



Orientalist painting, a new space — an openness to a new kind of understanding.”

Space is a crucial element in Essaydi’s *oeuvre*. In her artist’s statement, Essaydi admits to the need to go back to the space of her childhood in Marrakech — ‘space’ being a term that exists not only in the physical, but in the mental and spiritual. Here she reflects on the role of men in Arab society to fill ‘public’ spaces such as the city streets and work places, while women are typically confined to the ‘private’ spaces, the home or harem, which in turn fashioned an identity of them belonging to ‘a place’ and confined by the walls which hold them. Continuing with *Les Femmes du Maroc*, and continuing in the riotously colorful *Harem* and *Harem Revisited* series, Essaydi juxtaposed the elements of traditional Arab interiors — beautiful wood carvings, jewel-toned mosaics, grand courtyards and private resting places — with the literal skin and clothing of her models. These women seem to blend in with their very surroundings while remaining subversive and so very alive, a hallmark of Essaydi’s technique to present Arab women as beyond objects of male desire or subservient figures in a male-dominated society. The effect is chilling, beautiful and challenging, calling into question the clichéd tropes that have plagued the history of Western art. “Living in another culture, but symbolically marked by my homeland, I chose to engage the language and materials associated with traditional Arab and Islamic art as part of a negotiation of

identity,” Essaydi explains. “Looking back to my point of connection, I found new patterns formed in the metaphors of absence and presence, nearness and distance, and in the continuous dialogue between Eastern and Western art.”

The distance between girlhood and adulthood is a wide gap, and Essaydi’s lens turns into a metaphorical bridge between memory and reality. This bridge is at once necessary and urgent after encountering the Orientalist tradition of depicting a place so strangely resonant and beautiful yet so unfamiliar to the artist — and so common in the imagination of unknowing Westerners. “I am able to appreciate the beauty Western painters found in Morocco, Egypt, and other Arab countries, which they rendered in such loving detail,” Essaydi admits. “Yet at the same time, I cringe at their distorted and degrading view of the Eastern way of life, as portrayed in their work and most strikingly in their presentation of Arab women.” When speaking of contemporary Western engagement with artists from the Middle East, Essaydi cites the globalization of popular media and the promotion of artists from the region by their home countries as perception-shifting factors. “I have heard many people from the West describing art from the Middle East as having substance and how lucky we artists from that region are that there is so much tumult and chaos in the area to feed our imagination and influence our creativity,” she says.

That tumult and chaos has profoundly influenced the artist’s

Harem Revisited
#34b. 2012.
Chromogenic
print mounted
on aluminum
in three parts.
Dimensions
variable.