

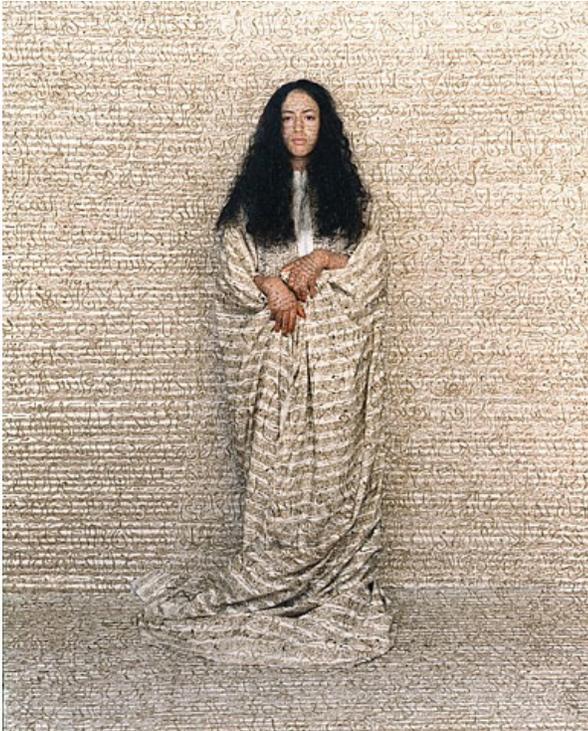
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WRITING WOMEN: INTERVIEW WITH LALLA ESSAYDI

BY MING LIN



LALLA ESSAYDI, *Les Femmes du Maroc #21B*, 2006, chromogenic print on aluminum, 152.4 × 121.9 cm.

Boundaries, now on view at Amelia Johnson Contemporary in Hong Kong, is Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi's first solo exhibition in Asia. The large-scale photographs feature women covered head-to-toe with Arabic calligraphy, standing or lounging in the settings of 19th century Orientalist paintings. While lifting from this visual tradition, Essaydi's works maintain a hybrid character. Combining the male-dominated arts of calligraphy, architecture and poetry with the female tradition of henna tattooing, Essaydi addresses the complex identity of Arab women today. Having studied art in the US and lived many years in Saudi Arabia, she denies the notion of a pure Eastern or Western perspective. Last week in Hong Kong, she discussed her recent work and the challenges of being a female Arab artist.

In your works, systems of power and domination, such as the male mastery of literature and calligraphy, are imposed on the photographed subjects. What are some of the contradictions and complexities that your work addresses?

I go to great lengths to make the text illegible. I want it to become a language of its own, appreciated in the same way as the figure. It doesn't necessarily need to have a meaning. The whole work is my story and the story of these women.

For me, [calligraphy] is important because it's the writing style of the Quran, and because it's a masculine art form I didn't have access to growing up. Poetry, architecture and calligraphy have always been considered "high-art" in Islamic culture. By writing calligraphy with henna, a medium associated with women's craft, I put the two together instead of pulling them apart.



LALLA ESSAYDI, *Harem #14C*, 2009, chromogenic print on aluminum, 152.4 × 121.9 cm.

I'm interested in your use of a double lens. You're not only examining the East through a western perspective, but also looking at an East that is a reaction or a response to a western perspective.

Yes, I've lived in the US for 16 years. While I identify myself as a Moroccan artist, I cannot deny my experience [in the West]. When people want me to talk about Saudi Arabia, I tell them that although I lived there for a long time, I don't have the right to talk about it as if it's mine.

Why was it important for you to start your investigation with Orientalist imagery?

Before going to the West, I had seen [Orientalist imagery] in books as just an exotic way of representing mystic spaces, mostly to men. It was during my travels that I found more of these books. I was born in a harem, so I knew the reality of women just lying around naked like that was pure fantasy. It bothered me, but I was fascinated because the paintings were so exquisite. I had a love-hate experience with them.

Orientalist paintings are very small I think because most of them were commissioned to be what Playboy is now, something to pass between men and not seen by women. They wanted a sexual fantasy, and this could only take place in another culture. I wanted to take the paintings and blow them up. If it was fantasy, I wanted it to have the full scale of fantasy.

When I was at school I made a huge Orientalist painting, and a curator from a museum was interested in it. When I tried to show her my other works, she had less enthusiasm. She only wanted the big fantasy. I started talking about the work, and she was surprised, she had thought the image was autobiographical. I was shocked that an expert in this area of art didn't even know it was a just sexual fantasy.

From that moment, I knew I needed to do something. I am an Arab woman, and I don't see myself in these paintings. A lot of people ask me why I choose to dwell on this issue, and it's because it's not solved. It may not be about the odalisque now, but the odalisque is what later became the veiled female figure. If we don't unveil that founding myth first, we cannot begin to address the rest.



LALLA ESSAYDI, *Les Femmes du Maroc- Harem Women Writing*, 2008, chromogenicprint on aluminum, 50.8 × 61 cm.

While Orientalist paintings seem impermeable, your works' textured surfaces invite the viewer to enter into the pictorial space. How else do your works depart from the originals?

The most important way is the women's gaze. The subjects choose the way they want to be seen—they are very confrontational. Then there is the voice, which is the written language. Additionally, I removed all the trappings which make the original images so beautiful: the lush colors and costumes. In Orientalist images, though paintings appear voyeuristic there are couches and settings luring you in. In my works, the space is abstracted. The only thing that shows the figure is lying down is the gravity of the body and the curvature of the text, so you cannot enter the space comfortably. Also in Orientalist paintings, you don't see details like dirty feet facing the viewer. Lastly, my figures are not nude. I always say that my works are process oriented—the viewer completes them and that's part of the dialogue.

Boundaries is on view through April 6.

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