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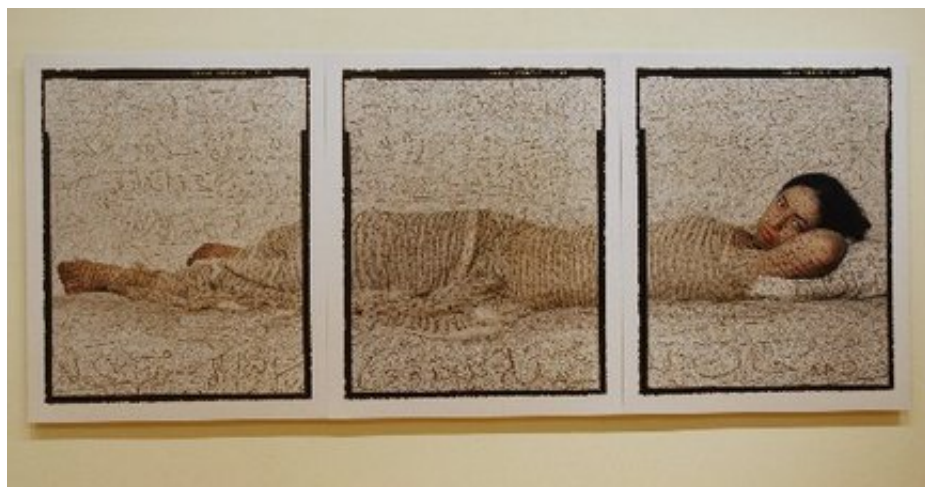
'Les Femmes du Maroc' restages familiar paintings with photographs of Moroccan models

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Star-Ledger Staff

By



Lalla Essaydi restaged 19th-century

"Orientalist" paintings of harem life for her exhibit of photographs "Les Femmes du Maroc," on display at the Zimmerli Museum in New Brunswick. As in her other works, the surface of "Reclining Odalisque" is covered with Arabic calligraphy done in henna.

By Ronni Reich/For The Star-Ledger

Rich blue drapes contrast the expanse of the reclining woman's skin as an ornate fan of peacock feathers, a gold sheet, jewels and a pipe create an atmosphere of decadent sensuality.

"I am not the woman in that painting," Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi said in an interview, describing her reaction to 19th-century "Orientalist" works like Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's "La Grand Odalisque," Jean-Léon Gérôme's "The Slave Market" and Eugene Delacroix's "Les Femmes d'Algiers" ("The Women of Algiers"). The last of these paintings inspired the title of Essaydi's "Les Femmes du Maroc" at the Zimmerli Art Museum, which opens today.

The idea for the exhibit came 10 years ago, when Essaydi studied with an expert in the style in Boston who believed the images of nudes lounging subserviently and women being sold in the streets resembled contemporary reality.

"I always had this love-hate [relationship] with Orientalist painting," she said. "I find them exquisite but at the same

time, the content is absolutely outrageous.”

In “Les Femmes du Maroc,” she reclaims the scenes of harem life with which she grew up in Morocco and Saudi Arabia by restaging familiar paintings with photographs of Moroccan models. Set in a white room, each centers on women draped in white cloth, with every surface — walls, clothing, skin — covered by Arabic calligraphy drawn in henna.

Recasting the paintings, Essaydi stripped them of nearly all accoutrements and affectations. Opulent color, accessories and male characters have all been removed, so that women become the sole focal point. There are no nudes in the exhibit, and women are mostly shown in traditional burkhas or bed sheets. Striking, direct gazes from dark, almond-shaped eyes often replace coy, hazy or off-center glances.

“I wanted to give the real image of the Moroccan women we know,” she said. “She is not repressed — she has determination and creativity like any man or like any woman in the West or any other part of the world.”

As she brings a fresh, critical eye, she retains essential qualities of original paintings, small prints of which are helpfully shown alongside photographs at the Zimmerli. In “Fumée d’Ambre Gris,” based on John Singer Sargent’s work of the same title, robes made partially of hospital gauze take on chiffon-like softness and delicacy.

By contrast, her photograph titled “#41” features a flowing top left open to reveal an undergarment, updating a picture of a woman exposing her breasts — on this, shown for the first time and the exhibit’s most provocative, the calligraphy appears more central than decorative, with a large inscription from the Koran.

This is the only work to actively and deliberately reference God, Essaydi says. For the most part, the inscriptions are personal expressions from her diary.

“I think of my work as a book,” she said. “The women become the paragraphs and the pages.”

The use of the text itself makes a statement. The calligraphy she employs has traditionally been a high art form reserved for men, and the decorative process of applying henna has been considered women’s art.

“I wanted that to merge this male and female art together, not separate or tear them apart,” she said.

A great deal of effort accompanies this fusion. The photographs take up to six months to prepare, with Essaydi carefully applying line after line of the fast-drying henna to the fabric using the needle point of a syringe. The poses, created in collaboration with the models who Essaydi engages for years at a time, are thoughtfully conceived. For example, an odalisque split into a triptych of body sections provides a spin on the old exaggerated elongation of the female form.

“We can’t forget the poetic part of art,” she said. “I don’t just have a message, otherwise I would get a pamphlet

and go out into the street.”

Les Femmes du Maroc

When: Through June 6. Tuesdays-Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; first Wednesday of each month, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Where: Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers, 71 Hamilton St., New Brunswick

How much: \$3. Admission is free for museum members, Rutgers students, faculty and staff; children younger than 18, and for all on the first Sunday of each month.

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