

ARTMARKET

REPORT

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Essential info for collectors of art
with a focus on Australia, Asia and
the new emerging global market

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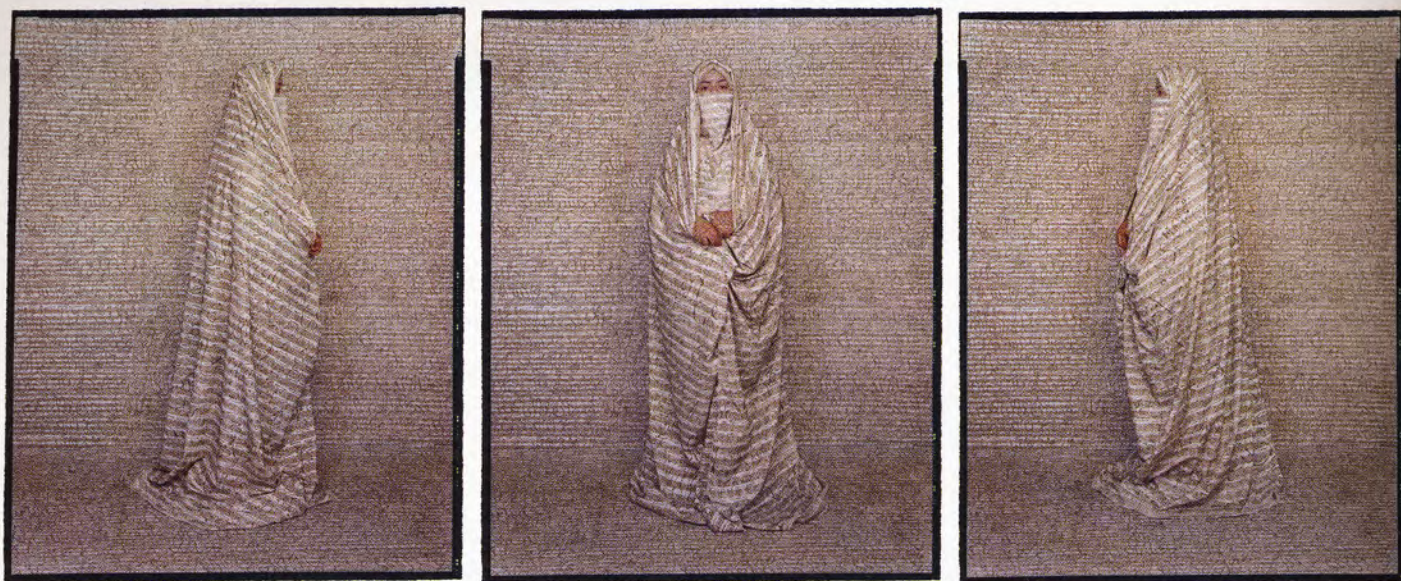
Lalla Essaydi

AUD \$17.95

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The scapeland of Lalla Essaydi

ARTIST PROFILE

By Caroline Vera Fox



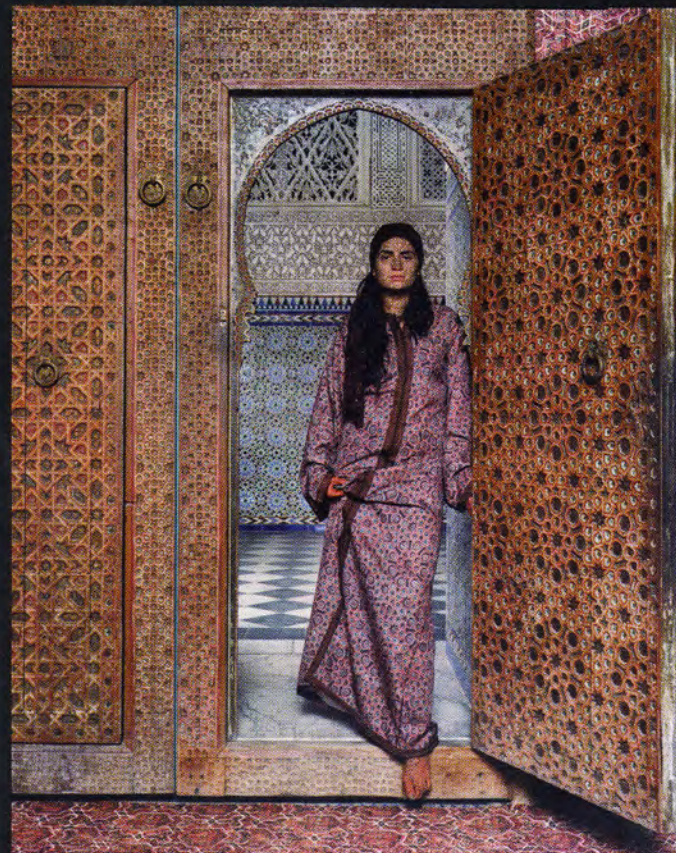
Rivers of plain white cloth inscribed with text. The calligraphic line is the living pulse running through her staged tableaux. Lalla Essaydi taught herself the art of calligraphy, a practice normally denied to Arab women. It is the men who learn the sacred script. Her chosen pigment is henna. Henna is symbolically associated with women. The writings take many months.

Odalisque is a Turkish word meaning 'of a place'. In the studio a stage is set. The models, or shall I say actors as they are participatory, are women from Lalla's own family in Morocco. They are alive to their cultural heritage, and the memory of their maternal forbears who lived private lives inside the 'women's quarters' of a nineteenth century harem. Carefully choreographed, the models take their place, silent; megalithic. The scribed cloths cover the room. The writings contour the flesh. Henna marks the women's arms, legs, and face, desexualizing the body. The women's eyes do not invite you in; only their black tresses, like slabs of fluid jet, set against the creamy mindscape, stir the senses. Handwritten rows wave and slant into rhyme and rite. The softly striped stratum of a limestone coastline comes to mind. Photographed at a distance, and viewed as wallpaper, the calligraphy pays homage to the mosaic patterning and the ornate carved plasterwork of Islamic decorative art. A smooth, linear reading of the text is always interrupted by the hang of the fabric, which drapes and folds, twists and loops on and around the women's bodies.

Lalla leads the viewer into her imaginary rooms. We understand that in her culture, living within the private spaces reserved for women is natural; it is not enslavement, the women are not subservient,

mothers and children lead normal lives. Western feminists have often misunderstood this cultural hierarchy and notion of segregated space. The western males 'peeping tom' Orientalist gaze is an established genre in nineteenth century art history. Lalla presents us with a different story, the inside story. This 'internal gaze' stems from her own childhood memories, within the thick walls of her family harem. This subjectivity is not straightforward. She does not give us a 'domestic Orientalism', there is no sense of time and place, and the domesticity is symbolic. A cocktail of memory and imagination, this is a story of female politics and formal aesthetics. Lalla is well versed in the plastic language of painting. The landscape of the poetic image is one of solitude. Within this place of solitude she successfully constructs scenes which deny the voyeuristic gaze. Her odaliques are cerebral, cloaked in the writings of real life, placed within rooms of the mind: abstract.

The most recent series of photographs is set in a historical harem, part of the beautiful Dar Al Basha palace, in Marrakech. In these new works, there is a shift away from the monochromatic theatre of female cultural politics. The rooms are now real, the magnificence of the architecture and surface decoration dominate the scene. A figure merges into the sacred geometry of Islamic art, dreamlike. Personal ego wanes. There are no clues to her actual life. She is now servant to the space of distant memory. The architectural dreamscape of the artist's autobiography is a space of poetic beauty: this is the spiritual scapeland of Lalla Essaydi.



'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.'

Opposite top:
Lalla Essaydi

Les Femmes du Maroc #22abc
C-Type print, mounted on aluminium
Printed under the direct supervision of the artist from the original negative
Triptych, Edition 3/15
Images courtesy the artist and Waterhouse & Dodd London

Above:

Lalla Essaydi
Harem #2, 2009
Chromogenic Print
Courtesy of Edwynn Houk gallery, NY

Left:

Lalla Essaydi
Harem #4b, 2009
Chromogenic Print
Courtesy of Edwynn Houk gallery, NY