

The Arts

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Beyond tradition

Women from the Islamic world are conquering the galleries with their subversive art



Andrew Renton

A GROUP of women artists from the Muslim world find themselves unexpectedly exhibiting in high-profile exhibitions and commanding big prices for their work. The surprise is that they are working neither against nor entirely within the Islamic tradition.

One of the newest is Ghada Amer. Her show at the London Gagosian Gallery opened last week and there were lines of impatient collectors jostling for her paintings before they were even on the walls.

I've been working with Ghada recently writing an introduction to her new catalogue. Hers is hard-hitting stuff. The paintings are brightly coloured canvases with stitched threads, repeating motifs across the surface. Look a little closer and these repetitions reveal graphic images: highly sexualised poses of women lifted directly from men's pornographic magazines. The stitching technique is a way of reclaiming so-called "women's work" as an empowering practice. The images, when reproduced by a woman, remain problematic, charged, obscene — but they are in the hands of the artist. She is in control.

And Amer's not alone. Shirin Neshat, born in Iran, makes films that construct sites of fantasy belonging to a subtly transposed world of veiled women. Passions sear, missed encounters, unsummed relations are felt in every frame. The photographs from her Women of Allah series regularly fetch £50,000 at auction.

Prices for Mona Hatoum's sculpture can double that figure in the heat of the bidding. She has a major exhibition at White Cube in Hoxton at the end of the month. Born in Beirut of Palestinian parents, educated in London, she has moved from performance-based work to sculptural forms that relate to domesticity and oppression, signalling indirectly how the woman's body may be represented. It's not about the role of women in the Arab world, or about the politics of Arab identity, but it relates powerfully to those issues.

What is remarkable about these women is that they do not wholly reject Islamic culture. Although they choose to operate outside of it, there is always an underlying reference to that point of origin to



Contemporary Islamic art: Ghada Amer, standing in front of her work, *The Large Black Painting*, represents the rising profile of women artists from the Muslim world

be felt in their work. The position they take is deliberately ambiguous. The Islamic limitations imposed upon women and the absolute prohibition of representation in art of human figures — let alone stark-naked body parts — make their gestures especially engaged and uncompromising.

And it is precisely because of this engagement that their work resonates so strongly in the galleries of London and New York. These

artists are knowingly, and possibly at some risk to themselves, working against a monolithic tradition that is invested with the power of faith.

There is nothing remotely comparable in Western art, primarily Christian in origin, much of which has long abandoned its religious roots and left us with an art that has nothing against which to test itself. The modern world has given us an art about art — and in times of great upheaval we sense that

something is missing. The work of these women is so effective because it brilliantly adopts the strategies of the contemporary idiom. It looks at home on these white walls, but it also knows where it's coming from. It is rooted in a millennium of communal theory and practice.

The question is, can the work return to its geographic point of origin and work as a useful counterpoint to apparently immovable and religious doctrines? The

journey back to the heartland of Islamic culture can only be made in small steps.

The artists' commanding international presence has given them a certain celebrity status in their countries of origin, where their work can hardly be exhibited. Amer did have a small show in Egypt a few years ago, but outside of the museum system — in a private gallery in Cairo. There is no commercial infrastructure that could support her work there, even ignoring the very obvious threat of arrest, prosecution and worse.

It's no small irony that Amer's only real representation in the region was a major show at the Tel Aviv museum. It caused some ripples back in Egypt, but she's unrepentant.

Her work is about giving a voice to the unspoken. She's not about to be silenced by any political agenda.

These artists are not replacing one ideology with another. It's not East versus West, or traditional against modern. Rather, the work draws from both sides and plays them against each other.

Contemporary commentators, when they talk of "international" art, generally mean the exact opposite. They are referring to a global style that is brewed in the capitals of so-called Western culture. These Islamic women artists have produced a work that stems from a particular consciousness but looks in all directions. It never settles down in one place. This is the real art of the world.

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Iranian Shirin Neshat, left, at her Serpentine Gallery exhibition, and Palestinian Mona Hatoum's Grater Divide