

ART / ARCHITECTURE

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Stitch by Stitch, a Daughter of Islam Takes On Taboos

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

WHAT is going on now politically is like a mirror of what has always gone on in myself, because I am a hybrid of the West and the East," says Ghada Amer, a 38-year-old Egyptian-born artist who lived in France from the age of 11 and moved to Manhattan four years ago. "It's a clash between civilizations that of course don't understand each other. I've lived with these contradictions all my life."

It's no surprise, then, that Ms. Amer talks about making art as both therapeutic and biographical. Her subject is women, always, and in both her paintings and her sculptures, in which embroidery is her main tool, she beautifully and subtly investigates the place of women in the history of all cultures.

"I don't want viewers to see my work as the work of 'the other,'" she says. "That's the most insulting thing that could happen."

From a distance, the tangle of lines in her vibrantly colored canvases apes the style of Abstract Expressionism. But as these matrices come into focus, you realize that her "paint" is actually long strands of thread, affixed to the canvas with a clear gel medium, and that they are the loose ends of delicately stitched images of naked women, repeated across the background like a wallpaper motif. Many such works are now on view in a survey of Ms. Amer's work at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo, Norway, through Dec. 2. (The show will travel to Düsseldorf, Germany, and Umea, Sweden.) Her new work, "Encyclopedia of Pleasure," is on view at Deitch Projects in SoHo through Dec. 22.

Ms. Amer, who received a master's degree in painting at L'École des Beaux-Arts in Nice, found her artistic direction after a visit to her parents in Cairo in 1988. There, she saw how pervasively the veil had been adopted again, hiding the reality of Egyptian women as she knew it. She was particularly stunned, she says, by a fashion magazine featuring sewing patterns called "Venus," which she felt ludicrously superimposed Egyptian veils and hats and long sleeves on Western fashions.

"Seeing this magazine changed my life," Ms. Amer says as she tries to unearth the publication in her cheerful, cluttered studio

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Ghada Amer with "Encyclopedia of Pleasure" — boxes under embroidered slipcovers — at Deitch Projects in SoHo.

in Harlem. "It made me make art."

Ms. Amer began playing around with these dress patterns. She liked the idea of representing women through the medium of thread because it is so identified with femininity. She also wanted to talk about the problems of women everywhere, not just in Muslim countries, so she started sewing images of women doing universal domestic chores like vacuuming. But still she wasn't satisfied; she felt she needed a more radical contrast with the embroidery. So she began exploring pornography as another form of cross-cultural woman's work, lifting images directly from pornographic magazines and stitching them across her canvases. And yet the lusty, vivacious women in these images seem hardly victimized or dirty; s. me-

where in her process Ms. Amer reclaims a sense of their strength and sexuality. Asked how she views them in their new context, Ms. Amer says: "They're my friends. I have a very good relationship with them!"

Valerie Cassel, who organized Ms. Amer's first solo museum exhibition in the United States at the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston last summer and was part of the six-person team to select Ms. Amer for the Whitney Biennial in 2000, says: "Amer uses the language of painting — particularly of Abstract Expressionism, which was such a male-dominated movement — and subdues it, overpowers it, by sewing on top of it. She takes the nude female image performing in porn magazines and re-presents it, removing the c. id-

ness. When we see those images in her paintings, we feel as if we've accidentally walked into a woman's boudoir, where she's pleasuring herself rather than looking at something primarily designed and distributed for a male eye."

While her paintings appropriate the visual language associated with women, her sculptures incorporate the written counterpart. "Private Rooms," for instance, shown last year at P.S. 1 in the exhibition "Greater New York," is composed of a long row of sumptuously colored hanging satin storage closets stitched with all the text from the Koran that refers to women, underscoring their small presence in the book.

In her current installation at Deitch, Ms. Amer uses passages from an 11th-century

book written by a Muslim man titled the "Encyclopedia of Pleasure." In the book he earnestly tries to catalog, scientifically, all aspects of sexual pleasure for both men and women.

On the 57 boxes stacked and scattered around the gallery like moving crates — summoning the idea of leaving an old home for a new one — Ms. Amer fitted canvas slipcovers embroidered with sections from the encyclopedia pertaining to women, including her favorite chapter, "On the Advantages of a Nonvirgin Over a Virgin."

"What I find so fantastic about this book is that it's profoundly religious," Ms. Amer says, explaining that it was written during a flourishing intellectual period in Islam but that it has long been a forbidden text. Indeed, the only evidence of its existence is a poor English translation written as a doctoral dissertation and never published. "It's not that the author wanted to make a revolution," she says. "It's that he wanted to be a better Muslim by being a better sexual being. I copied it as a way of preserving it, as proof of something that is very different from now."

This text is in English, yet Ms. Amer often uses French, and she says it's not important for the viewer to read it all but just to understand a word here or there. "In the mosque, you can't read all the words on the wall," says Ms. Amer, whose text-based pieces have included beauty advice and the dictionary definition of love. "It's not meant to be read. You just get a sense. I think for Islamic people, the text and the image are the same. When I think about using a text, I don't think about translating it into drawings. To copy it means I have illustrated it."

While Ms. Amer's parents are progressive in some ways — choosing to educate her and her three sisters in France, for instance — they are strictly religious and have had to get used to their daughter's choice to be an artist, particularly one dealing with the taboo subject of sexuality. Ms. Amer recounts a story about her traditionally veiled cousin, whom she first hired five years ago to help with the time-consuming embroidery.

"In the beginning, she thought that a sex shop had commissioned this," Ms. Amer says with amusement. "I gave her a catalog and tried to explain to her what I was doing. Now, she's the one who explains it to other people. I never believed that art had the possibility of changing the world. Maybe now I believe it a little bit." □