


LE MILE

FASHION & CONTEMPORARY ART

N°10



ADELINE WOHLWEND ALBAN E. SMAJLI ALEX SAINT ALEX SCHIER
ANDREAS ORTNER GHADA AMER HERBERT NAUDERER
MIHAELA NOROC ZANELE MUHOLI



**“It’s all the education, it was imprinted,
and we have to correct it, but sometimes
it’s very difficult to correct it.”**

*An interview by Mikal Shkrelí with Ghada Amer
documented by Mairanny Batista*



Le Mile 2.jpeg
(827 X 1168)

>>The Brain of the World:
A look into the creative
mind of>>

GHADA AMER

INTERVIEW BY MIKAL SHREELI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAIRANNY BATISTA

A few light knocks on the door standing at the end of the hall evoke a muffled "hello" and curious expectations. A bright smile greets us, then welcomes us to the studio, quietly tucked away on the west side of northern Manhattan. GHADA AMER, an internationally known and recognized artist who has been featured in various museums around the world, lets us into her creative space to spend some time getting to know her, the soul behind the provoking and sometimes controversial artwork that she shares with the world. Also in the studio, longtime friend and sometimes creative counterpart, Reza Farkhondeh greets us as well while he paints soft pallets of florals onto a large canvas, outlining the shape, layering the colors for definition and depth. I recognize his name and his style of work from the collaborative art that I found on Ghada's website. "We have been working together on and off since school times," Ghada explains. Pleased to meet him, we are gently ushered through the hallway and into the larger studio room in the back, surrounded with windows in the top corner of the building, the setting sun lights up the white walls and illuminates the hanging brushes of all kinds, shapes and styles.

Ghada offers us tea and walks over to the kitchen to prepare some.

We gander around the space, observing several large pieces of untouched canvas leaning against a plastic-covered wall, supported by upside-down paint buckets, ready to be meddled with. Three tables are spaced in the center of the room, dining-room style and parallel, providing separate stations for focus on specific projects, ones specifically that require the hand embroidery work that Ghada is most known for. Before the stacked canvas frames in the corner of the room stands the table with a work in progress mounted on top of it, straddled between two rolls that support the section of focus. Loose threads hang low in various colors.

This appears to be what Ghada has just been working on before we arrived. The piece is hard to make out, but stenciled letters spell out a famous quote of Eleanor Roosevelt which is repeated, stitched in with thread, and remains as a backdrop for a larger image that is being formed above them, of which is not yet readable. The focus is on the letters, but in the final piece, the larger image can be read, but so far to us, the whole picture's beauty is still a mystery. And even so, the detailed work and aesthetic in what we can see is just as captivating. Ghada returns to the room and sits at the table with the unfinished embroidered art to pose for some pictures of her in action. "This is how it's done, the process," she reveals. "It looks like this takes a lot of time!" *I observe.*





Le Mile 4.jpeg
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"Yes" she admits. She threads the needle diligently and gracefully through the canvas, outlining the letters. As she weaves, I notice stencils on the walls, of letters, shapes, and even a fly swatter that can be used as a stencil as well. Or maybe not. Besides them are a series of organized plastic cabinets filled with smaller paint brushes, colored pencils and spools of thread.

The high-pitched screams of boiling water summon Ghada out of her seat and back into the kitchen. We prepare a fitting space for the filmed interview. Ghada returns with the tea and sits on the stool, of which she decorated with glued thread of many colors, and adjusts her posture before the center white canvas that leans against the wall. I inhale the aroma of the tea in my hand, burning my tongue a bit on an eager first sip, and we start our interview. Being educated in Paris and Nice, Ghada was born in Cairo, Egypt, and has spent much of her time in the United States. She is mostly known for her multi-layered embroidery work which display themes of sexuality, eroticism and feminine art. One particularly well-known collection is titled, "You My Love", displaying acrylic and embroidery on canvas of female bodies, poised in sexual

ways, alluring, mysterious and profound as well. I asked Ghada if there are any other collections of art that she has done that might be shadowed by this series. "My garden work" she explains, "people don't know it because it is in remote places and because it's not in a gallery, not in a museum, art centers, stuff like this, so people haven't seen it." The garden work consists of a series of installations within abandoned gardens in different locations around the world, some in Italy, others in Indiana. One specific installation is the word 'LOVE', dug deeply into the

ground as if it were a grave, "it was experimental" she adds, "I wish people (will) know more about these works." Ghada's work is loaded with meaning and they are all visually captivating. Refreshing to the eye in their unique perspective of presenting concepts and images, ideals and perspective. I ask Ghada about her drawings and prints, of which I found on her website, which display Disney characters in provocatively sexual ways through the use of layered imagery. I ask about her intent and specifically inquire about her message, when it comes to these pieces. "Well, I don't have a message in general anyway, in my artwork. I don't like this term, a 'message', because a message is something that you can speak. And

I don't like this word in general, 'feminine' arts, that say 'this is how you should feel, this is what I feel' ... I have a problem with the wording of the question, but it's important to say that I don't particularly like to have a direct message, and this is what differentiates my work with other feminists work that have a very clear message. But in this particular Disney work with the sexuality, it's because we think that children have no sexuality, like suddenly you become sexual at 18 ... so for me this is a big problem in our society ... how to raise children in

terms of sexual education and how we don't put sexuality in any of the children in terms of their desires, how they form, so this is what I'm trying to ... some children are sexual more earlier than others, and in kids you can see them, and it's very shocking, and what is this sexuality? It's so taboo, because people think you are a pervert. It's not about being a pervert, but about being conscious that this is something that exists and needs to be addressed."

OK so, artistic expression, expressing oneself, or even sexually expressing oneself, they both can relate to freedom, freedom to be ourselves, freedom to be who we really are, our desires; is that something that's important to you?

You know, what is important, it's something I wish and is important to me particularly to be free with my sexuality. (laugh) it's the only way I can deal with the problems of how I grew up, my culture, my taboos. I grew up in a conservative culture, and how I wanted to know more about sexuality, and it was taboo, even to think about it, looks like this takes a lot of time!" and then I discovered in the West it's taboo ... it's my own way to find freedom, I don't know if you call it freedom...knowledge! Because

freedom, you can never find. I don't even know what it means, freedom. But knowledge, I prefer ... sometimes, even if you understand, you cannot just achieve this freedom, even if you want, it is so, a stitch in you.

We can try but we won't get there. Exactly. It's all the education, it was imprinted, and we have to correct it, but sometimes it's very difficult to correct it.

But then, art can be a way to educate, to share knowledge in some ways.

Yes, I believe, but education, it's a very personal path, so just every-

body has to find their own knowledge. I don't want to be like 'oh this is how you should think'. People find how they want to think, and what they want to think.

So can art do that as well, and we are interpreting it for ourselves so everyone has their own interpretation so it can lead to education for oneself.

Exactly because we are asking questions, to work this knowledge.

This kind of goes with the lack of message.

That's exactly why I have a big problem with the word 'message' because message is a very unilateral kind of education, 'you have to think that way', 'this is the world'. No, I don't want this.

Very interesting, because your art can reach more people in deeper ways, more profound ways.

Yes, yes, beyond cultural education as well, like people that, I don't know the culture, Japanese, Chinese, South American as well, it's all about the human being, not about 'cultural' knowledge.

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Le Mile 6.jpeg
(827 X 1168)



Le Mile 7.jpeg
(827 X 1168)

I finish the last sip of my tea and place the ornate cup onto the empty table beside me. "But did you see the new work? You should look at the new work!" Ghada exclaims.

We get up from our seats and make way towards the desktop computer behind me, of which I had failed to notice earlier. She opens a PDF file with images of the exhibition titled, 'Rainbow Girls', that is featured in the Cheim & Read gallery. "I wanted to do this because when we think about feminism, we think, 'oh it's over and we have resolved many problems'. I wanted to take some quotes that are short, and that do not criticize men, because the woman, if she has been oppressed, of course partly it is because of men, but partly because she let herself be oppressed. She should stand up fight, instead of fighting the man and society, she should get her freedom back ... so I wanted to give power to women but without criticizing whose fault or whatever fault, we just have to go back and fight and be powerful because we are powerful." One of the quotes that is repeated as the backdrop for a piece of the exhibit is "Nobody gives you power, you just take it." Ghada explains that she wanted to use these quotes, "like prayers that you repeat repeat and repeat ... a mantra that you repeat and it becomes.

I did it on the portraits and on the landscapes. This is the principle actually." I comment on the power of words themselves, even if they are a backdrop in the work, and Ghada responds, "and you don't particularly want to read them, these new works are totally different; you can read them if you want, and then you lose the image, but you can go back and forth, the perception." Considering the shifting nature of her work, I ask Ghada if her exhibit is steering away from her previous work or choosing to expand on what she has already done. "You know, it's evolving. It's more me, very refreshing to do this body of work, to play with words. I always worked with words anyways, from the gardens to the sculptures, but this is the first time that I worked with words and figuration." We assemble ourselves back into our original positions, me by the table and Ghada before the white canvas atop the decorated stool.

You also use Arabic in this exhibit for the first time. Now you have the power of words in a different language, a different alphabet. Are you trying to reach a different audience?

Yes. I speak four languages, French and Arabic are my two best languages, but in this particular series, I actually translated the French quote from French into English. I didn't translate any quote from English to Arabic. I chose the quotes that are from my culture, how the people speak because in my country and the Arab world they are very active and interested in art and I want to say something to them. This is why I chose to speak in Arabic. And English because I know that they can understand it and everybody else can understand. The Arabic ones, unfortunately here they can't understand it, but it's okay, it doesn't matter to me, at least I can reach them, it's very important that I can reach them. If I say this (the Arabic quotes) in English it always feels like it comes from the 'others' or 'other culture', than if you say it in your own language, especially in my culture, where language is so important and art and calligraphy, that I don't like particularly because I always thought I would never make calligraphy, but this time calligraphy was very important to me.

Would you like to share one of the Arabic quotes that you do have?

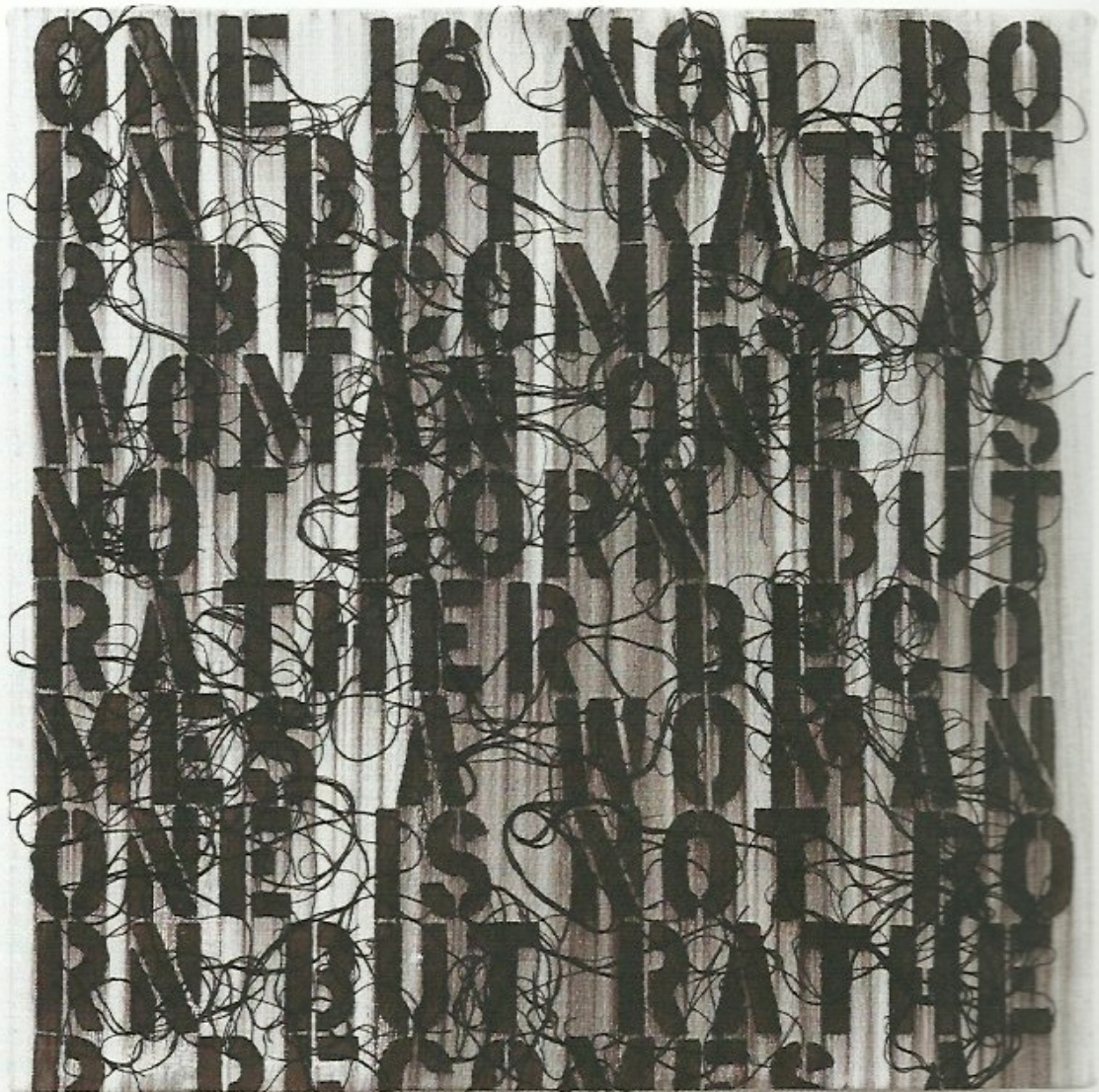
The first Arabic quote that Ghada shares with us comes from the controversial move made by Amina Sboui, in which she painted the Arabic quote, "my body belongs to me, and is not the source of anyone's honor" across her nude chest, and posted the photos on the internet. It ultimately led to her arrest in Tunisia. Ghada explains her inspiration and the importance to be extremely receptive and alert to her surroundings. And in particular, the quotes were chosen because they are meaningful and short. The second quote Ghada shares is, "the woman revolts in the north, revolts in the south, revolts in the west, revolts in the east, and revolts against the body politics, and be the brain of the world."

It's like a poem.

Yes, exactly.

I comment on Ghada's sweater, woven thread that reminds me of her artwork and ask if she made it herself, "my mom did! She inspires me!" Laughter roars in the studio and the topic of family is brought into the room. "No, it's not easy for me," Ghada explains about her mother, "It bothers her, and it's good, that's exactly what I want. And it bothers a lot of people in Egypt." Ghada discusses a situation with another close relative whom did not approve of her work at all, "I told him, 'You don't have to look!

Why did you look? I am not forcing you! You are forcing me to think like you, but I am not forcing you!" Ghada's work was shown in Egypt in 1994 in a private gallery and although it was a big risk, Ghada shares her surprise that some notable people in Egypt have supported her since then. Although these strong reactions aren't unique to the Egyptian audience, "even from Americans, I get some very strong reactions; I was very surprised ... they are scared of the children ... they are afraid it will pervert them. But you know, I have two nephews and nieces and they are normal and they grew up with all of this art around them and they are totally okay." Ghada's eyes light up with a sense of pride and truth, and we agree that all cultures have the same taboo, that women have traditionally been represented behind the man. We finish our interview and Ghada returns the empty tea cups to the kitchen. We pack our bags and put on our coats and notice Ghada and Reza doing the same; their working hours at the studio are over, and we are all going home. "I like to do my work with Reza because he is a man and I am a woman and sometimes we switch roles; he does the landscape with flowers, and they think that he does the erotic and I do the flowers and landscape." We all laugh and Ghada continues, "and sometimes I ask him, 'can you give me some of your flowers' and he takes some of my women, and then we draw them and we break the boundaries ... there is this idea that men have to be only 'macho' and there are men that are really feminist and this is how we work together because for men as well, it's not fun to have this role as the dominator, who always brings the money and all of this." Ghada pauses and admits, "if I was a man it would be very stressful." More laughter emerges "... so as well, the work we do together is very interesting politically and in this art as well, not only the quality of art, but the energy, and we think, 'we're going



TEST #8

2013

Acrylic, embroidery and gel
medium on canvas

20 x 20 inches

50.8 x 50.8 centimeters
CMA/GA/1000

to fool you'; I can be a man if I want, he can be a woman, in terms of the art." We descend the stairs and find the outside world to be cold, wet, and the four of us run through the dark streets towards the nearest subway. Hopping onto the C train downtown, Mairanny gets off first, and a few stops later I have to exit the train as well, leaving Ghada and Reza together with smiles on their faces, waving at me through the gritty subway window as it carries them onto their next destination. I think about the beginning of our interview, realizing that Ghada is a strong force in the art world, loudly standing in silence as a homage of strength for women, men, individuality, expressive sexuality, and the strive to attain freedom. Without imposing any of her views, Ghada's work carries heavy knowledge in significance and meaning, yet purposely and tactfully lacks a message; the reaction, the response, is the magic of its essence. But where does this essence come from? What is steering Ghada? As I await for my crosstown bus, I remember my last question with her.

Do you have somewhere you want your art to go, a direction, let's say, are you trying to street it to a certain place?

"The art steers me. I don't ... It takes me."