

The background of the entire page is a complex, abstract artwork. It features a dense network of thin, dark lines, some of which are blue and others black, creating a web-like structure. Interspersed within this network are clusters of bright pink or magenta, which appear to be stylized flowers or berries. Green, leaf-like shapes are also scattered throughout, adding to the organic feel of the composition. The overall effect is one of chaotic yet rhythmic energy, with the colors of the motifs contrasting sharply with the light, off-white background.

Ghada Amer

Recalculating Exchange Rates: Power and Poetics in the Works of Ghada Amer

Laurie Ann Farrell

We need no deep knowledge of semiotics, feminist theory, or art-historical methodology to make sense of the rules governing the use of signs in the work of Ghada Amer, who appropriates stereotypes as the material of her creative inspiration. Amer's multimedia work raises questions about the nature of sexuality in different societies. Recurring signs and images in her visual vocabulary include domestic goddesses, airplanes, cartoons, patterned flowers, gardens, embroidery, stickers, text in translation, and erotica, symbols she often plucks from their original contexts, cleansing them of their substance and history, filtering them through translation, and then recirculating them in new reflective spheres. Combining explicit images with delicate embroidery, her work confronts societal taboos of both the West and Islam. While exhibition catalogues and critical reviews have explored art-historical links and sociopolitical issues raised in her work, this brief survey of her methods (including painting, sculpture, and outdoor installation as well as embroidery) will investigate the complex, sometimes esoteric layers of significance in her artistic practice.

Amer's biography and work are typically framed by the following data: an Egyptian-born, female, post-Camp David Treaty-generation artist, now living in the West. Reviews call her a cultural hybrid, a feminist, and a member of the newest avant-garde. To a voyeuristic degree, these articles focus on the erotic imagery cloaked in her works on canvas, which are often compared to the gestural paintings of Abstract Expressionism.¹

Amer tells me that her background is mixed. Born in Cairo, she has lived in France for over twenty years, and doesn't consider herself singularly Egyptian, African, or French. She will say that her parents are 300 percent Egyptian, and that she speaks Arabic fluently; but she adds that she and her sisters were