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Where Sacred Law And Pleasure Collide: The Photographs of Lalla Essaydi



Lalla Essaydi, from "Harem Revisited"

It's a complex thing, this place of women in the Muslim world. In Islamic countries, men have historically abused the sexuality of women, using it as an excuse to keep them locked and covered,

enslaved at home, veiled in the outside world, objectified. In the West, men have taken the reverse approach, made vivid by Orientalist painters who portrayed women from Morocco and Arabia in romantic, hyper-sexualized poses of half-nudity, stretched alluringly on couches, gazing seductively from beneath sheer veilings of precious silks, an exotic fantasy, here, too, objectified.

Lalla Essaydi is all of these women, and none of them.

Moroccan born, Essaydi spent much of her adult life in Saudi Arabia before emigrating to the US, where she studied painting and photography at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/Tufts University. Since then, she has developed an extraordinary oeuvre (I confess she is one of my favorite artists of the moment), achieving that rare balance of art that is at once political and aesthetic, as much social commentary as a statement on, for, and about art itself.

The works for which she first became known – the series “Femmes du Maroc” and “Converging Territories” – were here most personal pieces, autobiographical in the way that novels are often autobiographical, and equally layered in metaphor. Photographed in the rooms to which the young Lalla was sent whenever she disobeyed as a child in Morocco, the works depict women veiled or swathed in white sheets of cotton fabric on which the artist has written, in careful Arabic calligraphy penned with traditional henna dyes, a kind of journal entry, a part of her own story. (In later works, she used, too, the stories of her models.) The same calligraphed fabric hangs along the walls of the rooms behind the women posed there, so that

they become, as it were, indistinguishable from their surroundings – an integral, intimate part of the world that they inhabit and yet at the same time, invisible within it.



J.A.D. Ingres, "Odalisque"

It is in these works, I think, that Essaydi best articulates the dual imprisonment of Muslim women, or perhaps better said, of women in the Muslim world. In “Converging Territories,” her women stand facing out at us – except that they are faceless, their features completely hidden – veiled – behind the same cloth that drapes their bodies and the walls that entirely embrace them, captives in their own lives, in their stories, and imprisoned by the stereotypes imposed on them by the patriarchal, misogynistic societies in which they live. Yet for all their similarities, the works in “Les Femmes du Maroc” present a rather different view: here, Essaydi’s women, still draped in white, now appear seductive, the heavy cotton sheets becoming more translucent, their bodies echoing the erotic poses common to Western Orientalist paintings of women from the Middle East (think Jean-Léon Gérôme).

But look closer. In fact, Essaydi's models' faces, unlike Ingres', say, do not entice; they confront. Look at the expression in "Grande Odalisque 2," for instance. This woman is not calling for a man: she is asserting her existence contra his, wrapped in her own story, her own autobiography. She is not his sexual servant. She is her own master.

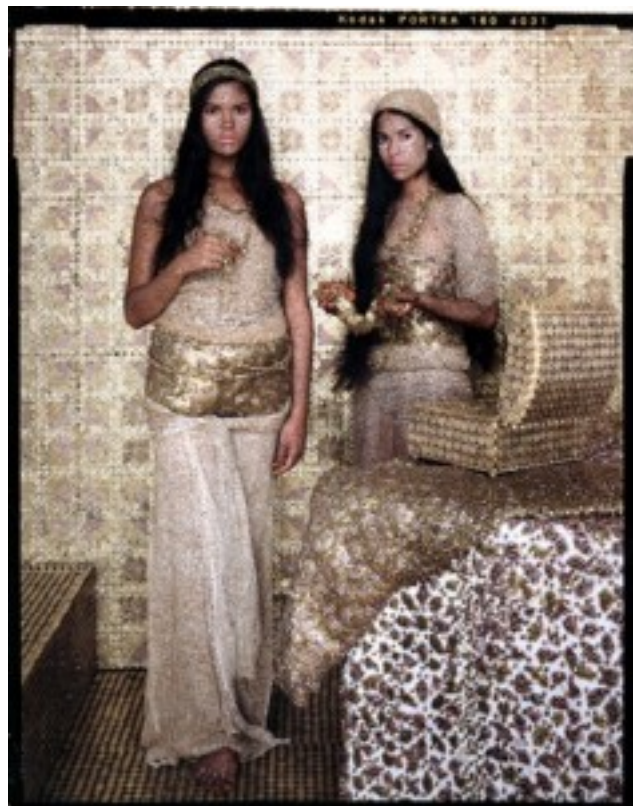


Lalla Essaydi, "Grand Odalisque II"

I've known few artists who work harder or with more absolute focus than Essaydi, whose immersion in her projects of the past few years has been so deep that she literally cut herself off from the outside world (or as much as was practical) while producing "Harem," "Harem Revisited," and more recently, "Bullet." The "Harem" series, including "Harem Revisited," take the narrative further, so the women's garments either thoroughly mesh with the surrounding, traditional Moroccan architecture, or – as in "Revisited," with the stunning richness, sensuousness, and sensual overwhelm of the jewel-colored silks that clothe and curtain them and their

calligraphed bodies.

But most recently, Essaydi has embarked on still another project, and by far her most political, entitled “Bullet.” Visually stunning, the sheen of gold blazing against white walls and dark skin, the photographs of “Bullet” give us women whose seductiveness is pure power, a sisterhood of sirens enrobed in narratives and weapons, in environments of color and form that dazzle and entice. When an exhibition of these works at the Baku Museum of Modern Art, Azerbaijan,



Lalla Essaydi, "Bullet #6"

opened in November, I asked Essaydi to talk about her work in general, and about this extraordinary series, especially.

Although she had just finished installing the show – her sixth major exhibition in less than a year – she took the time to answer some questions via e-mail. A few days later, we met for a drink at a café in Istanbul. When I asked if she were not exhausted, she answered very simply, “as long as I’m creating, I am happy.” That, then, is her story – veiled entirely in her art.

Abigail R. Esman: Can you tell me about how the “Bullet” works evolved?



Lalla Essaydi, "Bullet #11"

Lalla Essaydi: The Bullets series comprises artworks that use castings of bullets as a key element; they adorn all surfaces, woven into costumes and threaded around women. The body of work evolved as a response to the developments in Morocco and the rest of the Arab world. This new work references fear about growing restrictions on women in the new, post-revolutionary era that followed demonstrations in the Arab world

ARE: How do they fit into the narrative of the previous photographs? They seem in some ways even more political to me, but I may be reading too much into it....

LE: This new series is much more openly confrontational since the visual vocabulary I chose alludes directly to violence and violence projected on women. Women have been at the forefront of the uprisings in the Arab world, and as soon as these new regimes took hold, women were subordinated anew. This gender apartheid is not about piety, it is about dominating excluding and subordinating women, It is about barring them from political activities, preventing them from fully exercising the rights Islam grants them.

The fear – my fear – is that this also could further marginalize women in their native countries as well as in the art world by defining them solely by their gender.

ARE: Technically, can you explain how it is you compose the bullet environments?



The making of the bullet fabrics

LE: First, I have two assistants in the U.S. who buy the bullet castings for me from training booths; we buy them by the buckets, sort them from metal scraps, cut them, make holes on them so I can saw them and later weave them as a mesh. Since bullet casings are heavy, I weave them into small pieces and take them to Morocco where I assemble them into cloth. For the background of the set, I hired people who have hunting licenses so they can buy and fire the bullets for me before we cut them and embed them into wood panels to create tiles and beds and floors. The fabrics are sewn in my studio in New York and then transferred piece by piece to Morocco where the work is photographed. It is a very long process since I needed to carry these shells with me each time I travel. The process of sawing and weaving is also very slow.

ARE: Your previous series, the Harem, also marked a departure for you, among other things through the incredibly rich involvement of color. Was there a personal reference for you in that setting as there was in the earlier works, which took place in the rooms to which you were banished as a (naughty!) child?

LE: No, this was not part of my family's homes. The new series is set in the harem quarters of a palace in Marrakech. The quarters are exquisite. The palace, which took 28 years to complete, is decorated with mosaic, stucco, stained glass, and carved wood. The harem itself is located at its very heart, behind a labyrinthine network of corridors and massive doors. Even now, one can sense its oppressive atmosphere of isolation and concealment. In preparing this work, I spent some time there, trying to imagine how the women felt who were consigned to this space, the loneliness, companionship and solidarity that they shared.

In the case of the harem I wanted to show that it is not the place of male Orientalist fantasy, it is a place for household. The physical harem is the dangerous frontier where sacred law and pleasure collide. This is not the harem of the Western Orientalist imagination, an anxiety-free place of euphoria and absence of constraints, where the word "harem" has lost its dangerous edge. My harem is based on historical reality; that of the West, on artistic images – an idyllic, lustful dream of sexually available women, uninhibited by the moral constraints of 19th Century Europe.



Lalla Essaydi, from "Harem Revisited"

ARE: Some of the Harem pieces are extraordinary and powerful commentaries — as your work generally is — on Orientalist art. But I never get the sense that you fully condemn that work; in some ways, it's as if you also find great beauty in it. Is that correct? how do you see the French Orientalist works as art works, independent of their — however inadvertent — chauvinism?

LE: An important way for me to undermine these works has been to expose them as fantasies — to blow them up to a large scale (Orientalist fantasy paintings of "harems" were often small, perhaps for secretive sharing amongst men) and to formalize their distorted elements, of architecture, woman, harem etc. I've also removed the suggested narrative that serves the fantasy and removed or altered the sumptuous fabrics of Orientalist works. My work remains

beautiful because I see this as an access point for people to understand my deeper questions. I would also say that on first encountering Orientalist painters I felt a love-hate towards them, as they are beautiful, yet their beauty cannot be disconnected from the chauvinism they represent. I do not celebrate Orientalist paintings, I do, however, have a love/hate relationship with them. I can't ignore that they are exquisitely conceived, but their content is extremely troublesome. And I use similar tropes to reference them, by seeming to cater to, but in fact disrupt the tradition in many ways. It takes multiple reading of my work in order to see all the layers., and to fully understand its content.

ARE: At the same time, I also can see that you are yourself celebrating the cultural riches of Morocco, the



Lalla Essaydi, "Harem #15"

Middle East and North African countries. Although I tend to think of your work as first and foremost being about the experience of women, would you say that these elements are also significant to your work? Or do they just happen incidentally, perhaps through the inherent qualities that you bring to your vision and your work?

LE: I full-heartedly celebrate the cultural riches of Morocco and the Arab world, but also, I would also say that all elements of my work are carefully considered. Gender roles in Morocco are perpetuated by our aesthetics, our cultural riches, so combining traditionally male and female art forms has been a vital tool for me to express and question gender hierarchies. My work is in many ways autobiographical, it is about the experience of a woman questioning stereotypes impressed on her by both the East and West.