

Maura Reilly, "D as in Drips: A Conversation with Ghada Amer,"
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D AS IN DRIPS: A CONVERSATION WITH GHADA AMER

Maura Reilly

Maura Reilly: I'd like to begin by asking you a very basic question. When and why did you decide to become an artist?

Ghada Amer: When I was a young girl in Egypt, I adored my art class because I could make such a mess and nobody shouted at me. It was total freedom; I could get as messy as I liked. I loved it! (Laugh.) It was a girls' school only, with strict rules. There was no talking whatsoever. Art class, which took place in the basement, was the only class where I could be free. But when I moved to France at age 11, art class was different. I didn't like it. We had to learn perspective, representation, and it was completely controlled. I had to cut carefully with the scissors, had to paint within the lines—no drips allowed! It was horrible. I hated it! I remember thinking even then that this was not art. But I continued to draw at home, and my parents allowed me to, but only after I'd finished my homework. They eventually realized that I wanted to be an artist and conceded to let me apply to art school in 1982. But when I applied, my application was rejected. I had submitted a patchwork as my artwork, not realizing that I was meant to submit a painting. I was not yet aware that there were hierarchies between artistic mediums, with painting being the highest and craft the lowest. It was then that I decided that if I wanted to become an artist then I had to become a painter. Besides, it was the cool thing to be then! (Laugh.) I didn't know yet that all the famous painters were male. It was then that, suddenly, I realized I was a woman. I decided to speak about this – and to make painting at the same time. This is what I'm doing. It's painting with the conscience that I'm a woman.

MR: When did you start to use embroidery in your work?

GA: I decided to use embroidery in my work after realizing that the *language* of painting is dominated by men. It was only when I went for a semester abroad to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1987 that I learned that there were important women artists, using different formal languages. Feminism was a topic that was openly talked about there—in a non-threatening way—unlike at my art school in France where it was never spoken about, or was considered aggressive, lesbian or man-hating. But in Boston it was different. When I returned, I became fascinated with Rosemarie Trockel. She had successfully invented a language for women using knitting, and I liked her use of commercial and political symbols, as well. I wanted



to invent something similar to her work. In 1991, eureka, I found it. I made a painting manifesto titled *Cinq Femmes au Travail* that is a quadriptych that represents five women at work—shopping, cleaning, cooking, looking after a child, and then the final or fifth woman references me, the artist, in the act of sewing the work itself. I was interested then in the “domestic” as both medium and subject.

MR: What I find brilliant about this early work is that the four scenes are constructed as neatly stitched line drawings on unprimed canvases—and yet, despite the fact that there is no acrylic on the canvas, you refer to these as your first fully embroidered “paintings,” with your “paint,” in fact, being actual strands of thread stitched into the canvas and then secured with a gel medium. I think this is critical to understanding your painting technique: that you define it as not necessitating paint on canvas.

GA: Correct. By using embroidery and gel on canvas as my medium, I am developing my own feminine language of painting.

MR: Your interest in domestic imagery ended abruptly around 1993, when you first introduced pornography into your work. Can you discuss how you made this critical, career-altering decision?

GA: By 1993, I wasn't happy sewing the subject of women. I needed to develop my ideas more and was worried that an embroidered image of a woman at work—such

as ironing—was a symbol of double submission. I didn't want that. I wanted these women to be empowered; active, not passive. Pornography was and continues to be my solution. It allows me to represent women using embroidery, a woman's tool, but to show Woman, the universal woman, as an activated subject empowered by her own pleasure.

MR: Where do you find your source material?

GA: I find the images in magazines like *Hustler* and *Club*. Once I've selected the ones I like then I trace them onto vellum paper with pencil and use them later by transferring them on to my canvases or works on paper.

MR: I was delighted to see that you included several of your explicit embroidered drawings and watercolors in this exhibition. I know that this was a radical decision for you in that these works have never before been exhibited in the US. Why did you choose to do so at this specific moment?

GA: There were a number of factors. For twenty years, I have been hiding my vellum on paper drawings because I was embarrassed by them and have been using them solely as source material for my paintings. I'm less embarrassed now. I've been drawing these images for so long now that the women are like cartoons, like clichés. With the new drawings, I just decided to create them as artworks for the first time.

ABOVE: *Cinq Femmes au Travail* 1991 embroidery and gel medium on canvas (4 panels) 21 5/8 x 24 3/4 in. 55 x 63 cm each

MR: Two of the paintings on view in the exhibition are collaborative works, titled with the acronym “RFGA,” meaning that they are produced by Reza Farkhondeh and Ghada Amer. Can you discuss this collaboration a bit, how and when it started and why it is so important to the development of your work?

GA: My collaboration with Reza began in 2000 when he surprised me by painting on one of my canvases in my absence. I wasn’t upset about it; he’d been very depressed, and I was delighted to see that he had taken an interest in painting again—even if it was on my painting. I wanted to help him. Reza was depressed about his own painting and believed that if he painted on my canvases, versus his, then he could “trick” his depression and still be able to paint. At first, he would just make marks in my works, almost with trepidation—as in *Colored Strokes on White Diane—RFGA*, 2002, in which he added beautiful, cream-colored V and X shaped tape-like markings randomly throughout the canvas, adding his “touch” to my aesthetic. Eventually, once he came out of the depression and began feeling more confident, he added strong formal elements to the works, as in *Wallpaper* and *Grey Kiss*, both from 2003.

MR: If they are collaborative paintings then why are they authored by you alone?

GA: Reza has always been embarrassed about his “interventions” in my work and did not want me to acknowledge his collaboration. I disagreed. I wanted to publicly recognize the collaboration because I knew it was an important contribution to my work. In 2001, he finally agreed to let me add the acronym “RFGA,” as a way of secretly coding the works that he had painted on.

MR: Why is this collaboration so important to you? What does it give you?

GA: Artists tend to repeat themselves, I think. This collaboration gives me a breath of fresh air. It’s challenging and surprising. It pushes my technique and my ideas in new directions. I don’t know if I could do it with somebody else. Reza profoundly inspires me.

MR: He’s your muse.

GA: Yes, he is. I like his work; it’s very inspiring, and beautiful. I never thought we could work together. But since this chance incident in 2000 we have been developing a language together. I think of my work as two languages: the language of thread (that was a deliberate choice) and this communication with Reza (that I fell into).

MR: More recently, over the past two years, you’ve been producing a lot of collaborative works on paper with Reza, which differ formally and conceptually from the earlier RFGA paintings.

GA: Yes, and we’ve produced less RFGA paintings together lately while we focused on the works on paper, which we’ve made during residencies at STPI, Pace Prints, Neiman Center. But I have a feeling that our new RFGA paintings are starting to look more like our recent collaborations than the earlier RFGAs. I suppose this is normal. They’ve developed.

MR: I can certainly see that *Paradise Girls—RFGA*, 2010 is different from previous ones insofar as it involves a new round gestural threading and gelling technique that you’ve been developing. However, its palette is more tranquil, its figure-ground relationship more shallow, and the formal aesthetic more decorative.

GA: Yes, but I feel the word decorative is not correct.

MR: I guess what I’m trying to say is that these RFGA paintings more closely resemble the works on paper produced with Reza at Pace Prints. To me, it appears that these new paintings you’ve made with Reza in 2010 are less RFGA than they are truly collaborative works. If this is the case, then perhaps they should be authored by the two of you. Do you agree? Or, is Reza still not content or embarrassed about being acknowledged as a full collaborative participant in the paintings?

GA: This a great point that you raise here. I do think that we should start signing the new RFGA paintings together but Reza won’t agree to it. Beginning in 2005, we started signing all our collaborations on paper or video with our full names, but it was too late to do it retrospectively on the paintings. Reza prefers being recognized as a co-author on our works on paper where he says he expresses himself more freely. But he needs to decide what he wants with the paintings.

MR: Since your eureka moment in 1991 with *Cinq Femmes au Travail* you’ve been developing your own feminine language of painting, deciding sometimes to add acrylic to the canvas, while at other times avoiding it altogether—as in the mid-1990s when you boycotted acrylic and painted with thread only, allowing the embroidery and threaded drips to stand in for gestural abstraction. Then in 1997 you returned to painting with a vengeance and began combining your embroidered porn ladies with expressionistically painted canvases to dramatic effect. Since then you’ve been continually reinventing your techniques. In the last few years, however, it seems as if you’ve become increasingly experimental in your threading and gelling techniques,

in particular, as is visible in the more isolated swirls in *D as in Drips* or the burst of threads in *The Black Bang*. What has precipitated this recent explosion in formal experimentation?

GA: I have been experimenting a lot over the last two years. But I always have. In my last show in 2006 I was experimenting with figure sizes, for example with *Trini* and *Knotty But Nice*—both from 2005, which is very different, for instance, from what I was doing in *Big Black Kansas City Painting—RFGA*, 2005, where the figures are identically sized and arranged serially throughout the canvas. Because I am developing this particular way of painting that is a combination of embroidery and paint, I am continually inventing new techniques, especially ones that put embroidery on a hierarchical par with painting. Besides, painting has set rules, embroidery doesn't, so I can experiment more with the embroidery than I can with the paint. Lately, I've been threading and gelling the embroidery differently, trying to make it do things it hasn't before. Until now, I could only create my "threaded drips" horizontally and vertically. But now I'm painting gesturally with the drips. I've never been able to do that before.

MR: How have you achieved this?

GA: I've changed the way I'm using the whole canvas, its stretcher, the threads, and the gel medium. One major difference is that instead of gelling it while the painting is vertical, now I'm gelling it on a horizontal. It starts after the embroidery is finished with two assistants holding the re-stretched canvas horizontally about four feet from the ground, which gives me enough clearance to crawl beneath and arrange the threads by either brushing them using my fingers as bristles.

MR: I understand now. Since all of this is done from underneath, the hanging threads are occupying more of a 3D space than they would otherwise. Does this technique make it easier for you to determine how the threads relate to the painting's surface in a more gestural way?

GA: Yes, because I can lie beneath the painting and look at it from a different perspective. After I've untangled the threads, my assistants lower the stretcher onto a large sheet of plastic already in place on the floor. In some cases, like *Color Misbehavior* and *D as in Drips* we lower the canvas slowly, face down, to the ground so the threads collect and puddle randomly. In other cases, like *The Black Bang* and *Rainbow Checkers* we just dropped the canvas from the height at which we were holding it to create a kind of sunburst effect. It's sort of a violent process, but I like it because the threads are never caught up by air currents in the same way twice. Sometimes we'll



Color Misbehavior 2009 embroidery and gel medium on canvas 70 x 59 in 177.8 x 149.9 cm

re-drop it several times until I'm happy with the final result. So, after the painting is either dropped or lowered onto the plastic, we use the plastic as a wrapping to hold the threads in place and then tip the canvas upright. If I like the result I usually let it sit for a few days while I think about it, and if not, we'll restart the whole process until

we've got it just right. Afterwards, I place the canvas right-side-up horizontally on a table and apply the gel medium with a spray bottle only using the brush to collect excess gel.

MR: How ironic! You have almost completely eliminated the brush itself from your new paintings—only using it at this final stage as a sort of sponge for the gel—and yet this is the breakthrough moment when you feel that your work has finally achieved the gestural painterly affect that you've been seeking. Was there one work in this series in particular that made you realize that you had moved your painting to a new level?

GA: It was when I finished the painting *Color Misbehavior* that I suddenly felt that I could finally paint after all these years. This painting is as important to me as my first painting, *Cinq Femmes au Travail*, 1991. Because when I did that painting I knew I was going to develop this language of thread. With this new painting, *Color Misbehavior*, I've discovered that I can now finally paint gesturally with thread. I have been developing the language, the grammar, and now I can play the music. In this series of recent paintings the subject matter is less important to me now. Yes, there are porn women, but I'm more interested in the technique now. I'm also more comfortable with the content--which is why I'm finally showing my porn drawings—and can concentrate just on my technique.

MR: Are you saying that you are liberated from content altogether?

GA: I'm saying that I almost feel like I can treat subjects other than the Woman now. It is a total breakthrough. I might be able to move beyond the Woman. I'm considering it. We'll see.

Maura Reilly is Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts (AFA). Prior to joining the AFA in 2009, she served as founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she organized the critically acclaimed *Global Feminisms* (co-curated with Linda Nochlin), permanently re-installed *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago, and curated several other exhibitions, most notably *Ghada Amer: Love Has No End* (2008). Reilly has taught art history and theory; published and lectured extensively; and has received several prestigious awards, including ArtTable's Future Women Leadership Award (2005). She has curated numerous international exhibitions, including, most recently, *La Mirada Iracunda (The Furious Gaze)* (2008), *Nayland Blake: Behavior* (2009), *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became* (2009), and *Richard Bell: I Am Not Sorry* (2009). Reilly received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.