

Ceramics Art + Perception

July 2017

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| USD | \$20 |
| EUR | €18 |
| CAD | \$27 |
| AUD | \$27 |
| GBP | £15 |



ART

Painter and Sculptor: the ceramic art of

Ghada Amer

Written by **Anthony Stellaccio**

In *Feminism/Postmodernism (Thinking Gender)*, feminist scholars Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson acknowledge the myriad theoretical frameworks needed to accommodate the diverse experiences of women separated by race, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, location, and religion. There is not one kind of feminism, they say, because there is not one kind of woman. Feminist theory, therefore, is more 'like a tapestry of many threads and hues than one woven in a single colour'. This is also an apt metaphor for Ghada Amer and her artwork.

Amer was born in Egypt, educated in France, and has made a globally recognized name for herself as an artist while living in New York City. Middle Eastern in Africa, a Muslim in America, and, perhaps, a bit too American in the Middle East, Amer's composite identity is frequently being reshuffled, often involuntarily, between socio-cultural contexts that construct identities just as they construct genders. Amer's acquiescence and opposition to cultural 'norms' in each setting are part of what defines her as a person, woman, and artist.



Froissé, 2014, ceramic
9 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 8 in.
24.1 x 19.1 x 20.3 cm.

A nuanced transnational, Amer is best known for painted and embroidered canvases depicting icons, archetypes, and caricatures of the female. Often, the women in her artwork are pornography extracts: isolated female specimens engulfed in their own pleasure or pleasing other women - and they are described with a minimum of economic lines and contours. In another act of reductionism, these women are almost always young, white and Western, not devoid of culture and ethnicity per se, but stripped of racial and cultural particularities that might limit the interpretation of her work to a narrow profile. To put it differently, Amer does not wish that she, or her politically and sexually charged portraiture, would be veiled by prejudice and presumption.

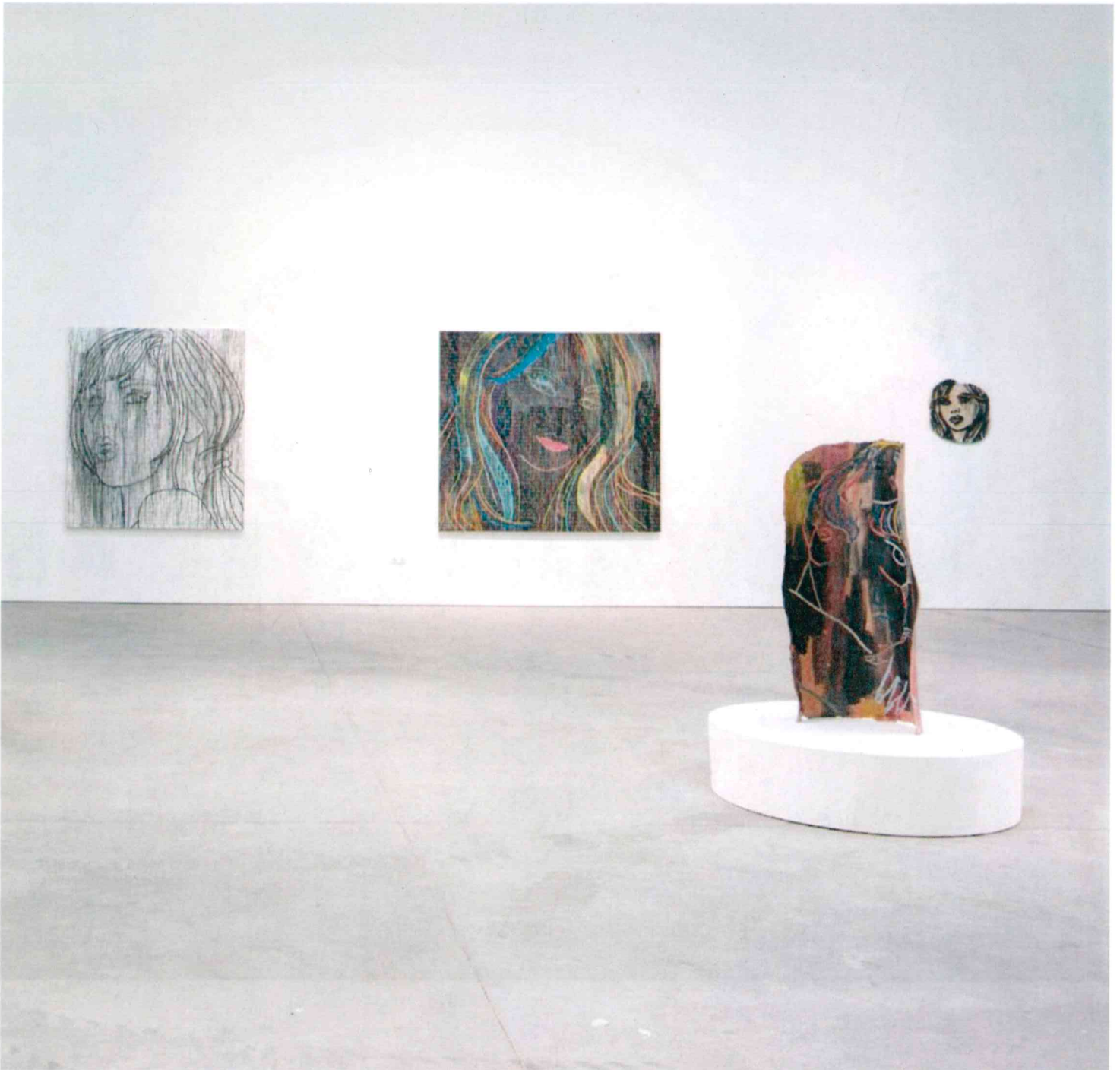
Sculpture, land art and gardens, and both indoor and outdoor installations also define this multimedia artist, her ideas translated between materials and spaces just as she is constantly being translated between cultures and languages. Translation is key, as art historian and critic Laura Auricchio has said of Amer, as each one generates 'information by introducing or uncovering additional meanings'. It is, in essence, a process of revelation through accumulative reiteration that continued with the first major exhibition of her ceramic work. Created during a specially designed residency at Greenwich House Pottery in lower Manhattan, Amer integrated her work in clay with a select number of canvasses and steel sculptures, all shown at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. This was the gallery's inaugural exhibition, as well as Amer's first showing in the Arab world in almost twenty years.

The integration of clay and canvas and the relationship between the two, as demonstrated in this show, is important for understanding Amer's art. First, Amer views the canvas as a male-dominated space, the messy, macho, ejaculatory works of the abstract expressionists being the quintessence of this colonization. To bring embroidery to the canvas is, for Amer, to bring forth, in a new idiom, a distinctly female voice traditionally exiled to the 'low' arts and crafts of domestic spaces. The artist's work is mimicry and mockery, as well as critical and revisory. This is to say nothing of her (erotic or pornographic?) imagery, which asserts the power of female pleasure. Amer's images appropriate, and thus sustain, but also undermine female tropes just as they alternate between being voyeuristic and empowering. Precariously ambiguous, Amer's images implicate the viewer in the final determination of their meaning by pitting the personal and political against intent and interpretation.

Creating her images by repeatedly puncturing the painted canvas and using the perceptibly maternal binding of thread to affix art deemed low, to art exalted as high, Amer commits a loaded act. The weighted gesture is indicative of the artist's complexity and depth, her frustration with the limitations she has experienced as a woman and minority, and the social and political views that those imposed limits shape. The act also reveals how the artist's work, imperative and serious, is shaded with her irreverent wit.

In Amer's hands, similar qualities emerge in clay, the material's roots in craft and domesticity being an important part of her new work's vocabulary. This relationship between the content of the material and the content of the work is sculptural in its sensibilities, but the artist's approach is primarily that of a painter. Amer's clay work will often begin as slabs gessoed with porcelain slip. For color, the same white base is mixed with mason stains that offer the predictability a painter is accustomed to. Worked over with a brush, blocks, patches, and streaks of bold color enhance the gestural lines that are subsequently incised and inlaid with colored slips, or simply painted on top, to define and foreground her figures.

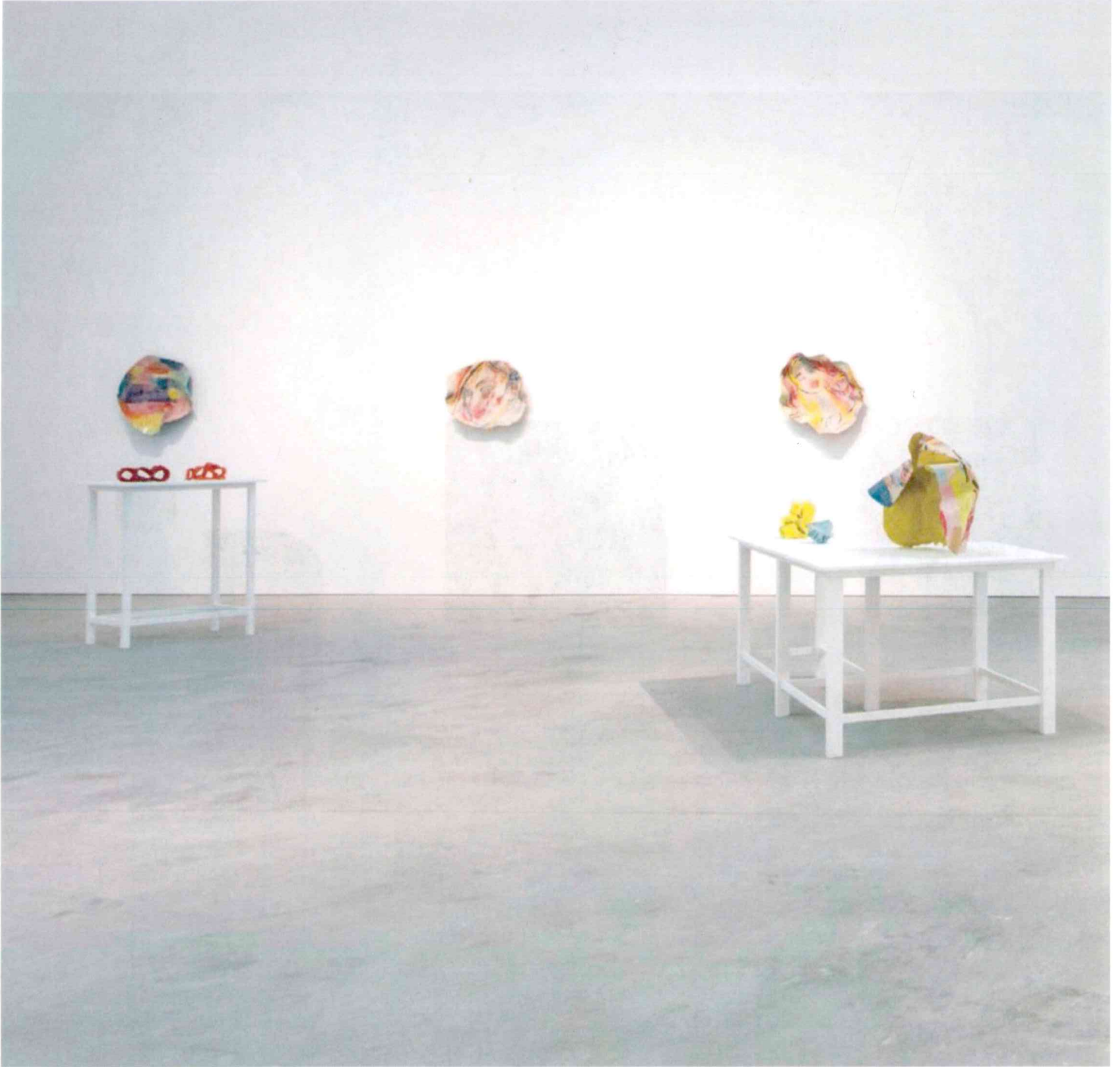




ART

Installation Shots.

Photographs by Musthafa Aboobacker,
Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.



ART

Working with the flat plane of the painted slab, Amer began exploring ceramic form by creating a series of slump-molded plates. While seeking to retain the functional form's connotations of domesticity, the artist used the shallow curves of the mold to bring the first traces of sculptural dimension to her clay canvasses. Even more subtly, her lines of thickly-caked colored clay add another layer of physical depth, as do the lightweight, incised lines that subtly stretch, pool and pull color from Amer's painterly surfaces. Traces then became chasms as the artist began to dramatically bend and twist her painted sheets of clay into freestanding, amorphous forms. In her progression from painting, Amer's 'plates' are significant for breaking the square plane of her canvasses, their boundaries either becoming complementary to the images they host or suggesting their fragmentation. An the artist's expressive force of mass and depth added and, in the cracks, coarseness, and strength of fired clay, a raw and humanizing physicality as well.

The more dramatic, freestanding forms are similar but behave differently as they curl and curve, hunch, arch, and sprawl to support themselves. Forms often ride their edges, gesticulating, sometimes wildly, through linear, ribbon-like postures. These stances preserve the now-freestanding slab's two-dimensionality, creating a divisive line in space between one side, exposed to the viewer, and another that is hidden, with bends and tucks compromising the boundary between the two. The tension between revealing and concealing adds a layer of content to Amer's imagery, while heaving billows of mass and pinched folds of clay-flesh add a bodily suggestiveness. There is also a hint of violence in the sometimes-aggressive transformation of the slab. Indeed, the artist's pushes, pulls, and peels, much like the resulting tears, can read like a record of force and impact upon the clay, a thrilling escape from the obstinacy of the canvas, or even as a revenge upon painting itself.

Readable as a subtext of the freestanding forms are a limited number of works at a reduced scale. Although these small sculptures were originally intended to be maquettes for larger sculptures in metal, in effect and in name, works like *White Strokes* and *Black Line* isolate the formal elements of color, texture, and gesture. Indeed, it is not their reference to future works that makes them suggestive of studies, but their ability to give the core components of painting both shape in space and the intimacy

of object-hood. There is also an uncanny purity and immediacy to these extracts that is not so much the result of technical naiveté (which remained largely irrelevant to the artist), as it is the product of rediscovery. This is one of Amer's strengths throughout the show specifically and ceramic art in general, unveiling the full dimension of a familiar term by revealing it anew in the process of translation and the interaction between media. Rough hewn, these works may ultimately remind us that Amer is a newcomer to an, at times, temperamental material, which brought failure as well as freshness. However, the show in Dubai succeeded in documenting the latter.

The curation of the exhibition, a collaborative process between the artist and Dr. Shiva Balaghi, also foregrounded Amer's approach to materials. In her clay work, for example, color and texture were, arguably and always, an objective in the artist's approach to clay as canvas. The gallery too was gessoed for Amer with a brilliant and pristine newness that was both surgical and seraphic. In bringing the two together, the installation of Amer's works achieved a striking balance and distribution of color that bound them together inexorably, effectively, the painting of the gallery with form.

In this broad view of her exhibition we are reminded that, while Amer is an omnivorous artist executing in any material or mode that can propel her work forward, she is ultimately a committed painter. The problem with this posit, however, is that even in her role on canvas as a subversive anti-painter she at once denies and implies the patriarchal archetype of the canvas and of high art. We must, therefore, reframe her ceramic art and her multi-media work at large as an attempt to bring diversity to the fore, to make complementary and equal under one name, painting, what is falsely rendered unequal and differentiated. Through the same lens, we can also understand painting as an orientation: the fluid and inclusive bearing of a natural compass and not a exclusionary, rigid classification. (And this is something that ceramic artists, often forced into a liminal and marginal position within the art world, can no doubt appreciate). What Amer advocates here is a way of thinking, one reflected in her art, and that is, slowly, taking hold in the more progressive niches of global society. What Amer advocates is, to her credit, also what she lives. ■

A Black Line, 2015,
ceramic, 7.5 x 8 x 2.5 in.,
19.1 x 20.3 x 6.4 cm.

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About the Author

Anthony Stellaccio is a freelance scholar and fine artist trained in ceramics and folklore. He is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics, the American Folklore Society, and is currently the international coordinator for Artaxis. His past appointments include the Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art and the Lithuanian Art Museum in Vilnius.

