

FRIEZE



Ghada Amer, 'Paravent Girls', 2023, installation view. Courtesy Tina Kim Gallery, New York; photograph: Hyunjung Rhee

Ghada Amer Refigures the Othered Woman

BY Danielle Wu

November 27, 2023

In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement and the revocation of *Roe v. Wade*, the idea of rescuing women through their visibility appears to have reached a critical fatigue – at least in leftist circles in the US. But French-Egyptian-American artist Ghada Amer remains determined to iterate the need for women to pursue liberation in the symbolic and psychic realms as well as in their lived experience. The artist's latest show, 'Paravent Girls' at Tina Kim Gallery, presents a new body of work that continues her lifelong investigation into women's representation.

The exhibition opens with a demonstration of Amer's sculptural process: *Study for Sculpture 4* (2021) is the outline of a woman, copied from a pornographic magazine, painted onto cardboard. The artist creates her bronze works from these paintings by pressing clay onto the outlines, leaving fingerprints and traces of touch intact, before employing a lost-wax casting process. Echoing the loose threads that have come to define her embroidery works, Amer here allows gravity to pull the pigment in vertical drips, producing a dissonance between the come-hither looks the women project and their interior emotional states. As they perform seduction, the women seem to weep or sustain injury, as in the case of *Sculpture with Wounds* (bronze) (2023).

WITCHES (2023) displays the fuel for Amer's fire: writings by Simone de Beauvoir, Audre Lorde and other canonical feminist writers. Abridged to their pithiest parts, these text-based works are sized like placemats – settings for a table at which the writers were denied a seat. Collected, however, they tread rather too closely to the oversimplified brand of consumer feminism that suggests equality is achieved by a confidence boost and new clothing, recognizable on protest signs and their cheapened commodification on pins, T-Shirts and saccharine social-media graphics. The gender essentialism of Hollywood actress Ginger Rogers's quote, 'THERE'S NOTHING A MAN CAN DO THAT I CAN'T DO BETTER AND IN HEELS,' has not aged gracefully, for instance. But this is

not so much a signal of Amer's – or feminism's – failure as it is a testament to the resilience of patriarchy making it necessary to reiterate such aphorisms.

Evident from the grouping is the dominance of Euro-American voices in the field of universalized feminist teachings. Nearby, Amer's *Another Revolutionary Woman* (2022) offers a welcome change: a quote from the contemporary Egyptian writer and psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi, a name likely unfamiliar to most gallery-goers. It reads in Arabic: 'The revolutionary man will be considered a popular and respected hero but the revolutionary woman will be considered weird and abnormal and unfeminine.' Its placement outside the chorus of accepted, if not tired, mantras highlights the position of the Arab woman as an unresolved and far more fascinating question: what does it look like, Amer seems to ask, for the 'Oriental' woman to represent herself?



Ghada Amer, 'Paravent Girls', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: Tina Kim Gallery, New York; photograph: Dario Lasagni

Amer often recounts her entrance into artistic practice as marked by a traumatic moment when a male teacher at her art school, the Villa Arson in Nice, refused to let her attend his painting classes because she was a woman. Although this has been characterized as a sexist interaction, many neglect to note its colonial dynamic. As Amer's works show, centuries of erasure and misrepresentation – including depictions that justified the occupation and violation of her homeland – still occlude a more authentic portrait of womanhood. Amer doesn't attempt a more realistic representation, nor even pretends such a thing is possible; rather, her work makes contemporary the enduring state of the 'Oriental' woman as othered by feminism. What was the porcelain vase or the perfume bottle is now cardboard packaging and advertisement. The 'Oriental' woman remains a container, a cypher, a screen and a *paravent*: sentient enough to be criminalized for her sexuality but not enough to be man's equal.