

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Harris, Susan, "Beyond the Needle," *Tema Celeste*, October-December 2000

susan harris

beyond the needle

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The tendency to identify an artist in terms of a single aspect of her/his artistic output limits the degree to which a viewer can appreciate the diversity of the artist's conceptual, expressive, and material approaches to art making. Classifying an artist as a feminist, minimalist sculptor, abstract painter, or "the one who knits" no doubt enhances the work's marketability by satisfying consumers' desires for facile recognizability and sound bites. But disregarding alternative or lesser-known aspects of an artist's oeuvre that do not conform to or demonstrate an obvious relationship to a signature style sells both artist and audience short. Ghada Amer and Rosemarie Trockel share knitting/sewing as processes by which they are simultaneously celebrated and misunderstood. Yet, resisting categorization, Trockel's art has influenced the younger Amer' in its exploration of different media, in its accommodation of multiple and often contradictory interpretations, and in its avoidance of didactic or theoretical strategies. While it would be a contrived enterprise to force equivalencies of form, intention, or conceptual construct between the two artists, it is valuable to acknowledge these corresponding aspects of both art making and pigeonholing as jumping-off points for a consideration of their conceptually and stylistically resonant oeuvres.

Rosemarie Trockel is a German artist who emerged in the 1980s during a period that was dominated by Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, and George Baselitz. In Germany at the time, she was virtually alone in addressing issues such as feminism, sexuality, and the human body, and she soon became an influential, international figure.

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Rosemarie Trockel, *Untitled*, 2000.
ink-jet print, 24 x 19 cm.
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

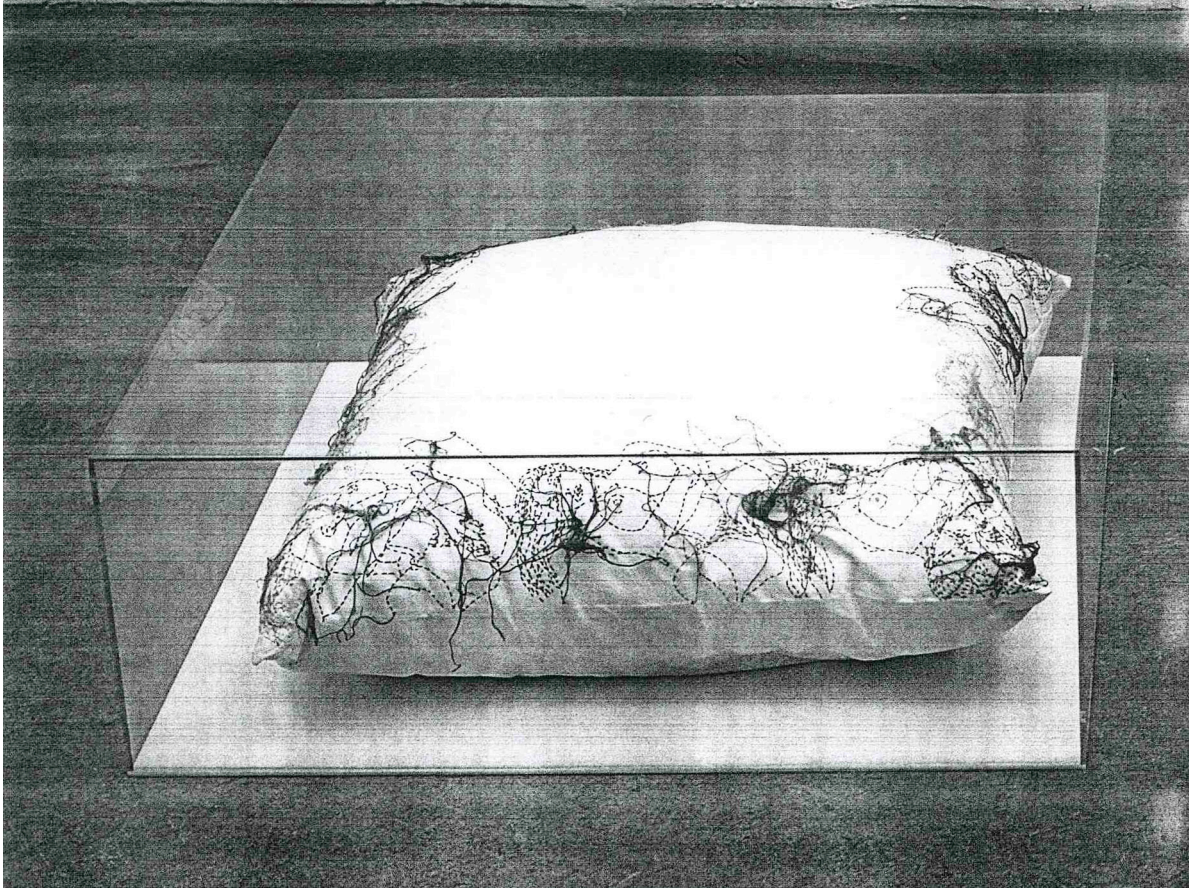
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Ghada Amer is a young star in the global art arena. She is known primarily for sewn paintings that straddle figuration, decorative abstraction, minimalism, and pornography. Thread is the primary material of Amer's paintings, although layers of lyrical abstract washes, smears, and drips of paint are laid down upon the stretched canvas first so that, from a distance, one sees what appear to be patches of color and decorative, if congested, passages of lines. Moving closer, one discovers that the rows of line and color are broken contours sewn with thread depicting bare-breasted, open-mouthed, and open-legged women. Engaged in sexual and, often, masturbatory acts, the figures, which Amer meticulously stitches by hand, are outlines of bodies that she has traced and transferred from

pornographic magazines. The appropriated figures are repeated in gridded or striped patterns over the canvas—their stitched contours obscured by trailing threads that hang free or lie tangled and flattened with a transparent gel. The repetitive decorative patterns of pornographic images suggest a correspondence between the commodification of the female body and artistic output. Amer and her contemporaries of the 90s employ wool/thread and knitting/sewing as already accepted materials and art practices. But in the 80s it was still necessary for Trockel, a female artist in a male-dominated art world, to investigate whether or not it was possible to overcome the negative clichés of knitting by doing away with the handicraft aspect—and to see if it would qualify as art without being categorized or dismissed as women's

art. In 1985 she began making paintings with stretched knitted wool that incorporated patterns and text. In contrast to Amer's hand-sewn, labor-intensive process, Trockel had her paintings manufactured, co-opting the world of industry to perform women's work, while establishing a correlation between creativity and commercial production. Warhol's influence is evident in how she relates art to consumerism and mass production, as well as in her serial repetition of motifs. Her knitted grounds are embedded with repeated abstract designs or well-known symbols such as swastikas, Playboy bunnies, and Woolmark logos that she copied from pattern books and women's magazines, and transformed into decorative patterns through mechanization. Defying notions of originality and uniqueness, and



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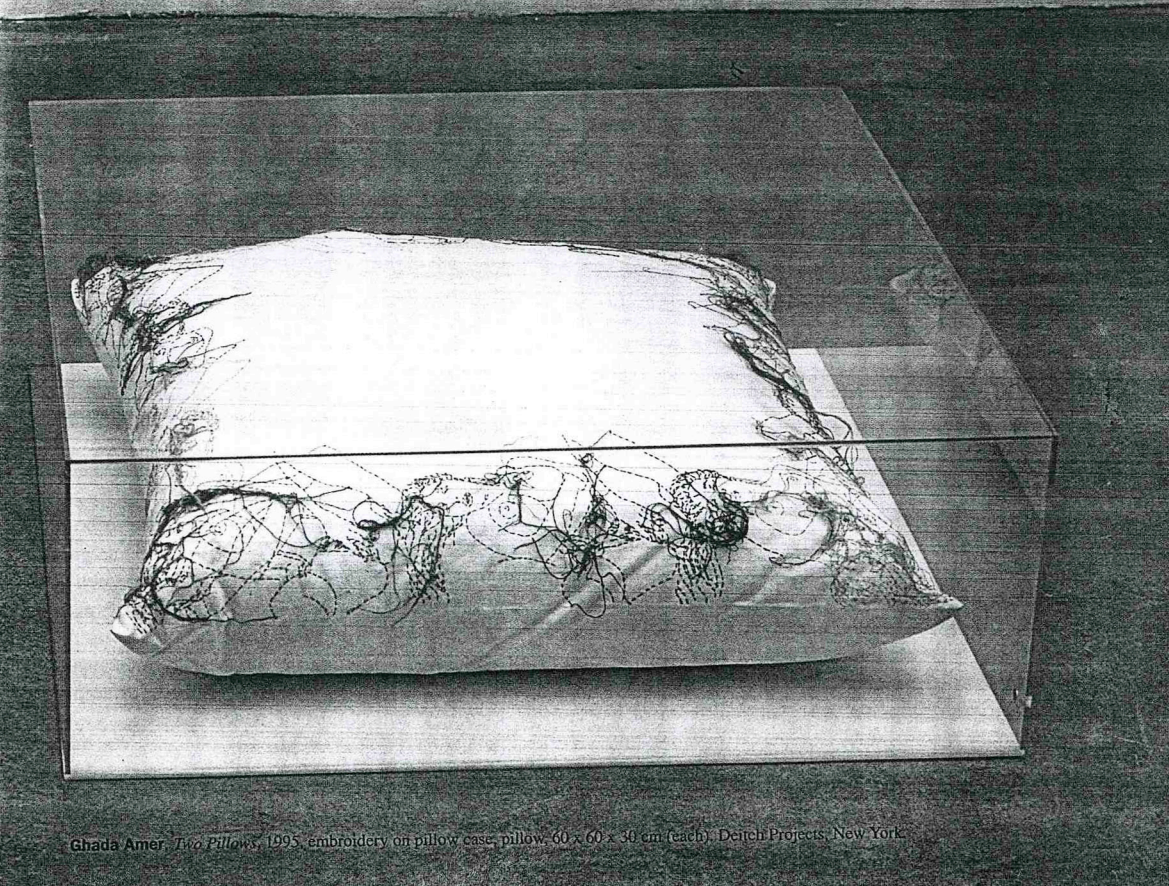
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dispelling the fixity of meaning associated with symbols, Trockel and Amer each call attention to contemporary art practice and the ironies associated with image duplication and sign manipulation. A lot of ink has been spilled over the connection between Amer's and Trockel's stitchery and the political, social, and theoretical ramifications of what has traditionally been considered women's work—and in Amer's case, the female body as the site of the male gaze, seduction, and self-pleasure. Much attention has also been given to the fact that Amer is an Egyptian expatriate, and her work has been interpreted as a product of and rebellion against an oppressively patriarchal society. Embracing exotic, Third World cultures is in vogue, but reading Amer's work in terms of being female and Muslim misrepresents the breadth of

her endeavors, and reinforces stereotypes of marginalization. In the 80s, Trockel's concerns were focused largely around feminism, identity politics, and the social formation of women. Amer, emerging a decade later, has stated explicitly that feminism is not a subject of her work. Rather, in a tone mixed with irony and nostalgia, her art revolves around reflections on happiness related to love, sex, romance, and pleasure. Enmeshed in these preoccupations are her visual references to Abstract Expressionism's macho linear lyricism—employed less as a critique than as the only option for a viable painting language, given women's historical exclusion from the territory of painting. She cleverly inserts into this masculine arena a feminine world of delicately sewn images and the

taboo subjects of women's desire and sexuality. But, instead of substituting one exclusionary strategy (feminine) for another (masculine), or indulging in a false notion of equality, she cultivates difference through multiple sign systems, subjects, references, and gender sensibilities.

The richness of her multivalent vision is reinforced by Amer's lesser-known forays into sculpture and installation. Some examples include *Private Rooms*, exhibited in P.S.1's *Greater New York* and consisting of garment bags embroidered with texts from the Koran; *Two Pillows*, made for the separate bedrooms of a duke and duchess in France and embroidered with images of solitary pleasures; *La Belle au bois dormant*, an installation with a white wedding dress embroidered with the text of *Sleeping Beauty* and a scarlet version



Ghada Amer, *Two Pillows*, 1995, embroidery on pillow case, pillow, 60 x 60 x 30 cm (each), Dorch Projects, New York

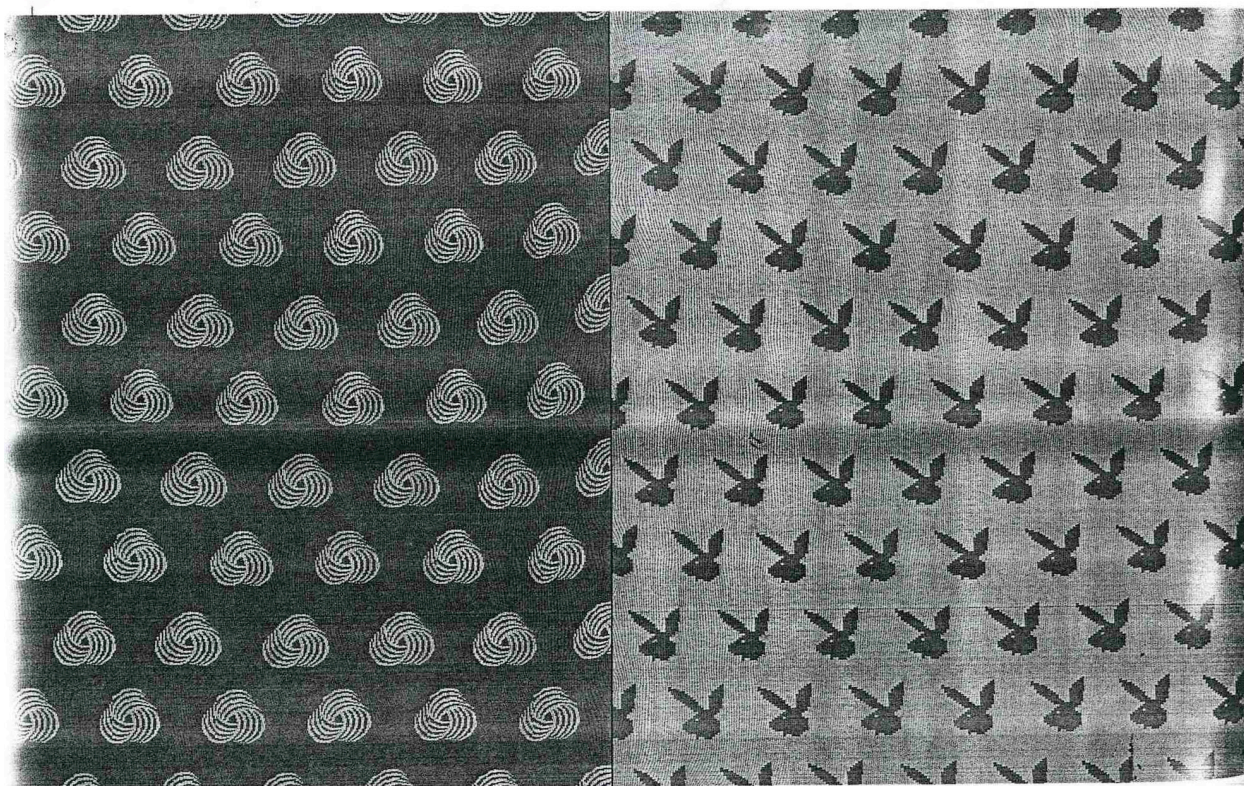
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of the same dress draped over a chair; *Cactus Painting*, a 70-square-meter "painting" made with cacti that alludes to geometric abstraction, installed on the roof terrace of a reconstructed Roman theater in Valencia, Spain; and numerous gardens that investigate the activity of gardening (like sewing) as a feminine language. In an abandoned

and all of Amer's works are linked conceptually by ideas on love, loneliness, sexuality, and art. Trockel has always been engaged in different forms of expression. In all media, she has blurred boundaries—exposing and sustaining contradictions between genders; between art, domesticity, and commerce; and between things

extreme or the effacement of sexual difference on the other. Privileging difference over unity, her art is defined by its open-ended, multivalent discourses free of hierarchical positioning, exclusion, or erasure of identity. Trockel has done a wide range of sculpture, but all of the works share a witty, if obtuse, interaction between the



Rosemarie Trockel, *Untitled*, 1988, machine knitted wool, 2 panels, 200 x 320 cm. Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

garden in Santa Fe, for example, she designed *Love Park*, a romantic promenade with benches and signs bearing quotes on love. The benches were designed for couples, but oriented so that lovers could not face each other—thus preventing intimate communication. While there is little in common visually between these gardens and the sewn canvases, they

natural and artificial. In the knitted clothing pieces, for example, that can be read as male and female, or the stovetop works that refer to kitchen work, industrial objects, minimal sculpture, and abstract painting, Trockel—not unlike Amer—represents both genders and their differences, as opposed to settling for the subordination of women at one

image and the material in which it is rendered. She often brings together two disparate entities to foster ambiguity and draw attention to the instability and arbitrariness of signs and symbols. Influenced by Joseph Beuys' merging of art and life, Trockel has juxtaposed everyday, synthetic items with fossils or natural objects in hermetic vitrines, so that the contents appear, like

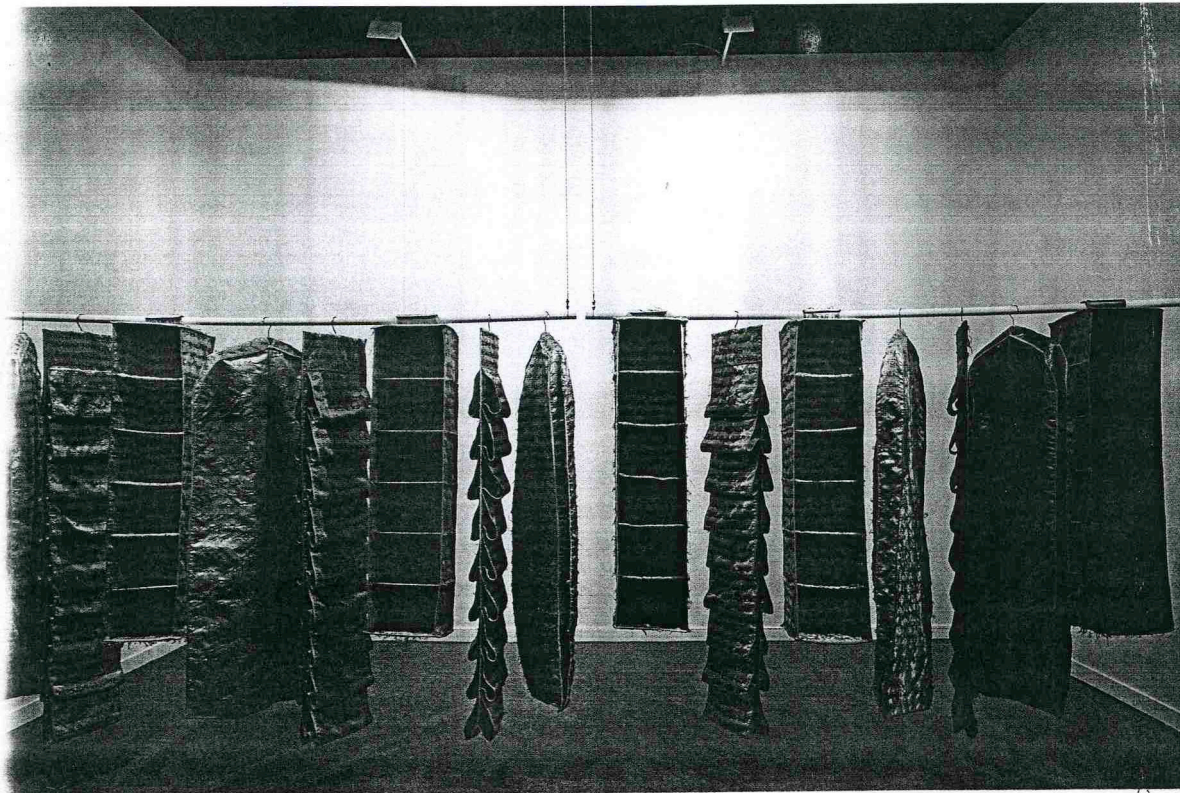
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curiosities or scientific specimens, to have a preciousness worthy of museological preservation. Drawing has always been for Trockel a significant vehicle for speculation and experimentation. Even her sculptures, photographs, and videos have strongly two-dimensional and graphic elements. Usually pencil, ink, or gouache on unassuming paper, the

revelatory power of the process of metamorphosis, which is a recurring motif throughout her oeuvre. Trockel's spontaneous and intuitive approach to drawing applies to her video work as well. In place of any discernible narrative structure, she typically isolates specific moments to represent larger, more complex sequences of events. Many videos

in a sleeping chamber that she did for the 1999 Venice Biennale. The visual diversity and interpretive inconclusiveness of Trockel's work challenge viewers' attempts to apprehend and articulate its meaning. Amer is similarly prone to shattering boundaries and investigating varied forms of art making. Their shared predicament of being categorized for



Ghada Amer, *Private Rooms*, 1998, embroidered sculpture, installation at ARCO, Madrid. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

drawings range from highly gestural and rapidly executed sketches to carefully rendered images of a more traditional nature. Always expanding the parameters of drawing, she has worked with digital technologies to dematerialize original drawings—their reduced clarity intended to enhance awareness of realities that are normally indiscernible—evoking the

have featured animals as substitutes for human beings in order to examine mental and behavioral patterns in social interrelationships. Recent works suggest her growing interest in providing refuge from a consumption-driven world, as in her urban oases designed for midday repose, or as in *sleepingpill*, a dreamy, large-scale video of people

a single, if ongoing and eloquent, group of work has resulted in limited dialogues around their respective oeuvres. But it is precisely the unclassifiable nature and elusiveness of their art that are the sources of the richness and complexity which makes their art so compelling.

Susan Harris is an independent curator and writer living in New York.