Ghada Amer’s elaborately embroidered paintings, sculptures, and installations add discomfiting overtones to the needlework that has played an important role in feminist art for the past thirty years. Her works forge uneasy alliances among feminist, Islamic, and postcolonial ideologies, yielding hybrids that settle in no one place, culture, or political position. For example, viewers of Amer’s Private Room (1999) encounter hanging garment bags made of richly colored satin and embroidered with extensive texts culled from the Qur’an. By presenting the holy Arabic words in French translation, Amer creates a double obstacle that blocks English-speakers’ access to the original meanings.

The unsatisfied desire to understand is transformed into material pleasure in Amer’s more recent stitched canvases. In Gay Lisa (2000) pornographic images of women traced or copied from sex-industry magazines challenge us to rethink female sexuality, while unmotivated drips and tangles of brightly colored thread revel in their own excess, and in an embrace of bodily enjoyment. Amer is one in an emerging generation of artists working to reclaim female pleasure as a subject for feminist art.

**A Brief History of Feminist Embroidery Art**

Since the 1970s, feminist artists have been challenging the boundaries that divide art from craft, public from domestic, and masculine from feminine by incorporating embroidery into their work. By appropriating this traditionally feminine and domestic form of creativity, artists ranging from Kate Walker to Judy Chicago to Elaine Reichek have called attention to the complicated history of women’s needlework. Their sewn objects, canvases, and samplers critique the tradition that has classified sewing as hobby, craft, or ornament, in opposition to the rarefied professional arts of painting and sculpture.

In The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, Rozsika Parker locates these artists in the context of English sewing practices from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century. “Embroidery,” she points out, “has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness. . . . Paradoxically, while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity.” Feminist artists who have incorporated embroidery into their work are operating within this paradox, using a traditionally feminine endeavor to forge new models of womanhood and claiming high-art identity for an activity usually relegated to the status of craft.

In the 1970s Kate Walker and Judy Chicago called on the domestic and communal connotations of women’s needlework to foster a new model of collaborative art practice. At the Women’s Art Alliance in London, Walker took part in a postal art project known as Feministo that questioned whether the categories of public and private, home and work, were separate, gendered, and incompatible spheres. The artist members of Feministo were women dispersed throughout England who created works of art in their homes and sent them to one another by mail. Walker contributed a sewn work entitled Sampler (1978) that featured the embroidered text, “Wife is a four-letter word.” One year later, Chicago first

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2. Ibid., 207–9.
displayed her Dinner Party, for which more than four hundred men and women had created a table with thirty-nine place settings, each devoted to a woman from the past or to a mythological female figure. Embroidery, used to decorate the place mats, was combined with other traditional crafts, including pottery and china painting.

Elaine Reichek’s embroidered works from the 1990s follow in this vein. When This You See..., Reichek’s 1999 installation in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, consisted of twenty-five samplers that encourage viewers to consider embroidery in relation to both the history of women and the history of modernism. Speaking of her choice of materials, Reichek explained, “It is deliberate


Jackson Pollock. Number 1 (Lavender Mist), 1950. Oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas. 87 x 118 in. (2.21 x 2.99 m). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
that for tools historically associated with ‘male’ art—paint, brush, canvas—I substitute media usually seen as related to ‘female’ activities.” 4 In 'Sampler (Andy Warhol)' (1997) she performs a double substitution: with its horizontal format, all-over composition, and intertwined “drips” of red, black, and yellow thread, the work appears to be a reduced and sewn version of a Jackson Pollock drip painting. Yet the title does not reference Pollock. Instead, Reichek directs our attention to Andy Warhol's 1983 'Yarn Painting,' which was itself a comment on Pollock’s enormous, hyper-masculine paintings of the late 1940s. 5

Problems of Hybridity

Although Amer shares some of her feminist predecessors’ sensibilities, her works complicate both their Western focus and their gender ideologies. Private Room (2000) introduces the main themes that course through her oeuvre. In addition to challenging received wisdom regarding both femininity and embroidery, this piece addresses problems of sensual pleasure and cultural hybridity. Installed at the Greater New York Exhibition at P.S. 1, the visually enticing Private Room presented fifteen satin garment bags suspended from a rod stretched between two walls. Dyed in rich saturated colors, set off against white walls, and shimmering with reflected light, these otherwise prosaic sacks became a field of visual pleasure. Their sheer beauty beckoned visitors closer; the curious were rewarded with embroidered texts stitched across the surface of each suspended object.

The physical presence of heavy, life-size garment bags evokes the figures of women concealed in chadors increasingly seen in Amer’s native Egypt. Amer has expressed dismay at the religious conservatism that often circumscribes the sartorial, personal, and professional choices of Egyptian women. Recalling the less constrained lives of Egyptian women in the 1970s, when her family moved to France, she laments the impact of conservative Islamic law on women’s attitudes toward their own bodies. In a recent interview, she described her own experience of this effect: “When I go home, I feel so conscious of my body, every time, conscious of the relationship to the body of everything I wear. Everything is so hidden that if you have a finger out, it becomes the focus of sexuality.”6 Amer has identified her work as “a vengeance against this.”

The texts embroidered on the garment bags of Private Room present the multiplicity of Islamic attitudes toward women, countering the sometimes monolithic gender politics of religious conservatism. As Amer explains, she “took all the sentences that speak about women from the Qur’an and embroidered them in French.” The words of the Qur’an are sacred when written in Arabic. Not wanting to give offense, Amer offers the text in the secular French. Although religious concerns may have loomed large for Amer, the translation nonetheless has a significant impact on viewers’ experiences of the work. 7 The scale of the piece was partly determined by the Qur’an itself, as the number of embroidered bags was set by her wish to include every text in which women are mentioned. Setting all of the statements side by side, she highlights the diversity of viewpoints expressed in the holy book and takes issue with the narrow perspective on women promulgated by some Egyptian authorities today.

Turning our attention from content to form, we find that Amer’s text functions like the Egyptian woman’s exposed finger: it is the unattainable focus of the viewer’s desire. 8 Written out in neat rows of clear capital letters in a Western

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5. Handler, “Reichek.”
European language familiar to Amer’s fellow residents of France, the words of the Qur’an promise to yield their meanings to the attentive reader. Even so, Private Room requires us to grapple with the problem of reading across languages and among cultures. First exhibited at ARCO in Madrid, and later in New York, the work addressed local audiences in a language native neither to them nor to the Qur’an’s original readers. Spanish- or English-speaking audiences who encountered the Qur’an as mediated by Amer’s French translation struggled, to a greater or lesser degree, to understand the foreign words. Amer insists that the linguistic and cultural distances between viewer and work cannot be fully bridged. Try as we may to capture the original meaning, satisfaction will always be denied us.

For instance, English-speaking readers may wrestle with the meaning of one passage that offers guidance in selecting a bride. Amer’s translation reads: “Une esclave qui croit, a plus de valeur qu’une femme libre et polythéiste.” (A slave who believes is more valuable than a free and polytheistic woman). The original text is from the Qur’anic book Sura al-Baqarah 2:221 (The Cow). English translations struggle with the terms that Amer has rendered in French as polythéiste and libre. Three translations available on the Internet provide a sampling: “Wed not idolatresses till they believe; for lo! A believing bondwoman is better than an idolatress though she please you; and give not your daughters in marriage to idolaters till they believe, for lo! A believing slave is better than an idoler
though he please you.” Or, “Do not marry unbelieving women, until they believe: A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures you. Nor marry [your girls] to unbelievers until they believe: A man slave who believes is better than an unbeliever, even though he allures you.” One also finds this rendering: “And do not marry the idolatresses until they believe, and certainly a believing maid is better than an idolatrous woman, even though she should please you; and do not give [believing women] in marriage to idolaters until they believe, and certainly a believing servant is better than an idolater, even though he should please you.” These fine distinctions will always escape us, confounding our attempts to pin down a meaning.

Just as the Qur’an, already uprooted from its native tongue in her art, will never fully settle into one language, Amer herself is almost always identified as a figure in exile. In the exhibition reviews that have introduced her to an international public her name, like Homer’s “rosy-fingered” Dawn, is rarely seen without an epithet. Barry Schwabsky tells of “the Egyptian-born, French-educated” artist. Writing for the French magazine L’Oeil, Eric de Chassey discusses Amer, “born in Cairo . . . lives in New York, following a lengthy stay in Paris.” Amer’s exhibiting venues have also highlighted her condition of exile. At the 1999 Venice Biennale, her works were in the large Aperto section, devoted to an international mixture of artists rather than those selected to represent their homelands, housed in pavilions sponsored by their countries. Amer is always out of place. Her international past defies attempts to pin her to any one nation or culture. Whether in Paris or New York, Venice or Madrid, she appears in translation. Wherever she may be, her identity is inflected with the traces of other cultures, and she continually spills across local boundaries.

In interviews Amer both calls attention to and voices concerns about her identity as a “postcolonial subject,” with claims to several cultures but fully embraced by none. Recently, she described herself as feeling “a little French,” having lived in Paris for twenty-one years. Her feeling, though, was not sufficient for the French government, which has three times rejected her applications for citizenship. Speaking with Nigel Ryan in 1998, she granted that seeing her work as the product of “a woman from a Muslim society” can be “liberating” and can help to “command an audience.” Yet, acknowledging the potential pitfalls of that tag, she warned that such an exclusive focus could also serve “simply to stereotype, to restrict.” “I cannot resent people’s interest on this level,” she said, “but I cannot embrace it fully.”

Amer’s concerns about the stultifying effect of a “postcolonial” label echo anxieties voiced by several contemporary theorists about the resurrection of the postcolonial “hybrid” as a figure of fascination. In a historical analysis of hybridity, now an important term in cultural criticism, Robert J. C. Young offers a deceptively simple definition of the term: “Hybridity implies a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things.” Young reminds us that hybridity emerged from nineteenth-century investigations of botanical or biological cross-breeding. Indeed, apprehensions about hybridity gained currency within an anxious discourse on racial identity, as the fear of miscegenation found expression in debates over whether Africans belonged to the same human species as Europeans. Young suggests that a similar presupposition of clear and separate races, if not breeds, remains latent in the writings of some postcolonial thinkers who see and


12. Homi Bhabha, arguably one of the most influential figures in postcolonial criticism, has described “postcolonial perspectives” as emerging “from the colonial testimony of Third World countries. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity.” Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 171.


use cultural hybridity as a liberating strategy. The very concept of hybridity, he warns, runs the risk of reifying difference by positing a prior state of unadulterated purity, when cultural identities were both distinct and intact.

A more optimistic perspective, however, might see the hybridity of Amer’s Private Room—and, more generally, the hybridity of postcolonial societies—as revealing the essentially mixed and always unstable nature of language and social relations. Rather than presuming preexisting differences among cultures, the artist who makes hybridity visible highlights a constant state of interaction among all cultures and shatters illusions of cultural purity. The critic Yuri Lotman’s notion of the “semiosphere” offers one such optimistic model. His semiosphere encompasses “the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages,” which are marked by asymmetry, heterogeneity, and interaction. Not a simple “sum total of different languages,” the semiosphere is intricately “transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts.”

Perhaps we can recast Amer’s series of literal and implied translations as an ever-changing system. Rather than understanding the process of translation as an inevitably failed attempt at replication, Lotman sees translation as a crucial and on-going process that creates meaning. He calls translation “a primary
mechanism of consciousness. To express something in another language is a way of understanding it.” 18 Since two languages often do not possess exactly equivalent words, every translation generates information by introducing or uncovering additional meanings.

Problems of dialogue and translation take center stage once again in Amer’s Majnun (1997). Similar in structure to Private Room, Majnun features a row of life-size storage closets formed from orange plastic stretched over internal rectangular frames. A French text translated from an older Arabic text is embroidered in red thread across the surface. The embroidered fragment is from a tragic Persian love story in which a young suitor named Majnun writes letter after letter to his beloved Leila, but receives no response. Devastated by the apparent rejection, Majnun dies of a broken heart, and the silent but desiring Leila follows him to the grave. Amer gives form to Leila’s voicelessness by imagining her as an Arabian Echo, who can form no words of her own but only reproduce the words of Majnun, her Narcissus. It is these words that Amer embroiders. When written by Majnun, the text conveys desire and longing. Yet when mimicked by the powerless Leila, the words become travesties that block fulfillment. The impossibility of dialogue sounds the lovers’ death knell.

By giving voice to Leila’s silence, Majnun offers an equivocal answer to the questions posed by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 19 Spivak maintains that the logic of colonialism permits the colonized to attain representation only through the language and voice of the colonizer. Focusing on the conditions that relegate women from former European colonies to political and social silence, Spivak encourages these women to create their own voices by interrupting the colonizer’s monologue. Although Amer’s Leila can speak only in the colonizer’s language (French, in this case), and can voice only the words of the man who desires her, Amer herself performs the kind of intervention that Spivak advocates. Like generations of women before her, Amer uses the medium of embroidery for her text, employing a traditional realm of women’s subordination to speak about and against that oppression.

**Pornography and Pleasure**

Amer’s embroidered paintings move from ineffable erotics to bodily pleasure. Works such as Red Diagonals (2000) and Gray Lisa offer gracefully crafted, unapologetically explicit depictions of sexual acts. Seen from a distance, these works echo modernist paintings from the mid-twentieth century—United States. Red Diagonals, with its inverted triangle of red and black paint hovering at the top of the canvas, and oozing down the picture plane below, may claim the works of Clyfford Still as its predecessor. Gray Lisa, which features broadly brushed strokes of gray paint interrupted by drips and splotches of white and black thread, evokes the handling and color of Jackson Pollock’s Number 1 (Lavender Mist). 20 Upon closer inspection, however, we see that the seemingly abstract patterns that repeat across the paintings’ surfaces congeal into single or coupled female figures unmistakably engaged in sexual activities. These sewn images of women displaying their genitals, masturbating, or fondling each other introduce female sexual pleasure into the tradition of feminist embroidery art.

Since the 1950s, artists wrestling with the implications of American high modernism have investigated the rugged masculine persona of Abstract

18. Ibid., 127.
Expressionism, which is often said to be expressed through the sprezzatura handling of paint. In his two nearly identical paintings Factum I and Factum II (both 1957), Robert Rauschenberg uses repeated loose brushstrokes so similar that they might have been mechanically reproduced. He thus challenges the supposed spontaneity of the Abstract Expressionist mark. Offering a similar critique, Roy Lichtenstein’s Little Big Picture (1965) presents a magnified view of a bold brushstroke, complete with requisite drips, in the flat, simplified style of a cartoon strip, set against a grid of benday dots—a literal reference to mechanical reproduction. As we have seen, Elaine Reichek adopts the same frame of reference in her gender-bending Sampler (Andy Warhol), which uses the traditionally feminine medium of embroidery to replicate Pollock’s traditionally masculine dripped “skeins” of house paint.

Although Amer’s works also critique the gendering of Abstract Expressionism by forcing Pollock’s trademark style into contact with needlework, they
reach beyond art history to engage with lived experiences of women in both Western and Islamic cultures. In an interview with Rosa Martinez, Amer begins to explain her project: “I speak about women’s pleasure. . . . I believe that all women should like their bodies and use them as a real tool for seduction.” She presents her appropriation of pornographic images of women, taken directly from porn magazines, as a reaction against the conservative religious values of her native Egypt. At the same time, she is equally critical of the prudish denial of female pleasure that she sees in some Anglo-American feminism. “I totally reject,” she says, “the ‘old’ feminist attitude toward the female body: women should behave like men and despise make-up, mini-skirts and seduction.”

By encouraging women to use their bodies as vehicles of pleasure and instruments of power, Amer allies herself with a brand of gender politics whose very name remains hotly contested. Sometimes referred to as Third Wave Feminism or Postfeminism, or decried as no feminism at all, the wish to reclaim the sexuality of the female body for female pleasure has been gaining currency in Anglo-American gender criticism. Hoping to move past the aesthetic tradition, first identified by Laura Mulvey, in which men are the bearers of the erotic gaze and women merely the object, critics have sought to reintegrate sexuality into the female subject. In the 1990s, Johanna Drucker, Amelia Jones, and Mulvey herself, among others, sought new ways to think about visual pleasure without sacrificing female sexuality. Moving beyond voyeurism to embrace exhibitionism, Amer has said, “I think women like to show their bodies and men like to look at them. [In these works] there is an allusion to masturbation for women, to pleasure.”

Just as Private Room complicates Islam’s attitudes toward women, Amer’s embroidered pornography challenges anti-pornography feminists to rethink their positions on sex-industry workers. Amer asks, “Is it that the women [in pornography] are being used or is it that they choose to be seductive? If they are not being forced to do it, is it OK?” Her paintings bombard viewers with analogous questions. Are these women displaying themselves for our pleasure or for their own? Since they are delicately embroidered in vivid colors, and arranged in engaging patterns, is it permissible for us to enjoy the experience of looking aesthetically, or do we look purely for titillation?

The perhaps guilty enjoyment that we feel before Amer’s autoerotic women may hide in a more general discomfort with the very notion of pleasure. For these paintings seem to operate under the aegis of Roland Barthes’ Pleasure of the Text. In contrast to the desire created by Amer’s sculptures, which thrive in the gaps created by cultural collisions, her pornographic paintings revel in the unmotivated excess that Barthes describes as sheer pleasure. “The text of pleasure is not necessarily the text that recounts pleasures,” Barthes writes. “The pleasure of representation is not attached to its object.” For Barthes, pleasure lies in the unmotivated “extravagance of the signifier,” its “sumptuous,” “material,” and “sensual” qualities. What terms could better evoke the loose threads that flow from Amer’s embroidered women in streams of saturated color? How else are we to understand the streaks made as she drags her brush’s bristles through viscous paint?

With this endowment of pleasure, Amer gestures toward a new generation of feminist artists who aim to recapture bodily sensations in their embroidered

Sarah Webb’s 2001 installation *milk and tears* offers twenty-eight cloth diapers hanging from a wall like so many deflated balloons. In a delicate script, Webb has embroidered the edges of each diaper in blood-red thread with a portion of a poem by Anne Sexton entitled *Dreaming of Breasts*:

Mother,

I ate you up.
All my need took
You down like a meal.

This meditation on the breast as locus of pleasure and pain, as site of nurturing and place of destruction, shares Amer’s celebration of the contradictions of the female body. Working with fragmentary and paradoxical languages of forms, materials, and ideologies, Amer and her colleagues take heed of Barthes’ affirmation: “The text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel.”

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