Love and Desire
The Art of Ghada Amer

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Since the late 1980s when she began her investigations of stereotype and what some might consider transformative acquiescence, Ghada Amer has kept her practice on a steady curve of innovative form and provocative ambivalence, coursing at the edge of subtlety and nuance while simultaneously walking the tightrope of ideological risqué, masterfully combining flirtation and evident depth. At the heart of this performance is the sweet and ancient art of seduction by which she not only visually titillates the viewer, but equally conceptually mesmerises the reader. She is at her best when she creates a space for meaning, and lets the viewer fill it in.

Amer’s work has nevertheless consistently risen above traditional political affinities. Amer elects complexity rather than containability. Her work straddles histories, traditions, moments and locales with panache and millennial inevitability, seeming to obscure its subject yet inscribing her with the appropriateness of nomadic expansiveness. The subject in the work is travelled, not simply across geographies but across aesthetic sensibilities and traditions, as well, and therefore occupies the fluid and indeterminable confluence of numerous legacies and logics. From this breadth of knowing – this infinitude of empowering legacies – comes the ability to associate with and yet transcend, to identify with and yet defy, to lineate the contours of subjectivity outside of the frame, to negotiate and navigate the intricate and intertwining multi-strands of the new cool.

Amer’s early work fell across the borders of these anomalies. Her chosen subject was unequivocally female, and so were her themes, less determinate though they were. Her paintings dwelt on the ‘female’ territory of the domestic without any appeal to public or private heroism. As late as 1992 when she made La Femme Qui Repasse, a work on canvas featuring a young woman ironing with a potted plant beside her, and one of the last in her series of early works, placid domesticity remained her central theme. In her scenes women
dutifully attended to the most ordinary and traditional of chores; they sewed, mended, ironed, vacuum-cleaned and house-kept. In *Cinq femmes au travail* from 1991, one of five women in the piece is shown cleaning the floor, another doing the groceries. A third, dressed in aprons, sits on an office chair to stir a recipe while the fourth attends to a child. As in other works from this period, there is little, indeed no evidence, in either the countenance of the figures or their interpretable posture, to evince an authorial critique of domesticity as a female sphere. There was equally little to designate this domesticity as either an imperative or a prerogative. In other words, Amer reproduced the very stereotypes of femininity that radical cultural inquiries of preceding decades had problematised, without revealing an authorial opinion or ideological position. There was none of the theatricality of much work by young artists from the period, and no appeal to grandiosity. Her approach was devoid of noise or the will to power, and derived from no intentional challenge to – or indeed identification with – either tradition or its repudiation.

Even Amer’s chosen medium played almost within the stereotypical. From 1991 she began to work with sewing patterns and stitches, traditionally ‘female’ crafts, to which she was attracted through acquaintance with modelling magazines. In what may be her most significant contribution to the innovation of form in the late twentieth century, she applied thread and needle to canvas
in place of pigment, instantaneously uniting drawing, painting and tapestry. Although this decision to stitch on canvas could be read as a radical affront on the most male of these languages, the process itself began with less radical intentions. Her attraction to the crafts of embroidery, stitching and patterning, 'is not to be directly or indirectly linked to the recent history of painting', but more so to feminine concerns and preoccupations across cultures, in which sense it could be argued that her albeit uniquely innovative intervention on canvas and its attendant heritage began with a particularly non-contestatory codification of femininity.

In effect, from the beginning Amer lodged herself and her work in a decidedly ambivalent interstice between direct disavowal of the stereotype, and an outright rejection of radical cultural discourses on the visibility and representation of women. Her subject matter centred women without exploiting or objectifying them, yet it refrained from proffering a clear critique of their domestication. By reproducing the stereotype, it hovered on acquiescence, yet sampled radicality by making women its conscious and exclusive subject. In other words, Amer managed to avoid both abdication of ideological responsibility as well as polemicisation or polarisation.

Another remarkable element evident in these early works, is that in contrast to the pervading currents of the period, namely the obsession with the self, Amer eschewed the autobiographical as a subjectivist *sine qua non*. Nothing in her images provided a direct link, cultural or otherwise, to her subjects, except of course the obvious commonality of gender. In particular, intimacy, that supposedly integral element of the subjective, was markedly absent. Quite

*La femme qui zappe*, 1992, embroidery and acrylic on canvas, 85 cm x 100 cm
contrary to the confessional tendency of the day, Amer reproduced her figures and protagonists without apparent attachment, without inserting or revealing her self in them. Critics and scholars have been quick on occasion to make a presumptuous cultural connection between Amer and the subjects of her early work; between the fact of her Arab identity, her outsidership in France where she lived when these works were made, and her concern with women, domesticity, or indeed craft. Yet in the pieces under discussion, such a discursive connection can only be preposterous. While the images do not necessarily validate her dissolution in the text, there is nevertheless a deliberate withdrawal by which no specifics of authorial identity are volunteered or revealed; not culture nor race, neither class nor place. If anything what is evident is the studied distance of an observer, almost absent but evident nevertheless, naming the self as neither the I nor the Other, located perhaps within, perhaps outside but certainly not contained in discernible entirety in the confines of the picture.

What, then, are we driven to make of this distance? Do we read it as coda for the absence of not only the auteur but also of conviction? Do we interpret the placidity and absence of emotional intensity or theatricality in the images as indicative of a lack of investment, as symbolic of a recuperation of that vacuity for which high modernism, the direct precedent of the new subjectivism of the Seventies and Eighties, has now come to be known, in which case such return to kinesis might be interpreted as a retroaction against late century narcissism? Do we approach it as symptomatic of practice without mission, of an art without meaning?

In all cases, the answer must be in the negative. Instead, Amer’s apparent detachment from her subjects, in as much as it counteracts the obsessive narcissism of the period, nevertheless also points to an artist who is confident enough to place the responsibility and possibilities of interpretation and appreciation entirely at the disposal of the viewer without self-insertion or imposition. This subjective distance, this excision of the I, does more to focus our attention on the images and subjects as well as on eliciting the enigma of their serenity within a supposedly oppressive tradition or space. If anything, this was the true, new subjectivism, one where the self is evident only in the margin rather than the centre of contemplation, where the explicit is traded for the speculative, allowing the viewer to enter the picture.

It is useful to dwell for a moment on one fundamental aspect of Amer’s early work, namely the centrality of models and patterns. Amer mentions that she arrived at her signature language of embroidered images after much contemplation of images of fashion models in Egyptian and European fashion catalogues. She recalls noticing in one such catalogue that the Egyptian publishers had merely transposed the local vogue on existing images of European models, a facile act of budgetary convenience, on the face of it, but one that is particularly loaded and resonant with the most intricate symbolisms of cultural translation and anthropophagy. Except, of course, that far from the all transforming ritual which anthropophagy implies, this transpository act is neither fully transformative, nor does it completely yield to or efface the model. In other words, the model is adopted in its essence as a model upon which to act subjectively rather than submissively. We may not ignore the fact the essence of the model is to frame the subject; to provide a pattern or parameter of posture—a mould—to which the subject surrenders. Yet, in reality, the subject never fully surrenders to the model without exercise of their own essence which is to resist the mode, no matter how infinitesimally.
The model exists to facilitate replication, yet the fundamental premise of the replica is that the model cannot be repeated because the very process of replication annihilates the possibility of a perfect repetition. In other words, in its very essence, the model does not exist to be copied; it exists only to serve as a blueprint for a new entity, object, or state of being. In their use of European fashion models instead of locals, then, Egyptian fashion catalogue publishers seem to reiterate that their purpose is not to copy the Europeans but to use what already exists as a platform for what ultimately displaces it. Metaphorically, their practice underlines the fact that every model contains the promise of its own displacement.

It is this ingenious understanding that informs Amer's attraction to models, patterns, and replication. Beyond her use of formal replication, it also lends an insight into the nature of her early work and its predominant theme of the model woman. If the model cannot be repeated, then its representation cannot be read only as a proposition for its perpetuation. To the contrary, such representation equally engenders the possibility of a proposition for its displacement. The Egyptian fashion publisher who switches models and apparel across two cultures and contexts, operates on the invariable condition that something is discarded. That which is replicated recedes and ultimately dissolves in the genealogy of its own representation. In Amer's early work, though we are presented with what appears to us as faithful representations of a model, namely the traditional ideal of the woman, the very realisation of such representation - and the very act of its presentation - already places that model in jeopardy, just as in real life its replication does not guarantee its perpetuation but instead promises its displacement. The artist needs do no more, since the primary role of the creative individual is not to accept or repudiate, but to call attention to, to place at the centre of contemplation, to bring under scrutiny.

Through the adoption and representation of the model, Amer also accomplished that essential preamble of all fruitful engagements, which is to question. What the question is -- or ought to be -- we are not certain, just as we are bound to be divided on what its answer might be, but of the fact of its presence we are in no doubt. And we are in no doubt because we are forced to pose our own questions upon encounter with these images. We look at the works and we ponder the images and we wonder what the message might be. We acknowledge the different tropes, perhaps even recognise their possible symbolism. We contemplate the various histories drawn together on the canvas, and the fact of numerous trajectories of signification and meaning. We realise that at the heart of such deft utilisation and synergy of traditions inevitably lies a question, the germ of an inquiry, the outlines of an invitation and a challenge, and the enigma -- the ineluctability -- of this question rivets our minds to it. What shall we make of it? At the very least we ask: is this the model to be followed?

By 1992 we find the artist moving on from the theme of the domestic model, although she would retain her formal attachment to patterns and models. One of her works on canvas from the period, tellingly titled *Happy End*, shows a couple in part, their hands clasped as they go for a walk. It is the perfect trope of the domestic ideal, with romance and bliss and the promise of tranquillity. It would also signal the conclusion to a phase in Amer's work, the end of innocence, for in Amer's subsequent work she would forfeit tropes of domestic stability for those of turbulent desire and passion.

With *Happy End* we already notice that her technique has an important new introduction; the neat thread lines of earlier work begin to give way for more
pronounced tassels that hang where the threads end, as if the artist has abandoned the metered poetry of her earlier work in favour of free verse. Like free verse the lines hang loose at ends, increasingly rough and full-bodied, erratic rather than smooth, polychromatic. In a series of untitled works from 1992 subsequent to *Happy End*, there is an evident new level of command of form, but there is also a more freewheeling – perhaps even agitated – psychology at work which comes across in the lines on the canvases. Pigment disappears completely, so that the idea of colour is provided not by recourse to paint, but through its reinvention in polychromatic threads. Even where this is not the case, the threads are bundled or swirled to create the feel of impasto. With this extension to her use of thread that turns it fully three-dimensional, Amer not only distends the very limits of painting, she in fact adds the last of the canonical forms to her work: sculpture.

It is important, perhaps, to note that this synergy of forms and trajectories of tradition is affected simultaneously to the introduction of pronounced texturality, a texturality which not only references painterliness, but at the same time inscribes the sculptural. Though the artist may not have intended it, this texturality in itself carries a cultural and epochal resonance that is difficult to ignore. All texture is the product of lively interaction, of a reciprocal engagement whose purpose is to leave a trace. Texturality is, also, a register of naturalness and of the full-bodied, whereas its absence or reverse often involves or implies refinement or polish, which is the methodical removal of the unruly or unsightly. Often the purpose of counteracting the textural is to
expunge those elements that represent an object, entity, or even society. On the other hand, to imbue an object or entity with texturality is not simply to imbricate it with added density and complexity, but to recognise the essential complicatedness of things.

Many of Amer’s works from late 1992 until 1995 are without title, indicating at some level a growing emphasis on form and its possibilities and implications. Over the period her thread-work became heavier, woollier, and unavoidably looser, and composition gained prominence. In a rhetoric that does not begin in this period but would appear and gain prominence in the late 1990s, the artist notes that part of her work is a direct and enduring engagement with expressionism, especially Abstract Expressionism. This engagement would become more evident in her work in the late 1990s, and in her most recent paintings.

Amer’s engagement with late modernism, especially Abstract Expressionism, is nevertheless more than mere romance or fascination. It is an intense preoccupation, a tug, almost, between the safety of disavowel – that is to say, the ease with which the artist could ignore this ideological and stylistic bygoner – and the headiness of surrender to it. At a certain level, it is a formal and psychic tussle between a strong desire for the rustic and earthy – the masculine – which rightly or wrongly Abstract Expressionism has come to represent, and received notions of the limits of feminine venture. Ironically, it is also a wrestle with the Abstract Expressionism’s ultimate anchoring in the logic of tradition as much as it is a utopian aspiration to an ideal. In effect she wedges herself between history and its contestation, between the academy and its survival in the guise of a retrograde avant-garde. Which is to say that she essays an affront on both the academy and its malcontents, with the will not only to vanquish tradition and its hold, but also to possess and tame its antecedent. Ultimately, this play of ambivalence between appeal and uncertainty, masculinity and femininity, consent and sanction, custom and subversion, decency and decadence, is not only to be found in the purely formal or ideological niches of her practice, but replicates itself in every other aspect of her work.

More significant than the tussle itself are the quiet but notable results of Amer’s engagement in it, especially manifested in her ability to muddle the borders between figuration and Abstract Expressionism without necessarily appealing to alternative streams of late-century expressionism. Particularly important is her insertion of narrative, and her introduction of what could be considered feminine preoccu-
pations and discourses, into her retake on the abstract expressionist tableau, which counteracts the latter's canonical preference for the evacuation of content and cognisable narrative.

Also, it is the ultimate irony of Abstract Expressionism as part of the avant-garde that it should come to represent, at one level, a masculinity that is fetishised because it is exclusivised, and having been fetishised must ultimately be possessed if only to be tamed or consumed, and at another level, an iconic paragon that must be deconstructed and subverted. Amer's tussle with Abstract Expressionism bears the evident mark of fetishism, Abstract Expressionism being, of course, formally enthralling by way of its enchanting utilisation of the primordial: the drip, the swab, the obsessive impasto. It is also the dark, looming theatre of uninhibited recompense, the

*Love Park (detail), 2000, reactualise au Muee des Beaux Arts De Tours*
arena of bold enunciation and unbridled drama where neither belch nor growl is disallowed, the very canyon of primal revelry.

Whereas any reference to sexuality that might have existed in her earlier work remained so understated as to be almost absent, as she begins to wrestle with and reinvent the dark and bawdy language of expressionism, she gradually but determinedly steps up the vividness of the sexual and erotic in her work. First she introduces nudity, beginning with literally veiled figural references that are almost visually indiscernible except at close distance. In vignettes covered in thick masses of thread and made to appear like globs of colour on canvas, she presents images of women engaged in sexual exploration of their own bodies. She appears guarded at this stage, as we find in some of her untitled works from 1993, at once conscious of the cultural weight of her new undertaking in broaching an almost anathematic territory of visual discourse for a modern woman of her cultural and religious extraction, yet acutely calculating in her now-established and familiar strategy of quiet seduction. In time this guardedness disappears, but not entirely as the artist retains the seductive hook of partial revelation in her work. The subject matter itself would remain central to her practice for the rest of the 1990s and would come to define her oeuvre, albeit inaccurately so.

Ghada Amer’s introduction of erotica or sexually near-explicit imagery in her work, though not at all sudden or without context, was nevertheless a phenomenal act that again set her apart from her peers in the same manner that her rejection of verbose subjectivism did at the beginning of her career. Given her background in a society which, quite like the West, has come to criminalise the outwardly, sexually suggestive or explicit, her chosen subject matter placed her among the most bodacious Arab cultural practitioners of the century, in rank perhaps with her countryman, Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz – who long before Salman Rushdie – distended the borders of orthodox religious allowance by confronting and reinventing sacred mythologies in his controversial genesis, Children of Gebelawi – and certainly alongside such notable Arab women authors as fellow Egyptian and leading feminist Nawal el Sadaawi, and the Algerian Assia Djebar, author of L’amour, la fantasie. Sadaawi’s 1972 novel, Women and Sex had dared to introduce issues of women’s sexuality into popular and literary discourse in Egypt, in same way that Amer’s work from 1993 especially, became preoccupied with a direct engagement with both female sexual desire and male voyeurism. Though it could be argued that the temporal circumstances differ – which argument would indeed be tenuous at best – we are nevertheless able to glean the significance of Amer’s engagement with female sexuality in the widespread reproach and persecution that befell Sadaawi in Egypt after the publication of Women and Sex.

Yet sight is not to be lost of the fact that Amer finds inspiration for her engagement with sexuality not merely in popular sources or daily predicaments in the West, but even more so in the rich literary and philosophical traditions of Arab and Muslim cultures; the marvellous sura of the Qur’an, which she quotes in her embroidered sculptural piece, Private Rooms, for instance, or the grand erotic treatises of the medieval Arab physician, Sheikh Umar al-Nafzawi which the artist references in her outdoor piece, Love Park. All of these sources, and more, are suffused with detailed meditations on sexuality, eroticism, passion, romance, differences between the sexes, and the vagaries of human relationships, that provide relevant hooks and anchors for Amer within her heritage, and augment her sources in the
Western tradition. They also constitute a valid historical context within which her work may be seen as the continuation of a long tradition of Arab investigations of both sexuality and human passions.

It is not without relevance to note that Amer’s increasing employment of text in her work beginning with her ‘beauty tips’ in 1993 may owe as much to these traditions of acute textuality, which in fact left our civilisation the legacy of text and writing, and their infinite imbrications of day-to-day experience, as it does to practices within contemporary art, or to her own personal, literary proclivities. Indeed, regarding contemporary references, none is any more relevant to her experience than the preponderance of text in contemporary Arab visual culture. In other words, the daringness of Amer’s imagery or subject matter does not necessarily place her diametrically in opposition to her culture of birth, but rather underlines her strong connectedness to it, a connectedness which liberates her from blind adherence or servitude to either present configurations, or popular perceptions, of that culture.

Amer has noted in conversations that some of her work may not be warmly received in her country of birth for reasons of its subject matter, which underlines a rather moot point, namely that her expatriation has provided some level of distance and less mediated secularity for her to engage openly in subjects that she considers both artistically endearing, and socially pertinent. However, it is equally pertinent to note that her concerns transcend the specificity of her genealogy or cultural background, and are in no way intended to constitute tropes of Otherness. In the same way that the medieval Sheikh Naqzawi addressed issues of general human desires and inclinations without otherising specificity, so does Amer occupy herself with immediate and historical concerns of women across cultures. In other words her true and ultimate subject matter might better be articulated as ‘woman, phenomenally’, to use Maya Angelou’s phrase.

Amer’s introduction of the erotic and sexually near-explicit in her work may then be seen as an act of double-consciousness. On the one hand, it was an act of self-definition outside the confines of contemporary, fundamentalist cultural stipulation or socially coded limitations while reconnecting her with an older tradition of open, philosophical inquiry into all aspects of human behaviour. On the other, it is a continuation of her own personal investigations of the female universe and its location in culture as a whole, both contemporary and historical.

Conceptually speaking, Ghada Amer’s work since the mid-1990s may be summarised as an infinite treatise on two invariables of the human condition: love and desire. In what we may call her post-Happy End work, these two concepts have remained pre-eminent, manifesting in different trajectories of inquiry that range from the preponderant focus on sexuality and its duplicitous implications, to the slippery underpass between vanity and voyeurism. The latter she contends with in works such as the Conseils de beauté from 1993, in which the quiet detachment of her earlier phase translates into a rich and convoluted irony as she brings women’s concern for bodily upkeep centre-stage. Although in those works she again reveals no easily discernible intent to critique, we are almost forced to perform our own deconstruction of the phenomenon in question and perhaps, should contemporary theoretical inclinations prevail, to place it at that overgrown crossroads between customary male stipulations and female subjeckhood.

But love and desire remain the central theme around which all else revolves.
For the protagonist of Amer’s return to the grand philosophical subject, the first is impossible, unattainable; the second inevitable and insatiable. It is these paradoxes; the allure yet impossibility of love, and the omnipresence and insatiability of desire, especially as it emanates from our corporeality, that constitute the very core of the human predicament. They are the spikes upon which nature impales our species. With both fascination and disillusionment, Amer rivets her ardour and angst on the futility – and fatality – of passion, the inescapable desirability of fervent attention on the heels of which follow certain rejection and hurt, the inevitability of bitter and lonely calm after the storm, the inextricability of the thorn from the rose.

Though not as sanguine, something in this arguably cynical Weltanschauung reminds us of the poet Sylvia Plath; in fact, we could almost hear the ‘first

*Cactus Painting, 2000, Cactus et gazanias, CCC, Tours*
voice’ in Plath’s tragicomic poem, ‘Three Women’ intone: ‘It is the calm before something awful: The yellow minute before the wind walks...’ The acute pain of the desire to be loved, and the headiness of the moment of possession and passion, even out in a momentary harmony that bores ill; calm which ultimately careens into the abyss of failure, as if to say that some things are not meant to be. In the end love, or harmonious union, is ‘nothing but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, yet never attained’, to use Bob Marley’s words. It is this conclusion that is at the heart of Amer’s Cactus Painting with its beautiful flora, its alluring inflorescence, its thousand thorns. It is also the subject of her Love Park with its torn benches, sawn in two and misaligned; its contradictory epithets and aphorisms on love and fulfilment drawn from sources as disparate in time as they are in vision. In Cactus Painting, commissioned by the curator Rosa Martinez in 1998, Amer uses the cactus plant as a metaphor for love, the cactus in bloom surrounded by thorns signifying the eternal duplicity of fervour and hurt. The cactus is the bleeding heart, and more, for its perennial hardiness represents an invariability, even perpetuity that comes closer to the nature of love. Also, as the source of the powerful and intoxicating, tequila, the cactus aptly captures the ominous headiness and treacherousness that characterise unrequited affection. The florescent cactus becomes the ultimate signifier of hopeless passion; fragrant, colourful, dangerous.

And if love is treacherous and unreachable, what shall we do with the body and its needs? How to attend to the desire for pleasure which racks our being? Shall we give free reign to that which is ineluctable within us, or assuage it as we may? Shall we contain it, repress it, or deny it? Amer’s embroidered women explore their bodies, their pleasure zones, often alone, mapping and claiming every inch, loving it. Yet they leave us with the impression that this self-exploration, affirming as it is, nevertheless falls short of true fulfilment. This predicament is further complicated by the myriad strictures of culture, and especially by the vagaries and absurdities of gender disparity and socialised inhibition.

Between the strands that define Amer’s inquiries then, one finds a seeming conflict, the same conflict that marks the watershed between early feminism and what has now come to be known as its ‘post’. It is the same conflict that we find equally beautifully, wrenchingly articulated in Sandra Cisneros’s poetry, namely the woman’s right to own space on the one hand, and on the other the yearning for companionship which often compromises the integrity of that space. Through various, fitting formal strategies, all of which reveal a careful contemplation of the conjunction of vehicle and idea, Amer brings visual poignancy to this apparent conflict sans resolution.

Ghada Amer describes her practice as expression rather than critique, observation and reflection which, rather than denounce from the higher rung of an objectifying, value hierarchy, instead readily self-situates within experience and those invariable, oft illogical inconsistencies of reality in which revelation is rooted. Though her work has unarguably essayed a significant contribution to the advancement of formal strategies in turn of the century art, a proper appreciation of her oeuvre must begin from the more robust and fecund arena of the extra-formalistic, the convoluted terrains of experience and life itself where art finds its incontestable meaning and indispensability on the premise that, as James Baldwin wrote, life is invariably the greater of the two.