

Lalla Essaydi: Crossing Boundaries, Bridging Cultures

Edited by Dina Nasser-Khadivi and Ahmed-Chaouki Rafif, with contributions by Mitra Abbaspour, *et al.* ACR Édition Internationale and Edwynn Houk Gallery, 2015

Reviewed by Carol Solomon

This lavishly illustrated, luxury slip-case edition is the most comprehensive study to date of the large-format photographs of the Moroccan-born, New York- and Marrakesh-based artist, Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956). Yet another manifestation of the renewed interest in Orientalist art, the book celebrates Essaydi's rise in the last ten years to a position of international recognition.

Orientalist fantasies of the lascivious Arab woman persist in the Western imaginary, and the imprint of Edward Said's influential discourse, *Orientalism* (1978), positioning a superior West over the East, is still in evidence. But new paradigms of Orientalism informed by the rhetoric of globalization are taking hold as old ones are challenged and revised. The image of the "exotic Arab in need of civilizing rule" has been displaced by a vision of the Arab as "an integral member of the global economy of cultural production" (53). Major collectors and collections of Orientalist art are now concentrated in North Africa and the Middle East. No longer constrained by a dominating Western perspective, the Orient is being returned to the Orientals.¹ In contemporary art, a tradition of counter-Orientalist representation has emerged. Artists with ties to the Arab and Islamic world have engaged with the legacy of Orientalism by appropriating and deconstructing the Orientalist lexicon in order to dispel myths, transform hardened associations, and critique existing realities and assumptions. Lalla Essaydi is one such artist.

Essaydi produces elaborately staged photographs in series using the Orientalist tropes of the veil, the odalisque, and the harem. Engaged in a

critical exploration of female Arab identity, the artist makes use of the thematic language of European Orientalist art to contest established myths and reveal "Orientalism as a projection of the sexual fantasies of Western male artists—in other words as a voyeuristic tradition" (12). Essaydi adopts the use of calligraphy, an art form historically associated with male practice and sacred Islamic art, as a female mode of expression. Using henna, the quintessential means of Arab female adornment, she applies an intentionally indecipherable calligraphic script to the skin of the women, their clothing, the drapery. A protective veil concealing the woman's body, the calligraphy becomes an instrument of empowerment and agency, metaphorically giving voice to the artist and her female subjects.

The collective aim of *Lalla Essaydi: Crossing Boundaries, Bridging Cultures* is to provide a more nuanced understanding of her art by presenting it in multiple contexts. Most illuminating is the identification of the many influential ties, formal and otherwise, to the artist's cultural roots in Morocco and to Islamic traditions in architecture, art, and design. The title of the book alludes to the artist's liminal perspective, the product of her transnational, transcultural personal history as an Arab woman raised in Morocco, educated briefly in Paris, and resident for many years in Saudi Arabia before moving to the United States, where most of her training as an artist took place and where her art was first shown.

Consisting of several essays and copious illustrations, the monograph begins with an introductory statement by the artist and a brief biography by Kinsey Katchka, curator of the artist's mid-career retrospective *Lalla Essaydi: Revisions* (2012) at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. Five essays follow: four by specialists in different areas, and a fifth, more personal, reflective contribution by Egyptian feminist writer and Arabo-Islamic women's rights activist, Nawal El Saadawi.

The artist's statement highlights key elements of her personal history—her Moroccan heritage and the transforma-

tion of her critical perspective as a result of her lived experience in the West. Essaydi discusses the significance of architectural space, "actual and metaphorical, remembered and constructed," (10) at the core of her practice, explaining the historical association of gender and space in traditional Muslim society: men are identified with public space, women with the private, domestic space. In Morocco today, these spatial boundaries persist although they are less rigidly enforced. In the Morocco of Essaydi's youth, access for women beyond the prescribed boundaries was much less permissible. She comments on the misrepresentation of Arab women and culture in Orientalist art and in the West as she elaborates on the definitions of her basic topoi—the veil, the odalisque, and the harem. She assigns political significance to the participation of her Moroccan models in the creation of her works. All family acquaintances, these women eagerly participate in her project despite the painstakingly slow process of applying henna, which can take as long as nine hours. "They feel they are contributing to the greater emancipation of Arab women," says Essaydi, "and at the same time conveying to a Western audience a very rich tradition often misunderstood in the West" (11).

The first essay, by Stéphane Guégan, a specialist in nineteenth-century European Orientalist art, begins with a brief theoretical justification of the revisionist approach to the study of Orientalist art. He dismisses Edward Said's *Orientalism*, as a "manifesto," which has lost its "essential credibility" in the years since its publication in 1978. However, his repudiation of Said's work is misplaced in the case of Essaydi's art because the artist has identified him as one of the major influences in her work.² Guégan does concede that Said's writings were valuable insofar as they reminded us that Orientalism "cannot be approached with an innocent eye, lazily or carelessly forgetting the geopolitical conditions and anthropological conditioning in which writers and artists operated" (22). According to Guégan, Said's "identity-monomism is no longer possible, much less operational in the geographical and mental spaces of postmodern mobility" (22).

Under the influence of more recent theorists, such as Homi Bhabha, new perspectives in the dialogue of difference have now opened up, making way for the discovery of “a much more subtle dialogue” (22).

Bypassing the most frequently discussed French nineteenth-century Orientalists, Guégan considers Essaydi’s works in relation to depictions of the harem by Henriette Browne and John Frederick Lewis. Theirs is not the clichéd and sexualized portrayal of the sultan’s “oppressive and macho harem” (31) but a space of protective confinement, which echoes historical reality. For the women inhabiting this space, it is a world of their own control, of comfort, serenity—a space of female and familial camaraderie. Essaydi’s art embraces this wholesome apprehension of the harem as it quietly speaks to the emancipation of Arabic women and the undoing of one-dimensional Orientalist stereotypes. And yet, Essaydi’s work invites us to step inside a world where women are hardly immune from male control and oppression.

One of the attributes of the book is that it provides a fuller and more accurate understanding of the concept of a harem and its multiple associations. A class-based institution, not historically distant as one might expect, the harem was part of Essaydi’s childhood experience.

Mitra Abbaspour also avoids the standard clichés of nineteenth-century European Orientalist art and looks to non-Western sources in her essay, which explores historical precedents for Essaydi’s representation of the harem. A photography curator, Abbaspour locates the early history of photographing women in the harem in the late nineteenth-century Persian court of Nāsir al-Dīn Shah. An enthusiast of the medium, Nāsir al-Dīn Shah took pictures of his wives, thus creating authentic photographs of harem women. Abbaspour introduces other examples of non-Western harem-related imagery from previous centuries to consider in dialogue with Essaydi’s themes.

Characteristic elements of Moroccan design in *zellige* tilework, textiles, and architectural ornamentation (including elaborate overall patterns carved in

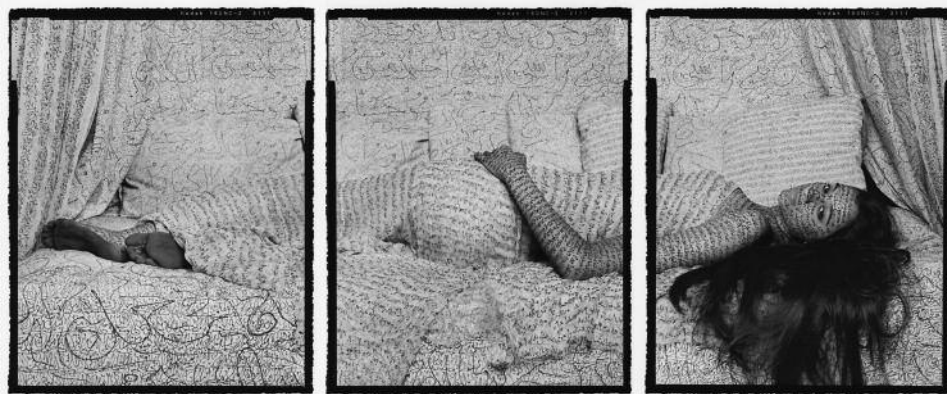


Fig. 1. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Beauty #1* (2008), chromogenic prints mounted on aluminum.

plaster and wood in intricate geometric detail) are identified as sources of inspiration for Essaydi’s aesthetic language. As explained in the essay by Maryam Ekhtiar, a curator of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the artist’s apparent “joy of filling spaces,” otherwise known as the phenomenon of *horror vacui*, is a common trait of Islamic art (67). Essaydi’s propensity towards overall geometric pattern and her use of calligraphy and vibrantly colored fabrics are also attributed in a generalized way to sources in Moroccan and Islamic manuscript illumination and textiles. Several examples are discussed by Ekhtiar, who seeks further affirmation of the artist’s indebtedness to her Moroccan and Islamic heritage. Not mentioned among non-Western influences on Essaydi’s art are works of contemporary artists, such as the photography of Shirin Neshat, an important predecessor in the use of text over female bodies.

The essay by Nawar El Saadawi focuses on Essaydi’s use of henna and calligraphic text and the liberating power of the written word. This Egyptian advocate of Arab women’s rights (herself imprisoned for her controversial writings) explores Essaydi’s ability to reverse “the silence of submissive femininity” in her expressive campaign for women’s rights and justice (80). The “creative ambiguity” of Essaydi’s art succeeds in El Saadawi’s view because, rather than “obscuring meaning,” it “clarifies and opens the mind to new universes” (80).

The final essay, “A Delicate Balance,”

by Kinsey Katchka provides an overview of Essaydi’s development as an artist through a close analysis of each of her photographic series produced between 2002 and 2013. Katchka examines how in each successive series Essaydi deconstructs the essential elements of the Orientalist idiom. However, for some viewers, as Katchka acknowledges, Essaydi’s counter-narrative challenge to tradition and convention “goes unrecognized” (87, 105, 106). One must ask if the message is too subtle, the stereotypes too deeply embedded, the reclining models so beautiful they actually enhance the Orientalist fantasy as in *Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Beauty #1* (2008; Fig 1). Or has the idiom simply not been transformed enough? Some critics claim that Essaydi’s art actually reinforces the Orientalist stereotypes it seeks to contest.³ The strength of Essaydi’s art, Katchka contends, is attributed to its “deliberate subtlety” and multilayered complexity, making it rich in “paradox and ambiguity” and leaving it open to varied interpretation (106).

The remaining, largely illustrative part of the book (pages 108–367) contains more than two hundred high-quality plates. Each series, with the exception of *The Three Silences*, is briefly introduced and represented by a selection of full- or double-page color illustrations. Several fold-out plates are interspersed with commentary and brief quotes by the artist and other sources. The book concludes with a list of publications comprising mainly exhibition reviews. Sources listed here

lack page references as do several of those cited in the notes for the individual essays. A list of suggested readings consists mainly of titles devoted to Orientalist painting. Also included are an exhibition history and a list of collections housing works by the artist. The book omits dimensions and the number of photographs in each series. The text would be improved by including a discussion of the evolution of women's rights in Morocco during the artist's lifetime, especially the influence of Mohammed VI's reforms of 2003 on the legal status of women. This is concisely reviewed in relation to Essaydi's art in Cynthia Becker's provocative 2009 article "Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads," which sheds light on the

comparatively soft revolution waged on behalf of Moroccan women in Lalla Essaydi's art.⁴ The reader of this beautiful book comes away with an appreciation of the varied richness of Essaydi's works in both form and content, and benefits from exposure to critical approaches now current in the analysis of and reassessment of Orientalist art. •

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Notes

1. Jean-Claude Vatin, "After Orientalism: Returning the Orient to the Orientals," in

After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-appropriations, eds. François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015).

2. Lalla Essaydi identifies Said, along with Linda Nochlin, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawar El Saadawi as her major influences in a 2012 *PBS Newshour* interview, "Q&A: Lalla Essaydi Challenges Muslim, Gender Stereotypes at Museum of African Art," www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2012/05/revisions.
3. Benjamin Genocchio, "Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism," *New York Times*, March 5, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/nyregion/07artsnj/.
4. Cynthia Becker, "Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life* 3 (2009): 143–66. (reference not included in Essaydi text).

Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art

By Gill Perry
Reaktion Books, 2013

Art and The Home: Comfort, Alienation and the Everyday

By Imogen Racz
I.B.Tauris, 2015

Reviewed by Anne Swartz

The home in contemporary art has been a subject for many artists as a material image. It also is a gathering point for artistic meditations on how the dwelling encompasses the social situation. In recent years, the home has been examined in the art historical and visual culture literature in edited collections of essays and as a study of a few artists. British curator Colin Painter's *Contemporary Art and the Home* (2002) and Anglo-Australian cultural historian Sara Ahmed's *Uprootings/regroundings: questions of home and migration* (2003) are essay collections, while art historian Jennifer Johnung's *Replacing Home: From*

Primordial Hut to Digital Network in Contemporary Art (2012) focuses on case studies, emphasizing art that offers alternatives to the fixity of the home.

Perry's and Racz's monographs are welcome additions to the literature and will become essential references. Both consider the literal structure of the home and house and functions like domesticity, and have organized their text into themes, with each chapter functioning independently.

In *Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art*, Perry frames artists exhibiting in Britain, Europe, and America and their explorations of the representational form of the house or home as an image and a subject in installation art. She interrogates the house and home as either a spatial configuration or representation, utilizing theoretical models ranging from phenomenology to feminism. Although her study centers primarily on American and British artists, she also includes several artists of other nationalities.

Playing at Home is divided into seven chapters, with numerous subheadings to organize the analysis. Perry has brought together artworks in each chapter where she can highlight a theme, such as "Family Traces," in the first chapter. She then immediately

begins surveying a limited number of works by an artist. Usually she considers only one complex piece with numerous components, such as Chinese artist Song Dong's *Waste Not* (2012) comprising more than 10,000 objects. In select instances, she will discuss more. In Chapter 3 on "Broken Homes," she discusses one to three works by seven artists and then extends her appraisal to five works by Korean artist Do-Ho Suh, who has made numerous important works about the home. Chapters open with a consideration of the art and have neither a framing introduction nor a summary conclusion. Nevertheless, with 45 color plates and 75 halftone illustrations, it is an excellent resource for anyone interested in a detailed overview of selected themes about the house and home in contemporary art.

The title phrase "Playing at Home" establishes the general scope of the book, which examines human engagement with houses, including a remarkable variety, from dollhouses to dream houses, even haunted houses. Perry recognizes the enormity of what a house and home can represent in the artistic imagination: "Our relationships with 'home' and its material correlate, the house, can reveal complex cultural geographies in which established