

Mail & Guardian Friday

January 19 to 25 2018 • mg.co.za/arts



Art and eroticism: Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh
bare it in Cape Town Pages 4 & 5

Ghada Amer
Reza Farkhondeh

Art



SS Mendi ritual breaks new ground

Faye Kabali-Kagwa

Seven feminine figures, seven red-stained lips, seven sets of heels, six white jumpsuits, one figure in an umbhaco holding iTsoba – Lhola Amira. A red cloth is draped across her one shoulder. Her movements are deliberate as she leads the six uniformed people down to the pier of the Kalk Bay harbour.

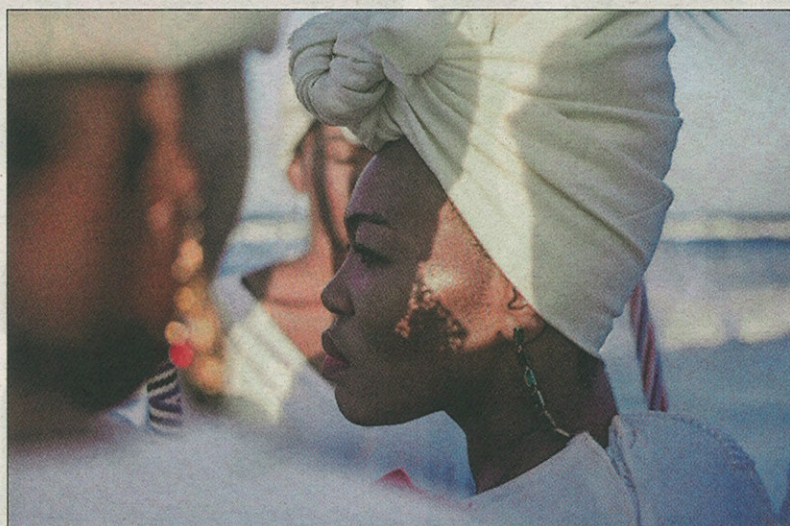
Over the next two days they follow her on to a fishing boat, sit, dance and sing next to the University of Cape Town SS *Mendi* memorial, walk into waves caressing the Milnerton beachfront and hook arms as they brace themselves against the Cape Town winds as Amira leads them to the Vredehoek quarry.

I am one of these womxn. We have been called to witness and to heal the memory of the *Mendi*.

Amira kneels down on the wooden pier. Laid before her are imphepho, a bottle of Viceroy, a jar of silver coins and a jar of sea water. These are offerings made to the ancestors before we board a small fishing boat. Linda Kaoma, Abongile Memela, Sibho Titio and I sit along the side of the boat. Amira sits at the back alongside Mtombo Sogiba, who is also a healer. We are seven headwraps bobbing in open waters. Two fishermen accompany us, steering the vessel. This is the first leg of our journey together. This journey is an appearance by Amira that will be documented. She has titled this appearance *Xa Sinqamla Unxubo*, which loosely translated from isiXhosa means “stopping the flow of agony”.

Amira is an artist who shares a plural existence with curator and academic Khanyisile Mbongwa. The two womxn exist as two distinct selves who share one physical body. Amira's practice is that of appearance. Her work is centred on the survival of black individuals and black womxn in particular. For this particular appearance she recalls the story of the *Mendi*.

This story is one that insists on being retold, even when the pages of history books refuse to hold it. For years the story has been passed down orally as lore. The *Mendi* left the shores of Cape Town on January 16 1917 on its way to Le Havre in France. On board was the last contingent of the South African Native Labour Corps. They were sailing out in response to the British request for



Memory: Images from Lhola Amira's *Sinking - Xa Sinqamla Unxubo* (2018). Photos: Onele Liwani, courtesy of SMAC Gallery, copyright: Lhola Amira

more manual workers on the Western Front. This was during World War I. The contingent comprised 805 black privates, five white officers, 17 non-commissioned officers and 33 crew members.

On the morning of February 21 1917, the SS *Darro*, a much bigger ship, hit the *Mendi* straight on. The damage was so extensive that the *Mendi* sank in 20 minutes. A total of 646 men lost their lives. The *Darro* was spared.

Integral to the retelling of this story are these words that were supposedly spoken by Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha as the men drummed their feet on the deck of the ship as it sank: “Be quite and calm my countrymen, for what is taking place now is what you came here to do. We are all going to die, and that is what we came for. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. I, a Zulu, say here and now that you are all my brothers ... Xhosas, Swazis, Pondos, Basotho and all others, let us die like warriors.”

“We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war cries, my brothers, for though they made us leave our asse-gais back in the kraals, our voices are left with our bodies ...”

These words are also inscribed on to the memorial at the University of Cape Town. We sat under it on the first night holding blue, green, red and yellow candles. Our hands shielded the flames as the wind tried relentlessly to blow them out. When it succeeded, we would reignite our flames from our neighbours. Amira was quiet. She turned to us and said in a low voice: “I want to live. I want us to live. We negotiate dying all the time.” I stared at my flame struggling to keep itself going.

It was clear then, and at every site we visited, that what we were called to do was to think of these men beyond death. These were not just bodies, but people with lives. It was difficult not to look at the sea and think of death, to feel the waves hit the boat again and again, feeling perpetually off kilter.

Sometimes I forget that one does not have to die to be worthy of life. I needed to remind myself that, before

there is death, there is life. I realised that the healing was in the communal and in the witnessing. There were various points on our journey together where I did not understand the impulses of some of the womxn, but I had been called to bear witness and acknowledge their journey.

Amira's appearances challenge the ways in which Western discourses make sense of time, space and activism. Our engagement with the memory of the *Mendi* was one that did not have a fixed temporal locale. It was important that we understood the significance of the time that they lived, but also to recognise how their spectres continued to shape our lives today. We were asked to be in a constant space of awareness and presence.

In this way Amira's appearances and understanding of cultural production is a critique of Homi Bhabha's notion of a “third space” — an idea in sociology that describes a hybrid space in which the first (the physical) and second (the remote) spaces fuse, that allows remote participants to engage in social relations with one another at a distance. Amira insists on a fourth space that resists definition. It is in a constant state of becoming and is therefore emancipatory as it asks us to constantly reimagine our past and our future.

Seven womxn sit on their haunches, all dressed in white, their heels digging into the sand, salt covering their red-stained lips as they look into the ocean. At some point, they all gather around the one with a red cloth draped across her shoulder. She looks into the distance. A tear rolls down her cheek. We have come here to mourn the lives of men whom history had threatened to swallow. We came to listen to the voices left behind with their bodies. We came to cleanse ourselves and we came to rejoice in the lives we have left to live.

Lhola Amira will present *Xa Sinqamla Unxubo* at the Investec Cape Town Art Fair from February 16 to 18

Variations of

On the eve of the first showing of their collaborative work in South Africa, artists Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh speak to Alex Dodd about beauty, stereotypes and the unfathomable eroticism of abstract shapes

If knowledge is bodily, is it possible to receive ideas in orgasmic ways? Beyond our cerebral computation of quantitative “hard” facts, there is a more sensual and incarnate kind of knowing — an evolving understanding of shifting ideas and memories about people, places, contexts and power. Perhaps the transmission of these other forms of knowledge occurs in ways that are concentric, layered, fluid, multiple — like a female orgasm. These are my speculations as I head down Loop Street to rendezvous with artists Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh, who have just touched down in blazing Cape Town from subzero New York.

When absorbing the floral and fecund surfaces of their work, the last thing that comes to one's mind is snow. Their mixed-media drawings hum with an interplay of hibiscus red, translucent blues and wooly pastel plains of fleshy pink, offset by intensities of jazzy yellow. Mouths and bodies tangle together in an evanescent field of desire. The stitched outlines of seductive lovemaking or masturbating women pop out from overlays of pattern and liquid washes of dripping colour. Blooming petals and flourishing leaves simultaneously reveal and conceal voluptuous shapes of rounded rumps and pert, ample breasts, human and plant bodies tangling together in a miragelike dialectic of sex.

The atmosphere is slow, tropical and steamy — a hothouse of proximity and possibility. So it's no surprise that the sixth-floor studio Amer and Farkhondeh share on 151st Street and Broadway in Harlem gets a lot of sun.

“We're not far from the Presbyterian Hospital, so it's the usual New York cliché of honking, firefighter sirens and ambulances,” says Farkhondeh in an accent that blends Farsi, French and New York English. “We often hear police cars because we're two blocks away from the precinct. We also hear lots of music in the area — especially in the summer — because it's a Dominican neighbourhood and the people love merengue [dance music]. Everything happens outside on the boulevard — people playing checkers, cars playing music so loud they're shaking, and sometimes there are small disputes in the neighbourhood.”

Yet when the two artists are in the process of initiating a new series of collaborative works, it generally happens in silence. “We don't actually communicate by spoken words. I'll do some drawings on paper and then Ghada can take whatever she likes or is inspired by to work on. And vice versa.”

Farkhondeh was born in Iran and studied in Tehran, Nice and Paris. It was at art school at the Villa Arson in Nice in 1988 that he met Amer, who had moved with her family to France from Cairo, where she was born.

They both moved to New York in 1996 and started working together almost by accident when, in 2000, after a period of immobilising depression, Farkhondeh turned to his good friend for support, moving into Amer's studio.

Without her permission or consent, he intuitively began adding layers of

paint to Amer's canvases and drawings. At first, Amer was shocked by her friend's uninvited interventions and became increasingly intrigued by his additions to her works in progress and began to encourage the visual dialogue.

“Collaboration is a mutant riddle. It is a type of creation that resists control,” says Amer.

They coined the moniker RFGA (Reza Farkhondeh, Ghada Amer) as their joint signature and continued their collaborations in tandem, while simultaneously sustaining their individual practices. Farkhondeh brings his open-ended investigations into the forms and beauty of nature to Amer's explicit explorations of female sexuality.

In addition to mixed-media works on paper, their current exhibition, which opened at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town this week, features their first series using a new material — a synthetic fabric called Pellon. This absorptive cloth bears the random traces and stains of liquid pigment and pulp that has dripped through in the paper-making process.

“We worked on the front and the back of the Pellon so that it shows traces that you would never have if you traced directly in the front,” says Amer. “We wanted these traces to be a bit vague or obscure.”

Last year, Amer was honoured by the Smithsonian Museum of African Art alongside South African artist Mary Sibande for the potency of her art, which “confronts globally relevant issues of gender, identity, inequality, access, privilege and power”. Her embroidered surfaces feature fragmented erotic imagery sourced from pornographic magazines like *Hustler* and *Club*.

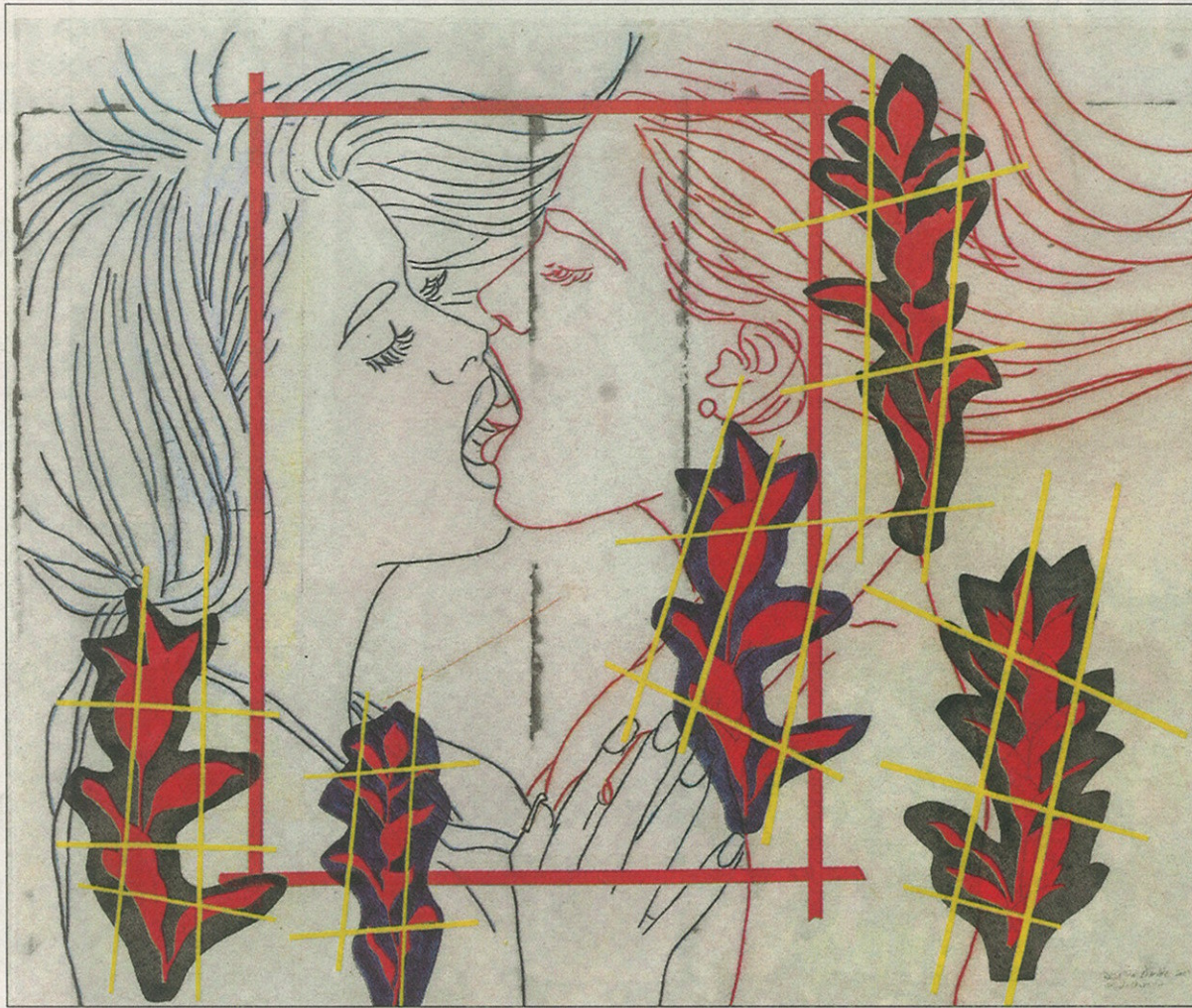
“I thought embroidery was a good medium to speak about women,” she has said. “As a child I used to help my mother make dresses. In Egypt at the time it was expensive to buy already-made clothes ... It was an activity where women would gather and sew together — my mother and all of her female friends, my grandmother, the grandmothers of all the neighbours of our house.”

Like Sibande, whose work draws on her female ancestral power line, Amer's work is born of a domestic medium imbued with matrilineal inheritance.

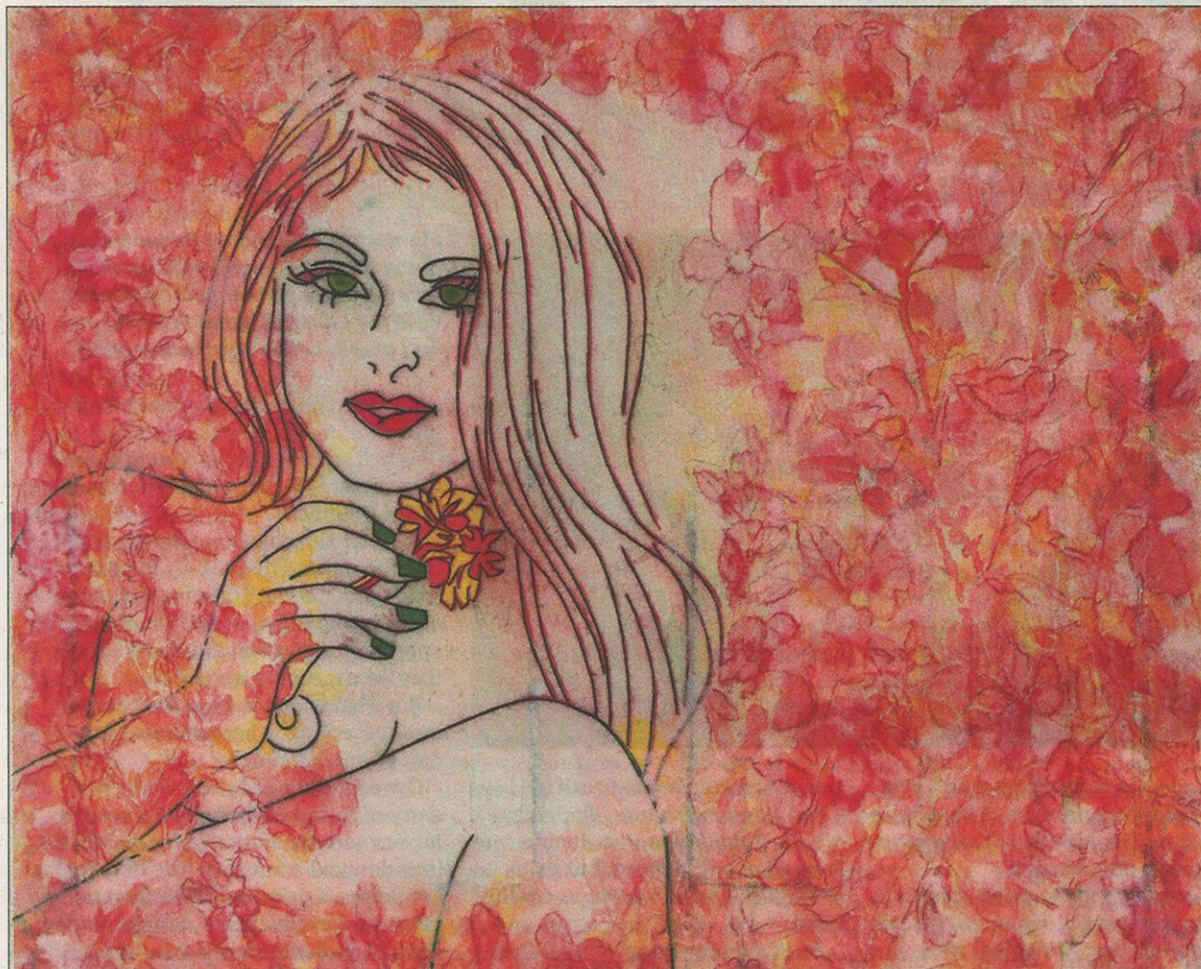
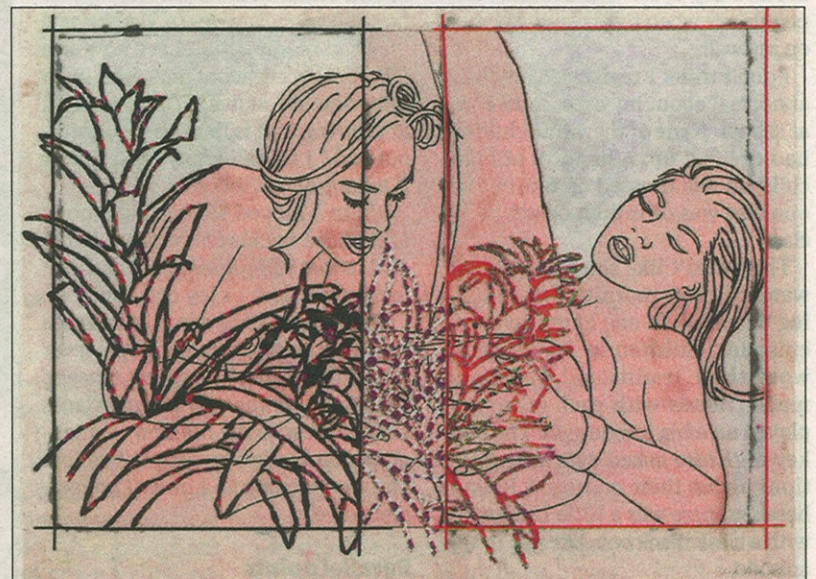
Both Amer's individual works and the collaborative pieces she makes with Farkhondeh lend themselves to ready circulation in the hashtag era of #MeToo and #TimesUp. They are immediately eye-catching, bold and appealing. They do not resist beauty. This makes them very transmissible and viral, but when you start to look more closely, to delve into the layers and ponder the meanings behind the titles, there's no end to the possibilities they bring into play. Histories and meanings emerge from the layers the deeper in you get.

Both artists have made works that explicitly explore the mysterious interplay of text and image, and the titles of this collaborative series are full of eroticism, provocation, politics and wit: *Madame de Pompadour*; *Esther, Queen of Persia*; *Portrait of*

on a difficult blue



Naked beauty: In their mixed-media works such as *Lust* (left), *Esther*, *Queen of Persia* (below left) and *Mutual Consent* (below), Ghada Amer's evocations of female sexuality meld with Reza Farkhondeh's meditations on nature. Photos: Brian Buckley



to know: 'Why are all your women white? Why white?' Because if you have an Asian woman, or an Arab woman or a black woman, who does not conform to the stereotype of white beauty, then it's easy for white viewers to say: 'Oh, *they* have the problem [prostitution, pornography, desire, lust, embodiment, sensuality]. We don't have these problems.' They would be looking at these women as 'the other' and this notion of the other is very problematic. So I'm not going to talk about the other; I'm going to talk about you and us."

Her stance on the politics of beauty is equally clear and compelling. "When Reza and I were studying together in Nice, we had a professor of aesthetics who, from the first lesson and throughout our studies, was very focused on interrogating the notion of beauty. This was the climate in which we studied ...

"It was a very dichotomous time in France in the late Eighties when they believed that painting was dead and that there was no need for beautiful things. This was the way of thinking — to be cool is to be anti-aesthetic. The world became very conceptually driven. If you had a concept and it was a good concept, you've got good art."

"But this is a very male, Cartesian way of looking at things. We happened to be very interested in this notion of beauty which had been abandoned. I was personally — and I think Reza was too. This was why we had chosen to do art — because we were touched by beautiful things. So it was a little bit harsh when we found that we could not even use the term 'beauty'."

"To this day, we don't agree with this movement. We think that beauty

is a vehicle of thoughts and a political vehicle by which you can communicate in very subtle ways. Messages that hit you — boom — in your face do not have resonance. Beauty has a resonance. It has to meet you at your level and then you grow with it. I cannot relate to myself just politically. If that were the case, then I shouldn't be working as an artist. I should be going to the Senate to make political work. I make art and it speaks about society and the life we are living."

This does not mean that they shy away from making dangerous or hard-hitting work. Included in this exhibition is a video of their performance piece *An Indigestible Dessert* (2008), made in response to the era of secrets and lies spun during the George W Bush/Tony Blair era in which false information about Iraq's alleged secret stash of weapons of mass destruction was propagated by Anglo-American intelligence services to justify the Iraq War.

This work entailed creating a lush cake with the imprints of Blair and Bush, which was destroyed by a sledgehammer-wielding Amer and consumed by the audience. "Since 2001, when Bush won the election, we were so upset. It took about six years just to digest that horrible dessert and then to speak it when nobody even wanted to speak about it."

Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh's *Love Is a Difficult Blue* is on at the Goodman Gallery, third floor of Fairweather House, 176 Sir Lowry Road, Woodstock, Cape Town, until February 24. Both artists will be in conversation with the curator of the exhibition, Lara Koseff, on Saturday January 20, discussing this new body of work and their method of collaborative practice

Tallulah Black; Disarray of Emma Bovary; Courtissane; Olympia; Mutual Consent; Girl of Safe Places; Miss Indulgent; My Blood, My Decision; Boogynight; House of Lust; Flesh and Flower; Angel's Hut; Voluptas; Daffodil; Love; Slut; and White Posy.

"I only have a little part in the title," says Amer. "Reza is a poet. He loves words and writes. He works as much on the titles as on the piece — researching, thinking ..."

The title of their Cape Town show, *Love Is a Difficult Blue*, is inspired by Alain Souchon's *L'amour à la machine* — a song about putting love through the washing machine to see whether it retains the vitality of its original bright colours, in which Souchon sings: Matisse, *l'amour c'est*

bleu difficile. The song title came to Farkhondeh as he was looking at the contour of a woman in one of Ghada's drawings and recalling the stance of a figure in a painting by Matisse.

Both the exhibition title and the works recall the Palme d'Or-winning 2013 film by French-Tunisian director Abdellatif Kechiche, *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, which unfolds a tale of intellectual and artistic striving, sexual communion and the indelible impact of first love. The film is concerned with both the inner and outer experiences of being a woman; it is as fascinated by the abstractions of thought as by the body. Like these artworks, it is erotically charged and femalecentric, but collaboratively wrought by the combination of both

the male and female consciousness. In this mode of inclusive, dialogic feminism, the RFGA works also recall the title of a book by African-American author, feminist and social activist bell hooks: *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*.

Some might argue that these works replicate a stereotyped, hegemonic view of beauty. The women depicted are never large or androgynous. With their flowing tresses and voluptuous curves, they repeat classic Western ideals of female beauty. But for Amer, this stereotyping is entirely intentional.

"I want them to be stereotypes. For me it is important," she says. "And I want them to be white. Sometimes white women are uneasy and want

drawn by
ntions
ued by
ogress
visual
iddle. It
ts con-

RFGA
er) as
tinued
while
r indi-
brings
is into
ure to
female

works
ition,
n Gal-
atures
aterial
n. This
ndom
gment
ugh in

nd the
shows
have if
," says
to be a

red by
frican
artist
of her
levant
equal-
r". Her
e frag-
d from
Fustler

a good
n," she
elp my
t at the
ready-
ctivity
nd sew
of her
er, the
ours of

work
ances-
s work
edium
tance.
ks and
makes
lves to
tag era
they are
old and
beauty.
ossible
to look
layers
nd the
ssibili-
ies and
ers the

ks that
erious
nd the
ies are
a, poli-
adour;
trait of