Amer for some of the same reasons embroidery originally did. "The history of painting was invented by men so I wanted to work with a medium that was more associated with women," she explains, switching easily between English and French. (She lived and studied in France before moving to New York 20 years ago). However, the idea to try her hand at clay did not arise out of a political or social critique as her embrace of embroidery did. "I got the idea to do ceramics after watching fabricators of my metal sculpture make prototypes out of clay," explains Amer. "This is the first time I work with sculptural forms where I do it all, not a fabricator," she adds, "I like the immediacy."

Her commitment to conquering clay is evident as she conducts a studio show-and-tell at Greenwich House. She points to surprises in some of the first pieces she made: "These drips of red, this bloop of blue, I don't know where they come from."

Looking at newer work fresh from the kiln, she returns repeatedly to consult a mathematically minded grid that she's made in clay to document her investigation of various slips and glazes. The variety of clays and kilns, the colours, the glazes, the drying process all required of her many weeks of diligent exploration.

To experiment with three dimensional composition, Amer took slabs of clay and "I started to play with things: I wanted to smush them." This "smushing" led to the creation of show's sculptures representing the greatest shift for her, with tabletop works like the lemon-coloured *Study in Yellow* and *Yellow Strokes* (both from 2015) whose crushed contours suggest the confident dynamism of a John Chamberlain. She also tested adding various types and amounts of paper to her clay, ultimately settling on Costco brand bathroom tissue as the best additive for how she wanted the clay to behave and to look once fired.

Where Amer has experimented less is with theme. For the Dubai show, there are ceramics sculptures ranging from the familiar portraits of women, more characteristic of Amer's paintings, to entirely new abstract forms. The exhibit includes some of her earliest experiments with ceramics and, more arrestingly, larger sculptures painted on both sides such as *Hiding* (2014) and *Full Moon Kiss* (2015) that fold onto themselves like clay blankets.

When I ask about her source material for these figurative works, she stands on the tippy toes of her bubblegum-pink Crocs to reach the upper shelves of her art supplies. In her studio, she keeps magazines that she has collected over the years in Egypt and the West. Amer works with images of women from popular culture. She reappropriates the female form into something entirely her own, open to interpretation by the viewer. The work is a feminist gesture that crosses borders.

In Dubai, Amer's new work is being shown in a gallery space adjacent to one featuring sculpture by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, a friend of Amer's — to inaugurate gallerist Leila Heller's Dubai outpost. At 15,000 square feet, the Heller's space is now the biggest commercial gallery in the United Arab Emirates, according to her son Alexander, who serves as its director. That fact gives the gallery's programming choices immediate significance.

And Heller, who opened her first gallery in New York in 1982 and has historically been committed to showcasing Middle East artists in New York, says that when she first seriously began thinking about expanding to Dubai, she knew she wanted to launch

with Amer's work. This was in 2008, about the time Amer had a large and well-received solo show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. "Ghada is such an important Arab and Middle Eastern

From Left: *Study in Yellow*. 2015. Ceramic. 15.24 x 24.13 x 10.16 cm; *The Blue Knot*. 2014. Ceramic. 12.7 x 15.2 x 20.3 cm; *Study in Orange*. 2015. Ceramic. 12.7 x 25.4 x 15.4 cm.

Hiding. 2014. Ceramic. 15.24 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm.



"THE HISTORY OF
PAINTING WAS INVENTED
BY MEN SO I WANTED TO
WORK WITH A MEDIUM
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MORE WITH WOMEN"

Ghada Amer



The Black Knot.
2014. Ceramic.
29.2 x 31.75 x
22.9 cm.



*Portrait of a Girl in an
Abstract Composition
#1.* 2014. Ceramic. 64.8
x 58.4 x 2.5 cm.

artist and a leading international woman artist, and we felt that that is how we wanted to inaugurate our programme in the region," recalls Heller.

Not surprisingly, with such high stakes — the inaugural exhibition for a new gallery, the first public reveal of her work in a new medium and her first show in the Arab world since the mid '90s — Amer's emotions are running high. "I feel happy and anxious at the same time!" she says.

"I'm anxious how the show will be received," adds Amer. But perhaps more than anything, she is thrilled to have her work seen and, she hopes, understood in the part of the world from which she hails. "I'm happy because the Middle East is bubbling with art and artists and I am happy to be part of what is happening." ■

Right: *La Russe.*
2014. Ceramic.
77.47 x 68.58 x
16.51 cm.



Ghada Amer's *Earth. Love. Fire.* is on view at Leila Heller Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai through December 24th www.leilahellergallery.com