

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Kolesnikov-Jessop, Sonia. "Ghada Amer: Defusing the power of erotic images" *New York Times* (March 12, 2007).

The New York Times

SINGAPORE — In 1996, the then-struggling Egyptian artist Ghada Amer made an unusual deal with an American lawyer: one of her paintings for a green card. In retrospect it was a good deal for both parties. Her permanent move to New York launched her career internationally and the "visa" painting, worth \$4,000 at the time, is now estimated at \$125,000.

Amer has made a name for herself with controversial work of exquisitely embroidered pieces exploring female sexuality. She is working on an ambitious set of 13 prints at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, pursuing a collaboration started in 2001 with the Iranian artist Reza Farkhondeh. She said she enjoys collaborating with this longtime friend because she feels their works complement each other. "He sees things in shapes and I see things in lines," she said. "My work also tends to be systematic. By working with someone else it give me the possibility of breaking the system and going further."

Given their explicit sexual nature, it remains to be seen whether the prints will be shown publicly in Singapore. At the end of the year, however, Amer is planning to show them at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul.

In the meantime, two of her pieces, "Checkers" (2006) and "The Encyclopedia of Pleasure" (2001), will be presented on March 23 as part of Global Feminism, the first show celebrating the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Afterward she will go to Rennes, France, to work on the installation of her first permanent garden — metal rods covered with roses spelling out, "Once upon a time in a far away land."

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In May, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome will put on a mini-retrospective of Amer's work, and she will have a separate show at the Francesca Minini gallery in Milan, with a new installation work as well as a video on another collaborative work with Reza, "Indigestible desert," featuring the smashing of a 1.8-meter-long, or 6-foot-long, cake of George Bush and Tony Blair effigies lying side by side.

Amer's current work in Singapore continues the erotic themes she's been exploring for the last 14 years — images "lifted" from pornographic magazines, but blurred by the embroidery technique she uses on her canvas. Stitching in small point, she leaves the long, loose threads after knotting them on the front of the canvas, then uses a transparent gel to glue the threads on the surface. The effect is similar to paint dripping, a mass of abstract lines from far away that only reveals her erotic figures on closer inspection.

"She is one of the most important contemporary feminist artists today," Maura Reilly, curator of the Sackler Center, said in an e-mail. "She has taken the medium of painting, with its long history of masculine prerogative, and upended it by occupying its territory, and integrating into its field a feminine universe — that of sewing and embroidery. By re-appropriating pornographic images for her own means, she disassembles their power to arouse, hidden as they are beneath the veils of threaded drips."

While the artist sees herself as a feminist, she says she doesn't have a feminist agenda. "Actually, it's not easy for me to do this kind of work. It's not like I enjoy going to the porn shop. I am actually a prude," she said in an interview in the Tyler Institute studio. "I started doing it for myself. I wanted to break my own barrier, not the barriers of the West or the Muslim world. Everybody loves to see me as a Muslim, but they don't see it's not about Islam, it's about something else. I'm not trying to shock, it's not perverse, I'm not doing this with a political agenda. It just happens that I'm Muslim and a woman."

Amer started to use embroidery in her work early on. "I liked the idea of representing women through the medium of thread because it is so identified with femininity. I wanted to 'paint' a woman with embroidery, too," she said.

It can take up to three months for Amer to complete a piece, so her body of work is limited. For her current work, she is confronted with the additional challenge of trying to use thread on paper, which is proving extremely difficult as the natural fiber breaks. "I do some embroidery on paper. But it is impossible to have it as intense as my canvas, and I am limited by the size of the paper," she said. "I still want to use thread, so we're experimenting with the paper to make it stronger."