

Traditions Rooted in the World of Women

by A . M . Weaver

Two women, one from Morocco and the other from India, share a relationship to contemporary arts practices and the use of cultural signifiers rooted in the world of women.

At the top of their game as international artists, Lalla Essaydi and Vibha Galhotra borrow emblems from indigenous cultural traditions, making them integral to their visual lexicons. Through the photographic mimicry and subversion of Orientalism (a Western term for depictions of Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African cultures), Essaydi promotes the reconsideration of the North African woman as exotic "other" and part of a polygamous system replete with harems. Galhotra appropriates the *ghungroo*, a symbolic emblem of femininity that is ubiquitous in East Indian culture. She uses thousands of small metal bells (worn as anklets by Indian women and classical female performers) to construct sculptural works that address organic growth, urban sprawl, and environmentalism.

Essaydi's large-format chromogenic photographs contain a wealth of contradictions—part tribute to Orientalism, which she loves, but at the same time deconstructs. She re-contextualizes identity within simulated scenes from renowned Romantic paintings by Delacroix, Gérôme, Ingres, and Sargent, bridging her hybridity as a Muslim, woman, mother, and artist. Charged cultural signifiers, such as the veil, the harem, and the female body, become sites of reflection through which she unravels stereotypes and historicism.

The implied site of many of these photographs is within the confines of the harem itself. Harems, which existed in Morocco until the mid-twentieth century, were households for individual or extended families. Each wife had a salon where she lived with her immediate family; men had separate quarters and visited their wives and children at designated times. A matriarchal system (based on patriarchal lineage) ruled the harems' domain. The outside world was the purview of men.

Essaydi chose Dar el Basha, a majestic palace located in her Moroccan hometown of Marrakech, for the 2009 series *Harem*. The women are posed within luxuriant architectural motifs and surrounded by zellige tiles, lounging on cushions of the same pattern. Essaydi photographed the palace tiles and printed the patterns on fabric, which were then fashioned into the garments worn by her models. Fully camouflaged, these models, like apparitions, become silent testimonies to how women lived their lives in a harem. The subjects in her *Harem Revisited* series (2012) wear ornately embroidered caftans and are surrounded by patterned brocade fabrics and drapery. These antique textiles, loaned to the artist from the Nour and Boukher Temli Collection, date back to the 17th century. These works allude to Essaydi's personal translation of an empirical reality having grown up in a harem.

Erotic environs reminiscent of Orientalism are absent in Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc* series (2005–2008). The female figures and their white garments are covered in veneers of hand-scripted henna. Their poses and visages exude a subtle sensuality, reflecting qualities attributed to essential feminism, which celebrates the differences between women and men. Their quietude, beauty, and power epitomize the feminine, while the use of text serves as both veil and symbol of defiance.

Essaydi literally writes with henna across the body, nude and clothed, in a derivation of kufi calligraphy, one of the earliest forms of Islamic script, using excerpts from her own journals. She explains, "I am practicing a sacred Islamic art usually inaccessible to women. To apply this writing in henna, an adornment worn and applied only by women, adds a further subversive twist." She brings calligraphy exclusively into the realm of women, framing their experiences as an appended history of this art form.

Partially legible and intentionally obscured fragments of her life story, as well

RIGHT: LALLA ESSAYDI Les Femmes du Maroc: Fumée d'Ambre Gris (Smoke of Ambergris) Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum, dimensions variable, 2008. © Lalla Essaydi, New York / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.





LALLA ESSAYDI *Harem Revisited #36* Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, dimensions variable, 2012. © Lalla Essaydi, New York / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

as pivotal transitions such as childhood, adolescence, and marriage, are evident in her oeuvre. Essaydi mitigates the liminal space between a traditional existence as a Muslim woman and the cosmopolitan arena she now occupies living in New York City. Author Fatima Mernissi equates Essaydi's work with the legendary tale of Scheherazade, who told stories for one thousand and one nights to the King of Persia for her life's salvation.

Essaydi's handwork in henna merges sensibilities attributed to adornment, beauty, and ritual. Her writings, seen on yards of cotton fabric on the bodies of her subjects and interior walls of her locations, resemble embroidery or delicately drawn latticework that seems to go on for infinity. The women's loose-fitting garments refer to silks and cotton that Muslim women artfully embroider by hand before being made into caftans.

The veil, or hijab, has multiple readings in Islamic culture. The first reference to a hijab in the Koran was the lowering of a curtain to create privacy for Muhammad and his fifth bride Zaynab bint Jahsh on their wedding night. Fatima Mernissi's exposé *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* asserts that the hijab had two connotations in early Islam. A metaphysical hijab separated

one from the radiance of God, while the mystic Sufis believed the veil also represented a crucial flaw in character—the inability to lift oneself out of a corporeal existence in pursuit of the divine.

Today, the veil is a supreme symbol of modesty and a much-contested emblem of both the repression and liberation of women. Essaydi states, "Behind the veil, an Arab woman maintains a private place, even in public."

In her recent series *Bullets Revisited* (2012), Essaydi offers unsettling commentary on violence toward women. Using thousands of brass bullet casings, she constructs shimmering interiors. Yet, the handsewn shells used to embellish the cotton cloth bedding, jewelry, loin cloths and bodices of her reclining models belie their devastating materiality.

Vibha Galhotra recodes the cultural symbolism of ghungroos. When fashioned into *payals* or anklets, ghungroos (made of copper, brass, and silver alloy) ward off negative energies, serve as accessories, and when broken, signify a fall from innocence. They also declare the presence of a woman in the home and mark the body's rhythms in classical Indian dance. With thousands of these feminized everyday objects, Galhotra creates mammoth sculptures and tapestry-like wall works.

Through the appropriation of these



ABOVE: LALLA ESSAYDI *Harem #2* Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum, dimensions variable, 2009.

© Lalla Essaydi, New York / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

BELOW: LALLA ESSAYDI *Bullets Revisited #3* Triptych of chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, dimensions variable, 2012. © Lalla Essaydi, New York / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

