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NEGOTIATING HYBRIDITY IN THE WORK OF LALLA ESSAYDI: AN EXPLORATION OF GAZE

by

SUSANNAH BRITTON DARROW

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond

ABSTRACT

The photographic work of contemporary Moroccan artist, Lalla Essaydi, embodies a new artistic hybridity that reflects her nomadic, globalized background. With this work, the artist employs visual symbolism and uses multiple forms of artistic media as a means to analyze her multicultural background. Throughout her series, which spans 2004-present, Essaydi uses both literal and metaphorical representations of space and self as a means to examine the multifacetedness of her national identity and the many gazes that define that identity. She uses artistic production as a means of mediating the collective experiences of her identity in order to negotiate and construct a revised image of self.

INDEX WORDS: Lalla Essaydi, Hybridity, Gaze, Orientalism, Contemporary Middle Eastern art, Multiculturalism

NEGOTIATING HYBRIDITY IN THE WORK OF LALLA ESSAYDI: AN EXPLORATION OF GAZE

by

SUSANNAH BRITTON DARROW

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

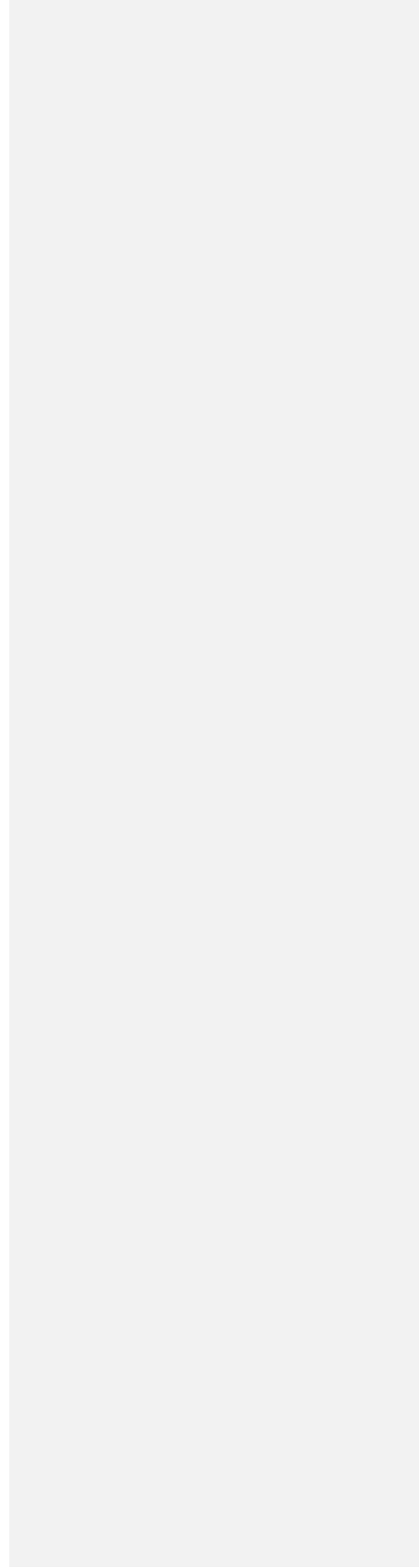
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2013

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2013



NEGOTIATING HYBRIDITY IN THE WORK OF LALLA ESSAYDI: AN EXPLORATION OF GAZE

by

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Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

For my mother, who trusted I would finish this thesis.

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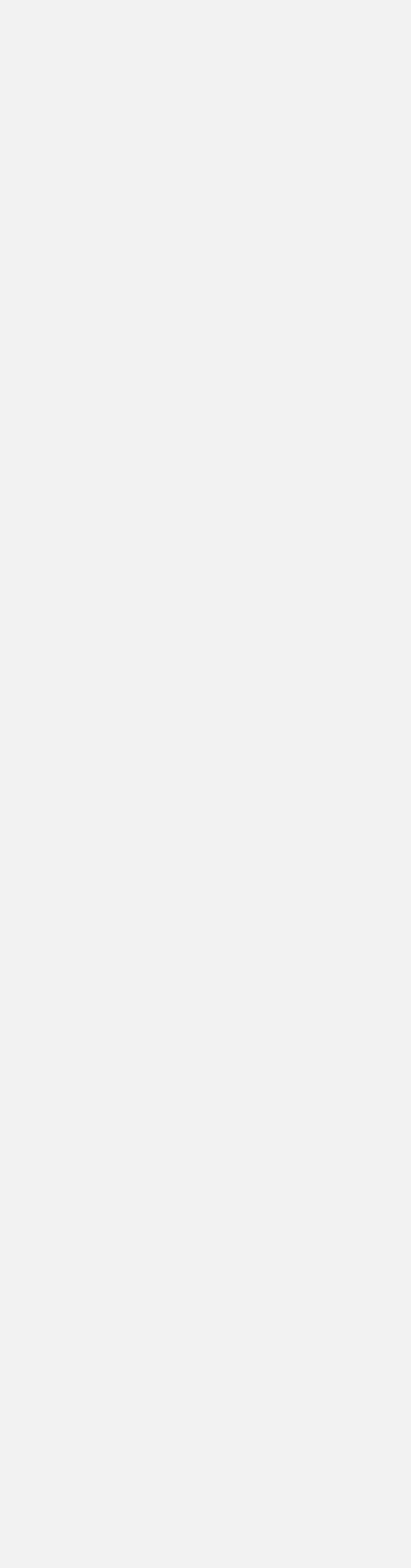
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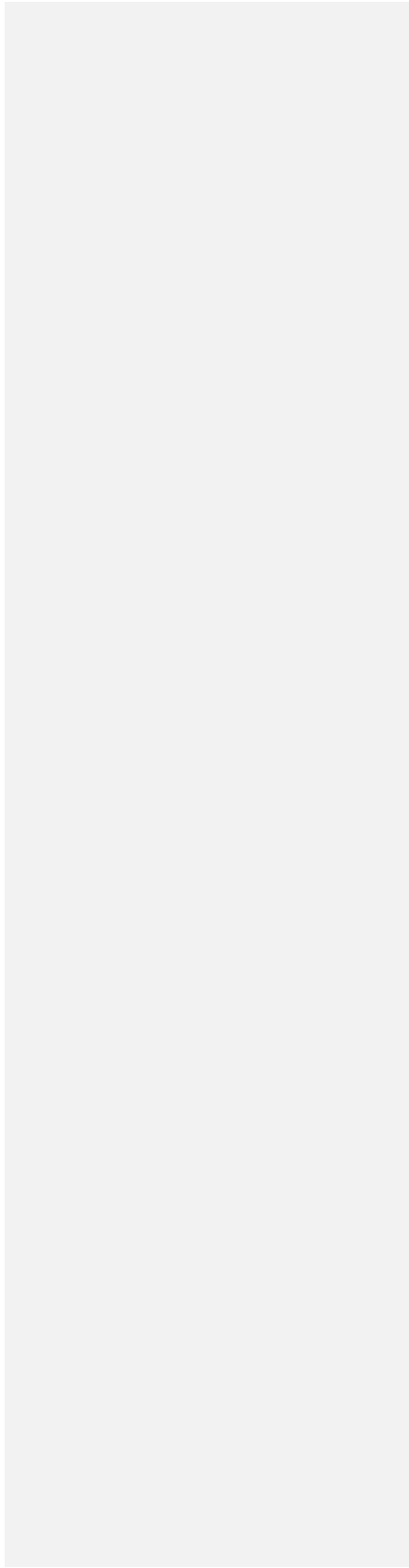
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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1998, *Art Journal* magazine invited a group of curators and art critics from around the world to take part in a discussion on the nature of artistic identity in a post-national, globalized world.¹ The [goal](#) was to begin to understand the roles of the local and the global within this new contemporary framework. The introduction to the article describes the birth of a newly mobile generation of artists whose semi-nomadic lifestyles combine the “experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile” in a reassertion of new identities in a movement the [authors](#) coin “global art.”² The (mostly) photographic work of contemporary Moroccan artist, Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956), embodies this new [global](#) hybridity. With this work, the artist employs visual symbolism and uses multiple forms of artistic media as a means to analyze her multicultural background. Essaydi uses both literal and metaphorical representations of space and self as a means to examine the multifacetedness of her national identity and the many gazes that define that identity. Essaydi manipulates the tropes of visual culture surrounding the Arabic female and attempts to revise those histories in the context of her present.

Essaydi has experienced diverse geographic settings throughout her life to date. Essaydi is Moroccan by birth and spent her childhood [in Marrakech, Morocco](#). Marriage took Essaydi to Saudi Arabia where she spent many years of her adult life. In 1990, Essaydi left Saudi Arabia to attend the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France. She then relocated to the United States where she completed a BFA and MFA in Boston, Massachusetts, at the School of the Museum of Fine

¹ Although over a decade old, the article remains a seminal compilation of writings on issues surrounding multiculturalism and “global citizenship.”

² Monica Amor et al., “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” *Art Journal* 57 (1998): 29.

Arts. She currently divides her time between New York City and Marrakesh. Her life's somewhat nomadic course has resulted in a global affiliation, rather than affinity with any one nation or city. In an interview for the exhibition catalogue for her 2005 series, *Converging Territories*,

Essaydi said of this multiplicity:

When I'm in Saudi Arabia, they call me the Moroccan. In Morocco, they call me the Saudi. In the West, I am someone from a different culture. I had to create my own space. My work gives me a sense of belonging that I couldn't find in a physical space.³

In her artwork, [Essaydi](#) creates a dialogue between these cultures and nations that comprise her identity.

Essaydi defines a liminal intermediate space in her work to situate her multicultural background. One of the preeminent scholars on the concept of hybridity, Homi K. Bhabha, wrote in his seminal work on the subject, *The Location of Culture*,⁴ that contemporary identity exists in an ambiguous space where "complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" exist as dynamic elements subject to continual renegotiation. Within these new constructs, the more traditional categories of gender, class, and nationality, which previously were considered singularly as definitive elements of one's [identity](#), are no longer sufficient. He writes that "'in-between' spaces" create a forum for developing "strategies of selfhood" that are both individually and collectively based. These spaces "initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."⁴

³ Lalla Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), 28.

⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

Essaydi's process of representing her global (or hybrid) identity is done both through symbolism within her imagery and in the techniques that she uses. At the surface, her work appears to consist of simply posed photographs of Moroccan women, however, it is actually comprised of complex layers of writing, painting, and photography that reflect the artist's multivalent identity. Essaydi leaves evidence of her facture and the layers of creation in the final photographic presentation. Each step in this process becomes part of a performative act by Essaydi that serves as symbolic actions in her construction and depiction of identity.

This examination of Essaydi's work covers four major series in her career and the ways that she explores the various aspects of her identity in part by establishing contrasting gazes within each of her series. The juxtapositions that she presents illustrate the different locations and constructs that form the multifaceted identity that she claims. The series allow Essaydi to explore her personal artistic history, as well as a broader cultural context that includes female Arabic identity more widely. While Essaydi has received some critical attention, this thesis will be the first to discuss multiple series, including her newest body of work, *Bullet*, which is still in construction, in order to examine the progression of and shifts in the artist's exploration of self-identity across the different series.

Chapter One will look at Essaydi's early series, *Converging Territories* (2004), which comprises a self-reflection of the artist's identity as both a Moroccan and Saudi Arabian woman. The series depicts women, both singularly and in groups, in a seemingly non-descript location. The space is lined with illegibly written, Arabic text-covered fabrics that also form the garments that clothe the women to create a seemingly immeasurable space [Figure 1]. This chapter will delve further into the idea of hybridity, and contextualize Essaydi within a broader

discussion of African artists bridging both Western and non-Western markets. Specifically, the chapter will explore how [Essaydi's](#) construction of her imagery, [her recourse to text](#), and the narrative themes within [this series](#) reflect the [realities?](#) of a self-identified non-Westerner. [The physical and metaphorical spaces](#) that Essaydi constructs for her figures [offer](#) a means of exploring [and contextualizing](#) the convergence of [the artist's](#) multiple identities.

Chapter Two will offer a look at *Harem* (2009), [a series that](#) marks a transition to an exploration of Essaydi's Arabic identity from a Western perspective. In this series, Essaydi uses compositions that reference nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings' depictions of women in their foreign space of the harem. Essaydi appropriates the elaborate tile work found within the harems to create clothing for her models; she creates a space that envelops the women within the architectural space [Figure 2]. I will explore the tropes of Orientalism that Essaydi uses as a way to both subvert traditional conceptions of Islamic women and assert a new agency in constructing a revised identity for these women. This series marks a transition for Essaydi from an interest in using non-Western-based imagery to more historically-based Eurocentric depictions. The transition in the [se](#) series is symptomatic of her role as both as an "insider" and "outsider" in her use of the Orientalist visual constructs. This chapter will also examine a broader use of the [female](#) body as a means to regain authority in the writing of history. [In addition, t](#)he chapter will reference [Essaydi's](#) series, *Les Femmes du Maroc* [\(date\)](#), as a means to illustrate the transition of [her](#) focus from a self-reflexive gaze to [one that subverts the Western](#) colonializing one. It will focus on the use of the figure within the revised Orientalist context of Essaydi's work as a means to [explore](#) the constructedness of the non-Western identity by a European audience.

Chapter Three will examine Essaydi's newest series, *Bullet*, which is currently in production. The series pays homage to Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat, and the more directly violent and political imagery common to Neshat's [early](#) oeuvre. This series establishes a new connectedness to a dialogue with other Arabic feminist artists. As there has been limited scholarly writings on Essaydi, examining her work in relation to her fellow contemporary feminist Arabic artists provides a direct context for understanding themes within her work in the international art world that have not been previously discussed. This chapter will examine Essaydi's development of new cultural identities and the re-writing of visual culture as it relates to the exoticized female figure through appropriation and subversion of imagery of the harem and violence. The chapter will explore the transition of Essaydi's gaze and self-identification as it relates to a more contemporary image of the Arabic world as opposed to the depictions of the harem used in her previous series.

Throughout these series, which span 2004-present, Essaydi has examined multiple facets of her hybrid identity. This hybridity takes on different forms and perspectives as the visual rhetoric of the series shifts the focus of her gaze upon both herself and the larger Arabic world. Essaydi finds herself [in](#) a liminal space in contemporary culture where it is necessary to produce new cultural imagery that defines a time of transition. She uses artistic production as a means of mediating the collective experiences of her national and personal identity in order to negotiate and construct a revised image of self.

2 HYBRIDITY AND NOMADISM IN CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

As a contribution to the 1998 issue of *Art Journal* that provided a forum for curators and art critics to discuss issues of globalization in contemporary artistic identity, curator, art critic, and writer Okwui Enwezor's essay, "Between Localism and Worldliness" examined the idea of national identity for African artists who no longer live exclusively in Africa.⁵ For Essaydi, a Moroccan/Saudi Arabian-identified artist who now lives in New York City, this conundrum becomes extremely relevant to an analysis of her work. Essaydi embodies this new artistic hybridity that the curators described through her use of visual symbolism and multiple forms of artistic media in her exploration of her multicultural background. By examining discussions of hybridity as a contemporary means of expressing identity, this analysis will explore how Essaydi's series, *Converging Territories*, uses both literal and metaphorical representations of space as a means to express the multifacetedness of the artist's personal and national identities.

In this "global art" movement, described by Enwezor, the artists' "experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile" are coalesced in a reassertion of new identities.⁶ In the case of an artist like Essaydi, Enwezor questions whether migration has caused artists' senses of self and place to be abandoned.⁷ For Essaydi, her identity as Moroccan or Saudi Arabian has not been abandoned, but simply reconfigured into an identity that combines each of the cultures and influences she has experienced. The contemporary condition of hybridity is

⁵ Okwui Enwezor, "Between Localism and Worldliness," in "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 34.

⁶ Monica Amor et al., "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998): 29.

⁷ Enwezor, "Between Localism and Worldliness," 32.

this overlap of “domains of difference” that Bhabha describes, which combines a collective experience of nationality, localism, and culture.⁸

Enwezor writes that new problems surrounding the idea of place have [developed](#) as a result of a reality of placelessness that has emerged not just within Africa, but also globally.

[There](#) is migrancy between a world that is accessible via the Internet, which allows for global exchange and [for](#) popular culture’s influence to permeate, and the world of a country’s more localized and traditional culture and history. The oscillation between these multiple realities has led to the need for a new discourse on “place, identity, and memory,” which reflects a deconstructed African identity where there is no absolute identity or terrain that these artists inhabit.⁹ Likewise, cultural critic Irit Rogoff has described that geography functions as a more mutable concept where place can be considered a nebulous period of time that reflects a historical link between subjects’ experiences.¹⁰ Essaydi abstracts the location of her images in the *Converging Territories* series as a means to embody multiple geographies and historical periods. The absence of spatial definition allows the imagery to transcend any defined place and time to exist on multiple planes simultaneously. As opposed to the idea of geography as a defined spatial plane, Rogoff postulates that geography is in fact a frame of understanding that is continually shifting. This becomes an important concept to consider in relation to the role that geography plays in the process of identity formation. If geography is dynamic, then so are the identities associated with those geographies. Rogoff writes, “It is the effort of arriving at a positionality,

⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

⁹ Enwezor, “Between Localism and Worldliness,” 33-34.

¹⁰ [Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* \(New York: Routledge, 2000\), 2.](#)

rather than the clarity of having a position, that should be focused on.”¹¹ Essaydi describes her investigation of these new spatial constructions within her artwork as one that requires both the traversing of a “geo-cultural terrain” as well as an imagined one.¹² [Like the environments](#) Enwezor and Rogoff discuss, the spaces Essaydi creates are both literal landscapes and locales, but they also exist as ephemeral representations of history and culture.

Essaydi’s pluralistic national identity has allowed her to encompass multiple identities and perspectives in the construction and interpretation of her work. *Converging Territories*, completed in 2005, is a series of over 25 photographs that depict Moroccan women, both singularly and in groups, in a seemingly non-descript location. The space is lined with text-covered fabrics that also form the garments that clothe the women [Figure 2]. Like many of the artists described in the *Art Journal* article, Essaydi experiences a global affiliation rather than [an](#) affinity with any one nation or city as her home. The uncertainty of both terrain and identity that is a result of her nomadic life has led Essaydi [to](#) occupy the liminal space that Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*. The established vocabularies around borders that have traditionally defined nations have contributed to the displacement that Essaydi experiences.

By subverting national definitions, a new space is created where a boundary-less, disidentification can occur.¹³ In *Converging Territories #21* the image consists exclusively of a wall of fabric, covered entirely in text [Figure 3]. Unlike most of the images from the series, the female figure is absent from the composition. In place of the figure, at the bottom of the composition there is a mound of fabric, which is covered in the same continuous text as the wall

¹¹ Rogoff, [Terra Infirma](#), 3

¹² Ray Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary Art* (2008): 148.

¹³ Rogoff, [Terra Infirma](#), 120

drapery. [Because this fabric occupies the space normally held by Essaydi's model, we can read the fabric as representative of an absent body.](#) The mound of fabric separates the wall from the floor, which creates some sense that this photograph is of an actual space, as opposed to just a flat image. The text that covers the fabric is Arabic calligraphic script, however the scale of the photograph distances the focus of the image so that the script is illegible. The text can be identified as non-Roman script, however, any subtleties to language are uninterpretable, creating an undefined national association. In this series, Essaydi's investigation of identity seems more rooted in her Moroccan and Saudi background, as opposed to her relatively new location in the United States. It is this conflation of her national identities that are more readily present in this series. The space that Essaydi has created in her artwork is an attempt to merge each of these [non-Western](#) cultures and nations that comprise her identity. This hybridity allows her to be both multicultural and an outsider to each of the nations with which she identifies.

For Bhabha, contemporary identity exists in a liminal space where “complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” exist as dynamic elements subject to continual renegotiation. Within these new constructs, the more traditional categories of gender, class, and nationality, which previously were considered singularly as definitive elements of one's identity are no longer sufficient. He writes that “‘in-between’ spaces” create a forum for developing “strategies of selfhood” that are both individually and collectively based. These spaces “initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”¹⁴ For Bhabha, the minority elements of identity are coalesced into a larger collective body. For example, in

¹⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

the triptych work *Converging Territories #22* Essaydi places three figures [Figure 4]. One panel shows two figures writing text onto the fabric that covers the cloth the third figure on a separate panel wears. The fabric also covers the ambiguous space the women occupy. By creating compositions using multiple figures, Essaydi further illustrates that this fabrication of identity is not bound exclusively to her, but the larger collective of the Arabic woman. Essaydi depicts the women actively creating the space the surrounds them and the fabrics that clothe them as a way to illustrate that they are constructing their own identity in this ambiguous landscape. Essaydi produces the spaces these women occupy as a way to illustrate the constructed nature of her own identity and the archetypal depiction of Arabic women. Essaydi's choice of title for her series, *Converging Territories*, illustrates her clear intention of depicting the multiple elements of identity at the point where these elements converge. Bhabha quotes Said in describing a more modern notion of the nation where "no single explanation sending one back immediately to a single origin is adequate...there are no simple discrete formations or social processes."¹⁵ The notion of a "site of collaboration" is a concept Essaydi uses in *Converging Territories* as concords between disparate elements of her identity are created at these convergence sites.

Essaydi presents her hybrid national identity within her work by overlapping visual and cultural symbolism. Essaydi performs her identity through the act of creating her photographic works. In her artist statement for *Converging Territories*, Essaydi writes that the images are expressions of her personal history, as well as "reflections on the life of Arab women in general" to a degree. She says of the series that it is "an exploration of my experience growing up as an Arab woman within Islamic culture, seen now from a very different perspective. It is the story of

¹⁵ 3: Introduction to The Location of Culture BORDER LIVES: The art of the Present, From "Dissemination: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation," in The Location of Culture, pp 139-170.

my quest to find my voice, the unique voice of an artist.”¹⁶ By using various mixed media techniques and performances within the construction of her final photographic works Essaydi recreates this complex self at the meeting points of her disparate identities, symbolized in the various techniques and references she presents to the viewer in her work.

The series, begun in 2003, is one of Essaydi’s earliest series and serves as the most direct exploration of a sense of belonging and origin. Essaydi’s own uncertainty of belonging, as described in her quote, reflects a common struggle of contemporary global artists, continually questioning, “Where do I belong?” This question can inform multiple components of her complex identity from national affiliation to global perception to position in cultural history.¹⁷ This series reflects Essaydi’s investigation of her own self-positioning as a still identified non-Westerner, caught somewhere between Morocco and Saudi Arabia, but reflecting on this position from her new home in the United States. The visual symbolism is steeped in biographical imagery that Essaydi has abstracted to serve as a more generalized depiction of Arabic women. Unlike her later series, this depiction does not take on an overtly Western gaze towards these women, but can still be seen to originate from her view as a non-Western woman.

Essaydi’s process of assembling identity is done both through symbolism within her imagery, but also in the techniques that she uses. At the surface, her work appears to be simply posed photographs of Moroccan women, however the work is comprised of complex layers of writing, painting, and photography that reflect the multivalence of her identity. Essaydi leaves evidence of her facture and the layers of creation in the final photographs presentation. Each photographic print includes the film’s uncropped border. The Fuji brand is apparent in the mar-

¹⁶ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26.

¹⁷ 14-15 Rogoff

gins, and the crop marks normally edited out of a final photograph are included as part of the image. Additionally, Essaydi poses several of her figures wielding calligraphy brushes to draw attention to the process and actions needed to construct her compositions [Figure 5]. Essaydi has discussed that she views the photographs as more of a performance-based medium, because the process of writing on the fabrics and the bodies of her models is as much an act of expression as the final image [Figure 6].¹⁸ Each step in this process becomes part of a performative act by Essaydi that serve as symbolic actions in her construction and depiction of identity.

Essaydi explores the various aspects of her identity in part by establishing contrasting spaces within the photographs. For example, in the work *Converging Territories #12*, Essaydi contrasts a seemingly passive, veiled figure with an unveiled woman actively writing on the fabric surrounding her [Figure 6]. Although they occupy the same physical space, Essaydi is able to simultaneously describe a metaphorical public and private space in the same composition. The veiled figure represents the image that the women is allowed to show in public, while the figure with exposed hair reflects the identity shown in the private arena for an Islamic women. The juxtapositions that she presents illustrate the different locations and constructs that form her reality. Bhabha writes that an “interstitial intimacy” develops between binaries such as public and private, and the past and present that allows for a subject’s hybridity to become evident through the differences presented in a discursive image.¹⁹ These disparities allow Essaydi to explore her personal artistic history, as well as a broader cultural context, which to an extent includes a wider female Arabic figure.

¹⁸ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 146.

¹⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 13.

The physical space where Essaydi shot the *Converging Territories* series provides further complexity to the layers of identity she explores in this series, as it is a now abandoned family home from her childhood. Essaydi said of the home:

I wanted to set my work in the physical space where, in the house of my childhood, a young woman was sent when she disobeyed, stepped outside the permissible behavioral space, as defined by my culture. Here, accompanied only by servants, she would spend a month, spoken to by no one, a month of silence. So this literal space is also a psychological space, a space marked by memory, and an embodiment as well of cultural boundaries, a cultural space.²⁰

Essaydi [returns to this space](#) as a [means to create a](#) forum for discourse. The house is newly significant here as well because of the fact that it is now been made newly functional through Essaydi's use of the space for her photograph's setting. By using this space in her photographs, Essaydi has reactivated this part of her personal history, in turn making her Moroccan heritage newly relevant through this series.

Architectural and cultural spaces are closely intertwined concepts in Arabic culture and dictate a great deal about the interaction of men and women in that world.²¹ Generally these spaces are ones constructed and dictated by men, however Essaydi, a woman, is now in a new position of power as the creator to reconstruct a newly imagined private space.²² Amanda Carlson wrote in the exhibition catalogue for *Converging Territories* that Essaydi has shifted her use of the specific space of the home in Morocco, which previously had symbolized isolation and punishment, to more of a focus on ownership and agency of the female models to their bodies

²⁰ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 144-145.

²¹ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 145.

²² Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26-27.

and identities.²³ By playing into certain tropes of the Arabic female in a domestic setting, she simultaneously subverts them by placing the figures in this new liminal space.

Despite the personal specificity of the space that Essaydi uses for *Converging Territories*, the space itself is dramatically abstracted, as every surface in the image is covered in text-coated canvases. Without Essaydi's description of the space's relation to her family, there is no other indication of the exact location. In *Converging Territories* though, she is showing a new hybrid space that has been constructed from multiple cultures, and therefore should not be immediately relatable to any one culture or geographically identified space. She wrote in her artist statement for this series that the non-specific space where she depicts her figures is a reflection of her own perspective that has been shaped by both Western and non-Western cultures. The space she has created within her family's building has been reimagined and recontextualized to be not simply a house in Morocco, but instead a multivalent space influenced by Essaydi's hybrid identity. She writes:

Here I speak of my thoughts and experiences directly, both as a woman caught somewhere between past and present, as well as between "East" and West," and also as an artist, exploring the language in which to "speak" from this uncertain space. But in the absence of any specificity of place, this record of personal experience provides a new kind of space for the subjects. They have become woven into and marked by a text that is their only home, a home that is being continuously revised along with the experience of the writer.²⁴

As Bhabha describes, "the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately [involve] the whole laborious telling of collectivity itself."²⁵ This new home is the

²³ Amanda Carlson, "Leaving One's Mark: The Photographs of Lalla Essaydi," in *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), 4.

²⁴ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

²⁵ From "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation," in *The Location of Culture*, pp.139-170.

convergence of each element of Essaydi's background, which has coalesced into a new, previously undefined space, which she begins to make sense of through her construction of new symbolic frameworks. It is in the home that her individual experience becomes intrinsically linked with the larger collective framework of her identity.

Art historian Lisa Saltzman writes in her book, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art*,²⁶ that artists conjure histories within their artwork—whether personal, collective, or national- as a way of founding their relationship and context within the present. These histories become situated within a present context through their newly reconfigured visual representations.²⁶ This idea speaks well to the idea of hybridity because moments of historical transformation of traditional boundaries and identities occur when previously disparate cultural traits and histories coalesce into a new present reality.²⁷ By visually restaging the past, Essaydi's artwork then becomes a way of illustrating the convergence of historical tropes in contemporary contexts.

Curator Kobena Mercer wrote in the *Art Journal* article that the international art world is undergoing a "multicultural normalization" where particular tropes and expectations have become understood as the accepted truth, and therefore "norm" for that culture.²⁸ By engaging these binaries as a way to emphasize the characteristics of her identity, it would seem that Essaydi is in fact questioning these norms and shifting the viewer's perspectives to allow for a new cultural understanding to form. By situating the viewer in what critic, Susan Denker refers

²⁶ Lisa Saltzman. *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 7.

²⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.

²⁸ Irit Rogoff, "Twenty Years On... Inside, Out" in "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Winter 1998): 45.

to as “an uneasy space of representation,” Essaydi leaves her audience in the incomplete space that rests uncomfortably between the Western and Islamic world, and the private female domestic sphere and the public life of Arabic males.²⁹

Essaydi’s exploration of space as defined by nationality and culture also encompasses gender-based binaries. For Essaydi, as an Arabic woman, the issue of space becomes increasingly complex as the public and private spheres become gendered and therefore entrenched in certain histories surrounding gender in Arabic culture. As discussed, by visually representing these histories, Essaydi is also reconfiguring history within a new context and subverting the traditional views surrounding gender roles and Arabic women to create a contemporary female identity grounded in both past and present. Essaydi wrote in her artist statement that the origins of Arabic women’s feeling of confinement within the private, domestic sphere of society is based in architectural space.³⁰ She represents this confinement in her compositions, which are tightly enclosed around the depicted figures. Her use of text-covered canvases contributes to the idea of an overwhelmingly tight space that the figures occupy. There is no sense of exit from the space of these photographs because the space appears to be an unending as the walls of text are layered and continued across the entire composition. [By creating a space that symbolizes the metaphorical confinement of these women to a domestic space she emphasizes their traditional role. Her inclusion of the text that covers the fabric of this architecture illustrates the women’s increasing presence in a realm previously occupied by men exclusively.](#) Essaydi has established a new physical boundary created with these panels, which have trans-

²⁹ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 87.

³⁰ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26-27.

cended simply existing as a text and are now architectural components of the home the women occupy.

Essaydi's constructed space that creates this new home relates directly to Bhabha's description of the "unhomed" in *The Location of Culture*. [For Bhabha](#), domestic space has experienced confusion between private and public (the feminized home and the masculinized outside world) that has resulted in a merger of these previously separate spaces. This has created an unfamiliar home where the dwellers are disoriented, which causes them to feel unhomed.³¹ Essaydi has said that one of her intentions in creating this unspecified, or unhomey, space in her work is to disrupt her audience's expectations. Rogoff's discussions of geography complement Essaydi's exploration of space in her photographs in that both describe an attempt to articulate the "constant unease between efforts at self-positioning and the languages and knowledges available to write [about] culture." For Rogoff, being "unhomed" extends beyond the realm of exclusively public versus private space to the larger framework of nationhood and the sense of belonging to a set location. The idea of "unhomed geographies" suggests a more nebulous space that rests uneasily between a state of belonging and not belonging.³²

Essaydi's use of text is her most blatant exploration of the issues surrounding her hybrid identity. She uses text as a way to both reveal and subvert notions of East and West, masculine and feminine, concealed and revealed, and history and the present. The texts that she has written on the fabrics, which cover the entire plane of her compositions, are writings from her personal journals. This allows her to incorporate an autobiographical element in her works in a subtly disguised method not immediately apparent to her viewers. In these writings Essaydi dis-

³¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

³² 4 Rogoff

cusses her memories and experiences related to being a woman and an artist, however she layers the text as a way of obscuring its message. She describes the process of her writing as negotiating the uncertain language between her identities.³³

Bhabha [states](#) that language is a play of the privileged elite to exercise power in producing the figure of the Other.³⁴ In using this text, Essaydi exercises her power over the Western audience that presumably does not have the knowledge of Arabic to understand her writings. This in turn subverts traditional power structures of the East and West, by giving an Arab woman, the greater level of authority. [For Essaydi, in](#) Western visual culture, there is a separation of image and text. However, for Islamic art forms, calligraphy is as much a form of painting and visual representation as something more figurative and representational.³⁵ She writes of her combination of cultural influences, “The text is written in an abstract, poetic style, so that it acquires a universality which reaches beyond cultural borders.”³⁶ Essaydi utilizes the text in a way that embodies both her Western artistic training as well as her Islamic traditions.

As discussed, process is an extremely important component to Essaydi. The act of producing the calligraphy which appears on the clothed backgrounds of *Converging Territories* takes months, and the henna painted on the models takes hours as well. The process becomes ritualized because of the meditative hours that have to be spent creating these bodies of text. Essaydi reconnects with her female ancestors “from Tunis, to Morocco and Andalus, who specialized in manuscript writing as part of their well established reputation for handcrafts.”³⁷ By

³³ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 146.

³⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 20.

³⁵ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 144.

³⁶ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 146.

³⁷ Mernissi, “Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios more Dangerous than Scheherazade,” 10.

identifying the connection to her ancestry, the process of creating these texts becomes integrated with constructing her personal history, and through that, her identity.

The writing also speaks to the larger Islamic tradition as well. The [practice](#) of calligraphy is traditionally inaccessible to women and is reserved for holy texts. As a female producing the texts and placing them on a female figure, Essaydi reassigns new values to writing and how it is viewed and utilized. The document becomes transcultural by serving as a traditional veil, but simultaneously serving as a non-traditional vehicle for women that is rooted in American feminist artwork.³⁸ In a review of Essaydi's work, a critic stated that divergences in the use of text are at the hands of female artist reclaiming calligraphy as a way to "bear witness to the violence of history."³⁹ Essaydi describes that henna is used to mark the major milestones in the life of a Moroccan woman, so by combining traditional calligraphic texts of the Islamic, male-dominated world with the women's art of henna, Essaydi marks the milestone of this new agency for the women who are now taking an active role in establishing their own place in history.⁴⁰

Art historian Christine Mullen Kreamer addresses the concept of power in relation to the idea of inscribed meaning in the language of body arts. The notion of political and social power is germane to Essaydi's work as it addresses the concept of agency and her own body as it is situated in a politically charged context. Kreamer explores the power inherent in creating and maintaining knowledge through language and writing, and the connection of that knowledge to the capacity for authority. Authority is expressed through the dissemination of language. [As Kreamer writes](#), "Power is...dynamic, creative and enabling, and it embodies no-

³⁸ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

³⁹ Susan Denker, "Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories," in *Nka Journal of Contemporary Art* (2004): 86.

⁴⁰ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 146.

tions of agency, identity, appropriation, transformation and resistance."⁴¹ Exercising the power of language on one's body then expresses agency towards one's own identity, but also the reading of that identity by others.

The power of language is salient to the nebulous concepts of memory and history within the collective consciousness. A component of the continual evolution of memory and history is the removal and re-imagination of historical facts and memories to serve the current interests of a people. Mary Nooter Roberts explains that the readings of these [histories](#) varies and adjusts according to the occasion, politics, and customs of the day in order to meet present day demands. The past must always be considered a manipulated representation.⁴² She writes, "History is a legend, an invention of the present, and memory is always now."⁴³ The changing of history is a form of domination of knowledge within a culture and an individual's identity, and therefore an expression of their power.

Much as cultures use forms of graphic and written communication to develop cultural and historical identities, contemporary artists, including Essaydi, have also adopted these modes in order to express ideas regarding social and political purposes. Contemporary African artists have used language as a means for reclaiming meaning and identity associated with terms such as "diasporic" and "African."⁴⁴ The process of writing is an active mode of expression in that it constructs identity and social relations, which gives artists a new agency in their

⁴¹ Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Inscribing Power/Writing Politics," in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. by Christine Mullen Kreamer and Sarah Margaret Adams. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, National Museum of Art, 2007), 127.

⁴² Roberts and Roberts, "Audacities of Memory," 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ Harney, "Word Play: Text and Image in Contemporary African Arts," 204.

work.⁴⁵ As Kreamer described, by exercising the power of language, these artists have in turn rendered themselves powerful in the interpretation and dissemination of cultural and historical identity, and therefore, memory.

Saltzman describes this act of creation and recording of new histories as important because it puts the artist in the position of functioning as “an active agent in the cultural production of memory.” For an Arabic woman, the most disenfranchised figure in Orientalist visual history, this new assertion of power is a particularly potent one, because Essaydi is rewriting the condition of the new globally oriented female from a place of empowerment, as opposed to the previous position of oppression.⁴⁶ Bhabha argued that political empowerment could only emerge from a multiculturalist approach being presented by a community. By elevating issues from merely social differences experienced through traditions of disparate cultures, they become associated with “political conditions of the present,” allowing for revision and reconstruction. This revision becomes a means for renewing established history in order to “innovate and [interrupt] the performance of the present.”⁴⁷ Essaydi uses the visual rhetoric that formerly represented oppression to symbolize her liberation.

Along with her use of architecture, Essaydi’s symbolic use of text becomes significant here. The text is simultaneously “thought, speech, work, clothing, shelter, home, and world of its inhabitants, and constitutes a transcultural document that is more closely aligned with the currency of cultural nomadism, in particular with its link to new articulations of global femi-

⁴⁵ Roberts, “Inscribing Meaning: Ways of Knowing,” 17-8, 26.

⁴⁶ Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter*, 6.

⁴⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 3.

nism."⁴⁸ Because the text is so pervasive throughout the entire composition it becomes both a textural component, but also stresses the importance of that text and makes it an element that engages the audience rhetorically, if not literally.⁴⁹

As much as the physical places that Essaydi has inhabited have shaped her hybrid identity, so too have the intangible elements of her memories and history combined with her current experiences. Each of the spaces that Essaydi has created in her works serves to create new questions about spaces of memory as they are revised in a liminal "home of the present." Essaydi states that the spaces and panels of texts are like vehicles to "a new threshold" which exists between the memories of her past and the imagined spaces of her present.⁵⁰ Saltzman described that in any visual representation, the artist is always in the process of creating a new "material trace of the fugitive body" of memory; they capture and create a new history that defines the contemporary strategy of understanding the past in the present context.⁵¹ Drawing on philosopher Martin Heidegger's proposition that boundaries are the spaces from which something emerges, as opposed to the location where they end,⁵² Bhabha writes that creating this new "continuum of past and present" was necessary to the living, because refiguring the past invigorates the present.⁵³ Through her visual representations of hybridity, Essaydi empowers her subjects, her experience, and her history by reconfiguring her personal and national histories in the converging territories of her present. Essaydi uses the borders of these locations as the means to create a new space, specific to her personal cultural and geographic

⁴⁸ Denker, "Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories," 86.

⁴⁹ Carlson, "Leaving One's Mark: The Photographs of Lalla Essaydi," 5.

⁵⁰ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26-27.

⁵¹ Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter*, 2-3.

⁵² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

⁵³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 7.

experiences and history. Contemporary identity is comprised of a new localism that is unique to the individual and their own cultural experience, as opposed to the previous identification with the specific culture and history to which you were born. Contemporary artists inhabit a new globalism that redefines traditional notions of identity.

3 NEGOTIATING ORIENTALISM: REVISING IDENTITY

Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, originally published in 1978, began the discourse [surrounding](#) the idea of the Orient as a construct established and disseminated by the West as a means of asserting their power over the Middle East.⁵⁴ Orientalism defined the West by representing the East as "Other" through imagery, language, and experience.⁵⁵ Since the publication of this study, the concept of the other and cultural identity [has undergone](#) radical shifts as globalization, migration, and displacement [has replaced](#) traditional boundaries with seemingly borderless global spaces. Simultaneously, scholars [have](#) examined how this new global environment [results](#) in reassertions of cultural identification by the othered cultures.⁵⁶ Essaydi addresses the contemporary issues of cultural identity and representation by using tropes of Orientalist painting in her series *Harem* (2009-2011) and *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005-2008). Essaydi references Western representations of the Arabic female as a way to subvert traditional conceptions of Islamic women and assert a new agency in constructing a revised identity for these women. The *Les Femmes du Maroc* series illustrates a clear transition from Essaydi's allegorical comparison to Orientalist images through the subtle uses of text-based backgrounds and compositions, such as in *Converging Territories*, to a more immediate use of signs and images of the "Orient" in *Harem* through her use of actual harem settings in the background and women's clothing [\[Figure 8\]](#).

⁵⁴ This [chapter](#) will refer to the Orient to describe the Saidian understanding of a Western-defined Middle East in relation to the concept of Orientalism. This term does not reflect the geographic designation of this area, simply the theoretical space defined in *Orientalism*.

⁵⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1-2.

⁵⁶ Monica Amor et al., "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal* 57 (1998): 29.

Western-created Orientalist paintings have long been associated with the images that represent Arabic cultures as opposed to a more authentic historiographic documentation, based on firsthand study as opposed to fictionalized accounts.⁵⁷ This established visual tradition presented the Orient as “alien, unusual, irrational, deprived, and childlike” while defining the Occident as “rational, mature, virtuous, and normal.” For Said, this places the West in the superior position as a more established cultural authority, helping to define the still “primitive” East.⁵⁸ These homogenizing representations of the East became the basis for justifying European imperialist views.⁵⁹ Historian Lisa Lowe describes constructions of Oriental identity by the West as invented fictional misrepresentations of the Other, which serve to establish a “viable cultural identity” for the East.⁶⁰ Within these established visual tropes though, Arabic cultures have undergone historical revisions, which invert and subvert the Western imagery representing them; these revisions reclaim agency in the depiction of their society.⁶¹ Historian Abdalah Laroui described the contemporary Arabic ideology as interested in the self-examination of “their identity, their past, and their society” as a means critically to re-evaluate “the tools of thinking that have dominated the Arab mind.”⁶² Essaydi’s photographic works are a contribution to this revisionist discourse in the reshaping of representations of the exoticized Arab world, particularly through her depictions of women in harem-like settings.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 84.

⁵⁸ A. S. Kadayifci-Orellana, "Self-Orientalization and Occidentalization in Intra-Muslim Conflict," *Midwest Political Science Association 67th Annual National Conference* (March 11, 2010): http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p362961_index.html 3.

⁵⁹ Kadayifci-Orellana, "Self-Orientalization and Occidentalization in Intra-Muslim Conflict," 4.

⁶⁰ Lisa Lowe, “Rereadings in Orientalism: Oriental Inventions and Inventions of the Orient in Montesquie’s ‘Lettres persanes’,” *Cultural Critique* 15 (Spring 1990): 116-24.

⁶¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁶² Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 82.

Traditional Orientalist imagery of the harem created by white European male painters and writers of the late nineteenth century describes a voyeuristic experience of erotic pleasures based on stories from the mystical harems of the *Arabian Nights Tales* where Eastern women are placed in a position of objectification.⁶³ Essaydi's series *Harem* and *Les Femmes du Maroc* use compositions that reference these nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings' depictions of women in their mysterious space of the harem. *Harem* boasts the bright colors of Moroccan architecture and takes on a glossy, decorative appearance not unlike that of a fashion magazine spread [Figure 11]. Her later series, *Harem*, uses similar figure groupings and poses found in *Les Femmes du Maroc*, but *Les Femmes du Maroc* employs a more restrained palette, instead focusing on the detail of the written text like that in the *Converging Territories* series. These two series mark a distinct shift in Essaydi's interest from compositions that focused on Arabic text comprising the background and visual texture of her compositions, to attention to patterned-based visuals that do not appear to exclude her Western audience. Although the text she uses in her earlier series, including *Les Femmes du Maroc*, is layered to the point of being illegible for any audience, the unfamiliarity with the calligraphic text by Western audiences distances their connection to the imagery. By using tile patterns instead of text in *Harem*, Essaydi creates more universally legible imagery. The tiled backgrounds more closely reflect the types of "ethnic" and "authentic" Moroccan backgrounds used in travel magazines, as opposed to the unfamiliar panels of text present in her earlier series. *Harem* marks a shift from the abstracted location of the earlier series to a somewhat more specified architectural location [Figure 7, 9]. The space depicted in *Harem* is markedly Moroccan, but there is no additional indication of its geograph-

⁶³ Mary Roberts et al., "Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem" in *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 181.

ical or symbolic meaning. Both series, though, imply that the location is a private, domestic space inhabited only by the women in the photographs. Despite these changes, the reclined and seated poses of Essaydi's models remain fairly similar. *Les Femmes du Maroc* employs more direct references to Orientalist painting compositions, while *Harem* has evolved into less pointed allegorical imagery. These shifts in Essaydi's work allow this work to become legible to a larger audience that encompasses both East and West.

In both *Les Femmes du Maroc* and *Harem*, Essaydi directly references paintings from the Orientalist canon. By using imagery familiar to her Western audience as ethnographic representations of the Arabic world, as well as imagery acknowledged as authoritative by the sheer act of being iconic paintings, Essaydi situates her viewer in a more comfortable position to images of a new Arabic woman with whom the audience may not yet be familiar. Essaydi uses odalisque figures in multiple compositions throughout both series that directly mimic Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's iconic image, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) [Figure 12]. In her most direct reference to the iconic Ingres painting, titled *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque* (2008), differences exist that distinguish Essaydi's female figures from that of Ingres [Figure 13]. Ingres's female figure directs a strong, almost sexualized gaze toward the viewers, engaging them and illustrating her power. Essaydi's figure's gaze is less sexualized, although it is still direct.⁶⁴

Unlike Ingres, Essaydi clothes her figures in a way that hides most of their bodies. The portions of uncovered skin are still decorated in calligraphic script painted on in henna, providing a subtle veil to shield their figure from the audience's gaze. Essaydi's figures have the un-

⁶⁴ Fatema Mernissi, "Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios more Dangerous than Scheherazade" in *Les Femmes du Maroc* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2009), 10.

sual mark of exposed soles of the feet and hair. Like the subtle veil of text that covers the models' skin, the feet similarly are covered in a layer of henna. Traditionally for Islamic women, the hair and soles of the feet are always covered from public gaze, so in showing these features Essaydi is not only subverting the Western Orientalist images, but also Islamic expectations of women's modesty. By disrupting the expectation of both Western and non-Western audiences through this conflation of imagery, Essaydi allows her figures to transcend expectation and ritual to [form](#) a new contemporary identity.

Essaydi uses fabric, pattern, and text to envelop the women within the architectural space. Essaydi emphasizes equality between the women and the space they occupy, both literally in the architectural space and symbolically within historical imagery. She says of the techniques in her works that painting played a large role in creating her photographs, explaining "it was as a painter that I began my investigations into Orientalism—I created somewhat abstract settings for the work, settings that are deliberately reminiscent of Orientalist painting."⁶⁵

Essaydi puts careful detail into every element of the construction of her images, so that the production of the imagery becomes as important as the final photographic print. This process of assembling her images becomes symbolic of her assembling of the new Arab female identity while simultaneously referencing the Orientalist past. The multivalent techniques she employs are evidence of the complex, layered history and identities associated with the Orientalist depictions of these women. In *Harem #8* Essaydi's facture is subtly apparent throughout the details of the photograph [\[Figure 10\]](#). As described previously, Essaydi leaves evidence of her process in the photograph by including the image's crop marks and film brand apparent in

⁶⁵ Ray Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," *Nka Journal of Contemporary Art* (2008): 144.

the edge of the composition. The heavy black of the framed border removes the ability of the viewer to continue their line of vision past the image's edge. By leaving the marks of her process, Essaydi stresses her role as the mediator between the viewer and her imagery. She also reminds the viewer further that these images are fabricated and manipulated, and not simply a direct view into the world she documents.

The constructed elements of this imagery continue in the non-architectural components of the imagery in *Harem*. Essaydi created fabrics that directly appropriate the architectural tile work within the spaces the women inhabit. These fabricated elements permeate the women's clothing and shoes, as well as the chairs and pillows where they lounge. The models are placed directly in front of the original source material of the patterns to call attention to the origin of Essaydi's constructed fabrics. The re-contextualization of these patterns into clothing and furniture, as opposed to architecture, is not an immediately evident shift. Essaydi has placed these elements into the make-up of her photographs in a way [that](#) appears authentic, not unlike the misplacement of artifacts within nineteenth-century Orientalist works. The artificiality of the newly contextualized patterns in these photographs disrupts the assumed authenticity of Essaydi's depiction of harems, so that by making her facture and hand evident, she illustrates the fabricated nature of Orientalized identity. Essaydi uses the merger of her backgrounds and figures by implementing the fabrics as a way to condense and flatten the space of the photograph. This allows the audience to [identify](#) more easily and readily that the figures in Essaydi's photographs are intrinsically connected to the architectural and historical surroundings of the harem.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 146.

Critic Benjamin Genocchio questions whether Essaydi's photographs replicate more than revise "the stereotypical imagery she is working with."⁶⁷ For instance, *Les Femmes du Maroc #4* is a compositional facsimile of the poses and placement of figures in Eugene Delacroix's painting, *Algerian Women in Their Apartment* (1834), which illustrates Arab women as slaves resting within their harem [Figure 14]. Essaydi abstracts the location of the figures in the composition by simplifying the settings they occupy through her use of cloth as a means of flattening and obscuring the location. Essaydi integrates these women into the background to show the fixity of these poses and compositions in the mind of the Western and Arabic viewer who can never completely remove the image of the Arabic woman from these Orientalist paintings and settings, despite inaccuracies the images contain [Figure 15]. Essaydi stated that, in her photographs, the "projected space of Orientalism" was intended to compete with the new space of understanding that she is creating within the "authentic" domestic spaces of Arab women where they dictate how they want to be seen. Essaydi plays into the tradition of these paintings with the compositions to disrupt the viewer's expectations by appearing to cater to them.⁶⁸ Genocchio suggests that Essaydi appears to have simply recreated these Orientalist compositions in a contemporary context, without offering a revised subtext to the image. Essaydi makes subtle adjustments to her compositions to revise Orientalist characteristics of Arabic women, such as in the use of more direct gazes of the models towards their viewers in her Odalisque figures. Essaydi's images only have slight changes to the visual vocabulary of the

⁶⁷ Benjamin Genocchio, "Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism," *New York Times* (March 7, 2010): NJ14.

⁶⁸ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 149.

Orientalist works as a way to complicate the viewers' expectations and response to the work. This provides her audience an opportunity to revise their own relationship to this imagery.⁶⁹

A recurring theme in Essaydi's work, which directly impacts her relationship to Orientalist themes in her photography, is the exploration of her own multiculturalism and hybridity. As discussed in previous chapters, Bhabha's notion of "initiating new signs of identity" as a way to define society is a concept Essaydi uses in her series as she establishes concords between disparate elements of her identity to create a newly revised and envisioned identity seated in both the East and West. Essaydi's mixed background (which includes Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United States) raises the question of whether or not her works can be considered Orientalist because she exists as both an insider and outsider to the cultures she is representing. Her United States home places her as the Western figure of power depicting the othered female; her Moroccan and Saudi Arabian background establish her as the othered Islamic woman simultaneously. This dichotomy is important to consider because it becomes a critical component in her assertion of a new type of agency. In the depictions of these figures she [appropriates](#) Orientalist aesthetics [as a way of critiquing them](#) from a revisionist standpoint. Orientalism in a contemporary context becomes complicated because globalization and hybridity have displaced the established geographical and cultural binaries that existed at the time of the nineteenth-century Orientalists.

Essaydi's experience combines her hybrid geographical background and the perspectives she has adopted with the historical and present-day interest in representation of the Arabic female. Sociologist Fatima Mernissi wrote in the exhibition catalogue for *Les Femmes du*

⁶⁹ http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm

Maroc that women have begun to make images of the Arab world, which Westerners see as “a stagnant, traditional area.” because of the necessity to revise and represent a more accurate portrayal of their culture.⁷⁰ For Rogoff, understandings of geography have masked contemporary conditions surrounding how we understand identity formation.⁷¹ The new terrains to traverse contemporary constructions of identity include not only geography, but also history and gender. Essaydi states:

Arab women are having trouble with both worlds, Arab and Western. The Orientalist narrative is being projected on them from both directions. They are either weak and in need of rescue or jezebels who need to be brought under control. In my photographs, I try to clear away these projections so that they can be seen as powerful presences in their own right.⁷²

Essaydi constructs her photographs to play into the established visual rhetoric of Orientalism in order to carefully deconstruct the elements within it while maintaining the interest of both her Western and Arabic audiences.

The physical locations of these photographs are an important component to Essaydi’s examination of Orientalism within the new parameters that she defines. In Arab culture, gender traditionally defines the function of architectural and social space: men occupy public space, and women the private domestic one. Physical boundaries define cultural ones and dictate social roles within those spaces.⁷³ Essaydi wrote in her artist statement that the origins of Arabic women’s feeling of confinement within the private, domestic sphere of society is based in ar-

⁷⁰ Mernissi, “Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios more Dangerous than Scheherazade,” 12.

⁷¹ Irit Rogoff, “Twenty Years On... Inside, Out” in “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Winter 1998): 49.

⁷² Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 148.

⁷³ Waterhouse, “Lalla Essaydi: An Interview,” 146.

chitectural space.⁷⁴ She represents this confinement in *Les Femmes du Maroc* through enclosed spaces surrounding the models. Similar to the use of spaces in *Converging Territories*, her use of text-covered canvases contributes to the idea of an overwhelmingly tight space the figures occupy. There is no sense of escape from the space of these photographs because the background appears to be an unending wall of text, which is layered and continued across the entire composition. Essaydi establishes a new physical boundary with these panels, which transcend simple existence as text and act as architectural components of the home the women occupy. The ambiguous space in *Les Femmes du Maroc*, which was photographed in Essaydi's studio in Boston, transcends the specificity of the gendered home and becomes a newly imagined environment imagined by Essaydi to house the new image of the contemporary Arab female. The depiction of an abstracted setting adds additional layers of meaning to Essaydi's works, despite [the fact](#) that, in actuality, the setting is located in an American city. *Harem* also uses a space that is shielded and enclosed from the outside world. Like the textual background of *Les Femmes du Maroc*, tightly arranged tile work creates a similarly undulating pattern across the composition.

The Orientalist painters constructed their own form of abstracted Middle Eastern setting, which was a Western created and digested reality, and so too is Essaydi's space. The projections and assumptions of the viewer are what define the space as Middle Eastern as opposed to factual renderings of the setting. This uncertain space that the women occupy, Essaydi says, is:

A space of memory...where they are being revised, where each encounter with the viewer opens new questions. Beyond the reach of simple cultural naming,

⁷⁴ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26-27.

these words constitute irreducible marks of existence. They have carried me, like the women in my images, to a new threshold.⁷⁵

In *Les Femmes du Maroc #8*, the audience compiles the elements of the Arabic women and the calligraphic text to hypothesize the geographical location, however, no indication outside of these easily misinterpreted cues exists to confirm the location. Essaydi wrote that this space is not only intended to create geographical ambiguity, but also a temporal one. This uncertain setting is located in a space that combines the contemporary woman through her use of the henna and exposed hair and soles of the feet with the historical elements of traditional calligraphy and Orientalist compositions. The image loosely references Orientalist compositions of women in groups in an enclosed space, such as depictions of harems by nineteenth-century Orientalist painter John Frederick Lewis [Figure 17]. Like those nineteenth-century compositions that feature passive women lounging around their private space, Essaydi has a similar grouping with seemingly inactive women [Figure 16]. As with her recreation of the Odalisque figure though, the women in Essaydi's composition are more alert than previously depicted: figures glance towards one another indicating engagement with each other; the seated figure on the left attends to her garment, perhaps reading the text which has been inscribed onto her. As with all of the images in this series, the text-covered cloth covers the location of the image entirely. The absence of specificity removes the correlation to either the past or present, allowing the composition to hover in a liminal temporality between past and present.

Returning to Said's concern of who is creating these images and the power they garner from these photographs, it becomes important to consider the idea of the gaze. As discussed

⁷⁵ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

earlier, Essaydi's hybrid background puts her in a unique position of existing as both within and outside of the Middle Eastern world she describes. Rogoff said the gaze of a producer from outside of a culture will always be that of the viewer from outside, regardless of any artifacts or information about that culture that they study and collect. The producers of cultural voyeurism claim expertise about a culture and assert the authenticity of their depictions.⁷⁶ Because of her position as a global citizen occupying both the East and West, Essaydi is both this cultural voyeur Rogoff spoke of who creates potentially inauthentic imagery as well as someone from within the culture who critiques this othering gaze.

Essaydi establishes multiple gazes within these works that refer to both her insider and outsider positions. There is an allusion to the white, European male gaze through her references to Orientalist compositions. These imply the sexualized, othering gaze of the West as a hegemonizing force inflicted on the East. Essaydi said of her intention to mimic the sexualized gaze of the Western male:

I want the viewer to become sensitized to the voyeuristic, sexualized gaze of the Western Orientalist painters, but at the same time be enthralled with the authentic beauty of the culture these artists encountered in North Africa... My challenge has been to try to separate the beauty of the cultural surround from that of the women themselves, so seeming passive and receptive, so eerily like the furniture and the welcoming spaces.⁷⁷

The gaze becomes a component of the agency of Essaydi and the Arabic models. The gaze of the imagery is not exclusively that of the photograph's creator, but also the women's understanding of their gaze on themselves, as mediated by Eastern and Western male figures, too.

Historian Miriam Cooke writes of the contemporary Arabic female that their complex self-

⁷⁶ Rogoff, "Twenty Years On... Inside, Out," 47.

⁷⁷ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 149.

consciousness is defined by themselves, their communities, and the way outsiders see them.⁷⁸

However, the more collaged approach with Essaydi's use of the text and cloths, as well as her reconfiguration of text onto the human form are decidedly Western tropes in global feminism.⁷⁹ These opposing types of gaze documents her own background as an Arabic woman and the culture she experienced, but also her new perspective as someone now engrained in Western society. This has resulted in both a harsher critique of the imagery of depictions of Arabic women, but also a new acceptance of her original culture. Essaydi's methods of depicting these female figures speak to a larger discourse of global feminism while simultaneously being understood as Muslim. It is this dichotomy that is always present in this series.

There is also the gaze implied by Essaydi's medium of photography. The photographic lens carries the implication of the artistic gaze, which suggests the manipulation and construction of an image as separate from reality. The image taken through the lens exists as a projection of reality seen through the mediation of the artist, as opposed to a completely untouched account of what is being shown. Amanda Carlson wrote of Essaydi's use of the photograph as a vehicle for penetrating and "disrupting" the history of the images of the harem and the odalisque: "Photography as a medium and other lens-based art forms are embedded in a legacy of cultural encounter."⁸⁰

The veil in these works also becomes central to the discussion of revising the Western Orientalist themes in depictions of Arabic females. Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat works with Ori-

⁷⁸ Miriam Cooke, "Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World," *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring 2000): 150-184.

⁷⁹ Susan Denker, "Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories," in *Nka Journal of Contemporary Art* (2004): 87.

⁸⁰ Amanda Carlson, "Leaving One's Mark: The Photographs of Lalla Essaydi," in *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, (New York: powerHouse Books, 2005), 5.

entalist themes similar to Essaydi's, albeit in a much more politicized way. She described the history of the "Western obsession" with the veiled Muslim woman as intrinsically linked to the passive eroticism implied in Orientalist painting.⁸¹ Both Neshat and Essaydi use henna and calligraphic text to cover the bodies of the women in their photographs. When painted on the face, this text takes on the role of a symbolic veil by creating a layer between the audience and the photographed figure. The writing also serves as an Oriental signifier by virtue of being a traditional Arabic calligraphic text. In the work of both Essaydi and Neshat though, the text of the veil becomes both silencing and liberating, **both** imprisoning and empowering. The Western viewer becomes the outsider from these photographs because they cannot dissect the language within them, placing the knowledgeable Arab audience who can [discern some of the illegible text](#) in a new position of power. This illiteracy becomes another symbolic veil that exists between the Western audiences and the Arabic producers of these images. Essaydi links the implied secrecy of the veil with the "seemingly inaccessible interior realm...that is the precinct of woman in traditional Arab culture."⁸²

Outside of the issue of knowledge that emerges from the East-West dichotomy with this text within her non-Western background, Essaydi subverts traditional gender roles in the act of creating this text. She has chosen to write the text within these photographs in traditional calligraphy, which was a practice completed by men specifically for sacred texts. Essaydi has reclaimed this tradition not only **by** appropriating the male art form for her own use, but **also** by reclaiming the purpose of calligraphy to now be a form of text which can appear not only on

⁸¹ Iftikhar Dadi, "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34/1 (2008): 125-26.

⁸² Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 148.

the surfaces of a home, but on a woman's body.⁸³ Essaydi has reimagined and recontextualized the [calligraphic](#) texts as a new form of political statement and assertion of female identity in contemporary Arab countries. Essaydi wrote in her statement about this series that her models participated because they felt it contributed to displacing Western audiences' perceptions of them, which often missed their very rich cultural traditions.⁸⁴

Although the calligraphy that Essaydi uses is [historically](#) a male art form, henna is a traditional part of a woman's life as it is used to indicate rites of passage.⁸⁵ Essaydi has said that she is interested in complicating the traditional roles that both calligraphy and henna serve within their gendered roles as a way to engage with new types of cultural patterns reflective of a new hybridity.⁸⁶ Similarly to the cloths covered in the calligraphy, the surface of the model's skin is also adorned in calligraphy applied to the body with henna. In this way, the henna functions as both a tegumentary text to be read, but also a new type of veil for these women. They are shielded both literally by the cloth, but also [by](#) the words of Essaydi transcribed on their [corpora](#). Essaydi says that the text inscribed onto the figures of these women is also symbolic of the voice she is giving them through these photographs by representing them, as a way to suggest a fluidity to the hierarchies in Arab culture.⁸⁷

Essaydi says that this textual veil serves as a form of empowerment for the women of her photographs. She writes that her textual veil exists not only to conceal, protect, and deco-

⁸³ Denker, "Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories," 86.

⁸⁴ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26.

⁸⁵ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26.

⁸⁶ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

⁸⁷ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

rate, but also to subvert the silence imposed on these women by both Eastern and Western male figures:

These women “speak” through the language of femininity to each other and to the house, just as my photographs have enabled me to speak. Through these images I am able to suggest the complexity of Arab female identity—as I have known it—and the tension between hierarchy and fluidity at the heart of Arab culture.⁸⁸

Mernissi wrote of Essaydi’s veiling of Ingres’s traditionally nude odalisque figure that the veil exists to remind the audience that these figures of the Orientalist harem are not only constructed archetypes, but also are figures with their own communication strategy.⁸⁹ Essaydi described that her models participate in these photographs because they view it as a way to contribute to a small feminist movement working towards “the emancipation of Arab woman, and at the same time conveying to a Western audience their very rich traditions, often misunderstood in the West.”⁹⁰ The texts within [all of Essaydi’s photographic series](#) are taken from her private journals, so it could be said that the voice being given to the models then is not necessarily empowering them; instead it simply gives them Essaydi’s voice as opposed to that of the previously European male in the representation of their identity.

By writing on the figures and backgrounds of the worlds created within her photographs, Essaydi begins to re-write the established history of the Arab woman. Said [noted](#) that texts are used to create reality, and Essaydi is literally constructing her entire image’s landscape and reality with text, particularly in the case of *Les Femmes du Maroc*. Bhabha questioned whether the West produced an Other through theoretical language that emphasized the power

⁸⁸ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 27.

⁸⁹ Mernissi, “Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios more Dangerous than Scheherazade,” 10.

⁹⁰ Essaydi, *Lalla Essaydi: Converging Territories*, 26.

of the Orientalizer.⁹¹ Because Essaydi creates this text in the language of the traditionally subjugated figure she reclaims authority and is able to rewrite her identity in Arabic, in her own words. A section of the calligraphic text in Essaydi's compositions states, "The more my knowledge increases, the more I become convinced submissiveness is impossible."⁹² Essaydi directly correlates literacy with the power structure imposed upon women, explaining why she takes pains to articulate and give voice to the models in her photographs. The images are complicated though, by the fact that the writing on these models is taken from the personal journals of Essaydi. While the text is a form of empowerment for Essaydi, it is not necessarily so for every Arab woman. Because of her Westernized perspective, there is also still the possible element of an Orientalized effect to the writing.

In traditional Orientalist paintings the harem is a space that exists for the sexual voyeurism of men where the women appeared to be ethnographic props within the setting. Cultural critic Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab wrote that perceptions of the contemporary Arabic woman are partially the result of these images, which were seen as authentic historical documentation.⁹³ Essaydi shifts the representations of these women to new, contemporary figures who have a greater level of agency in the identity and perception of themselves by serving as models in the photographs. Philosopher Judith Butler described the idea of claiming the body as a historical idea as a means to mediate and concretize its expression in the world. The body may bear meaning that is "fundamentally dramatic" and can exist as a dynamic embodiment of identity

⁹¹ Waterhouse, "Lalla Essaydi: An Interview," 146.

⁹² Mernissi, "Lalla Essaydi: A Spinner of Scenarios more Dangerous than Scheherazade," 11.

⁹³ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 85.

through reenacting a historical situation, which is present within that body.⁹⁴ The figures in Essaydi's harems are indeed pregnant with the historical rhetoric surrounding the European depictions. However, by re-enacting these histories, new meaning is inscribed by the mere fact of their existence in a new present context. This new identity becomes a continuum of past and present that Bhabha describes as an "insurgent act of cultural translation" which renews the past through the performance of the present.⁹⁵

Essaydi incorporates the history of [Arabic](#) feminine culture through her use of the henna painted on the bodies of the women, as well as the Western visual tradition of Orientalist harem paintings. In each case she has made subtle changes to these elements as a way to revise the history of the symbolic meanings attached to them in a way that is newly relevant in her own contemporary context. *Harem* establishes an image of [the](#) Arab world by using a more Westernized aesthetic, implying a more contemporary world. Saltzman described that history encapsulates the ideas of the past as they relate to a personal history, but also a larger national and global collective history. She explains that the renegotiation of these elements of the past within a present-day circumstance allows them to not only be revised to fit the new context, but also that by referencing these elements of history, the past that is being referred to is made newly relevant and the memory of them is made to matter. The subject of history then, becomes "an active agent in the cultural production of memory."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Judith Butler, *Sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 91.

⁹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 7.

⁹⁶ Lisa Saltzman. *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6-7.

Artists are currently producing cultural imagery at a time of transition that results in complex figures “of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” exploring this new position.⁹⁷ It is [in](#) this liminal space within contemporary culture where feminist Arabic artists, such as Essaydi, find themselves. Rogoff wrote that it is imperative to understand how we interact with images in order to reshape the ways that stories surrounding cultures are represented.⁹⁸ Through understanding the history and ramifications of the Orientalist gaze, Essaydi is able to adjust the narratives surrounding her own identity. It has become necessary for [artists such as Essaydi](#) to use artistic production as a way of mediating the collective experiences of their national and personal identities in order to negotiate and construct a revised image of their identity.

⁹⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

⁹⁸ 30: Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*

4 DEVELOPING IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY MOROCCO

In 2009, Islamic cultural historian Munir Jiwa conducted a study on [the impact of 9/11](#) on Muslim artists who lived in New York City. Jiwa [examines](#) the [perception](#) of the [artists'](#) work [by](#) a global audience [and how the content is understood](#) as politically critical. These artists work to “strategically assert their particular positions as postcolonial elites and minorities working in the Euro-American art worlds.” [The artists each subvert](#) the narratives cast upon them by Western art history. Similarly, Essaydi (a Muslim artist no longer based in the Arabic world) works to a similar means in her attempts to revise Orientalist constructs of the Arab female.⁹⁹

Essaydi’s most recent series, *Bullet* (2009-present), continues to develop her exploration of the Islamic female, however [she](#) now [focuses](#) more directly [on](#) the identity associated with the [con-temporary](#) socio-political character projected by Western mass media.

The common thread [amongst](#) the artists Jiwa examined was a similarity in Muslim women artists’ understanding of culture, boundaries, and historical identity as both insiders and outsiders.¹⁰⁰ As we have seen in Essaydi’s previous series, particularly *Converging Territories*, much of [the artist’s](#) work uses a visual vocabulary that describes the straddling of identity based in both the Middle East and America. Professor Yvonne Haddad [observes](#) that Muslim artists’ visual [imagery](#) increasingly serves to mediate the “us versus them” mentality, particularly in a post-9/11 climate, which vilifies their Middle Eastern identity.¹⁰¹ In *Bullet*, Essaydi examines Western perception of violence [in](#) the Middle East through the allegorical use of bullets, which she pairs with Orientalist symbols that relate to Western perception of Muslim women.

⁹⁹ 79: Imaging, imagining and representation: Muslim visual artists in NYC, Munir Jiwa

¹⁰⁰ 83: Imaging, imagining and representation: Muslim visual artists in NYC, Munir Jiwa

¹⁰¹ 83: Imaging, imagining and representation: Muslim visual artists in NYC, Munir Jiwa

In an interview, Essaydi states that in *Bullet* she is interested in how the rhetoric of terrorism has re-shaped both East and West, but particularly life in Morocco. She describes that while the West has become desensitized to images of terrorism, Moroccans are still dealing with the anti-western religious mindset and their sense of being judged as terrorists by the West. She said of the new Arab identity in post-9/11 Morocco:

There seems to be a growing need to take shelter in a very clearly defined Arab identity, so that one frequently encounters the complete veil, and the beard, neither of which, until recently, was a common sight in this country. Morocco has long prided itself on its ability to assimilate modernity, to embrace progress, without sacrificing its own deeply rooted traditions. These days, I sense uneasiness with this kind of ambiguity.¹⁰²

By creating a background and clothing for her figures now constructed entirely of bullets,

Essaydi illustrates both the identity projected upon the Middle Eastern figure by the West and the identity that they are placing upon themselves. In *Portrait with Bullet Shells #2* [Figure 19], Essaydi references both the Middle Eastern and Western view of Arabic identity through the presence of the veil. The newfound search for Arabic identity within the contemporary Moroccan landscape provides an interesting connection and comparison to Essaydi's use of nineteenth-century Orientalist imagery. These more historical references are made contemporary and salient to the political environment of Morocco through Essaydi's use of the bullet components and the veil. In many of Essaydi's works there is an ambiguity of space and time, however, *Bullet* makes itself known as set in contemporary visual culture through the presence of the bullets.

Over the past decade Essaydi's work has focused on her shifting perspective as a Moroccan-born female now based in the United States. In a recent interview she stated:

¹⁰² http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

As an Arab artist, living in the West, I have been granted an extraordinary perspective from which to observe both cultures, and I have also been imprinted by these cultures. In a sense, I feel I inhabit (and perhaps even embody) a “cross-roads,” where the cultures come together – merge, interweave, and, sometimes, clash.¹⁰³

Like many of the contemporary Middle Eastern artists working in the United States, Essaydi mediates her experience in both East and West as a way to revise the historical and current discourse surrounding the Middle East from her personal perspective. Iranian-born, United States-based artist Shirin Neshat has said of her work that as a Middle Eastern artist her practice is always defined by the question of politics and revolutions. She notes that because of this her artwork serves to communicate to a larger global community, allowing for her voice as an Iranian woman to inspire her people.¹⁰⁴ Essaydi’s work fulfills a similar function, offering a non-Western voice to define and embody the Moroccan female. However, her role as a Westerner also gives this voice access to a previously inaccessible Western audience. The series to date that this thesis has explored have focused on a recreation and revision of Western-based perceptions of the Arabic woman based in the Orientalist imagery of the nineteenth century, as well as imagery based on Essaydi’s own exploration of her personal, shifting national identities. Essaydi’s series, *Bullet*, remains rooted in the perception of the Middle Eastern female, however one that is not so firmly based exclusively in Orientalist tradition, but also that of her contemporary Arabic female artists and the politicization of the Middle East.

Essaydi’s work embodies many of the themes of her contemporaries’ work, but within the unique style of her photographic work. Jiwa writes that in order to examine the work of

¹⁰³ http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.burnaway.org/2013/02/audio-shirin-neshat-lecture-at-scad-atlanta-define-art-conference/> Shirin Neshat Lecture

Muslim artists it is necessary to understand the artwork in relation to the role it plays in the production of cultural meaning.¹⁰⁵ Because *Bullet* has not been widely studied to date, I will examine Essaydi's contemporary, Neshat, to provide theoretical grounding for an examination of Essaydi's work. *Bullet* pays direct homage to Neshat's *Women of Allah* series (1993-7) and uses similar themes of language and empowerment, as well as mass media images of violence, which allows for a useful comparison [Figure 18].

Unlike Essaydi's colorful, textured photographs, Neshat uses a restrained black and white palette. In a discussion of Neshat's work, Iftikhar Dadi described the uses of "props" of Muslim culture that allow her audience an allegorical reading of the women in her compositions.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Essaydi creates her own set of allegorical symbols through the construction of her sets and clothing. Neshat's *Women of Allah* series focuses on portraits of women, generally from the shoulders or waist up, with a tight emphasis on their faces. In these images, the women are shown to conceal guns within their chadors, which cover all but their faces. Across the top of the photograph and the women's skin, Neshat forms a veil with a calligraphic text featuring Iranian poems written by women. In contrast, Essaydi makes a point to emphasize the full figure of her models, playing into the Orientalist tropes that feature the sexualized body of the exoticized non-Western female figure. As opposed to writing atop her prints, Essaydi writes her text directly onto the skin of her models. In *Bullet*, Essaydi's use of the bullet shells provides an unsubtle reference to violence and the Middle East similar to Neshat's gun barrels, which are pointed directly at her audience. The similarities of the robed figure, symbols of violence, and

¹⁰⁵ 81: Imaging, imagining and representation: Muslim visual artists in NYC, Munir Jiwa

¹⁰⁶ 30 Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories, Iftikhar Dadi, [Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 2008, vol. 34, no. 1] © 2008 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/2008/3401-000 125-50

calligraphic text provide useful points of comparison despite the differences in their imagery and countries of origin.

Bullet seems a natural progression from Essaydi's previous series, which have taken visual references to a non-Western locale. *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc* both feature cloths covered in calligraphic Arabic text that serve as architecture for the photographic [space](#), as well as the clothing the photographs' models wear. The calligraphy is not necessarily immediately evident as Arabic, but its illegible print creates a feeling of the unknown and exotic to a Western audience unfamiliar with the script. *Harem* appropriates the tilework found in domestic spaces in Morocco by replicating the patterns in cloth that covers furniture and the clothing around the women. The figures are placed within the tiled surface that served as the source material for the fabric. In these series the layering of identical patterns creates a flattened space within the photograph, which causes the figures and architecture to become integrated and camouflaged within one another.

Bullet continues Essaydi's investigation of architecture and [the](#) development of [spatial tropes](#). The sets in *Bullet* are comprised entirely of bullets that have been deconstructed and arranged into a tile-like pattern that form a background for the figures. Without the assistance of the [series](#)'s title the pattern is not immediately recognizable as the components of bullets. The bullets have been carefully arranged to mimic the tile patterns seen in *Harem*, which creates an effective parallel between her previous series and this new work. By drawing that connection to her former series, the viewer is more readily aware of Essaydi's source material and intention in creating an "authentically" based backdrop that still speaks to her interest in Orien-

talism and the architecture of the harem. This also situates the space of these photographs within a [Moroccan harem](#) setting, which assumes Morocco as the origin of this violent culture.

Like Jiwa, scholar Cynthia Becker examined the role of artists in the changing political environment of Morocco and how the discourses surrounding the country have impacted visual artists' imagery [\[Figure 20\]](#). Becker describes that the society is still marked by "fear, censorship, surveillance, and detentions; freedom of expression is still limited to expression deemed unthreatening to the legitimacy of the King and his control over religious affairs."¹⁰⁷ Becker writes specifically about [Essaydi's](#) own repression prior to leaving Saudi Arabia in order to attend college, and that it was only in being able to accompany her children that she was allowed to leave.¹⁰⁸ While much of Essaydi's [Bullet](#) series has focused on a critique of her Western audience's perception of Islamic women, there is still a connection to the subjugation of women in the models' confinement in the architecture of her photographs. Essaydi's work is critical of both the Western and Islamic treatment and representation of women.

Space plays an important role in Essaydi's imagery because it speaks to the larger relationship of women and men in Islamic culture. Men traditionally define public spaces, while women are confined to private, domestic settings. Essaydi describes that "physical thresholds define cultural ones... crossing a permissible, cultural threshold into prohibited 'space' in the metaphorical sense can result in literal confinement in an actual space."¹⁰⁹ In *Bullet #3* Essaydi literally confines her models within the tightly composed composition of the three frames of

¹⁰⁷ 144 Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads, Cynthia J. Becker

¹⁰⁸ 162-4, Becker

¹⁰⁹ http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

the photograph, as well as the background she has created with the deconstructed bullets [\[Figure 21\]](#). Similarly to her use of fabric backgrounds in *Converging Territories*, the architecture she has created with the bullets is all encompassing, suggesting an endless space from which her models cannot exit. This confinement is both literal and metaphorical. Essaydi suggests that the models' confinement in the tight visual plane she has created is similar to the Orientalist, Western media image projected upon them, which can be equally as hard to escape. The models in this space use Essaydi's common pose of the odalisque, which in Turkish literally means to belong to a place.¹¹⁰ The odalisque pose, appropriated by Essaydi from Orientalist painters, is now a means of further situating the models within the architecture of the photograph. For a Western audience, the models belong to this place of the private, harem-like setting steeped in the visual rhetoric of the Orient.

Unlike *Harem*, which explored multiple settings throughout a [private domestic building](#) in Morocco, *Bullet* returns to Essaydi's use of a background constructed entirely by her hand, like that of *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc*. Essaydi has spoken extensively to her interest in the process of creating her work. As discussed in previous chapters, Essaydi pays careful attention to [the](#) facture present in the work via the borders of her photographs.

Essaydi's workmanship and process to create the elements of the photograph are of primary importance to her work. The photograph is the result of the full performative process of creation that Essaydi goes through in order to construct each final piece. Irvin Cemil Schick described the Orientalist artists' process of "producing rather than reflecting reality." He [noted](#) that photographers would construct "inaccessible" scenes using props, costumes, and "assort-

¹¹⁰ http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

ed preconceptions” that would then be touted as documentary images.¹¹¹ In many ways Essaydi undergoes a similar process in her photographs where her imagined and actual experience become conflated in the final image, which is representative of her understanding of the Islamic female figure as seen from both a Western and non-Western perspective. Like the produced reality of the Orientalists, Essaydi’s images are not reflecting actual reality, but a constructed and mediated one influenced by a Western producer. [The act of creation allows Essaydi](#) to assert a new agency for herself and the larger Arabic female peoples she embodies. This constructed image is a conflation of both her depiction of [contemporary](#) Islamic women and the Western media’s projection of this figure. [Essaydi combines these identities to reflect a newly revised character representing elements of both Western and non-Western identities, never abandoning either.](#) Essaydi’s figure is an archetype of the Arabic figure that uses tropes of Orientalist art historical figures and contemporary mass media imagery as a means to directly confront her Western audience with their expectations.

The construction of the present through visual history is important to consider in relation to how communication and the circulation of information constitutes contemporary culture and the way cultures are accessed. Globalization has led to the increased circulation of information; as a result, popular culture has become more globally spread, as opposed to a localized phenomenon.¹¹² Western fascination with Muslim women and the veil is one trope of the Middle Eastern identity inflicted by the West, which has been continually renewed by the me-

¹¹¹ 350: Representing Middle Eastern Women: Feminism and Colonial Discourse Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950 by Sarah Graham-Brown; The Colonial Harem by Malek Alloula; Europe's Myths of Orient by Rana Kabbani; Inscriptions Review by: Irvin Cemil Schick Feminist Studies, Vol. 16, No. 2, Speaking for Others/Speaking for Self: Women of Color (Summer, 1990), pp. 345-380

¹¹² Rogoff, “Twenty Years On... Inside, Out,” 47-8.

dia.¹¹³ The media's rapid dissemination of the veil since the nineteenth century has resulted in its occupying a role in the repertoire of popular culture. This nineteenth-century interest in the veil was reinvigorated within the new context of post-9/11. The veil is now a symbol of cultural inheritance that represents the Arabic female, who is still subject to the dynamic writing of history. Along with the veil, this figure continually shifts into new, contemporarily relevant positions. Okwui Enwezor described that African artists in the late twentieth century are still segregated by Western audiences into "ethnic categories" as a means to understand their work through multicultural normalization.¹¹⁴ Essaydi addresses this Western desire for ethnographic imagery in her use of Orientalist style compositions, exotic locations, and veiling of the body. By using the characteristics assigned to Arabic women by the media and her audience, she places her imagery within an understood history of her viewer. It is [in her](#) reiteration of these stylizations that [Essaydi](#) explores the possibility of subverting the repetition of this imagery to give a new, revised voice to her identity and shifts its position in the contemporary context.¹¹⁵

In a discussion of Neshat's work, art historian Igor Zabel [offers](#) that Neshat uses the figure of a Muslim women enveloped in her black chador particularly because of the figure's iconic value. Both Neshat and Essaydi use an [anonymous](#) Arabic female figure that represents an exotic persona to their Western audience. This woman is understood by the audience via Western stereotypes and media imagery of the figure as opposed to experienced interaction. Zabel writes, "She does not try to purify the image of its role as a signifier [of](#) the otherness of the Muslim world. Such an attempt would necessarily fail since the image itself is inseparable from

¹¹³ Dadi, "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," 125-6.

¹¹⁴ Enwezor, "Between Localism and Worldliness," 35-6.

¹¹⁵ Butler, *Sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*, 91.

the connotation... She simulates it, making us aware of its constructed, artificial nature."¹¹⁶ Perhaps more explicitly than Neshat, Essaydi exaggerates the constructed nature of her photographic scenes as a way to illustrate the fabricated image of the Arabic female. Western obsession with the veiled Muslim woman began with Orientalism in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁷ In recent decades, the chador has come to serve as a symbol of terrorism and oppression in Western media. For Neshat, the chador embodies a complex mix of symbolism that encompasses repression, "veiled erotic promise," matrydom, fatalism, and social marginalization.¹¹⁸ The stereotypical image of the Muslim woman in a black chador has been revised in Essaydi's creation of new robes constructed out of bullets. In Essaydi's revised narrative, this is now a robe constructed and worn by a Moroccan female. This revision illustrates Essaydi's direct role in producing an image that is literally created out of a violent material, making the audience immediately aware of the connotation the robe usually holds.

Essaydi's construction of a new identity for the Arabic woman relies on both her own experience and the projections of the media to illustrate figures which bear cultural meaning for her audience. Judith Butler described that the body is a dynamic embodiment of its culture and history that appropriates meaning to be performed.¹¹⁹ Although Butler's discussion pertained to the concept of gender, it is still a relevant argument to consider in explaining the representation of ethnicity. Cooke described that it is the contemporary Muslim woman's position in the Arab world to "respond to the silencing conditions inherent to their newly globalized sit-

¹¹⁶ women in black, igor zabel 17

¹¹⁷ 125-6: Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories, Iftikhar Dadi, [Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 2008, vol. 34, no. 1] © 2008 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/2008/3401-000 125-50

¹¹⁸ 17-8, women in black

¹¹⁹ Butler, *Sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*, 91.

uation.”¹²⁰ As their realities shift from a local context to a global one, there is a renegotiation of their cultural values through a new globalized language that reflects the contemporary condition of identity. It is the re-evaluation of the language used to describe these women that becomes an intrinsic component in their revision of history and identity. Bhabha wrote of the need to “return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side” as a way to become an active participant in a new, hybrid reality.¹²¹

The compositions in *Bullet* use the same basic format as [Essaydi's](#) previous series, which feature both individual and grouped female figures. In each series this thesis has discussed, Essaydi has created the fabrics that the models wear. As we see in *Bullet #6*, this series boasts the most ornate appearing outfits for the women to date [\[Figure 22\]](#). By using the components of the bullet to create the women's clothing, the richness of the metallic colors appear more like sequins or hand-embroidered fabric as opposed to a more armor-like garment. In the previous compositions, the fabric the women wore allowed for the figures to camouflage within the background. The bullet outfits actually allow the models to sit apart from their background. The light and colors of the metals provide contrast to the flat bullet tile background. The construction of the robes here also resembles Western clothing more than Essaydi's previous robes, perhaps suggesting that these figures reflect a Western construction of the Arabic female as opposed to a more [traditional](#) depiction. The mixture of the [textures and colors of the](#) “fabrics” combined with the more body-conscious silhouettes cause the models to [reference](#)

¹²⁰ Miriam Cooke, “Women, Religion, and the Postcolonial Arab World,” *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring 2000): 154.

¹²¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 7.

more directly the nude odalisque figures in nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings. This eroticized pose reflects another common perception of this exotic, sexualized female figure, as made popular by Orientalist depictions of the harem.

In these photographs, Essaydi does not remove the allegories of violence as related to her Middle Eastern character, but instead chooses to place that imagery front and center. By featuring the violent component of this imagery in *Bullet* she is able to rewrite the images using her own voice.¹²² These images speak to both a Western and Eastern audience, albeit to different ends. Essaydi has said that her work is accepted and well received in both the Arab world and the West. Essaydi's multi-national practice allows her the unique opportunity to serve as a visual mediator for her audiences in both worlds. For her Western audience there is a direct critique of the Orientalist imagery they associate with an Arabic female figure and an illustration of a new way to consider this archetypal character. For her Arab audience, her images are immediately understood in terms of what they are attempting to do and serve as a way of discussing what images are disseminated of them in the West.¹²³ The photographs allow her Arab audience to consider the stereotypes surrounding their figures as a way to rethink their position to the West.

Historian Abdalah Laroui describes the contemporary Arab reality as hyper-aware of the omnipresence of the West in representations of the Middle East. Laroui writes, "This interpenetration of ideas and ideologies...can only be dealt with critically...by an awareness of the context of these ideas and of their historicity, which is attainable only through a close examination of

¹²² http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

¹²³ http://www.berkshirefinearts.com/05-31-2012_lalla-essaydi-recipient-of-smfa-2012-medal-award.htm Notes

the West's history."¹²⁴ Traditionally, photography, particularly that of non-Western cultures, is considered to freeze a moment in time, capturing an ethnographic, accurate image of the depicted culture. Essaydi captures a moment where her figures rest comfortably between their Orientalist past and the politicized imagery of their present.

Throughout Essaydi's series, which span 2004-present, she has examined multiple facets of her hybrid national identity. This hybridity takes on different forms and perspectives as the visual rhetoric of the series shifts the focus of her gaze upon both herself and the larger Arabic world. Through artistic production, she explores themes that are recurring within this identity as a means of mediating the collective experiences of her national and personal histories. These themes develop compositions and symbolism that mimic and create direct parallels between each of these series: hybridity, orientalism, and violence in cultural media. By contrasting these symbols, Essaydi attempts to negotiate and construct a revised image of self through the different types of gaze entrenched in the symbolisms origins. However, the repetition of compositional construction across each theme cause her exploration to become static, as she ceases to further develop the visual compositions aside from their setting and technique.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 84.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1. Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #3*, [2003](#).



Figure 2. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Harem #14c*, [2009](#).

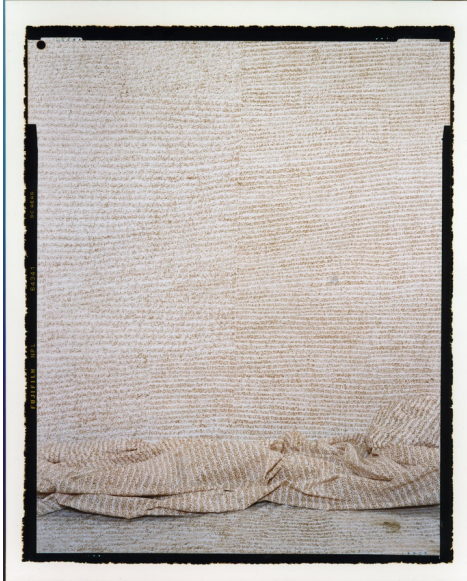


Figure 3. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Converging Territories #21*, 2004.



Figure 4. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Converging Territories #22*, 2004.



Figure 5. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Converging Territories #10*, 2003.



Figure 6. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Converging Territories #12*, 2004.



Figure 7. [Lalla Essaydi, Harem #5, 2009.](#)



Figure 8. [Lalla Essaydi, Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Beauty 1, 2005.](#)

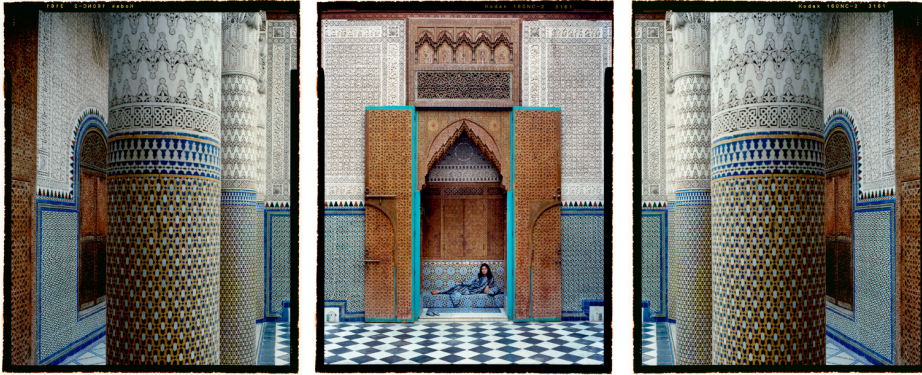


Figure 9. [Lalla Essaydi, Harem #1, 2009.](#)

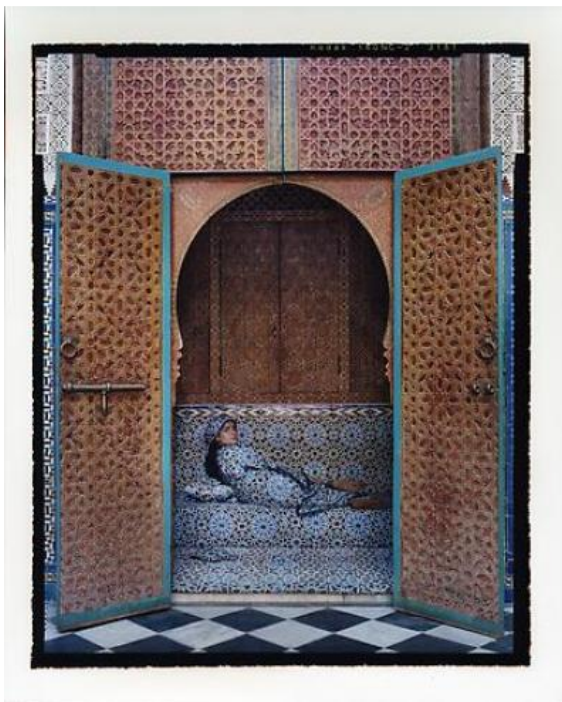


Figure 10. [Lalla Essaydi, Harem #8, 2009.](#)



Figure 11. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Harem #2*, 2009.

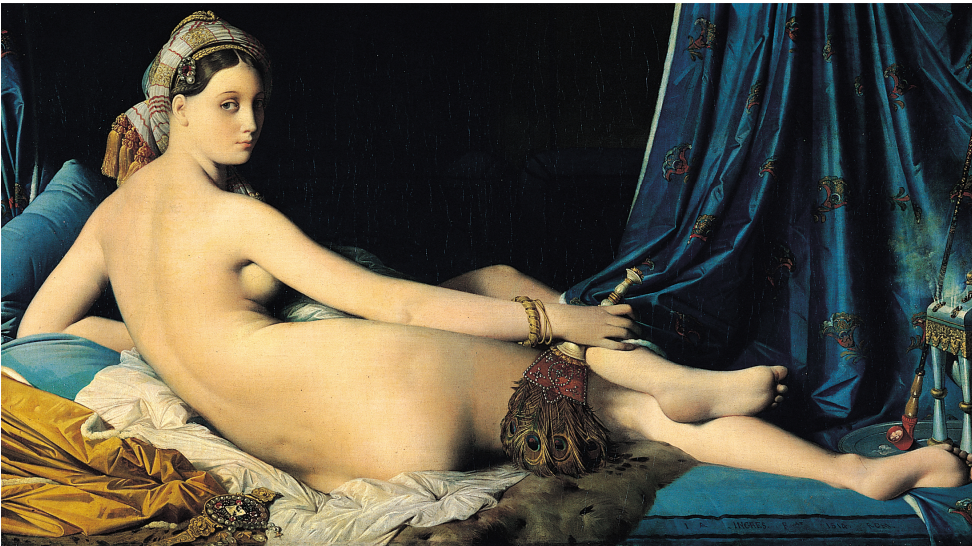


Figure 12. [Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres](#), *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814.



Figure 13. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Les Femmes du Maroc: Grande Odalisque 2*, 2008.



Figure 14. [Eugene Delacroix](#), *Algerian Women in their Apartments*, 1834.



Figure 15. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Les Femmes du Maroc #4*, 2008.



Figure 16. [Lalla Essaydi](#), *Les Femmes du Maroc #53*, 2006.



Figure 17. John Frederick Lewis, *The Harem*, 1851.



Figure 18. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994.



[Figure 19. Lalla Essaydi, *Portrait with Bullet Shells #2*, 2009.](#)



[Figure 20. Lalla Essaydi, *Bullet #8*, 2009-13.](#)



[Figure 21. Lalla Essaydi, *Bullet #3*, 2009-13.](#)



[Figure 22. Lalla Essaydi, *Bullet #6*, 2009-13.](#)

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