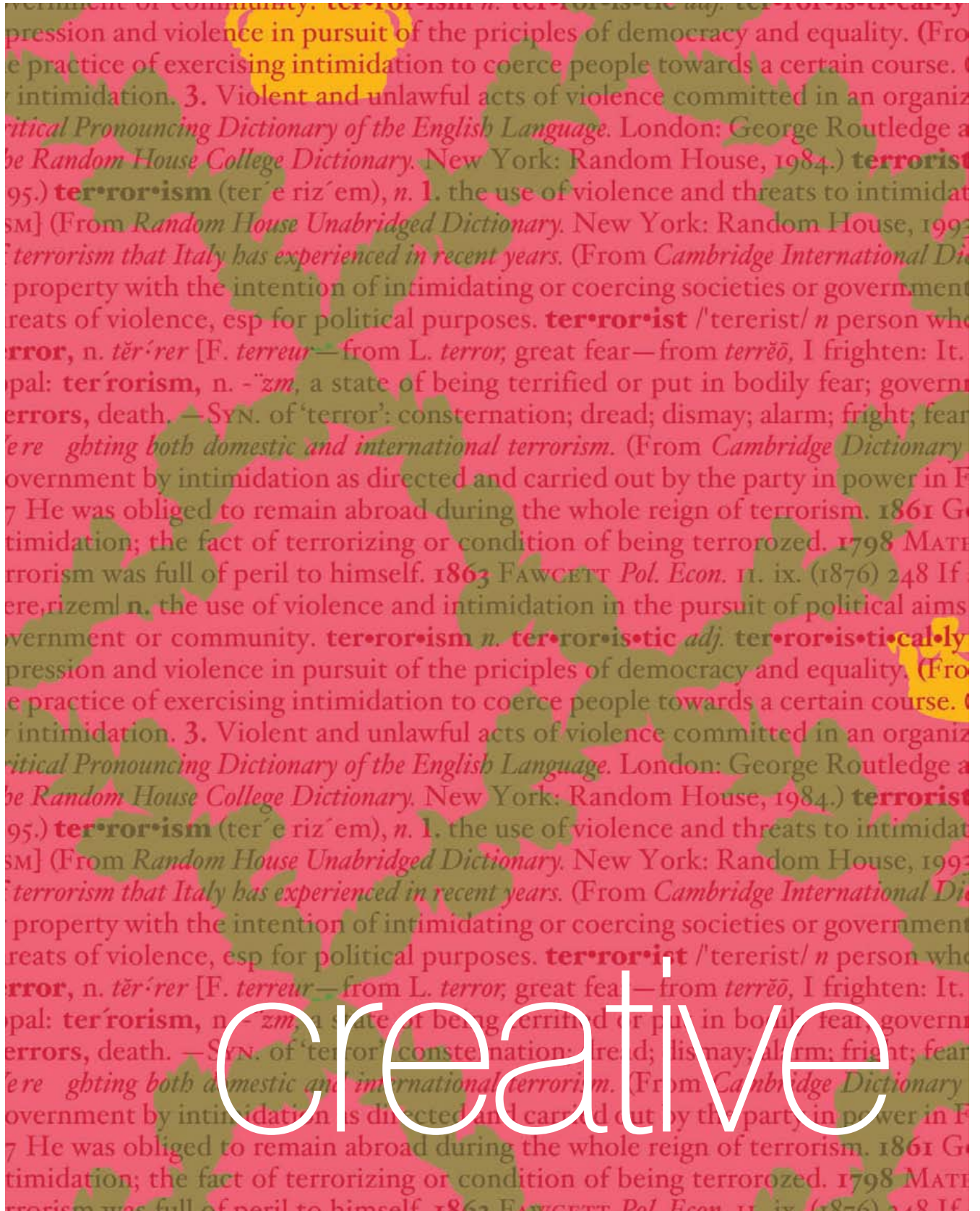


# CHEIM & READ



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ghada amer

# rebellion











## profile

Using embroidery with other media to create works of intense beauty and languid charm, Ghada Amer has continually challenged convention and turned traditions on their head. With a keen sense of her own role as a woman and of the values of womanhood generally, she forges ahead on her relentless artistic journey.



TEXT BY MAYMANAH FARHAT  
IMAGES COURTESY OF CHEIM & READ  
AND GALLERIA FRANCESCA MININI

Opening spread: (Detail) *Le Salon Courbé*. 2007. Wallpaper. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Francesca Minini.

Previous spread: *Le Salon Courbé*. 2007. Embroidery, fabric, wallpaper, wood, carpet. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Francesca Minini.

Facing page: *Andy's Princess and the Pea-RFGA*. 2005. Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas. 160 x 198.1 cm.

Surrounded by the sights and sounds of a predominantly Latin-American community, Ghada Amer's North Manhattan lies in one of the city's most vivacious areas. Here, an imported blend of Caribbean culture vies with the gritty push and pull of urban life. A stripped-down labyrinth of rooms in which works in progress hang near exhibition posters and images from popular culture, her studio is a world away from the posh galleries, chic night-clubs and multimillion-dollar apartments that characterise the downtown Chelsea district, the epicentre of American art. That she is represented by one of the country's foremost galleries (Cheim & Read) and is placed among the ranks of groundbreaking feminists such as Barbara Krueger is fitting for a multimedia artist whose cutting-edge work has received international acclaim. Yet living and working uptown, beyond the peripheries of one of the world's leading art scenes, also makes sense.

## Crash Landing

In person, Amer has an unassuming presence. Her petite stature and genial demeanour is not what one would expect from someone known for making the art world blush. However, this soft-spoken artist is an obvious force to be reckoned with. From the onset of her career, over 20 years ago, Amer has remained defiant of the often-rigid boundaries of mainstream art. Celebrated for her embroidered paintings in which erotic depictions of women are overlaid with layers of abstraction, she has rejected placating imagery and conventional modes of representation. At the same time, she has built an impressive oeuvre of politically charged installations and performances.

"I wanted to invent a new way of painting that would be associated with women's activities. It was a necessity to address women's issues by first addressing the medium."

Born in Egypt in 1963, Amer moved to southern France at the age of 11. This experience was jarring, as she sought to abandon the cultural norms of her Muslim upbringing once confronted with French society. Ten years later, she began her artistic training at the Villa Arson Epiar art school in Nice and went on to study at the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts

Plastiques in Paris. It was in Nice that some of her earliest creative rebellions took place. During this formative stage of her career, she turned to embroidery in place of the traditional oil or acrylic media found in Western painting and decided to incorporate French text into her compositions, although her instructors had expected her to use Arabic calligraphy. "I wanted to

invent a new way of painting that would be associated with women's activities," she explains. "It was a necessity to address women's issues by first addressing the medium." In essence, what was expected of her as a woman, a foreigner and an artist would inspire her to rebel with determination. "I have always addressed these issues, even as an art student," Amer affirms.

Perhaps even more affecting for the artist was her return to Egypt in the late 1980s after a long absence. Upon arriving in Cairo, Amer quickly noted the dramatic transformation that had taken hold of her native country. Gone were the days in which women went about their daily lives with ease. What now existed was a strict code of moral behaviour that dictated virtually every aspect of their existence, above all, their physical posturing in Egyptian society. This was to have an inescapable affect on Amer. Returning to France, she feverishly embarked on creating work that underpinned the universal subjugation of

Long before the post-9/11 political climate inspired Contemporary artists to explore xenophobia, Amer was questioning the purported tensions between Islam and the West.

women. Undeterred by the so-called cultural divides between East and West, she absorbed both worlds and then brazenly turned them upside down. In 1996 Amer moved to New York City “to become an international artist!” she proclaims with excitement. “For me, this was the centre of the art world and the art market and I wanted to be a part of that.”

## Webs of Implication

Since the early 1990s, Amer has explored the ways in which social constructs of gender, sexuality and love intersect and diverge and how, like these intersections, the act of painting is a fluid process open to interpretation. Her early work, such as the acrylic, embroidery and gel on canvas piece *Woman Zapping* (1992), in which a female protagonist stares blankly at a television with remote control in hand, takes aim at the imagined docility of women. The image, seemingly lifted from a magazine advertisement, is executed in thread with jagged stitching, the method of which conjures up the notion of “woman’s work” that is reserved for domestic life. As a result, what might be overlooked in the world of mass media, where such impudent statements on the roles of women become easily digestible, are suddenly revealed for their bleak implications.

Similarly, *The Definition of Love According to Le Petit Robert* (1993) takes an excerpt from the popular French dictionary and embroiders it in delicate, meticulous threads, with words appearing to fade out of the canvas. The language used

to define the word is overtly masculine, a minor oversight which Amer toys with as something that goes unquestioned and is inherently absorbed in the complex system of ideals

that emerges as human relationships are defined by gender and power. Sewn over these words is a cobweb-like grid of red string, emulating the spontaneous “subconscious” painting associated with Abstract Expressionism. Evoking this school of Abstraction, the artist also points to the dominance of the male perspective in art, as the 1950s movement was thought of as a statement of masculine bravado.

Amer probes further into this social conditioning in the conceptual piece *Barbie Loves Ken, Ken Loves Barbie* (1995–2004), which consists of two large cotton body suits embroidered with red text, offering an astute observation on the early indoctrination of prescribed gender roles to children. In lieu of dolls that might hint at the lifelong expectations of men and women, the artist offers a virtual casing for their physical embodiment. In many ways, she also presents a more sombre meditation on love, as the full-body suits resemble strait-jackets.

After moving to New York in the late 1990s, in an attempt to become what she describes as “international”, Amer’s paintings became increasingly provocative. A noticeable difference in the sensibilities of Americans toward female sexuality, one rooted in the country’s puritan background, has driven the artist to test audiences all the more. Often working within the tradition of Pop Art, where replication speaks volumes, her brand of social commentary is at once relentless and playful. Her erotic works are usually disguised beneath layers of medium, causing the viewer to approach the canvas with intense scrutiny – a process that often ends with a jolting surprise. In a feminist sense, the sheer production of such works stands as an act of reclaiming social agency in itself. Similarly, her elevation of embroidery, long considered

Facing page:  
Love Grave. 2003.  
Installation shot from  
the exhibition *Forefront*.  
13 September–30  
November, 2003, The  
Indianapolis Museum  
of Art.

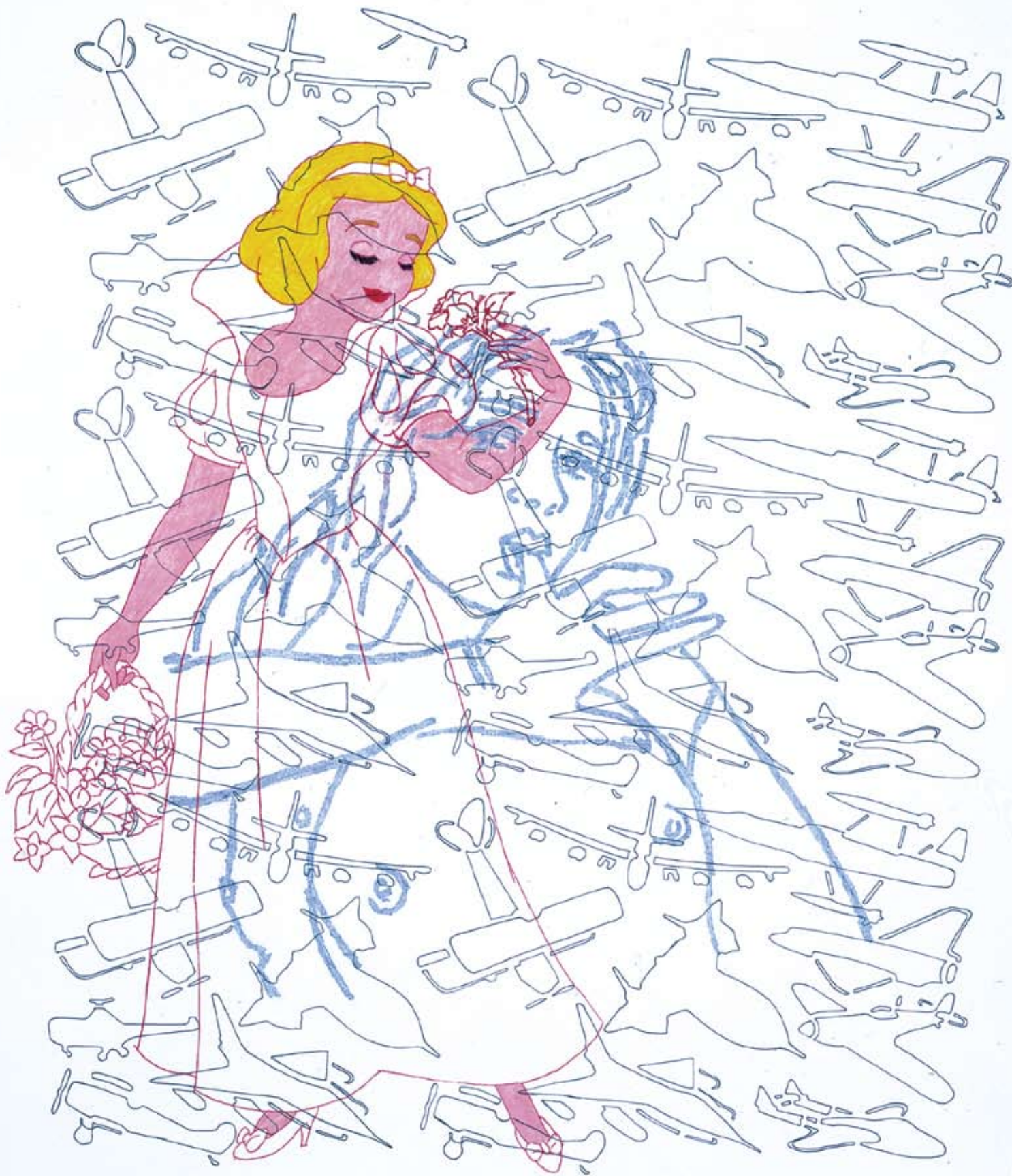
































an “ordinary” and “domestic” art form, shakes the realm of aesthetics, reconfiguring an age-old tradition into a viable Contemporary art form.

## Going Global

While the shrouding of erotic images in drip-like layers evokes an overt masculinity, one that seemingly overcomes the sensuality of her female figures, at all times she and her subjects have the upper hand – they are neither objects nor fetishes, but fierce attacks on the senses. These explorations have spanned the length of her career, and with each series, Amer has found new ways to test the constraints of art and society.

Amer’s destabilising of the world as we know it does not end there. Within her arsenal are profound insights on modern political affairs. Never one to shy away from subverting her surroundings, these explorations appeared early on during her time in France in such works as *I Love Paris* (1991), a series of photographs featuring Amer and Iranian artist Ladan S Naderi

dressed in black burqas in front of popular monuments in the French capital. Long before the post-9/11 political climate inspired Contemporary artists to explore xenophobia, Amer was questioning the purported tensions between Islam and the West.

Most recently, these observations on global issues have come in the form of intricate performances and elaborate installations. In 2003 she was invited to participate in a large-scale public project that brought artists from around the world to Panama. Inspired by Panama City’s colourful buses, which are adorned by local painters, Amer set out to create *Six Chinese Proverbs* (2003), an installation which considered the nation’s distinct visual culture while injecting it with an element from outside its traditions. Pondering the furthest geographic

### Previous spreads:

Left: *The Pink Cowboy*. 2005. Acrylic, crayon, ink and embroidery on paper. 72.4 x 57.2 cm.  
Right: *Curfew*. 2005. Acrylic, crayon, ink and embroidery on paper. 72.4 x 57.2 cm.

*Cinq Femmes Au Travail*. 1991. Embroidery on canvas in four parts. 62.9 x 55.2 cm each.

(Detail) *The Big Black Kansas City Painting-RFGA*. 2005. Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas. 274.3 x 365.8 cm.


Above: *Borqa’*. 1997. Silk and black pearls. 80.6 x 70.5 cm.



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point from Panama, she decided to use Chinese proverbs as the basis for her project. Delegating the task of creating a set of billboards to Panamanian artisans, Amer gave them full rein over the creative interpretation of these texts. What resulted were highly political representations which the artists made their own, applying the wisdom of the proverbs to their immediate realities. One such image was placed in an affluent quarter, home to a number of politicians, and read “What you see is true, what you hear is perhaps not”. Juxtaposing images of impoverished citizens against a backdrop of false political promises, the billboard hit a nerve in Panama’s body politic and was removed within hours of being displayed. The remaining images created by other artists met similar fates.

Although wishing to execute more of this type of work, Amer confesses, they are not only time-consuming but costly. Take, for example, the installation *Le Salon Courbé* (2007), which consists of a hand-woven silk and wool carpet and custom-made upholstered chairs patterned after French-Baroque furnishings. Reminiscent of the lavishly decorated

rooms that have become staples of middle- and upper-class Arab homes, her salon replicates a domestic setting with a disconcerting twist. Decorated into the sides of the chairs are the Arabic definitions of the word ‘terror’ in a grid-like fashion. Covered in pink and red threads that drape loosely over the text, the chairs are simultaneously elegant and morose. By contrast, the multicoloured carpet is vivid and orderly. When displayed in Milan at Galleria Francesca Minini, the objects were accompanied by *Reign of Terror* (2005), a bright pink wallpaper embellished with gold crowns and the English definitions of ‘terror’ and ‘terrorism’. The weighty inferences of these politically charged works extend from today’s heightened state of fear and violence to the lasting legacy of Western colonialism in the Arab world. And yet, like much of Amer’s work, they are utterly striking and painstakingly beautiful, demonstrating the seemingly effortless ways in which she combines thought-provoking content with an acute sense of visual poetry. 

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