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# Photo Annual 2005

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Edited by Anthony LaSala

Do you have a special photography project? Contact section editor Anthony LaSala at PDN, 770 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. E-mail: [alasala@pdnonline.com](mailto:alasala@pdnonline.com).

Boston-based artist Lalla Essaydi didn't plan on getting recognition as a photographer when she began using her camera to assist her work as a painter. Nonetheless, it was the photographs she created that became the focal point of her work and a book by powerHouse. Essaydi, originally born in Marrakesh, Morocco, utilized calligraphy, henna, yards of fabric, female models and weeks of preparation to produce potent, stunning images that explore and rebel against the cruelty of gender inequality in her homeland.

## Calligraphy and a Camera

By Edgar Allen Beem

LALLA ESSAYDI GREW UP IN MARRAKESH, A DAUGHTER OF A LARGE, PROMINENT and conservative Moroccan family that owned extensive olive groves and a 500-year-old palace a few kilometers outside the city. The palace, which had been owned by her grandfather, was held in trust and was largely uninhabited except for a staff of caretakers. And it was to this sumptuous but lonely palace that girls in the family were exiled as punishment for transgressions against the strict patriarchal rules of Islamic social life.

"It was a psychological space," explains the Boston-based artist. "When I used to do something my family was not pleased with, I was sent to that house, usually for a day or two at a time, with only the servants. It was a place I just hated, as did most of the women in my family. When I was 15, I spent a whole month there. My brothers took me to dance at a nightclub. They were not punished, but I was. There was a lot of silence around me when I was there. It was huge and scary."

That experience of banishment and injustice now informs Essaydi's powerful and mysterious *Converging Territories* (powerHouse Books, 2005), a selection of 20 conceptual portraits from an ongoing series of photographs of female family and friends taken in that palace of punishment.

In an earlier series, *The Three Silences*, Essaydi photographed the family palace itself, but in *Converging Territories* she de-contextualizes her subjects, placing the Arab women and girls in a curtained-off space in which the cloth back-

ground, the robes and veils they wear, and even their bodies are covered in hennaed calligraphy. The calligraphy, written in Arabic, records entries from Essaydi's journal. As such, it is difficult to imagine a contemporary work of art that more fully integrates image and text. Lalla Essaydi's photographs are thus symbolic portraits, the women they portray, living metaphors for the subjugation of Muslim women. Despite this oppression, however, she remains devoted to Islam.

"I am a Muslim," Essaydi insists. "I am disenchanted with certain rules and certain interpretations of religion. It's a man's religion. It definitely puts a lot of power in men's hands, so women become second-class citizens. The religion the way it has been pictured is not the religion in which I believe. When there is no tolerance in a religion, it is not religion."

Essaydi was only 16 when she was married to a Saudi Arabian government official. She spent 20 years in Saudi Arabia, raising a son and a daughter, and

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**Right** An image from Essaydi's *Converging Territories*. Each photograph was created with a Cambo 4 x 5 camera.

ALL PHOTOS PAGES 210, 212, BOTTOM LEFT ON 215 © LALLA ESSAYDI



## Calligraphy and a Camera

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composition and lighting, but because she has been unable to find a good photo lab in Morocco, she never knows what she has created until she returns to the United States.

The smallest prints in *Converging Territories* (a title that suggests the convergence of Western and Arab societies as well as male and female, sacred and secular spaces) are 30 x 40 inches, the largest run as big as 90 inches.

The Arabic calligraphy, which cannot be read by most American and European viewers, begins, "I am writing. I am writing on me, I am writing on her" and, at its heart, expresses the artist's dilemma, "I am dreaming about freedom and don't know how to talk about it."

Amanda Carlson, who teaches art history and African studies at the University of Hartford, wrote the essay and conducted the interview with Essaydi that appears in *Converging Territories*. She believes that while Essaydi's calligraphy can only be understood by Western audiences on a decorative or symbolic level, it is nonetheless critical to an understanding of the artist's intent.

"Essaydi's photographs speak to a complicated history of restricted literacies," Carlson says. "In some cultures, women are restricted from learning the art of calligraphy that is used to reproduce passages of the Qu'aran. As Western audiences experience the pleasure of visual streams of text, they are confronted with the frustration of not being able to translate it. One's ability or inability to translate the text in Essaydi's photographs is an important part of the work itself."

Essaydi herself says of her inscrutably beautiful photographs, "My dream is to bring something back and share my experience with these women. When I am there, I don't really have an audience in mind. We just talk about our situations as women in society. But I am not a documentary photographer at all. I don't want to say, 'Well, this is how it is.' I want to give someone a chance to think. It's performance, painting and photography all in one." □

Below: One of 20 images in Essaydi's powerHouse publication.



## The Last Picture Show

By Edgar Allen Beem



Above: The Rialto Theater, Los Angeles, California.

AERO, FINE ARTS, GLOBE, HOLLYWOOD, MAYFAIR, Nuart, Orpheum, Palace, Rialto, Wilshire—the old motion picture palaces of Los Angeles and elsewhere loom up out of the dim, sepia-toned photographs of Steven Rood like recovered memories. Some of the 60 theaters portrayed in Rood's on-going "Picture House" series are still functioning movie theaters. Others have been abandoned or converted for use as churches or markets. All are proud monuments to a bygone era before the advent of the suburban cinema-plex.

"I see myself as a preservationist with a camera," says Rood, "holding on to the past and better times, harkening back to a time when optimism was still alive."

Rood, 42, is that rare being, a native Los Angeleno. Born in Los Angeles in 1962, he grew up with a camera in his hands, thanks to his father, a passionate amateur photographer and professional advertising writer. Progressing from Brownie to Kodak Instamatic to Pentax by the time he was in the 8th grade, young Steven primarily focused his lenses on motorcycle races and wildlife on weekend trips to the desert.

His attraction to nature was such that Rood majored in wildlife biology at Loyola Marymount University, but an advertising course he took as a senior elective put him on a different path entirely. After graduating with a BS in 1984, he enrolled at Art Center College of Design to study his father's profession: advertising. Over the course of the next decade, Rood worked for several Los Angeles advertising firms, rising from art direc-

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