

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Seaman, Anna. "Ghada Amer's Earth.Love.Fire is Leila Heller Gallery's inaugural show."
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Girl With Pink Lips (2014) by Ghada Amer. Courtesy Brian Buckley / Cheim & Read, New York / Leila Heller Gallery

Perhaps the biggest challenge when hosting an exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery, newly opened in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, is to fill its vast space.

The cavernous 14,000-square-foot area is the largest commercial gallery in the Middle East and as such, could present a daunting challenge to the artist and curator.

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However, its inaugural show, featuring works by internationally acclaimed Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, fluently inhabits the largest hall – one of the three – with a continuous body of work presented in such a way as to allow each piece space to breathe. This is quite a feat, achieved over several months of planning with gallery preparator Griffin Snyder and curator Shiva Balaghi.

The result is a stunning museum-quality exhibition that Leila Heller, the owner and founder of the gallery, who has been a stalwart of the New York art scene for more than 30 years, says she has been planning for five years.

“I wanted to open my new space with a very powerful global, Middle Eastern female artist and there was no better choice than Ghada Amer,” she says.

The exhibition is Cairo-born Amer’s first in the region for almost 20 years. It also marks the first time that Balaghi, a prominent scholar on Middle East art, has curated a show in the region.

Their collaboration – which began years ago as a friendship and developed over a series of studio visits in New York, where Amer lives and works – is a notable indication of the growing maturity of Dubai’s art landscape. In addition, Heller’s decision to move here underlines the importance of the UAE’s expanding gallery scene.

“The show came about organically, in a sense,” says Balaghi. “Ghada is a major woman artist with a significant international impact. Presenting her work in Dubai seemed a natural choice for Leila and I. Ghada’s work had been shown in art fairs in the UAE, and she’s part of the permanent collections of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Mathaf in Doha. Our exhibition gives the local audience a chance to see a fuller range of her art.”

At the heart of the show, titled Earth.Love.Fire, is a collection of ceramic works created after a two-year residency at Greenwich House Pottery in New York. The artist, best known for her embroidered canvases, which use small-point needlework and loose thread to both explore and disguise the female form, is usually labelled as a feminist artist – her choice of medium and subject place her easily into this category. Her foray into ceramics is also an attempt to use a medium more commonly associated with women.

“Ghada’s ceramic pieces represent the ultimate rebellion against painting as a historically male-dominated artistic genre,” says Balaghi.

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After several failed attempts at the pottery house, Amer finally found a way to use clay to create sheet-like sculptures, upon which she applied thick, colourful lines or scored deep grooves, creating an effect that mirrors the threads on her canvases.

There are also a series of abstract works, in which the clay folds in on itself, that show the sense of experimentation in the artist's process.

The unusual use of the medium captures what Amer continually tries to do with her art – challenge assumptions about gender roles and find her individual way of expression.

"Working against the grain of gender norms, she breaks free from expected artistic codes," says Balaghi.

Alongside the ceramics, a collection of new canvases hangs in the gallery, and large metal sculptures are presented at floor level.

"Ghada and I were very mindful of how people would experience the show," says Balaghi. "We wanted the viewer to be able to focus on each piece but we also created vignettes within the larger show – smaller stories that come to life as you walk through the exhibit."

What I find so impressive about these works is that they exude the spirit of the artist. The finger marks that are apparent in the tactile ceramic pieces show her exploration of the relationship between fine art and crafts, and allow Amer's presence to really be felt.

There are also several portraits – including a stunning self-portrait – made in ceramic plates that hang from the walls. Although they are smaller, they draw in the viewer and somehow leave a physical trace of the artist.

Balaghi recounts an anecdote from the installation that references this feeling of familiarity. "As we were installing the exhibit late into the night, Ghada stood in the centre of the gallery, dancing in circles as the large sculptures were installed, the paintings hung, and the ceramics carefully placed on the plinths. She smiled broadly and said, 'I feel like I am painting.' And, in a sense, the way the show is installed is itself an extension of the artistic experience."

• Earth.Love.Fire runs until January 4 at Leila Heller Gallery, Alserkal Avenue. Also on display is an exhibition of sculptures by Wim Delvoye. Visit www.leilahellergallery.com

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