



The work of Moroccan multi-media artist Lalla Essaydi has become iconic in the canon of Contemporary Middle Eastern art. Her stunning photographs of coolly beautiful Arab women wrapped in white cloth with hennaed calligraphy on their hands, faces and garments are explorations of both traditional Islamic life and the misconceptions of that life perpetuated by 19th century Orientalist painters who chose to depict sumptuous fantasies of harems, slave markets and grand bazaars which still resonate with Western viewers today.

Born in Marrakech in 1956, Essaydi spent much of her childhood in Morocco and later Saudi Arabia, encountering a strict Islamic environment and code of traditions that would shape her - and later her body of work - long after she moved to the West to embark on a formal artistic education. Beginning in the early 90's at the famed L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris where she studied painting and drawing, Essaydi went on to receive her BFA from Tufts University in Massachusetts and her MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts where she would first encounter photography as a medium to document her paintings. Thus, a new tool — and new love — was found and Essaydi, who always considered herself a painter first, recalling her intense relationship with color even as a child, embarked on a series of photographic

works, unaware that this medium would propel her to international acclaim.

Beginning in 2004 with her series *Converging Territories*, Essaydi sought to debunk the representations of the Middle East, and most importantly, Middle Eastern women, as documented in the saturated, sexual tableaux of turn of the century Orientalist painters. Particularly influenced by the French academic artist, Jean Léon Gérôme, whose work Essaydi encountered during her own deep, personal investigation of Orientalism while a student, Essaydi turned the notion of a 'harem' on its head by removing the overt sensuality and injecting a new, domestic reality — a reality close to home for the artist, whose father had multiple wives. No nubile slave women, no scantily clad dancers or pipe-smoking bathers to be found here; instead, Essaydi wrapped her models in white cloth and hennaed their skin with intentionally indecipherable calligraphy — an artistic practice traditionally dominated by men — and placed them in starkly intimate Moroccan settings, whether gazing with kohl-rimmed eyes at the camera, engaging in household tasks in a group, or reclining on a bed of hennaed sheets, recalling the classic poses of Gérôme's odalisques while keeping the viewer at bay. "These paintings and odalisques — of Gérôme's — provide a kind of foil for my own work, which sets out to invoke, interrogate, and complicate the Orientalist tradition," Essaydi explains. "In so doing, I hope to make possible, within the projected space of