

(Facing page) *Harem #14c*. 2009.
chromogenic print mounted
on aluminum
Dimensions variable

(Right) (Detail) *Harem 19b*. 2009.
Chromogenic print mounted
on aluminum in three parts.
Dimensions variable.

I believe that it does not matter who you are or where you come from, that an artist's duty is to communicate a message, to their viewers."



latest series of photographs, *Bullets Revisited*. At once a continuation of her previous explorations – the poetry on hennaed skin, the Orientalist posturing, the Arab interiors - Essaydi takes this work a step further and introduces a new element into the frame. What first appears as layers of shimmering gold tile or fabric is soon recognized as the round brass ends of bullets, encased on furniture, adorning the background, and even looped together to create shimmering robes and clothing fashioned on the models like heavy haute couture. The effect is mesmerizing; objects of violence are seen anew when re-purposed by Essaydi's hand, yet not once does the viewer forget the tragic implications such objects have had on the lives of these women and the environments they encounter. It may be a 'man's world,' but Essaydi's models remind the viewer who dominates the space between and despite their suffering, are the reserves of strength within a too-often misunderstood culture.

When speaking of the labels that the art world has all too eagerly placed on her - Middle Eastern artist, woman artist, Arab woman artist - Essaydi is dismayed by the need for such labeling, but accepts that as a multi-faceted, multi-national artist, the naming is inevitable. Instead, she offers that "the spectrum of emotional, psychological and physical elements that feed the artists is not bounded by their nationality or by their religion. Art exists in a border-less place, where the artist and the viewer work together to create experiences and bring you into their world." Further to the point, Essaydi categorizes her own work as both confrontational and intimate. "...the political is personal," she says. "It demands that the viewer face my true complexity—as a woman, Arab, Muslim, and African—living elsewhere, mediating between worlds.

It is not a fixed identity; it is a continual exploration of the tenuous relationship between memory and experience."

Those meditations have landed Essaydi in some of the most prominent private and public art collections in the world, and her work has been exhibited in a staggering number of international venues from Texas to Syria, England, New York, the Netherlands, Japan, Sharjah, Boston, U.A.E, Colorado and elsewhere. With the new urgency of Middle Eastern artists to expose their work internationally, the role of the artist as truth teller takes on a heightened importance. Essaydi's work, now in the public eye and international spotlight for over a decade, had begun and continues to dispel the myths of Arab society and the roles of women therein. She has been a crucial artist for not only Westerners, but the community at large, to engage with while exploring what it means to be marked by a complicated region yet conscious of the country you now call home. By "blowing up" the intimate spaces of her childhood and rendering them in her own unique hand, Lalla has created an unforgettable cast of characters who dare the viewer to think of the Middle East as merely a place for fantasy and exploitation. "I believe that it does not matter who you are or where you come from, that an artist's duty is to communicate a message, whether it be big or small, to their viewers," Essaydi says. This message, thanks to her body of work, resonates loud and clear beyond time and space, the Occident and the Orient, to 'mark' us anew and so very aware. **HBA**