

LALLA ESSAYDI

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF LALLA ESSAYDI: CRITIQUING AND CONTEXTUALIZING ORIENTALISM

Edited by Sarah T. Brooks

With Contributions by
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FOREWORD

In the fall of 2013, I had an opportunity to view Lalla Essaydi's work *La Grande Odalisque* in the 21st Century Art collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (Pl. 4). A colleague told me how much she appreciated the ways in which Essaydi's work challenged the viewer to reconsider the nature of historic poses and subject matter through shifting contemporary cultural lenses. I had the distinct pleasure of sharing how fortunate we were that Essaydi agreed to lend her important works to our exhibition and to visit our campus and community in March 2014.

In our sixth year of the College of Visual and Performing Arts' *Cultural Connections* Artist-in-Residence program, I am so pleased that internationally renowned artist Lalla Essaydi joins the growing list of distinguished artists whose exhibitions and public lectures have elevated our curriculum; left lasting impressions on students, faculty, and staff in the School of Art, Design and Art History; and benefited our local community.

To document Essaydi's visit to the School of Art, Design and Art History and to recall the immense graphic power and cultural interplay in her work, this catalogue has been developed with contributions from members of the James Madison University academic community. The catalogue features five contributions by distinguished art history faculty members Dr. Sarah Brooks, Dr. Maureen Shanahan, and Dr. David Ehrenpreis; history faculty member Dr. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi; and religious studies faculty member Dr. Danielle Widmann Abraham

as well as reflections by Ragan McManus, Executive Director of the Arts Council of the Valley, who coordinated the exhibition of Essaydi's work in downtown Harrisonburg at the Darrin-McHone Gallery. Much gratitude is extended to Ms. Kristi McDonnell, a graduate of our Graphic Design program, who designed this beautiful catalogue. I am also very appreciative of Gary Freeburg, Director of the Sawhill Gallery, for overseeing the installation of Essaydi's work on our campus. And I know I speak for everyone's deep appreciation for Dr. Sarah Brooks, who was able to coordinate the entire visit, exhibition, and catalogue that showcases this outstanding artist.

A special thank you is extended to Dr. George Sparks, Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and Dr. Marilou Johnson, Associate Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, who have continually provided support for the *Cultural Connections* Artist-in-Residence program. Dr. David Owusu-Ansah, Special Assistant to the President on Faculty Diversity, and Mr. Arthur Dean, Director of James Madison University's Office of Diversity, are also recognized for their genuine support of this important program. Our further appreciation is extended to the Office of International Programs, and to Dr. Lee G. Sternberger, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Executive Director of International Programs, for providing additional support for the *Cultural Connections* art exhibition and its catalogue.

The *Cultural Connections* Artist-in-Residency continues to be one of the School's most anticipated and valued programs. We are truly honored

to have Lalla Essaydi visit our school, campus, and local community. Her ideas, the exhibition itself, and the interactions she has with both university and local community members clearly embody the intent of the residency. However, when combined, each serves to solidify the important commitment that has been made to the celebration of diverse ideas and practices both within and outside of the arts.

William Wightman, Ph.D.

Director

School of Art, Design and Art History

College of Visual and Performing Arts

James Madison University

PREFACE

In the summer of 2013, the School of Art, Design and Art History at James Madison University contacted the Arts Council of the Valley, a nonprofit organization located in Harrisonburg, Virginia, about displaying photographic work by Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi. The resulting exhibition, *The Photography of Lalla Essaydi: Critiquing and Contextualizing Orientalism*, features fourteen large-scale photographs that are highlights from the artist's oeuvre. The photographs will be shown at two Harrisonburg locations—the Arts Council's Darrin-McHone Gallery and James Madison University's Sawhill Gallery, between March 7, 2014 and April 4, 2014.

Essaydi's intriguing staged tableaux converge Arab traditions with Westernized socio-political views to provide a multitude of interpretations that challenge our preconceived notions about people and place. Calligraphy, a traditionally male art form and an obvious signifier for language, is paired with the traditionally female art form of henna designs, to surround shrouded and unveiled women in Essaydi's images. The calligraphy points to a specific text, which could start with a narrative work or a bit of poetry. Then Essaydi recomposes the text in response to the setting and the communication that she has with the women depicted in her photographs. She allows the text to break down, so it becomes indecipherable, even for a viewer fluent in Arabic. In the end, the calligraphy acts as an embrace, a kind of safety net that holds and comforts the women within the space. The play of semiotic pattern and odalisque body positioning points to hierarchical paradigms, while the intimacy, serenity, and strength of

Essaydi's process and overarching constructed composition empower the women that exist within the frame.

This catalogue showcases photographs from the exhibition and includes scholarship from five James Madison University professors. Sarah Brooks' introduction puts Essaydi's work in an art historical and cultural context. Maureen Shanahan's interview gets to the root of Lalla Essaydi's intentions and gives eloquent insight to the artist's personal background and art-making processes. Danielle Widmann Abraham examines Essaydi's work in light of western audiences' broader expectations for viewing images of Muslim women today. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi's essay introduces us to the rich history of Morocco, and speaks to the political, ethnic, and linguistic underpinnings that inform identity in the region and the broader Arab world. David Ehrenpreis cites examples from European painting and Orientalism in conjunction with Essaydi's work, providing historic context for the photographs. Additional statements and acknowledgement from Bill Wightman, the Director of the School of Art, Design and Art History, and from Sawhill Gallery Director, Gary Freeburg, are also included in this book. The scholarship on Essaydi's work points to its importance in the twenty-first century and to the plurality of meanings generated by the artist's photographs.

Without exciting images and astute conceptual practice in art, there is nothing to write about. The authors, gallery directors, and organizers of *The Photography of Lalla Essaydi: Critiquing and Contextualizing*

Orientalism are entirely grateful to Lalla Essaydi for allowing us to share her artistic vision with the Harrisonburg, Virginia community. With over a thousand Arab-Americans living in Harrisonburg, it is our hope that this exhibition, along with complimentary public programs, will welcome public dialogue. We invite you to gain greater perspective on Arab culture and Islamic traditions through the work of groundbreaking photographer, Lalla Essaydi.

Ragan McManus
Executive Director
Arts Council of the Valley

INTRODUCTION

Sarah T. Brooks

This essay introduces the reader to the artist, Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956, Marakkesh, Morocco), as well as to her specific works featured in the exhibition and the three photographic series from which they derive. It will consider the artist's personal history, including her education and artistic training; the wide range of artistic media used in her creative production; the major themes Essaydi explores; the varied cultural contexts in which she works; and the importance of place and architecture in her creative process. Special attention is also paid to the significance of the textile arts and Arabic calligraphy in her work, and in Arabic culture and Islamic art on a broader level.

Lalla Essaydi's artistic work—fusing installation, calligraphy in henna, painting, the fiber arts, and the final documentary act of photography—offers contemporary audiences a unique and challenging lens through which to consider Arab culture and Islamic traditions, past and present (Pl. 1–2, 4, and 6–16). Often executed through large-format photography and imposing large-scale prints,¹ Essaydi presents her female subjects as life-size, or close to life-size, situated in intimate domestic spaces, a visual strategy that enhances the personal and frequently confrontational nature of her work.

The fourteen exhibited photographs originate from three major series executed over nearly a single decade—*Converging Territories* (2002–2004); *Les Femmes du Maroc*, or 'The Women of Morocco' (2005–2007; and 2008–2010); and *Harem* (2009–2010)—with twelve

photographs in total drawn from *Les Femmes du Maroc*. The first series, *Converging Territories*, explores gendered space in the traditional culture of Morocco, especially as viewed through the artist's memory of her experiences as an adolescent punished for disobedience. In these images, the artist emphasizes veiling and unveiling of the face, head, and upper body, as well as the rituals of henna body painting, which are tied to major life events for the women of Islamic Morocco.² *Les Femmes du Maroc*, its title in French pointing to France's colonial history in Morocco, directly challenges European fantasies and stereotypes of Arab culture, especially of Arab Muslim women. In this series Essaydi restages and critiques specific paintings from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of them canonical in the history of Western Art.³ This tradition in Western painting, including exoticized subjects from North Africa and the Middle East, is now commonly referred to as Orientalist painting.⁴ In *Harem*, Essaydi explores issues including the interaction between actual palace architecture, with its brilliantly colored, geometrically patterned surfaces, and how the female figure interacts with this built environment.⁵

The original Arabic term *harem*, or "forbidden place," is critical to an analysis of this later series and to a number of works in *Les Femmes du Maroc*. A *harem* in traditional Arab and Islamic culture is defined as the women's quarters of the home that are off-limits to males other than husbands or relatives. Wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers

inhabit its spaces, and these are the central subjects of Essaydi's work.⁶ This Arab definition contrasts with sexualized, western fantasies of the Muslim harem as constructed by Orientalist painters and writers over the decades (Pl. 3, 5).⁷

In Essaydi's words, "In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses—as artist, as Moroccan, as Saudi, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short, I invite the viewer to resist stereotypes."⁸ One of the most powerful determinants reflected in this statement, and in the staging of the artist's photographic series, is the fact that Essaydi's identity is intimately tied to notions of place and geography. First she is an Arab Muslim woman born in Morocco, or al-Maghreb, as the region has been known since the Arab conquest of the eighth-century (Pl. 17–19). Her artistic expression and her experience would certainly be different if she were a female artist born and raised in another Arab country of North Africa, or in the geographically more distant Middle East. This aspect of personal identity especially shapes Essaydi's unique discourse on subjects including the veil, the female body, and the spaces of the home and family.

The year of Essaydi's birth, 1956, marked the end of French influence over Morocco, France's most distant colonial territory in North Africa. The dissolution of the French Protectorate of Morocco (1912–1956) resulted in the establishment of the independent Kingdom of Morocco, home to a Sunni Muslim majority.⁹ The kingdom functions as a constitutional monarchy and is one of the most liberal states in the Arab world.¹⁰ While the *Arab Spring*, begun in December 2010 in Tunisia in central North Africa, and accelerating and spreading across North Africa and the Middle East



Fig. 1. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #10*, 2009

into the Spring of 2011 and beyond, still effects public struggles of power, Morocco's democratic shifts have been less volatile, with the institution of new constitutional and parliamentary reforms.¹¹ It is in such broader contexts that Lalla Essaydi's presentations of identity are most poignantly viewed.

Essaydi's global travel, residence, and artistic production in numerous locations straddling East and West influence her work in many

significant ways. Today the artist divides her time in the United States between an apartment and studio in New York, and a second studio in Boston, a city to which she has had longstanding professional ties beginning with her undergraduate training at Tufts University, followed by her MFA work at The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (completed 2003).¹² In Morocco, Essaydi frequents family homes and professional locations, including different sites in the capital of Rabat, on Morocco's Atlantic coast; the major inland center of Marakkesh; and the village of Tamesloht, twenty kilometers southwest of Marakkesh, with views of the High Atlas Mountains (Pl. 19). Such locations, with their wealth of historic monuments and buildings, document Arab and Muslim traditions of the region and are critical to Essaydi's creative process.

In the past, Essaydi lived for many years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a modern Arab, Islamic nation where religious conservatism and political authoritarianism have curtailed the freedoms of its subjects (Pl. 17). Saudi Arabia is a particularly wealthy nation, which garners it considerable power in the Middle East and beyond; the kingdom is also the modern nation state that controls two of the most holy sites of Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca—the destination of the Hajj, or Muslim pilgrimage, by millions of the faithful every year—and the site of the House of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.¹³

From 1990 to 1991, Paris, the capital of the French colonial empire once controlling Morocco, was also a temporary home for Essaydi as she trained in the traditional arts of painting at the *École des Beaux Arts*, or the School of Fine Arts. During this period of study Essaydi had the opportunity to explore first-hand the collections

of France, especially the national painting collections of the world-famous Louvre Museum. The Louvre today is home to a number of the French Orientalist paintings that inspire the artist's critique of Western art (Pl. 3, 5).¹⁴ Others are in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the artist was trained, or in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City where Essaydi now lives and works.¹⁵

Place, coupled with architecture, are important bearers of meaning for Essaydi, and the artist selected specific historic buildings to serve as the locations for her photographic series. These include a family home in the village of Tamesloht, where the building's interior architecture was draped entirely with inscribed textiles crafted by the artist (*Converging Territories* series, 2003–2004; Pl. 1). In these photographs actual architecture and its decoration are suppressed to create a space reflecting the artist's memory of her experiences of isolation and psychological confinement as a child in this space.¹⁶ By contrast, elegant palace architecture and intricate, brilliantly colored tile work take center stage in Essaydi's series entitled *Harem* (2009–2010). In this series scenes are composed within the building's vast light-filled courtyard; in its expanding interior spaces, framed by tile and intricately carved wooden doors and screens; or close-up, upon the ceramic tile paving of the *riad*, or urban palace, *Dar al-Basha* ("House of the Notable")¹⁷ in Marakkesh (Fig. 1; Pl. 16).¹⁸ *Dar al-Basha's* forms and decoration are a product of the architectural traditions of seventeenth century and later buildings of Marakkesh, in an age when the city served as the capital of the early modern Islamic kingdom ruled by the Saadian Sultans (1554–1659). Ultimately these architectural styles continued the earlier traditions of *al-Andalus*, or Islamic art and building styles c. 711–1492 CE, in

the Iberian peninsula to the north (Spain and Portugal today) and extending into parts of Morocco. This was especially the case during the reign of the Berber-Arab Almoravid and Almohad dynasties (1062–1269) whose rulers from Marakkesh controlled both the regions north and south of the Strait of Gibraltar (Pl. 17–19).¹⁹ Thus specific ideas of place and details of setting are both very important to Essaydi, whether she is delineating these in the actual spaces she uses for her ensembles, as in the *Harem* series, or whether she is recasting the actual built environment for artistic effect, exemplified by *Converging Territories*.

The three series highlighted in this exhibition represent the culmination of Essaydi's thoughtfully planned and meticulously executed performance-based artistic practice. Each photographic series can take many months to plan and realize, with the final photographic stage documenting both the products of Essaydi's creative processes and her engagement—social, intellectual, and artistic—with the Moroccan women with whom she collaborates. This photographic record results from the days or sometimes weeks of their working together.²⁰ Often the artist returns to the subject of an earlier, initial series, as in the case of *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005–2007; Pl. 2, 6–10) and *Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited* (2008–2010; Fig. 2; and Pl. 4, 11–15), exploring further subjects within this initial theme but with some notable differences. In the different “vintages” of *Les Femmes du Maroc* it is clear that Essaydi has selected in 2008–2010 more supple fabric, at times nearly transparent, for the clothing of her female subjects as compared with the initial works of 2005–2007. These wrapping garments are notably more sensuous and tailored than in earlier renderings, and

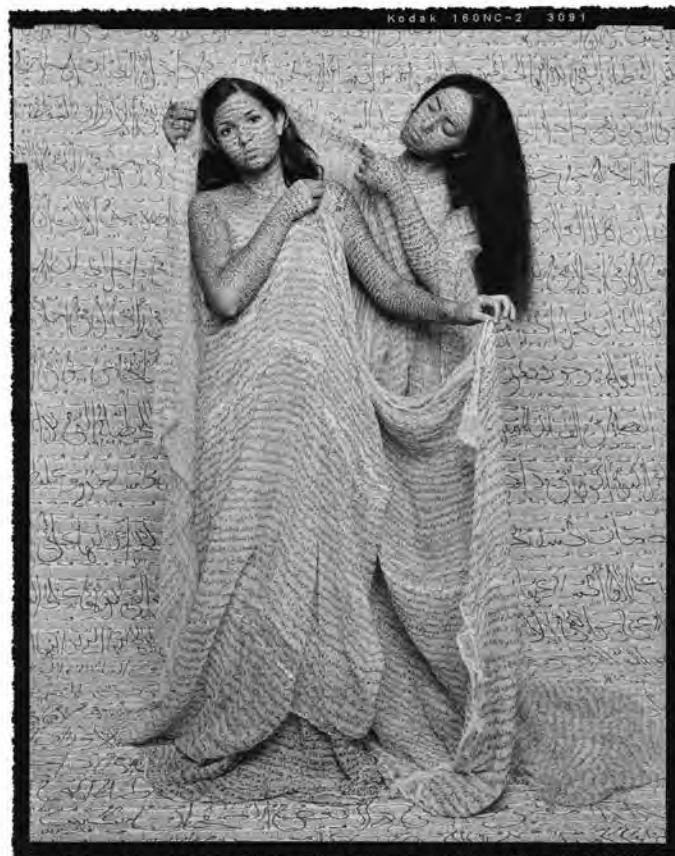


Fig. 2. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: After the Bath*, 2008

when viewed side by side this distinction highlights the allure of Essaydi's later subjects.

The artist's dedicated attention to dress, its patterned decoration and color, and the tactile qualities of the fabrics are yet further aspects of Essaydi's work that connect with traditions in Islamic art and culture for centuries. "The Draped Universe of Islam," the term coined by Lisa Golombek in her 1998 essay, describes the Arab-Islamic world's profound interest in textiles, including the layering of textiles in the decoration of architecture from floor to ceiling by carpets, hangings, and fabric furnishings, and in the covering of the body. In the case of tents, textiles defined the entire interior space of the home. Both in the production of their raw materials and in the finished goods, textiles were a source of great wealth for the empires of the Islamic world. Islamic textiles of the medieval and early modern periods were highly desired in Western Europe, sparking imitations and ferocious collecting of the authentic Eastern originals.²¹

A specific distinguished tradition in the textile arts that Essaydi's works suggest is *tiraz*, or a garment with embroidered Arabic calligraphy. *Tiraz*, in its most elite form executed in gold thread, was an especially prestigious piece of inscribed male clothing, often bearing the name of the Muslim ruler. Tiraz garments were given as gifts by Islamic rulers to members of their court and to foreign dignitaries.²² Yet Essaydi's garments in her first series are distinct to her female subjects, for one of the most striking elements of Essaydi's textiles is their color. In *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc* (Fig. 2; and Pl. 1–2, 4, and 6–15), the artist exploits the neutral, cream-colored textures of undyed cloth to

serve as the surface for Essaydi's reddish-brown, henna-painted calligraphy. In many ways the textiles serve as parchment or paper for the writing of Essaydi's texts. These undyed textiles also convey the notions of modesty and simplicity, which are highly valued, female attributes in Islamic tradition, as compared to the luxurious, dyed fabrics associated with male *tiraz*. The garments worn by the women of Essaydi's *Harem* series, as well as the surfaces and textile-wrapped furnishings that they rest upon, are cut from a different cloth. Here fabrics are co-opted to mimic the colorful designs of the surrounding tile decoration on walls and floors (Fig. 1; Pl. 16).

Essaydi is a master of textiles and the many diverse arts that contribute to her work, but painting was her initial entry point into the artistic career she has forged for herself. She was formally trained in painting, first in Paris and then at her undergraduate and graduate institutions in Boston, mentioned above, but Essaydi was first exposed to the practice of painting as a child. She observed her father as he worked in his home studio; for Essaydi's father, the visual arts were a hobby rather than a professional calling. Essaydi describes these experiences and the tremendous impact they had on her at such a young age. One of the most poignant details Essaydi reflects on is the relationship between artistic practice and intimacy with family members: "I used to associate quality time with my father with painting and drawing. Growing up, I always associated art with happy moments spent with my father."²³ It would seem that these warm sentiments, in particular, inform Essaydi's gathering of female family members and friends to collaborate with her in her artistic projects.

Essaydi's approach to wall decoration on a large-scale is another aspect of her work that, in part, may reach back for inspiration to childhood experience. Essaydi describes watching her father painting large-scale murals on the walls of the family's home.²⁴ Working in this scale Essaydi seeks to distinguish her photographs from what she describes as the often private, smaller paintings of similar subjects executed by male Orientalist painters.²⁵ In her first two series, *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc*, the walls of Essaydi's interiors—the family home in Tameshlot, Morocco (*Converging Territories*), and the artist's studio in Boston, recreating domestic interiors (*Les Femmes du Maroc*)—are covered by large textiles inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, or beautiful writing, an artistic and intellectual practice traditionally reserved for men in earlier Islam.²⁶ The female subject represented in *Converging Territories #10* is shown painting lines of calligraphic text with a delicate brush on the cloth hanging before her as she draws henna from a bowl by her side (Pl. 1). In this series, henna-inscribed calligraphy has also been drawn on the hands, faces and bodies of the women in Essaydi's compositions. To decrease the time spent applying henna to textile surfaces, the artist describes how over time she used a syringe with greater control to place the henna on the fabric's surface.²⁷ Essaydi is very purposeful in her minute execution within the composition of this Arabic calligraphy in a modern cursive script, and her final photographic work obscures the text by its relative small-scale within the larger composition. This is the artist's stated intention: to render the text illegible, even for those fluent in Arabic calligraphy. The elusive content of Essaydi's writings—a combination of texts including her own original poetry, prose, and journal excerpts—draws her audiences into the photograph.

Art historian and curator Isolde Brielmaier is the only author thus far to have published an English translation of a selection of calligraphy from one of Essaydi's series, in this case *Converging Territories*:

"I am writing. I am writing on me. I am writing on her. The story began to be written the moment the present began. I am asking, how can I be simultaneously inside and outside? I didn't even know this world existed. I thought it existed only in my head, in my dreams. And now here I am, an open book: Inside the book cover chapters are chaotic and confusing. The cover says more than the book. Chapter One is in fact the ending. Chapter Two is missing. Chapter Three builds a reference to the unknown, and the rest of the book is still in progress. Some paragraphs are written and rewritten and some are completely erased with the hope that they will never be read. Some are boldly typed to stand out. Some pages are ripped out, some freshly cut. Paper cuts make the reader bleed at times, reflecting the persona inside. Some chapters are written for me, by authors known and unknown. * Take a person out of her cocoon and watch her quiver in confusion. Holding on to ideas, sleeping (sometimes not) with a vision so real, so defined, a vision of a perfect world. In the stress of confusion: an unnumbered chapter begins, and ends. * A dialogue between reality and dreams. Arguing, fighting, hope comes creeping in silence, but forceful. The more you read, the more I recollect, the more I understand that expectancy is a sharp blade tearing the pages and disrobing the soul. Sometimes it is troublesome and painful. A chapter is obscured by absence and nothing could make it radiant. Words written on paper thick enough for me to feel the blood flowing under the skin, under the paper. The more you read, the more I know, the more it is impossible to

obey. Reading, I wonder whether this is birth or suicide? Here I might raise the question, Am I independent or not? or am I just autonomous enough to dream? I feel almost shameless confronting my nakedness. * I am daydreaming about freedom and don't know how to talk about it. I am staring at the book and not sure what language I am supposed to speak. When a book is translated it loses something in the process and what am I but generations of translations? I stand guilty outside and I stand inside, profoundly buried in my translation, painting behind the words that are carried along by the vital forces far greater than my own. I am a book that has no ending. Each page I write could be the first."²⁸

The rich content of Essaydi's calligraphy, when revealed, underlines the importance of text in Essaydi's visual images and their very personal nature. The time and labor involved in the execution of these thousands of lines of calligraphy, by hand, was considerable. The artist performed these tasks herself, often with the assistance of her female collaborators taking part in the series. This process took hours to complete.²⁹ In her use of text, Essaydi's emphasis on craft and the painterly arts stands out as the practice of female calligraphy is unified in time and concept with installation and performance, the fiber arts, and the final documentary act of photography.

In conclusion, Lalla Essaydi's fascinating, multimedia, performance art offers a unique perspective on questions of female identity in the Arab and Muslim world, especially in relation to the experiences of Moroccan women. Essaydi's artistic practices, which are conditioned by a dedication to meticulous staging, intricate surfaces, and ideas of place and architecture, reflect the artist's unique experiences as both an insider and outsider to her own culture.

1. These large-format, single-panel images on exhibit measure: 152.4 x 121.9 cm (60 x 48 inches), and 182.8 x 276.8 cm (71 x 88 inches).
2. Maureen Shanahan, "A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi," herein, 16–41; and Lalla Essaydi, "Artist's Statement," *Converging Territories. Photographs and Text by Lalla Essaydi; Essay and Interview by Amanda Carlson* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), 26.
3. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2009).
4. See the two essays exploring Orientalism and Lalla Essaydi's work herein: Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Arabs, Berbers, Islam, and Orientalism in Morocco: Historically and Culturally Contextualizing the Work of Lalla Essaydi," 46–57; and David Ehrenpreis, "Reclaiming the Harem. Lalla Essaydi and the Orientalist Tradition in European Painting," 58–64. For general reading on the Orientalist tradition in European and American painting, see for example: Gérard-Georges Lemaire, *The Orient in Western Art* (Cologne: Könemann, 2001); Donald A. Rosenthal, *Orientalism: The Near East in French Painting, 1800–1880* (Rochester, NY: Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1982); and Mary Anne Stevens, ed., *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse: European Painters in North Africa and the Near East*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1984).
5. For a broader look at photographs in the Harem series, see the artist's website: lallaessaydi.com. For a recent overview of all three series see: Kristen Gresh, "Constructing Identities: Lalla Essaydi," in *She Who Tells a Story. Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, exhibition catalogue (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2013) 39–42.
6. John L. Esposito, ed., "Harem," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), accessed electronically 1/27/2014.
7. See further: Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: the Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
8. For this precise articulation by the artist, see the overview of Essaydi's work on the website for her New York gallery, the Edwynn Houk Gallery: <http://www.houkgallery.com/artists/lalla-essaydi/>. A like sentiment is expressed in a number of interviews with the artist, including: Shanahan, 16–41.
9. On the Sunni majority in Islam, and the Shiite minority, see: John L. Esposito, ed., "Sunni," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, accessed electronically 2/4/2014. As defined therein: The Sunnis are the largest branch of the Muslim community, at least 85 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. The name Sunni is derived from the Sunnah, the exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad. The Sunnah guide all Muslims, but Sunnis stress it, as well as consensus. Islam's other branch, the Shiis, are guided as well by the wisdom of Muhammad's descendants, but through his son-in-law Ali.
10. While France controlled the majority of Moroccan territory, a second European colonial

power, the Spanish Protectorate, commanded Morocco's northern, Mediterranean coast including the city of Tangier at the Strait of Gibraltar, across from the Spanish mainland, from 1912–1956. See: C.R. Pennell, *Morocco since 1830. A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 111–296.

11. Nicholas Pelham, "How Morocco Dodged the Arab Spring," *The New York Review of Books*, July 5, 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jul/05/how-morocco-dodged-arab-spring/>. On artistic responses to the Arab Spring more broadly, see the permanent online features accompanying the 2013–2014 traveling exhibition, *Arts of the Arab World Uprisings*, co-organized by Dr. Christiane Gruber and Ms. Nama Khalil: <http://artsoftheArabWorldUprisings.com/>; and <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/histart/events/artsoftheArabWorldUprisings>.

12. Tufts University, Bachelor of Fine Arts, focusing on Women and Art, awarded in May 1999; School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Diploma in Photography and Installation, awarded in 1999; School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Photography, awarded in 2003.

13. Peter Staler, ed., *Oxford. A Guide to Countries of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; updated 1/31/2013), accessed electronically 2/3/2014.

14. See especially: Ehrenpreis, 58–60.

15. For example, the painting by Courbet in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art served as a point of departure for *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Sultane*, 2008 (Pl. 12): Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877), *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 195.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art (29.100.57).

16. Kristen Gresh, "Constructing Identities: Lalla Essaydi," 39.

17. On the linguistic derivation of the palace name, *dar* is the Arabic for "house," and *Basha* derives from the Ottoman Turkish for "notable one." I am grateful to Dr. David Hollenberg, Director of Arabic Studies at the University of Oregon, who is also a former valued colleague from James Madison University, for his generous discussion of the linguistic traditions associated with these terms.

18. *Dar al-Basha* is another family property owned by the Essaydi family. Gresh, 39.

19. On the Berber tribes, see: Hanifi, 46–57. On the Islamic art and architecture of *Al-Andalus*, and especially its connections to Morocco, see: Jerrilynn D. Dodds, ed., "The Almohad and Almoravid Periods," *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 75–126.

20. Shanahan, 18–19; Gresh, 39–42.

21. Lisa Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. Priscilla Soucek (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 25–43; see Chapter Two: Patterned Silks, and Chapter Four: Carpets, in: Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

22. Yedida Stillman and Norman A. Kalfon Stillman, "The Opulent World of Tiraz and Precious Textiles," in *Arab Dress: A Short History, From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 120–137.

23. Shanahan, 16–17.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

25. Ming Ling, "Writing Women: Interview with Lalla Essaydi," *ArtAsiaPacific*, March 21, 2013. <https://artsy.net/post/artasiapacific-writing-women-interview-with-lalla-essaydi>.

26. "Muslim Journeys, Item #230: 'Calligraphy' from Oxford Islamic Studies Online," Accessed electronically 2/3/2014. <http://bridgingcultures.neh.gov/muslimjourneys/items/show/230>; and Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

27. Samia Errazzouki, "Artistic Depictions of Arab Women: An Interview with Artist Lalla Essaydi." *Jaddiliya*, 16 May 2012. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5569/artistic-depictions-of-arab-women_an-interview-wit

28. English translation of the Arabic script authored by Lalla Essaydi, seen in the *Converging Territories* series. Isolde Brielmaier, "Reinventing the Spaces within the Images of Lalla Essaydi," *Aperture* 178 (Spring 2005): 20–25, 20.

29. Lalla Essaydi, "Artist's Statement," *Converging Territories*, 26.

A CONVERSATION WITH LALLA ESSAYDI

Maureen G. Shanahan

Lalla Essaydi's photographic work often revisits and critiques nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings generated by French academic artists such as Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) (Pl. 3) and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1839) (Pl. 5) who produced their work during the era of France's conquest of North Africa. In doing so, Essaydi responds to the construction of colonial discourse and the visual manifestations of its ideology.

As literary theorist Edward Said (b. Jerusalem 1935, d. New York 2003) wrote, Orientalism is a dominant ideology that depends upon a "flexible positional superiority," a "sovereign Western consciousness . . . governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections."¹ Late in his life, the French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) reportedly stated: "Thanks to photography, Truth has at last left her well."² Indeed, Essaydi's photography may be the truth that corrects or counteracts the Orientalist's eroticized fantasies of colonization.

The following interview with Lalla Essaydi [LE], speaking from Morocco, was conducted on Wednesday, November 27, 2013, via Skype by Dr. Maureen G. Shanahan [MGS], Associate Professor of Art History at James Madison University.

MGS: You received your MFA from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts in 2003 and have since had a very successful career and

achieved international renown. However, your artistic and intellectual development began long before that and took place in multiple cultural contexts, including your origins in Tamesloht (the sanctuary your family founded in 1563 near Marrakesh), several years in Saudi Arabia, training in Paris at the École des Beaux Arts, and study with independent artists. Could you explain what your early work was like? And can you describe some pivotal moments that have informed your thinking and work?

LE: Thank you so much for your kind words and for the invitation to share my work with your audiences and community.

My love for art started long ago when I was still a child. I remember spending time playing with pencils and colors in my father's studio. My father was a painter who had no professional training and painted as a hobby. I used to associate quality time with my father with painting and drawing. Growing up, I always associated art with happy moments spent with my father, who painted peaceful landscapes and flowers and very nice things and also made strange and beautiful sculptures of dried flowers and glass jars. I discovered later in my teens that he kept drawings of anatomies, of the figure, women, and nudes. As a child I was not allowed to see those drawings. I came across them by accident, and I knew they were not for my eyes so I never mentioned them to anyone until now. I have actually been thinking a lot about those drawings. I spent the



Fig. 3. Lajos Geenen, *Portrait of Lalla Essaydi*, 2009

afternoon with my mother today. I was hesitant, though I wanted to ask her about them, and I will one day. I would like to find out where those drawing pads went since I never laid eyes on them again.

So I continued to draw and paint until I got married and dedicated all my time to my family and I didn't touch my artwork for years. Circumstances in my domestic life changed, and when my children

were older, I found myself taking refuge in drawing and painting. But still at that time, I was just painting pretty things—flowers and animals—and just practicing to sharpen my skills. I did the same thing when I took intensive drawing and painting classes at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris (1990 and 1991). I wanted to acquire skills. My experience at the school was mostly in drawing and painting classes through continuing education. I didn't receive any degree from there but I was awarded a painting and drawing certificate. I only attended during summer and night classes.

My critical thinking in art really started when I joined the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. My philosophical interest and passion really began when I started taking art history classes and was more exposed to other artists' works. When I left my country and joined schools in the West, I wanted to gain skills. But I also wanted to learn about other cultures. I very soon realized that to do so, I needed to understand my culture first. This new perspective was the pivotal moment in my artistic career. It was when my artwork began to mean something more complicated and wonderful. It became a challenge. So this is how it really started.

MGS: Your father's works, do you still have those?

LE: We have some of the paintings but most of what he did was paint murals in my parents' old homes, and these homes are in ruins so the murals are being lost, unfortunately. He had spaces in these old homes where each season he would paint a new mural, one painting on top of the other. It was a hobby, but he was really, really good. His happiest times were when he was painting.

MGS: Your photographs capture staged moments in which you use multiple aesthetic practices: henna painting associated with female rites of passage (marriage and birthing) and ancient goddess cults; male-identified art of Islamic calligraphy; the manipulation of textile, pattern and decoration; theatrical staging of your female models; and large-scale photographic production. Could you explain some of your choices regarding settings, subjects, henna, calligraphy, poses, gestures, and framing?

LE: My work is really haunted by space, so space is very important to me. I started as a painter and in my mind I still am a painter because every single thing in my photographs is staged. There is a lot of preparation: all of the writing on the clothing, the body, the textiles, the compositions of photographs. When you look at them, even in my early work, which is monochromatic, such as *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2009) and *Converging Territories* (2005), it really looks painterly even though the colors are not there. I think of those photographs as photographic tableaux because of all the preparation they take. The photography is really the last thing in the whole process, the part in which I document what's happening. All these elements are really about cultural boundaries.

My work is about cultural boundaries and evokes art history. It is at once personal and political, domestic and social. It reaches back to myth and burdened stereotypes. It upsets our thinking about gender, hierarchy and power, and tradition that limits as well as preserves. It is about past colonialism and independence. It is about confinement and freedom, restraint and control, beauty and objectification. It is about the surface and what lies below, between,

and within. It is a work of a woman, by women, to women. It involves all these elements.

The process itself, the time I spent with these women, is very important. That is what determines what's in my work: the texture, the gestures. We get together in those spaces and we are a group of women. We talk a lot, not necessarily about my work. That comes at the end. Even at that point for me, I know that I am going to photograph but I am not sure how it is going to happen. So we get together and we talk and I write and respond to them. We spend sometimes days or weeks together. Each time, I see a gesture that suggests or conveys what's happening in that moment, and then I ask the women to pose and I do my drawings. Once I have enough drawings, we set them all together and we talk about them. I tell my models what I'm planning to do so I can get their collaboration one hundred percent, not only in the picture but in the way I do the work, how they should be seen, how they want to convey their own history to the audiences, even though when I'm working I don't have an audience in mind. A lot of my work will never be seen. It is too private. The moments we spend together are what is important to me and to these women. What we see at the end is really a very small documentation of a performance, of all that is happening with the group of women together.

MGS: You have said that the women in the photographs are "family acquaintances" who see themselves as part of a feminist movement and "feel they are contributing to the greater emancipation of Arab women, and at the same time conveying to a Western audience a very rich tradition often misunderstood in the West."³ Can you say

more about the women, whether or not there is a kind of community formation in the process of making the pictures, and what traditions are lost in translation?

LE: Most of the women are either family members or friends of the family. At the beginning, we are a group of thirty to forty women. To start they don't know much about my art or ideas. During the process of initiating them into my world of performance and art-making, and with time and patience, I explain to them the idea behind the artwork and the changes we go through during the process. I believe that the time we spend together is about bringing about change. We always learn something valuable from each other.

What is lost in translation is the experience I have with these women. Whatever I do, I can never bring that experience completely into my photographs. What you see is but a pale image of the intense experience of living in a community of women. The complicity, the intimacy, it's simply magical. We continue to keep our meetings regularly through the years. I change and they change in character, and the lives of these women are deep. It is heartwarming for me to see that I contributed in a tiny way to the lives of these wonderful and strong women. We have strong memories tied to the spaces we work in, and now we are trying to create new memories for the younger generation of women in the family and friends and whoever wants to join us.

We do not demonstrate in the streets. We are not militant in that sense. The change is very quiet. We work in a quieter manner suited to tradition and mores. I think it is the best way for us to be heard and to really cause change.

When you look at my work, there is a certain tranquility within it, which comes from that kind of performance, the way we are together. We are very strong women; we have very strong beliefs. But we also believe and know that in our culture, change cannot come by confrontation with people. It has to come little by little but in a very strong way. In that sense, in my work you can see that a little bit. It's peaceful. It's not confrontational but yet it's very strong and shows the character of the women.

MGS: The earlier series, *Les Femmes du Maroc*, is more monochromatic than the later series. They have a more meditative, introspective, or spiritual quality to them. In some, the way you arrange the drapery resonates with the image of the dervish, for example.

LE: It's true. In *Les Femmes du Maroc*, a lot of these images are also taken from Orientalist paintings. I would take the same pose and the central image and put them in a different setting with the women actually looking at the audience with their [direct] gaze, which is missing from these paintings. Because I remove all the props that make those paintings so beautiful and so dangerous, I needed to create an imaginary space for the women, a space that is created by their own voice, which is the text. Maybe that's what makes them look so peaceful; because of the color, the women seem very serene in their work.

MGS: One story recurs in many of your artist statements and explanations for the *Femmes du Maroc* series. You say that the series is set in a "large unoccupied house belonging to your family" where you were sent as a child for having transgressed.⁴ Could you

explain what your transgression was, as well as how the experience of space and memory are inter-dependent?

LE: The transgression was on my fifteenth birthday when two of my brothers, older than me, took me to a nightclub. As you know, I come from a very conservative family. We're not talking about now, when women can go anywhere just as in the West. At that time it was shocking for parents to find out that their fifteen-year-old girl had gone to a nightclub. So I was sent to this home. I was punished. We are eleven siblings, and there are women—cousins and aunts who are the same age—so there was no way to punish me by keeping me in the same house. It would not have lasted. I would not understand. For parents who were worried, it was like grounding a child.

But no other story has made as much impact. I don't know if people want to see me as a victim. It was terrible. If I had known it was going to go like that, that it would be seen as a tradition in our culture . . . No, it's nothing like that. I was a child, I was naughty, and my parents grounded me. I was sent to this beautiful home. I had two women with me, a nanny and lots of servants. It was a matter of twenty-four hours, and then I went back home.

What we tried to do with my retrospective at the Smithsonian African Arts Museum in D.C. [in 2011] —the title was *Revisions*—was that we wanted to change the image that had become so powerful with so many people when in fact it was nothing. They wanted to treat me like I was a victim, like I was sequestered in one of these old homes and no one was there, but in fact it wasn't like this at all. And I actually had to sit down and explain to my mother because somebody told

her and I felt very bad about it. So the story wasn't really as dreadful as people think. Rather, it was parents grounding their child for being mischievous.

MGS: I can identify with that kind of a story, as I am sure many university students will. Your work is often contextualized as a critique of colonial discourse informed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) in that your pictures sometimes appropriate and subvert painting by Jean-August-Dominique Ingres, Eugene Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Henri Matisse. Your work also seems to be in dialogue with Malek Alloula's study of colonial postcards in *The Colonial Harem* (1981) and Fatema Mernissi's *Scheherazade goes West* (2002). In her essay on your series, *Les Femmes du Maroc*, Mernissi characterizes you as a "digital Scheherazade." When did you first turn to themes of the female subject and, more specifically, the harem? Did your experience in Paris and at the École des Beaux Arts inform these themes?

LE: First, I fell in love with the aesthetic beauty of Orientalist paintings while I was in Paris many years ago. Then I started reading about Orientalism. I loved the way these paintings are painted; they are exquisite. But I then started seeing them as a portrait of a culture. At that time in my life, I started seeing them as a portrayal of fantasy and I, as part of one of the cultures being portrayed, knew that the images were not representative. They were portrayals of fantasy, and I thought everyone knew that.

It was an interaction that took place while working toward my MFA at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston that helped me bring to light

the fallacy of these beliefs and set the trajectory of my career. I had painted a very large painting of the work of Jean-Léon Gérôme, and a curator approached me, curious about the work. She wanted to know why I was incorporating Gérôme. I was making the painting so large; the original was small by comparison. I started to explain that Gérôme's painting was a fantasy and that I was trying to show that by putting the images in a different setting. I was hoping to make people realize that if you removed the characteristics of these paintings that make them so beautiful, that beauty that allows you to accept these women being sold in the streets and still look at them as beautiful things. As the discussion with the curator progressed, I expressed my belief that it was wrong to willfully misrepresent a culture in this way and depict fantasy as reality. The curator replied that she had no idea that it was a fantasy. She said, "I thought it was real."

Not surprisingly, this interaction had a lasting impact on me. I will never forget that encounter because it drew a line for me. I knew almost instantly that this was my path. So in a way, I thank her. My investigation with Orientalism started when I encountered Orientalist paintings in art history classes. While my paintings are engaged in exposing aspects of tradition and are, of course, the work of an Arab woman, I want to make it clear that I am also a Western-trained artist. The Arab painting tradition is quite different. In fact, one of the distinctive differences is in the way space is conceived in the Arab tradition. There is a figurative tradition in Arab art but the images are flat and two-dimensional. Also, the paintings in the Arab tradition are small. Ironically, it was my exposure to Western art that enabled me to re-enter artistically the spaces of my childhood and to see them in relation to the constructed space imposed by the Western gaze.

Now I paint and photograph large images, figurative oil paintings or photographs in Western techniques and established perspectives. I saw no reason why I shouldn't participate in this tradition as wholeheartedly as any other Western-trained painter. After all, I first encountered this Orientalist painting, Gérôme's *Slave Market* (1866), in the art history of the West.

MGS: The calligraphic text in your images functions in multiple ways: as poetry, as decorative line, and as screen that constrains and protects. In many ways, it seems to engage with a poetics on the limits of sight as a privileged way of knowing and as a means to disturb our desire for fixed meaning and categorization. Can you comment on your use of calligraphy?

LE: The text in my artwork is deliberately illegible, invented forms that allude to Kufic calligraphy that elicit direct access to information, thus the play between graphic symbolism and literary meaning. And the largely European assumptions that vision holds the best access to reality are constantly questioned. The meaning of the text changes according to each photograph. I usually start with a specific text that I had in mind while preparing for each photograph, but later the written text is a response to my surroundings and to the exchanges I have with the women in my photographs. I go to great lengths to make the text illegible. Even those who can read Arabic can hardly decipher the text since the henna, when it dries, changes shapes and part of it flakes off, making the text unreadable. I want the text to become a visual language of its own, appreciated in the same way as the figure. It doesn't necessarily need to have a meaning but the whole work is autobiographical. Written from a personal perspective, it is the

story of the women in the photographs as well as my own written in prose since poetry and calligraphy are considered high art in Islamic cultures.

Calligraphy is a consistent theme throughout my photographic work. It is an essential undertaking, meticulously handwritten on the models, walls, and massive swaths of textile. It is thus understandable that I do not think of my work exclusively as photographs. I don't only work with one medium. I like to paint or write or photograph. Each medium really informs the next. In my mind, I always think of myself as a painter because that's my formation, and I don't really think of my photographs as being just photographs. There is so much that goes into them. They are based on many, many things.

MGS: Could you also comment on the framing with the rough edges and text?

LE: As for the framing, first of all, I love Polaroids. That's the first time I tried to work in Polaroids. I have a few images but it's very hard to work in large-format. Most of my work, I like for it to be in really large scale as a response to those tiny paintings that were probably commissioned by men and used by playboys in those times. I need my work to be more theatrical in a sense. I started not only keeping the black border, but also creating it. If you use just the normal frame of black, you would have straight black lines. I go to great lengths to make it look like a Polaroid by taking tape and removing threads from it. Everything is done in the darkroom. Another thing that is very important for me is that, because we usually don't frame my work—it is mounted—the black frame then becomes the frame of



Fig. 4. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc* #41, 2006

the photographs. At the same time, when you look at it, there is the name of the film in it. A lot of people think that I superimpose the text in Photoshop, but everything is done in the traditional way. I work with large format. There is absolutely no manipulation whatsoever with my work. I shoot the film and we print in a darkroom the traditional way. Whatever you see in the photograph is what you get and those are the two reasons why I kept the frame.

MGS: You divide your time between New York and Marrakesh. You are represented in Boston and New York. Do you have studios in both locations? How would you characterize these two poles, and how do they inform your thinking and work processes?

LE: Yes, I have a studio in New York, but it's smaller. I do a different type of work in New York. It's hard to have a large space in New York. I live in Manhattan and I have a smaller one than here in Morocco. The reason is because it takes me a long time to engage the women I work with, and here in Morocco it's easier because they are my family. Here we know our history. It's easier. In the West, it's very difficult [to find models]. When I was in Boston, I engaged a group of Moroccan women who had the same experience as me, being from Morocco but living abroad. Over the years . . . it took me many years to really be able to work with them. It's very hard to bring everybody to New York. They work, some are still students, so I go to them. I kept my studio in Boston. Part of *Les Femmes du Maroc* was shot in Boston.

In Morocco, for me, it's much better to work here because I have much more access to Moroccan women. Also, I'm not completely

disconnected. When I live in the West and all my work is based on my culture and my personal experience, it's very hard for me to be far away for longer periods of time. I built a studio here two years ago, and I am building a small artist's residence that's going to be completed very soon. My studio is already completed and I have worked here in the last two years in it. This is of course when I'm not shooting on location such as when I'm doing part of this work in that old house or the *Harem* series shot in Dar al Basha, an old palace. This summer and the summer before, I did work in my studio here in Marrakesh. This is where I worked with the series *Harem Revisited* and with *Bullets*, for which I worked with bullet castings. I am actually working right now in Morocco preparing again. It takes me a very long time, sometimes a year of preparation before I can do the photo shoot itself. My studio in New York is much smaller. I start my projects in Boston or Marrakesh or sometimes I start in New York, but I complete them either in Boston or Morocco.

Even for the *Bullets* series, because I cut them there [in the United States] and started weaving them, and then I put them all together in Morocco to create the set, which took about two years of preparation. I can't find bullet casings here in Morocco. It's not legal to own guns so you can't find them. And, of course, I couldn't find many people to work with me even when I brought them from the United States. They were very worried about working with that. It was quite a challenge. We already showed the work and people know the work; I didn't encounter any problems, so I hope I won't.

All these women in Boston, it's very difficult even when I go to them, we have to schedule things for months [in advance]. If something

goes wrong, then the whole thing goes wrong. Here [in Morocco] it's not the same thing. I have all these groups of women. They are sometimes not even in the pictures. If I need them and somebody's not available, somebody else will take her place. Over there, it's very difficult for me.

MGS: Museums, galleries and collectors around the world have exhibited your work, which is now included in over fifty collections, as diverse as the Louvre, the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, and the collection of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. Can you comment on differences in your reception within differing cultural contexts?

LE: My work is also in the private collection of His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco and I'm very proud to have my work in his collection. I'm proud because it means that these heads of state and these institutions acknowledge and support me and these women and our cause. It's not so much about the prestige or flattery. I have issues I am working on, and if they are recognized by people in power, then maybe there is a chance there will be a little change and this is why it's important. I am flattered to have my work validated by these institutions, but it is very important for me that they recognize what I am doing for what it is, that I am working with these women to bring about change. I am an Arab woman and I don't want to be seen any more as an Arab woman who is oppressed and confined and locked away. And I don't want to hear people telling me, "but you are different." I think they don't know any Arab women like me and so they decide that we are all like that. At least people will start recognizing that not all Arab women are oppressed, so I am very

grateful. I have been getting a lot of exhibitions all over the Arab world. It took a little longer for them, but the work has been very well received.

I had a national exhibition in Morocco two years ago at the invitation of the Minister of Culture of Morocco. That exhibition toured four cities, all in the national galleries, besides other shows in galleries here in Morocco and the Biennial. I am having another exhibition that opens here in Marrakesh on December 28 (2013). I just came back ten days ago from Azerbaijan, where I had an exhibition in their modern art museum. In the Middle East, I had an exhibition in Sharjah, which is in the United Arab Emirates, and I had my work in many art fairs and auctions. The work is very well received.

It took a little longer for Morocco and the Middle East to recognize my work. I think it's because they didn't know much about it. The arts scene—maybe in the Middle East a little bit more than Morocco—is really quite young, and sometimes it's chaotic and not organized, but at least it's starting. In the Middle East, the art scene is more developed than here [in Morocco] because they have many museums. They have wonderful audiences too that are very interested.

Morocco is starting. They just opened the first Museum of Photography in Marrakesh about three weeks ago. They have very interesting groups of people—curators from the Getty Museum, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and several other places—very important groups, who are very supportive. There is a wonderful national museum opening very soon, I think in the Spring 2014, here in Rabat and a lot of galleries [Gallery 127 in Marrakesh], [there will

CONTINUED ON PAGE 41



Plate 1. Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #10*, 2003, Chromogenic print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm
[LE.CT10.4860.AP1]



Plate 2. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #1*, 2005, Chromogenic print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
[LE.LFM01.3040.6]



Plate 3. Eugène Delacroix, *Algerian Women in Their Apartment*, 1834, Oil on canvas, 180 x 229 cm
Louvre Museum, Paris, France [Inv. 3824] (Image: © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY, ART177562; Photo: Le Mage)



Plate 4. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*, 2008, Chromogenic print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm
[LE.LFMgrande.4860.exh4]

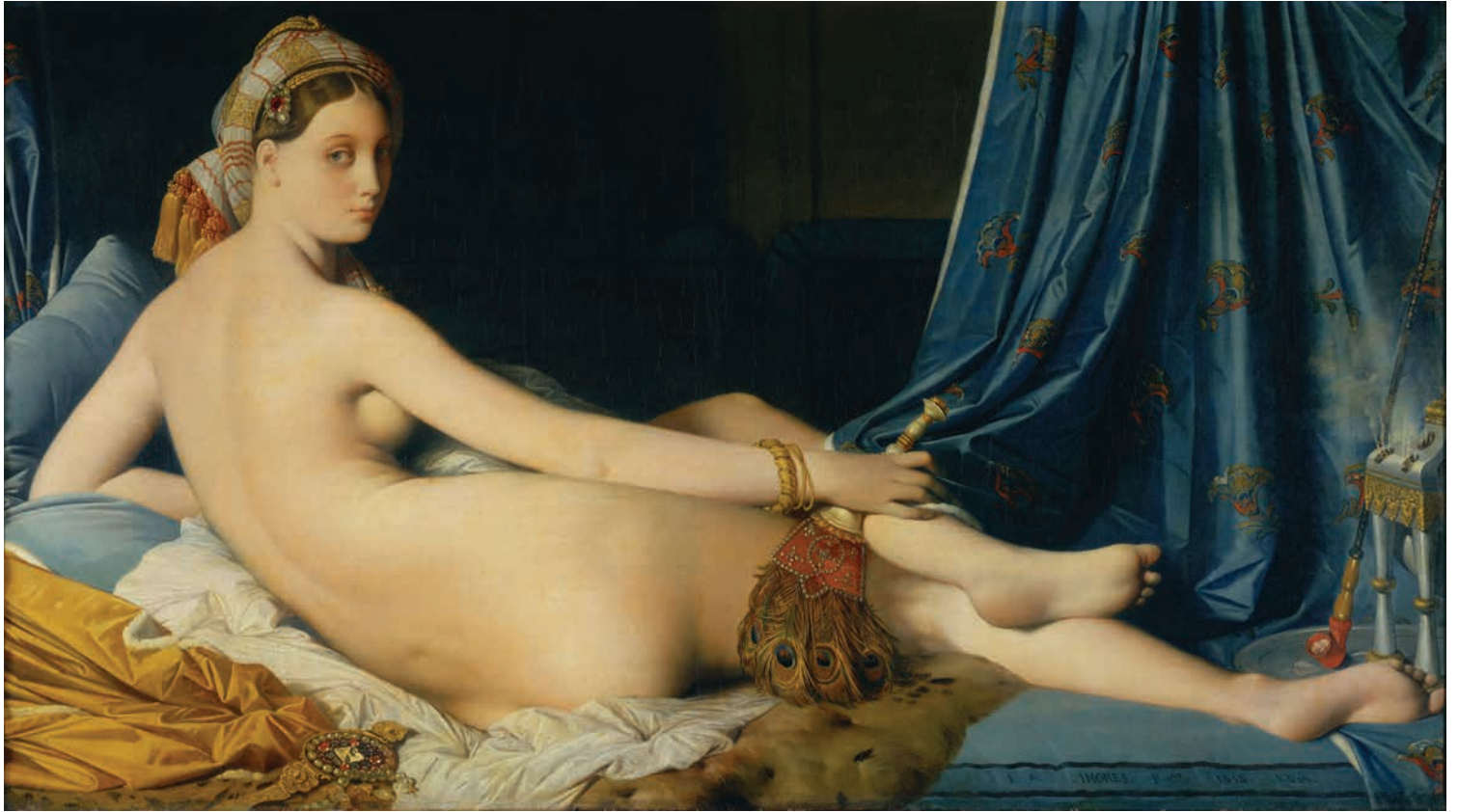


Plate 5. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, 91 x 162 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris, France [R.F. 1158] (Image: Scala / Art Resource, NY, ART25033)



Plate 6. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #16*, 2005, Chromogenic print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
[LE.LFM16.3040.11]



Plate 7. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #51*, 2006, Chromogenic print, 182.8 x 276.8 cm
[LE.LFM51.7288.exh]



Plate 8. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #21B*, 2005
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFM21B.4860.3]



Plate 9. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #41*, 2006
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFM41.4860.exh]



Plate 10. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #10*, 2005
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFM10.4860.4]



Plate 11. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Outdoor Gossip*, 2008
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFMgossip.4860.exh2]



Plate 12. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Sultane*, 2008, Chromogenic print, 50.8 x 61 cm
[LE.LFM_sultane.2024.5]



Plate 13. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: After the Bath*, 2008
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFMbath.4860.exh]



Plate 14. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Light of the Harem*, 2008
Chromogenic print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm
[LE.LFMlight.4860.exh2]



Plate 15. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited #2*, 2010, Chromogenic print, 182.8 x 276.8 cm
[LE.LFMrev02.7188.exh]



Plate 16. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #10*, 2009, Chromogenic print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
[LE.HAREM10.3040.1]

Northern Africa and the Middle East



Plate 17. Current Political Map of Northern Africa and the Middle East
(Used by permission of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin;
Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/n_africa_mid_east_pol_95.jpg)

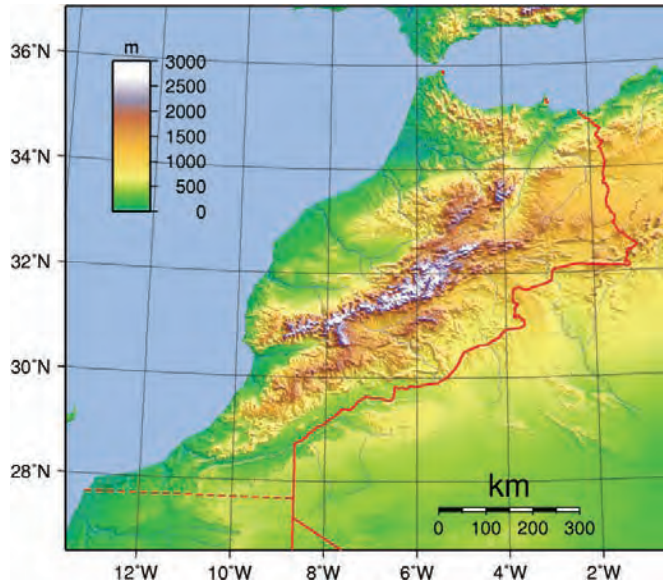


Plate 18. Topographical Map of Morocco
 (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morocco_Topography.png)



Plate 19. Map of the Cities and Major Towns in Morocco and the Western Sahara
 (Used with the permission of www.planigold.com;
 Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MoroccoWesternSaharaOMC.png>)

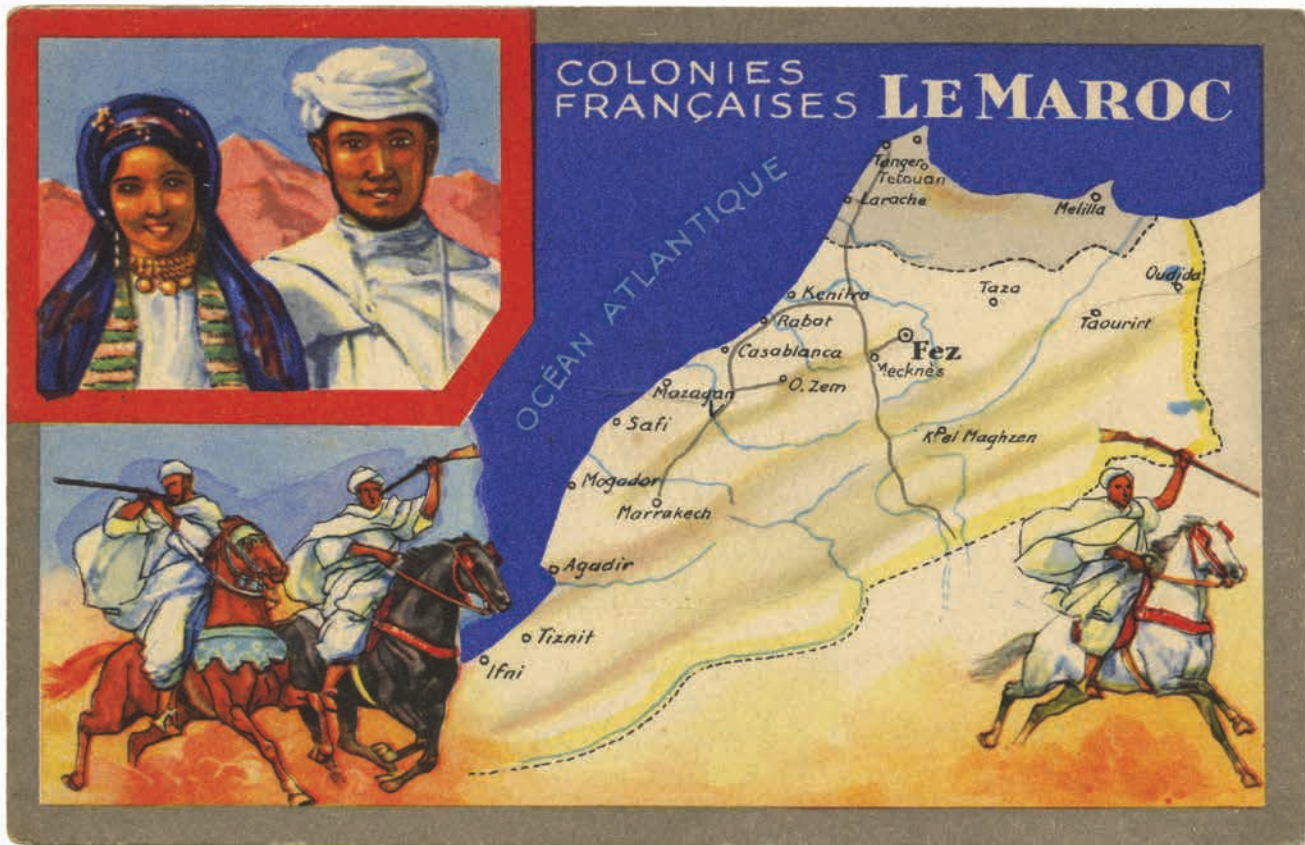


Plate 20. Anonymous, Color Picture Postcard, *Colonies Françaises: Le Maroc* (*The French Colonies: Morocco*)
Hand-drawn, colored map, mid-twentieth century, before 1956

“CONVERSATION” CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

be] two very important art fairs, the same as Paris Photo [www.parisphoto.com]. They are starting, having biennials. There’s a lot of interest, and I think it’s because the king is very supportive of the arts and he has wonderful collections, too. It’s happening. A few years ago, there was absolutely nothing. In less than ten years, we [Moroccans] now have museums. We had only one art school in the past. Now we have art schools everywhere, in every city. This is the season. Next week [early December 2013] is going to be the film season, like the Oscars. [The International Film Festival of Marrakesh was established in 2000]. [Martin] Scorsese is heading that. He invested in the film school here in Marrakesh [L’École Supérieure des Arts Visuels de Marrakesh], which is a very good school. It’s very exciting to be part of that.

MGS: Fatema Mernissi has characterized you as being part of this new wave of women that are occupying the visual realm.

LE: She is a very interesting person. I really liked working with her. I have been very, very influenced by her books during my studies. Interestingly enough, a lot of people ask me about being inspired by other artists and I love looking at other art. By all means, my work is informed by the Orientalist paintings. But I think the most [important] influence is [from] the writing of people such as Fatima Mernissi, Edouard Said, and Linda Nochlin. The writing is such an important part of my research that I can’t just say it’s only the visual that influences me. So Mernissi was a very important inspiration for me. I almost felt like she was doing all my research, and I just needed to read her books and I got to know so much. I got to meet her and spend time with her. She’s just fascinating. She’s wonderful.

As to being a new generation in the arts, I don’t know about that. As I explained, the art scene here [in Morocco] is very young. Of course, everyone who comes around this time is the next generation. There is not much to compare us to, that’s the thing. I’m not sure if what she is saying is about me personally. When I read Mernissi’s essay itself . . . we spent a lot of time talking. She interviewed me over days and weeks. She’s fascinating. Being with her was an incredible experience. I think she wrote about three essays before she decided the last one was the one she wanted to use.⁵ I must say that I loved what she wrote before and I wished she used those. They were much more about art. I think she is an amazing writer but sometimes you have specialties. As an art historian you would have a different approach to art than a literary writer.

MGS: I like what she wrote as well, but now I’m very intrigued to know about these other texts.

LE: I want her to publish them and to make a book of them, but it’s so hard because I travel so much.

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1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 7–8.
 2. Jon Whiteley, “Jean-Léon Gérôme,” *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2007–14).
 3. Isolde Brielmaier, “Re-inventing the Spaces within the Images of Lalla Essaydi,” *Aperture* 178 (Spring 2005), 20–25, 24.
 4. Brielmaier, 23.
 5. Fatema Mernissi, “Lalla Essaydi. A Spinner of Scenarios More Dangerous than Scheherezade,” *Les Femmes du Maroc* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2009), 9–15.

AT THE THRESHOLD OF INTERPRETATIONS: IMAGINING MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIVES

Danielle Widmann Abraham

Lalla Essaydi is a Muslim woman who creates images of Muslim women. In our contemporary world, when we see such images, they often emphasize the wearing of a veil and are presented in such a way as to symbolize the supposed flaws of Islamic religious tradition or Arab culture. As a result, the visual language for representing Muslim women has become stilted and hackneyed. Such media images do not communicate the breadth and depth of human experience as much as invoke an already taken-for-granted conclusion about the religious nature of women's oppression. Many Muslim women strain against this threadbare trope in the hopes of finding images that mirror the complexity and richness of their lives. Essaydi's photographs suspend the recurring symbolization of women's oppression. The artist moves away from reiterating the limitations of Muslim women's lives. She does this not by documenting everyday life through photography's potentially revolutionary realism, but by carefully composing subjects that resist clear ideological identification. The women in Essaydi's images are draped with words whose meanings are not transparent, as they lounge on platforms, talk and listen to each other, and alternately reveal and conceal their faces (Fig. 5–6; Pls. 1–2, 4, 6–16). They inhabit a space that is socially ambiguous yet intimate in scale. These are images that provoke questions rather than assert meaning. Their art is that they dislodge expectations in order to locate us in the interpretive moment itself.

For Muslim women, the ability to mark out and inhabit the interpretive space in order to share their experiences has been profoundly shaped by twentieth-century debates about the role and status of women in society. This is no less true for women across the globe, as the emergence of women's movements for enfranchisement and equal rights has fundamentally changed contemporary societies. Public debates about gender are far from resolved anywhere: the roles of women in public and private domains, and in religious and political life, are still profoundly contested. In many societies, signs of progress and improvement in the conditions of women's lives can be obscured by trenchant and pervasive asymmetries of power. For women in Muslim-majority countries, efforts to expand women's social, economic, and political possibilities run parallel to the desire to identify and protect an 'authentic' performance of cultural identity in the aftermath of colonial domination. This postcolonial pressure of authenticity situates public debates about women in society within the desire to preserve Islamic culture, such that whether or not women are religious and how they express their religiosity is held to be representative of societal vitality writ broadly. Muslim women confront, as all women do, those imbalances of power that diminish their lives. Yet this confrontation is contained by the particular contexts of Muslim societies where the memory of colonial domination intersects with the emergence of new religious

ideals about women's piety. From within this confluence of colonial legacies and postcolonial desires, women's performance of religion comes to be seen as the performance of social cohesion.

Essaydi's painterly photographs relocate women in new terms of debate about the role of women in Islamic culture. Her subjects take up the two Islamic traditions of calligraphy, a valued technique to communicate meaning through beauty and veiling, a practice through which women position themselves in relation to the ideals of faith. Yet Essaydi does not present a mere recapitulation or triumph of tradition. In her work, calligraphy does not embellish meaning but represents the ambivalent power of custom and history: it is that through which we can inscribe our own story, but also that against which we search for our own new terms of life. Her images of veiled and unveiled women—those whose faces we cannot see, and those whose gaze we cannot evade—also position us within multiple possibilities of compulsion and choice. In Essaydi's work, there is no facile rejection of religious tradition, but neither do we see its uncritical embrace. Instead, she shows women in intimate spaces engaging and creatively reformulating traditional practices.

Essaydi combines a repertoire of Islamic traditions, the culture of women's social lives, and the interior space of domestic buildings in framing her subjects. We see women at the threshold of action, either about to act or embodying the sharp contrast of inaction. The imminence of action, and its absence, makes these photographs images of potentiality. In the moment of women's engagement, we do not know what will be done or who they will become. We are held to that moment of decision, when an individual brings the broader

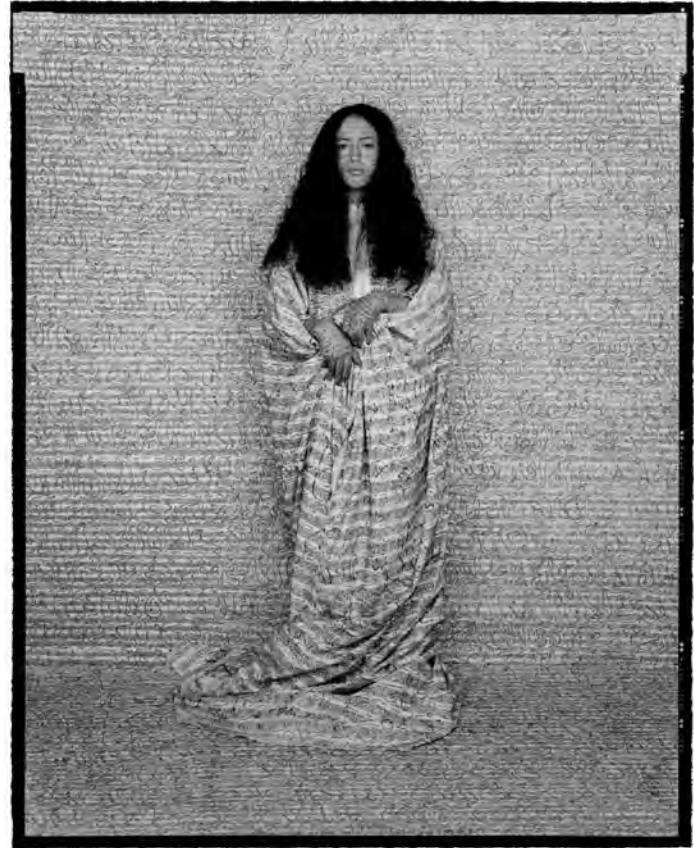


Fig. 5. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #21B*, 2005



Fig. 6. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Outdoor Gossip*, 2008

world into being by attempting to act upon it or not. Essaydi pictures the pausing of time in reflection before action, and thus shows us the interpretive moment in which women are compelled to make sense of their lives. Because her images often focus on one or two women in suspended engagement (see, for example, Fig. 5–6, Pl. 8–16), these photographs suggest the question of whether our subjective gestures can reshape the objective social world. It is this question itself that affirms potential being, for it contains the recognition that we could know something qualitatively new about life or that our experience could be different. Essaydi brings into view a moment in which the constant play of contingency has seemingly been stilled. We know that this suspension cannot last, and that her subjects must shift away from this still interiority in order to take on the next pose, the following gesture, the new story, and the outside world. What we see in the Muslim women she portrays is the consciousness of that potential move. So it is precisely through suspending her subjects in time and space that Essaydi imagines their active subjectivity, and turns the tropes of Muslim women’s objectification in veiling and tradition into queries about possible futures.

It is interesting to note that while Essaydi frequently represents Muslim women participating in the cultural practices of women, she rarely portrays them as mothers,¹ and none of her photographs represent women as wives. That is to say, none of her works portraying Muslim women to date represent women in the company of men. Essaydi’s focus is on women as they form cohorts for other women, rather than on the variety and variability of women’s roles within the family and society. She stages particular scenes from the life worlds of individuals, rather than representing women as

a gendered social class or as the embodiment of religious ideals. This suggests that it is only through trying to see a woman within the particularities of her context and her environment that we can grasp her unique way of performing the roles collectively ascribed to women.

Confronting endemic objectification of women and female bodies, Essaydi subjectivizes women through a sustained focus on the particular contexts in which individuals interpret and act on their worlds. A narrative of inevitable liberation or domination does not frame her images of Muslim women. Essaydi does not propose a moral ideal or an exemplary model of womanhood. Instead, she calls our attention to the way that the lived reality of identity is constituted when women embody and engage the givens of their particular history. Anthropologist Michael D. Jackson notes that the quest to find some kind of 'natural' self which exists prior to any kind of social experience needs to be replaced with a more robust understanding of the subject as one which moves between more-structured and less-structured modes of experience.² Essaydi visualizes this sense of subjectivity by showing us women who both blend in and stand out from the spaces around them. There is no physical or symbolic space in her work that is radically outside the domain of culture. What we see is that women do not have access to an alternative epistemological vantage point, but that they may not need one either. Framed for us instead is a moment which holds the potential of both identification and dissociation, where the integration and expansion of being are equally possible. Essaydi's images do not offer an idealized vision of liberation as the transcendental horizon against which women's lives are measured. She gives us instead

the assurance of potentiality and the satisfying sense that Muslim, Arab women still experience their own capacity to make meaning of their lives.

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1. Two works by the artist which explicitly suggest women's roles as mothers are *Converging Territories #30*, and a second piece from the same series published without a title. Neither of these works appears in the present exhibition. *Converging Territories #30* treats the practices of female veiling from childhood to maturity, and suggests the roles of mother and daughter. This image presents four female subjects in frontal view, and is intended to be read from right to left: a young girl, her face, head, and hair completely exposed; an early adolescent girl, her head and hair veiled, but her face visible; a veiled female adult, only her eyes and part of her brow visible; and a mature, adult woman, whose face and head are completely veiled. The untitled piece from *Converging Territories* presents the same adult woman with revealed eyes and brow from *Converging Territories #30*, seated on the floor, with the same young, unveiled girl in her lap. A bowl of henna is positioned on the floor in front of the pair. For *Converging Territories #30* online, see works from the *Converging Territories* series on the artist's website, lallaessaydi.com. For both works in published form, see: Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories. Photographs and Text by Lalla Essaydi; Essay and Interview by Amanda Carlson* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), front cover image (*Converging Territories #30*, single panel); 22–23 (*Converging Territories #30*, four panels); and 25 (untitled, single panel image of woman and girl).
 2. As discussed broadly in Michael D. Jackson, *Existential Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

ARABS, BERBERS, ISLAM, AND ORIENTALISM IN MOROCCO: HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALIZING THE WORK OF LALLA ESSAYDI

Shah Mahmoud Hanifi

This essay positions Lalla Essaydi's 'expatriate performance-based photographs'¹ in the context of Moroccan history and society. The following interdisciplinary exercise is designed for a general readership and a broad viewing audience. It will engage literature across a number of academic fields, including anthropology, history, and art history.

The modern nation-state of Morocco in northwestern Africa (Fig. 7, Pl. 17–19) contains approximately thirty-two million "Arab-Berbers"², and this hyphenated identity is important to reckon with because it and other forms of hybridity and compounded-ness are evident in Essaydi's work. The issues and questions of identity and representation that Essaydi speaks to are treated in the concluding section of this essay, where the concept of Orientalism is discussed. Before arriving at the point where Essaydi's work can be engaged, our first priority is Morocco's geography, after which the local and global dimensions of Islam, French colonialism in North Africa, and the scholarship of Morocco are addressed.

Today Morocco is territorially bounded by Algeria in the northeast and Mauritania in the southeast, the Mediterranean Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar to the north, and the Atlantic Ocean to the east (Fig. 7,

Pl. 17–19).³ The main features of Morocco's geography and physical environment are its coastlines, mountains, deserts, and cities. For millennia the coast has provided a series of aquatic connections to the wider world, the mountains have conditioned multiple forms of local social organization and a wide diversity of cultural expressions, its deserts have insulated not isolated the country, and its cities have risen and fallen along with polities that have come, gone, and interacted among themselves and with outside powers over the course of Morocco's recorded history. The north-central coastal region in the vicinity of the contemporary capital of Morocco, Rabat, contains archaeological evidence of Phoenician trading activity dating to the third century BCE that brought this region into economic and cultural contact with a cosmopolitan and intellectually vibrant prehistoric eastern Mediterranean civilization.⁴ A Roman settlement approximately seventy-five miles inland from Rabat at Volubilis was active from approximately the first century BCE to the third century CE.⁵ By the fifth century CE, this area and other regions of what later became Morocco had been nominally incorporated into the Byzantine Empire. A small number of conversions to Christianity had occurred among the indigenous Berber population by the time Islam arrived in the seventh century.

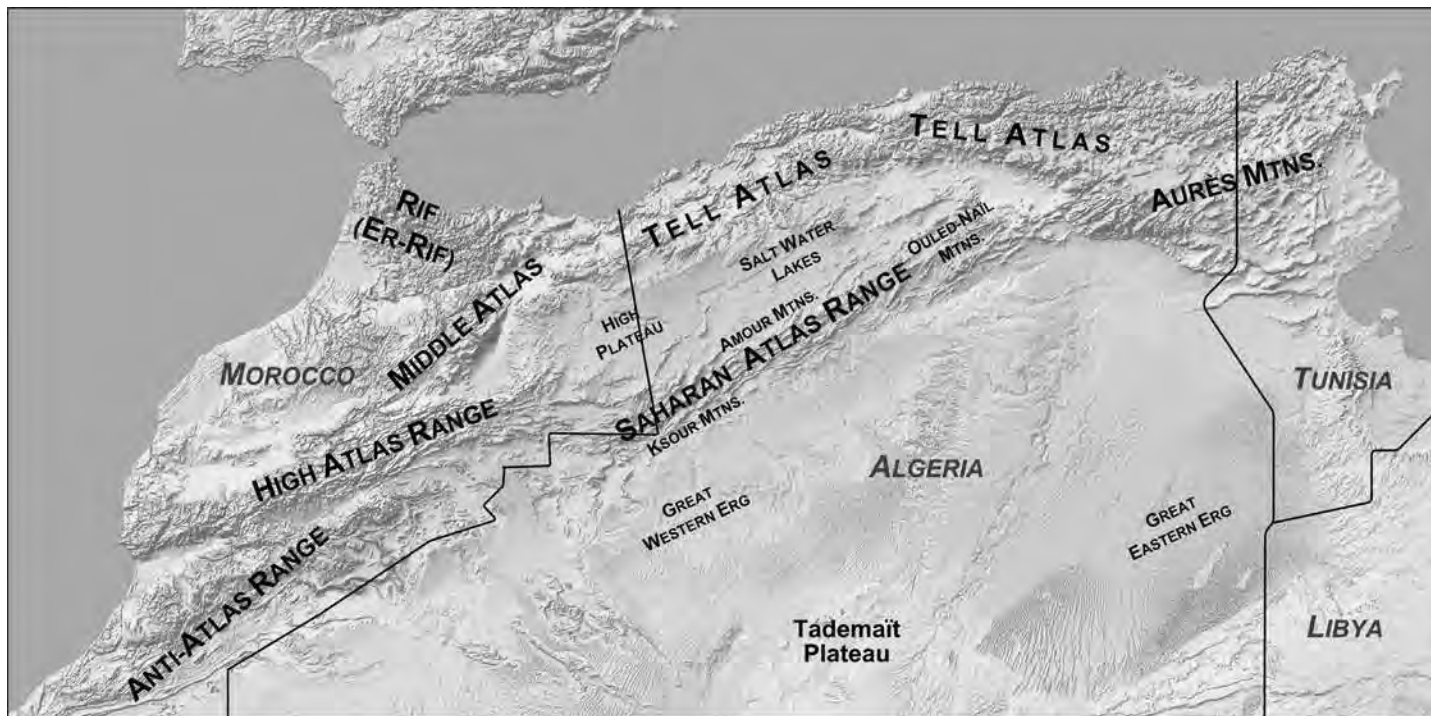


Fig. 7. Map of Western North Africa, including Political Boundaries, Showing the System of Mountain Ranges Forming the Atlas Mountains (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atlas-Mountains-Labeled-2.jpg>)

Islam's arrival brought Arabs and the Arabic language to the area that has since been known in that language as *al-Maghreb*. As with other regions Muslims encountered during the first century of Islam's existence, there were early large-scale voluntary conversions to the new faith in al-Maghreb. Over the next nine centuries as Islam expanded and congealed, a number of larger, 'structural' dynamics were in play.⁶ First was the establishment of multiple interactive local Islamic emirates and sultanates that were tied to the interests of various centers of powerful Islamic empires based in distant metropolises such as Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo (e.g., the Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid dynasties, respectively.) Second, just as their distant imperial patrons were in many ways urban-based polities, the local emirates and sultanates also took shape around cities, some of which were first established in those contexts, including today's urban centers of Fez and Marrakesh (e.g., the Idrisids and Almoravids, respectively). Third, the Islamic empires and emirates represented both Sunni and Shia expressions of Islam as well as the mystical dimensions of Islam or Sufism. Finally, and most significantly for our purposes, was the constancy of interaction between Berbers and Arabs, both of which terms refer to very broad categories people generally treated as separate races. Our interest is the interaction between these two widespread, historically very well established heterogeneous groups of urban, rural, settled, and mobile peoples. Islam has thus far produced fifteen centuries of interactions between Arabs and Berbers that have occurred across a number of cultural, economic, and political boundaries, in public and private spaces, in cities, villages and hamlets, along the coastlines and in the mountainous and desertified interior regions. Berbers inhabited Morocco well before Arabs arrived, and the Great Berber

Revolt in the eighth century was a significant threat to the authority and stability of the Umayyad Caliphate.

Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/9), a Berber from the ancient city of Tangier, personifies a number of the many significant opportunities for new forms of mobility and boundary-crossing of geographic, cultural, economic, intellectual, and artistic domains produced by the internationalization of Islam between the seventh and sixteenth centuries. Ibn Battuta's training in Islamic law necessarily familiarized him with the Arabic language, and his professional and linguistic skills allowed him to market his talents throughout and beyond the Muslim world, from Spain to China. The record of Ibn Battuta's approximate quarter century of travels from Tangier in present-day Morocco to Mecca in the Arabian peninsula, and then to and through West Africa, the Arab Near East, Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, North India, East and South East Asia, as well as the Iberian Peninsula, or modern-day Portugal and Spain, is known as *al-Rihla* or the *Journey*.⁷ A substantial portion of Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* is connected to his employment by a ruler of the North Indian Islamic Sultanate based in Delhi, Muhammad Ibn Tughluq (r. 1325–1351).

In addition to *Qadis* or jurists such as Ibn Battuta, the vast webs of patronage extending out from Islamic rulers and their capital cities, such as the Tughluqs in Delhi, attracted large numbers of highly skilled engineers and scientists, talented poets and other men of the pen, and much sought-after craftsmen who worked with a variety of materials, including wood, stone, ceramics, and textiles. The already extensive patronage networks that arose in the medieval

period were further expanded and elaborated by the three major early modern Islamic empires that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely, the Turkish Ottomans, the Persian Safavids, and the Mughals of India.

The eighteenth century was a time of significant growth in the numbers and forms of European influences in the Islamic world. British colonial activity in India and the French invasion of Egypt undertaken by Napoleon Bonaparte are the primary examples of this global trend. In the nineteenth century, when the British colonization of India intensified, the French, having relinquished Egypt to the British only three years after Napoleon's invasion, increased their activity in North Africa.

French colonialism in North Africa generated many kinds of writings and artistic representations of local landscapes and inhabitants. The images and texts of and about Arabs, Berbers, and Islam produced by French artists and intellectuals were designed primarily for consumption in France, where a large market for Oriental imagery, artifacts, texts and other forms of exotica had taken shape since at least Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The French colonization of Algeria began in 1830, which soon brought Morocco into the French imperial purview. The intensification of French interests in and around Algeria resulted in the establishment of Morocco as a French Protectorate in 1912 (Fig. 7). A picture postcard from the era depicts the boundaries of this new colonial state, as well as caricatures of its Berber and Arab subjects (Pl. 20). Hubert Louis Gustave Lyautey (1854–1934) was the first and most influential Resident-General for France in Morocco.⁸ Lyautey's tenure as

Resident-General from 1912 to 1925 resulted in substantial reconfigurations of Moroccan cities, major transformations in the relationships between Arabs and Berbers in urban and rural areas, as well as a series of new policies and initiatives relating to local arts and crafts production and marketing.⁹

During the imperial age of global empires, the cultural, economic, and political relationships between the European West and the Islamic East were fundamentally transformed. The economic, military, and general technological advantages that had accrued to the West conditioned the modes and means of European cultural representations of Islam and Muslims. Edward Said coined the term *Orientalism* to refer to multiple aspects of the Western European engagement of the Islamic East during the nineteenth century.¹⁰ An important aspect of Orientalism as the concept was introduced by Said includes the work of artists and writers who portrayed the Islamic Orient as being eternally and entirely culturally separate from the Western Occident. This style of Orientalist representation is predicated on the desire to produce and reproduce, materially and ideologically, an inferior "Other" culture destined to be dominated, exploited, and transformed by a superior civilization. As we will soon see, Essaydi's artwork critically engages colonial representations of North African women produced by French Orientalists.

Morocco gained its independence from France in 1956, which in turn generated new kinds of connections between Morocco and the outside world. In the 1960s and 1970s a large number of American scholars conducted fieldwork and archival research in the country, and today there is a large expatriate presence of



Fig. 8. Women in Festive Dress Wearing Berber Striped Textiles, in the High Atlas Mountains (Image after: Éric Milet, *Orientalist Photographs: 1870–1940, 2008*, 163)

jewelry worn by these Berber populations living outside Morocco's cities (Fig. 8).

Berbers refer to themselves as *Imazighen* (singular *Amazigh*), and their language, which is generally known as *Tamazight*, contains a number of dialects, including *Tishilhit* and *Tharifith*. In terms of social structure, the Berber tribes are organized by a system of partilineal groupings, among which small groups form larger groups and all groups at all levels have structurally similar groups that can either complement or oppose the group in question. Berber tribal groupings at all levels of the system are identified and defined by tribal chiefs who are referred to as *Imgharen* (singular *Amghar*) in Tamazight. Berber tribes and chiefs are often associated with shrines of famous deceased saints known as *Ziyarats*, *Khanqahs*, and *Dargahs* that serve a number of spiritual purposes in addition to providing general territorial associations and identities for the tribes and loci of political activity for the chiefs. The alliances, oppositions, tensions, and competitions within and among these graded Berber chiefs and their tribal followers that include kindred and non-relatives are mediated by groups of living saints. These saints are referred to as *Igurramen* (singular *Agurram*) in Tamazight and as *Marabouts* in French, and they as well as the tombs and shrines commemorating deceased saints possess divine charisma and power, or *Baraka*. These saints and shrines represent the conspicuous presence of Sufism through the Berber physical and social landscape. A 2012 photograph, shot in

American students, professionals, and US government employees and military personnel in Morocco.¹¹ The American scholarship on Morocco is heavily weighted toward anthropology, and the American anthropology of Morocco has had a substantial global impact on the discipline as a whole. A primary example of this influence is that one strand of the American anthropology of Morocco generated a disciplinary subfield now known as symbolic or interpretive anthropology.¹² In general terms this anthropological scholarship provides a wealth of insight into Moroccan tribal society, particularly its Berber populations in the Atlas and Rif mountains. A photograph c. 1900 suggests the striped textiles and

Fig. 9. Women's Heated Bath in an Ourrika Valley village near the Setti Fatma Shrine (at right, note the Tifinagh script on the white door frame) (Photo: Author, 2012)

an Ourrika Valley village near the Setti Fatma Shrine, documents the forms of Tifinagh script written on the white door frame to the right (Fig. 9). This view is seen outside a woman's bathhouse, with the bath's wood-burning furnace seen to the left.

How much room the segmentary lineage system allows for entrepreneurial political activity by chiefs, and the locations and roles of saints and saintly lineages inside and outside Berber tribal society are issues that have been vigorously debated in anthropological literature. Among the issues that have been contested are the distinctions and relationships between the rural tribal areas characterized by small hamlets and mobile tribes on the one hand, and the larger market towns and cities associated with centers of state power and government bureaucracy, and characterized by comparatively larger, more diverse, and dense populations on the other hand. The relationship between urban and rural zones and the cultural, economic, and political activity entailed in each realm is framed in the literature as a relationship between the *Bled al-Makhzen* associated urbanity and statecraft, and the *Bled al-Siba* associated with rural refractory tribes.¹³

The abundance, quality, and importance of the anthropology of Morocco has infused the smaller number of historians and political scientists working on Morocco with an interdisciplinary orientation that increases the significance of their work.¹⁴ Political science imported tribal segmentary theory and saintly mediation from anthropology



and applied it to the urban ruling classes and the Moroccan king, respectively. The historians have generally focused on the pre-Protectorate and Protectorate eras, with various forms of resistance to French colonialism receiving the majority of analytical attention. Morocco's colonial history has been examined from the perspective of Arab-Berber interaction in the rural zone and urban ethno-history focusing on the maintenance of cultural identity in the context of rapidly changing economic fortunes. A wide variety of authors, including anthropologists, historians, as well as travel writers and novelists have written on Morocco's cities, among which Marrakesh draws our attention as Essaydi's birthplace. The literature on Marrakesh includes widely acclaimed travelogues and well-received



Fig. 10. Anonymous, *Arab woman, Algeria, North Africa*
c. 1870, Photograph
(Image after: Eric Milet, *Orientalist Photographs: 1870–1940*, 2008, 176)

Essaydi's engagement of Orientalists re-focuses our attention to the study of Orientalism since Edward Said's seminal volume of that title appeared in 1978.

Since its appearance, Said's *Orientalism* has been uncritically applied and parroted by legions of sometimes doting and over-devoted admirers, as well as thoroughly interrogated by such high profile and reputable scholars and authors as Robert Irwin (2006) and Daniel Martin Varisco (2007). Others have been more even-handed and original in their responses to the book,¹⁷ including Said himself, who subsequently expanded and revised his original position on the subject. Our concern is with that very expansion and revision that results in the continued viability of the core principles forming the original idea. Toward that end, we need to identify a number of problems with Orientalism as Said first explained the phenomenon. One is that it does not sufficiently distinguish between the powerful European actors, for example, such as by separating the British from the French varieties of Orientalism, male from female Orientalists, Orientalists from different social classes and social backgrounds, or Orientalist writers from Orientalist photographers. These and many other varieties of Orientalists and articulations of Orientalism clearly exist and must be analytically accounted for. Second is a similar reduction of Orientals to a homogenous mass of people who have no agency of their own to accommodate, resist, or avoid Orientalist impulses. Another is that the totalizing Saidian template

ethnographic and historical works focusing on the neighborhoods, alleyways, and markets of the city, as well as the fundamental distinction between public and private space in this cosmopolitan yet archaic urban environment.¹⁵ Collectively, the literature on Marrakesh draws attention to its Berber heritage and content, as well as its Islamic, Arab, and Jewish components.

As previously indicated, Essaydi's work engages Orientalist artists who were active during the period of French colonial rule in North Africa. These Orientalists drew paintings and took photographs of North African women that Essaydi critically engages in her work.¹⁶

lacks consideration of the limits, gaps, and inconsistencies of Orientalism.¹⁸

Most relevant for us among the many refinements to Orientalism and re-positionings of Orientalists that have been advanced since the appearance of Said's seminal text are those concerning the role of 'native' intellectuals and "cultural insiders" in reconfiguring Orientalist imaginings and representations. Authors such as Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have directed our attention to this community of individuals who are products of and operate "in-between" multiple cultural, aesthetic, and political worlds. In so doing, they define a "third space," a hybrid arena where diasporic voices are heard and expatriate ruminations abound, a place where territory is de-privileged and yet space itself becomes amplified with hyper-meanings. To locate and describe this space we must necessarily use new vocabulary, and if one has not experienced such interstitiality and cultural liminality, this space and the movement to and through it must be imagined. The boundaries, overlaps, and disjunctions between experience and imagination constitute the location of Orientalism's imperial production in many ways. What we are concerned with at the moment is the world of the hyphen that connects Arab-Berber. Indeed, it is the tension of the movement between the terms that is at issue along this boundary. It is from this moving location, or location of movement—

Fig. 11. Anonymous, No. 347 from a *Picture Postcard Series: Mauresques* ("Moorish Women," or "Arab Women of Western North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula,") Photograph Collection Idéale, P. S. (French, active early 20th century)





Fig. 12. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #10*, 2005

in other words, the hyphen itself—that I would like to view Essaydi and her work.

To look forward from that vantage point, we must recall the hyphenated definition of Moroccans as Arab-Berber. The point to emphasize is that the hyphen does not represent equal units or even representation for each element in the compound. For example, Moroccans do not speak Arabic half of the time and Tamazight half of the time, or split conversations evenly between the two languages. Quite to the contrary, each language is used in different contexts for different reasons, for example, Arabic might be used in official written communication, while Tamazight is spoken at home. Ultimately, we must reckon with the inequality and unevenness of this linguistic relationship that reflects larger fields and articulations of power. Essaydi markets her work as Arab, not Berber. In that sense, we can conclude that if there is a Berber presence in Essaydi's work, it is subdued and subordinated to the Arab side of the bifurcated Moroccan identity.

From her birth in Marrakesh, time at her family home in nearby Tameslat, her education in Paris and Boston, studio in New York, and exhibitions in the Gulf, Essaydi's biography involves considerable mobility and circulation within and between locations in the East and West. Her personal migrations are cultural boundary crossings informing her professional boundary-crossings as she combines work with text, textiles, architecture, and photography.

To move from Essaydi's biography to the photographs themselves, we must first address the spatial framing of the images.¹⁹ In her first series, *Converging Territories* (2003–2004; Pl. 1), the choice of the particular

interior space where Essaydi takes her photographs results from an adolescent experience of a boundary-crossing that caused problems because it involved a cultural transgression (however innocent and innocuous) that was interpreted as jeopardizing her family's honor. Her punishment was banishment (however brief) to some kind of an empty second home that is artistically recreated in her photography today. By crossing the boundaries of honor, Essaydi's actions carried the specter of bringing shame upon the family name. In Tamazight and Berber culture, such a situation involves *Hchouma* or actions that straddle the border between honor and shame.²⁰

The women in Essaydi's photographs are represented not as Orientalized, sensualized, objectified, captive harem concubines, or *Odalisques*; neither are these Moroccan women represented as *Mauresque*, or semi-nude, and marketed for the titillation of an imperially empowered European consumer population (Fig. 10; also see Pl. 2–6). Rather, Essaydi plays on the Orientalist image of the *Maghrabine*, or veiled women (Fig. 11–12). Essaydi's intervention or reframing of older Orientalist images appears designed to give the women subjects in her photographs a sense of agency regarding clothing and nudity, and discretion regarding sensuality and sexuality.²¹

The calligraphy that ordains Essaydi's photos is deliberately unclear, but the Arabic is written in the Kufic style of script that is associated with one of the three ways Tamazight can be written.²² The invocation of literacy, that is literacy in Arabic, represented in ways that resonate with Tamazight, is important because while it unevenly combines Arab and Berber elements and implications, it also positions the work in a middle- to upper-class, possibly elite domain of Moroccan society.

The photos have a clean, sanitized feel that conjures up sensations of luxury, choice, and relaxation. This interior, chic, elite world of concrete differs from the more open, rural, soiled environment inhabited by the popular classes and tribal communities of the country. Just as she has apparently made a personal choice to elevate Arab over Berber and upper- over lower-class signifiers in her representations of Morocco and Moroccan women, Essaydi has also made a number of other choices between urban-rural, interior-exterior, leisure-labor, and a world either with or without animals, plants, trees, mountains, wind, dirt, and dust. For us, the relevance of such choices lies in what these artistic and ideological decisions and commitments emphasize, as well as what they leave out, when it comes to artistically representing Moroccan culture. The point is that when we view Essaydi's work, we must keep a mind's eye on the fact that a large portion of Morocco does not benefit or seek, but rather tends to avoid and even oppose a world conditioned by urban, elite tastes and sensibilities tied either directly or symbolically to state or royal patronage and the international art market.

The extended interaction Essaydi has with the women subjects in her photographs draws attention to the ethnographic component of her artistic production. One wonders how she communicated with these women. Did they speak Arabic or Tamazight, or French, or in all three languages? What were the variables that fed into those linguistic decisions? Did patterns of linguistic interaction change over time? Many if not most readers and viewers of her work will have the impression that Essaydi is just like the 'one of those women' in the photographs. Yet, her apparent preference for Arab over Berber in negotiating her own Moroccan identity, as well as her global travels

and education surely distinguish Essaydi in significant ways from the women she photographs. This in turn re-focuses our attention to Essaydi's interlocution of these Moroccan women's voices from that third space between cultures referenced above.

With that complex, hybrid, fluid space in mind, we are left to wonder how the women in Essaydi's photographs navigate the ever-present hyphen between Arab and Berber in Morocco. Would they subordinate the Berber to the Arab components of their own Moroccan identities as Essaydi has apparently done, at least for public consumption? Maybe so. Maybe not. But if so, for an 'ordinary woman' in Morocco the decisions about how, why, and when to convey, emphasize, or tap into one component of her complex identity over another would likely be framed and taken for different reasons than those that motivated Essaydi. Perhaps we can only conclude that the cultural and physical distance between an artist and her subject matter can never be fully surmounted, no matter how close to the real thing an image may appear.

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1. Paraphrased from Lalla Essaydi in: Kristen Gresh, "Constructing Identities: Lalla Essaydi," in *She Who Tells a Story. Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, exhibition catalogue (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2013), 39–42.
 2. Central Intelligence Agency, "Morocco," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mo.html>, accessed electronically 1/23/2014.
 3. For the origin of Morocco's international boundaries, see: Anthony S. Reyner, "Morocco's International Boundaries: A Factual Background," *The Journal of Modern African Studies: A Quarterly Survey of Politics, Economics and Related Topics in Contemporary Africa* 1.3 (1963): 313–326.
 4. "Chellah (Rabat, Morocco)," in *ArchNet. Islamic Art and Architecture*, archnet.org, accessed electronically 1/23/2014.
 5. "Archaeological Site of Volubilis," in the *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage List*, http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=836&tl=en, accessed electronically 1/23/2014.

6. For this period, see especially the "Visual Arts in Islam" (and Volumes I and II more generally) in: Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Volumes I–III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), II 501–531.
7. For more on Ibn Battuta and his Rihla, see: Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
8. For Lyautey, see: William A. Hoisington, *Lyautey and the French Conquest of Morocco* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); and Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8–9.
9. See: James Mokhiber, "'La Protectorat dans la Peau': Prosper Ricard and the 'Native Arts'" in French Colonial Morocco 1899–1952," in *Revisiting the Colonial Past in Morocco*, ed. Driss Maghraoui (London: Routledge, 2012), 257–284.
10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
11. A large number of James Madison University students have attended al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane (c. 70 kilometers from Fez) in the Middle Atlas Mountains.
12. When speaking of anthropology in this essay, the reference is to the socio-cultural branch of the discipline that by most definitions also includes archaeology, linguistics, biological and physical sub-fields. The following distills key arguments and vocabulary from books authored by Dale Eickelman (1976), Clifford Geertz (1973 and 1968), Ernest Gellner, David Hart, Paul Rabinow, and Lawrence Rosen, which are cited below. Clifford Geertz was a prominent advocate for interpretive or symbolic anthropology. It is important to note how much of the anthropology of Morocco is centered in and around the town of Sefrou. Also noteworthy is the inclusion of photographs (by Paul Hyman) in Rosen's ethnography and in the *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* volume by Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen. Although not treated in the text, the work of the anthropologist Susan Slyomovics (2012 and 2005) should be mentioned, as should Vincent Cornell's work on Moroccan Sufism (Cornell is a scholar of religion and not an anthropologist per se). Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Dale F. Eickelman, *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); David M. Hart, *Tribes and Society in Rural Morocco* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000); Paul Rabinow, *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Lawrence Rosen, *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Susan Slyomovics, "Fatna El Bouih and the Work of Memory, Gender, and Reparation in Morocco," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 8.1 (2012): 37–62; and Susan Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

13. See Eickelman's 1985 *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* for a "social biography" of a rural Qadi who migrates to a city, only to find employment in the French administration, and as such personifies the interactive relationship between rural 'tribal' and urban 'state' forms of learning and traditions of scholarship. This example speaks to an important relationship between *Zawiyas* or the religious monasteries in the rural Bled as-Siba zone and the *Madrasas* or religious schools associated with states based in the cities of the Bled al-Makhzen. Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
14. Here I am referring to the cited works of the political scientist John Waterbury and the historians Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Brown. Also worthy of reference is the work of the political scientist William Zartman, and the historical studies of Sebastian Balfour on the role of Morocco and Moroccans in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), Sahar Bazzaz on the Moroccan mystic Muhammad al-Kattani's resistance against the French, Ross Dunn on Moroccan resistance to the French before the establishment of the Protectorate, and C. R. Pennell's introductory modern historical survey of the country. The work of the medieval historian and social theorist Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406; see Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Khaldūn and Paul Casanova, and Ibn Khaldūn and Franz Rosenthal) on Arabs, Berbers, and Arab-Berber interaction in the Maghreb has been a primary point of reference for modern scholars (anthropologists, historians, and others) of Morocco. Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sahar Bazzaz, *Forgotten Saints: History, Power, and Politics in the Making of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010); Edmund Burke, *Prelude to Protectorate in Morocco: Precolonial Protest and Resistance, 1860–1912* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Kenneth Lewis Brown, *People of Salé* (Manchester: University Press, 1976); Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb Al-'ibar Wa-Dīwān Al-Mubtada' Wa-Al-Khabar Fi Ayyam Al-'Arab Wa-Al-'ajam Wa-Al-Barbar Wa-Man 'asarahym Min Dhawī Al-Sultān Al-Akhlbar Wa-Huwa Tarikh Wahid 'asrih* (al-Qahirah: 'Abd al-Matba'ah al-Misriyah bi-Bulāq, 1867); Ibn Khaldūn and Paul Casanova, *l'Histoire Des Berbères Et Des Dynasties Musulmanes De L'Afrique Septentrionale ... Traduite ... Par M. Le Baron De Slane* (Paris, 1925); Ibn Khaldūn and Franz Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); C. R. Pennell, *Morocco since 1830: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful; the Moroccan Political Elite-A Study in Segmented Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); and I. William Zartman, *The Political Economy of Morocco* (New York: Praeger, 1987).
15. For a sampling of the wide variety of literature on Marrakesh, see the popular travel writings of Elias Canetti, Peter Mayne (2002 and 1953), and Tahir Shah, the urban ethnography by Elizabeth Fernea, and the urban ethno-history of Emily Gottreich. Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *A Street in Marrakech: A Personal View of Urban Women in Morocco* (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press); Emily Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakesh: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Peter Mayne, *The Alleys of Marrakesh* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953); Peter Mayne, *A Year in Marrakesh* (London: Eland, 2002); and Tahir Shah, *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008).
16. See, for example, the photographs of North African women that appear to inspire Essaydi: Éric Milet, *Orientalist Photographs: 1870–1940* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 19, 163, and 176.
17. See the following for an informative collection of critical essays on the origins, elaborations, qualifications, and re-interpretations of Orientalism: A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
18. Here I am referring to the work Behdad (2003 and 1994), and Beaulieu and Roberts (who reference the important expansions and revisions of Orientalism by Codell [2012, 2008 and 1998], Lewis, Lowe and Nochlin [1988 and 1989]). For more on Orientalism and Art (painting and photography) in the Middle East and Islamic world see Alloula, Netton, and Tromans. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994); Ali Behdad, "The Orientalist Photograph," in *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, ed. Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2013) 11–32; Julie F. Codell, *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 1998); Julie F. Codell, *The Political Economy of Art: Making the Nation of Culture* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008); Julie F. Codell, *Transculturation in British Art, 1770–1930* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012); Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Ian Richard Netton, *Orientalism Revisited: Art, Land and Voyage* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); and Nicholas Tromans and Rana Kabbani, *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
19. See Maureen Shanahan, "A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi," herein, 16–41.
20. Milet, 126.
21. For more on Odalisque, Maghrabine, and Mauresque images as subtypes of Orientalist representations of North African women, see: Milet, 176 and 192; and Ken Jacobson, *Odaliques & Arabesques: Orientalist Photography 1839–1925* (London: Quaritch, 2007).
22. Tamazight can be written with the Arabic, Latin, and *Tifinagh* scripts.

RECLAIMING THE HAREM. LALLA ESSAYDI AND THE ORIENTALIST TRADITION IN EUROPEAN PAINTING

David Ehrenpreis

The Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi creates large-scale photographs of sumptuously dressed women sequestered in the exotic interiors of the harem. These spaces of the harem, the women's quarters of the traditional Muslim home,¹ are central to the artist's work and there viewers become quickly immersed, drawn into Essaydi's photographs by both their beauty and their nearly overwhelming decorative power. The artist frequently covers nearly every inch of these extraordinary spaces with sinuous strokes of Arabic calligraphy, and she uses the same "beautiful writing" to transform her subjects' bodies. Even the striking geometric patterns of the architectural spaces in many of Essaydi's works help conjure up a world of mysterious, hermetic splendor (Pl. 16).

At first glance, the photographer's captivating pictures bring to mind the voyeuristic harem fantasies of nineteenth-century Orientalist painters, including Eugène Delacroix (French, 1798–1863), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (French, 1780–1839), and Frederick Lord Leighton (English, 1830–1896) (Pl. 3, 5). Indeed, many of Essaydi's photographs are careful restagings of these male artists' most famous works. Essaydi uses the European paintings as

source material, then transmutes them from alluring fantasies into reflections and reshaping of her own lived experience.

Born into a conservative Muslim family, the artist grew up in a traditional Moroccan household. After marrying, she lived in Saudi Arabia for many years, then studied art in Paris and Boston. Now as an émigré who divides her time among New York, Boston, and Marrakesh, and frequently travels, she is constantly moving between East and West. At one level, her work examines this fluidity. She tries to create a space between these cultures, one that might bridge the gap between history and memory.

But first and foremost, in her striking pictures, Essaydi investigates different forms of power. For her, the domestic spaces of the harem represent the historical power of imperialism and colonialism, but also the patriarchal power men exert over women in the Arab world. Finally, the harem represents the power of her own lived experience. In her photographs, Lalla Essaydi reclaims these intimate spaces, and they become home to an empowered community of women who write their own stories and gaze directly into the future.

Over the past decade, Essaydi has completed three important series of photographs. Selections from the first two, *Converging Territories* (2005) and *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2009) have appeared in book form. Work on her current Harem series is ongoing. In each of these sequences, the artist explores the gap between historical representations of Muslim women and her own lived experience. But rather than simply rejecting the works of Orientalist painters, Essaydi explores the tension between beauty and stereotype. While studying painting in Paris in the early 1990s, she found herself drawn to these works' extraordinary beauty and impeccable technique, but simultaneously disturbed by their depictions of Arab women as passive, sexual playthings. Her equivocal reaction to these paintings provided an important stimulus for her career.

It is not surprising that the first work in Essaydi's best-known series, *Les Femmes du Maroc* (Pl. 2), is a restaging of Eugène Delacroix's famous painting, *Algerian Women in Their Apartment* (1834) (Pl. 3), which many scholars consider the first Orientalist painting.² An examination of Delacroix's work can help us understand the Romantic artist's motivation, as well as the historical significance of Orientalism. Delacroix accompanied a special French Ambassador on a trip to North Africa in 1832, and with the aid of French military officials in Algiers, gained access to a harem. The many sketches he completed there provided the starting point for his painting.

Delacroix portrays these beautifully dressed women seated in languorous poses around a water pipe. With the exception of a standing black female servant, at right, all appear to be in a drug-induced reverie. Both the space and its occupants are adorned in

every way possible. The women wear rings, anklets, necklaces, and satin slippers, while every surface of the space is filled with carpets, cushions, and colorful tiles. Delacroix's painting was greatly admired when it was shown at the Paris Salon of 1834 and was subsequently purchased by the French government. One of the key reasons for the work's success was the sense by his contemporaries that the painting was a meticulous documentation of a distant, exotic culture.³

The belief that paintings such as Delacroix's *Algerian Women in Their Apartment* could represent a kind of ethnographic truth can be traced back to the beginning of modern Orientalism, which began with Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns in the last years of the eighteenth century. In building his military force for the invasion of Egypt in 1798, Napoleon was careful to include one hundred sixty-seven artists and scientists. It was their task to record and document every aspect of Egyptian civilization, both ancient and modern, in exacting detail. These studies culminated in the twenty-four volume *Déscription de l'Égypte* (published 1809–1828), made up of ten volumes of plates and two atlases. A full set contained more than three thousand engravings.⁴

This impulse to document and map was a critical aspect of Imperialism, and artists and writers were involved from the beginning. Authors from Byron to Victor Hugo wrote stories and poems describing the Middle East as a primitive, unchanging place, while painters such as Delacroix fashioned images of harems filled with languid, sensual women.⁵ By the early nineteenth century, these representations had begun to form an imaginary but cohesive Western vision of the Middle East, a phenomenon that Edward Said described as Orientalism. For Said, this became a process of "dominating, restructuring, and

having authority over the Orient.”⁶ It is interesting to note that even Delacroix’s trip to Algiers was directly connected to French Imperial politics in North Africa. The painter was invited on this voyage as the traveling companion of Charles Edgar de Mornay, a French official negotiating with the Sultan of Morocco in the wake of the French conquest of Algiers.

In Essaydi’s transformation of Delacroix’s *Algerian Women in Their Apartment*, the artist invents a new utopian vision of the harem as an empowered community of women who understand and support each other (Pl. 2). *Les Femmes du Maroc #1* (2005) reveals how Essaydi carefully removes the conspicuous props and adornments on which Delacroix lavished such attention. She also gives her sitters more natural facial expressions. In place of a colorful and highly decorated interior, Essaydi offers a more confined, monochromatic space in which she has covered every surface, including the bodies of her sitters, with Arabic calligraphy. By doing this, the artist appropriates and subverts an activity traditionally reserved for men. She applies a similar approach in her restaging of Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres’ famous painting, *La Grande Odalisque*, (1814), with its reclining female nude (Pl. 5). Here Essaydi transforms a Western fantasy, the nude odalisque or “woman of the Oriental harem,” into a real person by clothing her and giving her a more commonplace expression (Pl. 4).

But it is in the actual creation of works like these that Essaydi most clearly demonstrates her artistic intentions. For the artist, making art is a social process, one that she has shaped to mirror her own experience of growing up in her family’s household. Each year, she

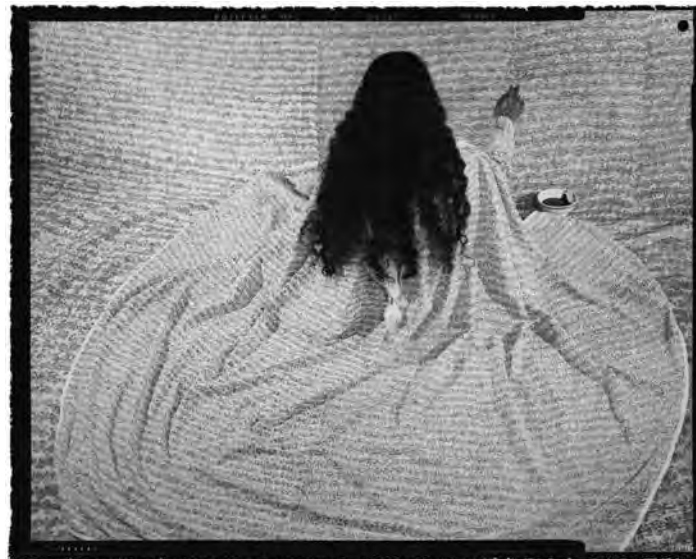


Fig. 13. Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #10*, 2003

returns to Morocco to spend several weeks in the company of female friends and relatives. These women serve as the subjects for her photographs, and the act of creating the works is both collaborative and communal. Living together for several weeks, they discuss and later rehearse for the pictures. To write on their bodies and on the surfaces that surround them, they use employ henna, a dye traditionally used by women to mark significant moments, such as puberty and marriage. Together, they create an exclusive realm of women, in which even the artist’s gaze is female and familiar.

A work from Essaydi's earlier series *Converging Territories #10* (2003) more clearly reveals her conception of the female artist (Pl. 1). Like all of her photographs, this image is beautifully composed and completed with meticulous attention to detail. Showing the female subject seated and facing away from the viewer, her voluminous garment inscribes a large oval within the photograph's rectangular frame. The subject occupies an indeterminate, almost monochromatic space made up solely of long swaths of fabric, which cover the walls and floor. Once again, every inch of these surfaces, as well as the woman's clothing, is covered with long lines of Arabic calligraphy. Essaydi has written that fashioning such spaces in her work allows her to transcend specific identities such as Moroccan, Saudi, or Western.⁷ As she did in her restaging of Delacroix's 1834 painting *Algerian Women in Their Apartment*, Essaydi again takes pains to create an imagined space of dream and memory.

To make the works in the *Converging Territories* series, Essaydi returned to an abandoned house on her family's estate in Morocco. As a child, she had been sent to this space as punishment for transgressions. Now she transformed the interior with fabrics and used it as the setting for her photographs. In *Converging Territories #10*, shooting her model from behind, the artist portrays her in the midst of writing, dipping her brush into a dish of henna paste and writing on the textile covering the wall before her. By having this female figure appropriate the male activity of calligraphy so conspicuously, Essaydi gives her tremendous agency. Perhaps this unknown woman functions as a stand-in for the artist, linked through memory to her past, but also transcending it. In her photographs for both the *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc* series, Essaydi imagines a self-sufficient

realm in which freedom and creativity are directly linked with the absence of men.

A comparison with the work of two prominent Iranian photographers, Shirin Neshat (b. 1957, Qazvin) and Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974, Tehran), helps illuminate Essaydi's artistic approach and political beliefs with respect to her own representations of the Arab world. The comparison also demonstrates how different generations of artists represent women's experience in Islam. It was largely Shirin Neshat who created a symbolic vocabulary for the first generation of these artists by incorporating the elements of calligraphy, the veil, and the female body into her early photographic work.

Shirin Neshat's photograph *Speechless* (1996) is one of the best known pictures from her influential series *Women of Allah* (1996) (Fig. 14). In these largely black-and-white images, the artist juxtaposes veiled women with weapons and Islamic calligraphy. Neshat has written that her conceptual point of departure for these works was the question, "What is the experience of being a woman in Islam?" But the artist quickly added, "I then put my trust in those women's words who have lived and experienced the life of a woman behind the "chador" [or body-length veil]"⁸ It is important to note that in Neshat's analysis of her work, here, the photographer is not one of "those women".⁹ The artist left Iran in 1975, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and was educated at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received her Master of Fine Arts degree in 1982.¹⁰

Neshat's return to Iran in 1990, eleven years after the Islamic Revolution, prompted her efforts to understand this utterly transformed

society. Thus, from the start of her artistic career, Neshat's perspective has been that of an outsider. Like many of her early works, *Speechless* was inspired by images of female Iranian soldiers that she saw in the press. The extreme close-up of the woman's face gazing mournfully at the viewer also evokes the most poignant work of contemporary photojournalists. And Neshat's sitter seems to stand in for all Muslim women. Ironically, like an Orientalist painting, her black-and-white photograph conveys a sense of documentary realism.

Despite its title, *Speechless* is anything but mute. Like many images from the *Women of Allah* series, it is calculated to shock. What at first appears to be a large earring soon takes the shape of a gun barrel pointed directly at the viewer. The lines of Persian calligraphy superimposed on the woman's face are verses by a contemporary Iranian female poet asking her male brothers to allow her to take part in the Revolution. *Speechless* is replete with latent violence and calculated to provoke anxiety in the viewer. We struggle to come to terms with a culture in which such jarring juxtapositions are possible, just as Neshat tries to understand a country so different from the one in which she was born.

In contrast to Shirin Neshat, who has never been permitted to exhibit her own provocative work in Iran, Lalla Essaydi's photographs have become increasingly popular with Arab patrons in Morocco and abroad. Qatar's newly created Arab Museum of Modern Art holds Essaydi's work in its permanent collections, and King Mohammed VI of Morocco;



Fig. 14. Shirin Neshat, *Speechless* ("Women of Allah" series), 1996
RC print and ink, 167.6 x 132.1 cm
(© Shirin Neshat; Image: Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)

Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi; and His Royal Highness Shaikha Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates have all recently acquired Essaydi's photographs. Essaydi's popularity among leading national institutions of the Arab world and the Arab ruling elite, while due certainly to the current political circumstances of these nation states, may also be owed, in part, to Essaydi's more subtle form of feminism. She describes her approach and that of her friends in a recent interview, "We do not manifest in the streets. We are not militant in that sense. The change is very quiet. We work in a quieter manner suited to tradition and mores. I think it is the best way for us to be heard and to really make the change."¹¹

In representing her own community of women and celebrating their creativity, Essaydi hopes her photographs will help foster a kind of peaceful revolution. Because of her fascination with Orientalist paintings and with her own history, she frequently underscores a sense of continuity between past and present.

The work of the Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian, who also creates photographic tableaux of her female friends and relatives, demonstrates how differently a member of the younger generation of Iranian female photographers interprets her experience (Fig. 15). Born in Tehran in 1974, Ghadirian still lives in the Iranian capital. Ghadirian was a child



Fig. 15. Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled* ("Qajar Series"), 1998
Gelatin-silver bromide print, 22.86 x 15.24 cm (Image)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Los Angeles, California, U.S. [M.2008.35.4]
(Image: © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA.
Licensed by Art Resource, NY, ART385458)

of five at the time of the 1979 Revolution, and thus growing into adulthood she has always worn the headscarf and does not feel the same stigma that Westerners attach to it. Perhaps because she has never lived abroad, the issue of how the West represents the East is not a primary concern. Instead, Ghadirian investigates the conflict in her own life between past and present.¹²

The starting point for Ghadirian's well-known *Qajar* series (1998) was a group of photographic portraits from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the artist found while working in Tehran's City Museum of Photography.¹³ Carefully restaging these images, she produces new sets, finds historical furniture, and like Essaydi, creates clothing inspired by the period. But into each photograph, the artist inserts an artifact from contemporary life: a can of Coca-Cola, a bicycle, or a vacuum cleaner.

In one of the most powerful pictures from the *Qajar* series, a woman wearing a headscarf (actually Ghadirian) sits with both legs firmly planted before a painted backdrop in what looks like a Qajar photographer's studio (Fig. 15). Gazing directly at the viewer, she glances up from reading a recent issue of *Hamshahri*, a popular Tehran newspaper. If Essaydi fuses past and present into a striking, seamless hybrid of Arab culture, Ghadirian emphasizes the disjunction between tradition and modernity in Iranian society.

In her later series, *Harem* (begun in 2009), Lalla Essaydi has been photographing her sitters in another historical building owned by her family, the Moroccan *riad*, or urban palace with courtyard, *Dar al Basha*, in Marrakesh (Pl. 16). The photographs are now in vivid

color and Essaydi's beautifully clothed women seem to meld into their magnificent surroundings. But in the artist's view, they become one with these highly patterned domestic spaces not because they are simply decorative possessions, but because they represent the enduring foundation of culture. If the family lies at the heart of Arab society, it is wives and mothers who rule that sphere. Beautiful and self-possessed, Essaydi's women are connected to their past, and will also help to shape their future. They are neither the Women of Algiers, nor the *Women of Allah*, they are the women of Morocco.

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1. John L. Esposito, ed., "Harem," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, accessed electronically 1/27/2014.
 2. The discussion of Delacroix's *Algerian Women in Their Apartment* draws on: Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798–1836* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 122.
 3. Porterfield, 122.
 4. Terence M. Russell, ed., *The Napoleonic Survey of Egypt: Description de l'Égypte: The Monuments and Customs of Egypt: Selected Engravings and Texts*. (Aldershot, U.K., and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).
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SAWHILL GALLERY ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lalla Essaydi is a James Madison University 2013–2014 *Cultural Connections* Resident Artist, with an exhibition of her work in James Madison University's Sawhill Gallery. The artist's dedication and enthusiasm for the project has been unwavering over these many months of planning, for which we are extremely grateful.

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Ms. Kristi McDonnell has done a truly exceptional job in the compilation and design of this catalogue. Her elegant and skillful work also contributed to the design of the exhibition poster, press release, and many other materials in connection with the Lalla Essaydi project.

In closing, we are grateful for the incredible support and commitment that the artist, Lalla Essaydi, has demonstrated towards the success of this exhibition.

Gary Freeburg
Director, Sawhill Gallery
James Madison University

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The enthusiastic support of the members of our Board of Directors is critical to the success of all the projects we undertake in the arts. I wish to thank Ginna Bauhan, President; Kevin Rose, Vice-President; Terry Weaver, Treasurer; Scott Jost, Secretary; Paul Somers, Member-at-Large; Kathy Schwartz, Past-President; Kay Arthur; Tom Arthur; Jenny Burden; Jim Hollowood; Danny Rohrer; John Rose; Valerie Smith; JR Snow; Nick Swartz; Kelly Troxell; Mary Rouse Walters; and Jennifer Whitmore. I am also grateful to our Honorary Board Members: Stephanie Byrd, J. Douglas Light, Joan Strickler, Judith Strickler, Michael Wong, and Peter Yates.

Special recognition and thanks goes to Sarah Brooks for her insight and determination to bring the show to our community.

And finally, we extend our profound appreciation to Lalla Essaydi for sharing her fascinating and important work with us.

Ragan McManus
Executive Director
Arts Council of the Valley

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Kristi McDonnell has done a truly exceptional job in the compilation and design of this publication. Her elegant and skillful work also contributed to the design of the exhibition poster and Press Release. She has been a pleasure to work with on all of these aspects of the show, where her intuitive design skills and creative problem solving were always appreciated.

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Sarah Brooks
Associate Professor
School of Art, Design and Art History