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REVIEWED: Lalla Essaydi: Beyond Beauty

By Gloria Wiley

The *Beyond Beauty* retrospective exhibition at Kashya Hildebrand in central London showcases five bodies of work by New York-based artist Lalla Essaydi (b. Marrakech, Morocco, 1956). Performative photographs of contemporary Arab women in classic Islamic backgrounds invite the London audience to rethink Arab and further Middle Eastern female identity. Essaydi often references works by historical European painters but also appropriates and subverts the language of 19th century Orientalism whilst dropping its long-standing Western male sexualised fantasies of the Muslim world, especially of its women. As such, Essaydi's photographs serve as a critique of Orientalism and by default of the West, yet they also hold a looking glass into Arab/Middle Eastern society itself.

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Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #1*, 2009
Chromogenic print, edition 12/15, 102 x 229 cm, (102 x 76 each), triptych. © Lalla Essaydi. Courtesy of Kashya Hildebrand and the artist.

Harem #1 (2009), a triptych of a palatial interior, offers a view of the harem, the most private of spheres in what is usually a polygynous Arab household and traditionally a place reserved for women. In the triptych's central panel, a woman stares at the camera, comfortably reclining on a mattress. The pattern on her kaftan, slippers and mattress mimic those on the wall's tiles behind her. The brown calligraphy covering the subject's exposed skin appears in conversation with the large room's intricately carved wood panels.

Although the piece is open to interpretation, several clues help decode it. Firstly, as the subject is merging with the building it is as though woman and harem are one - a private space. Secondly, calligraphy, a highly regarded Islamic art traditionally reserved to a select few men, covers the woman's skin. This writing, however, is done in henna, a dye carrying feminine connotations. A natural pigment used to decorate the hands and feet of brides-to-be, henna is by no means considered a fine art in the Arab world. In this manner, calligraphy's appropriation can be viewed as a form of rebellion, a feminist stance that gives women a voice even when the writing is muted and unintelligible. Thirdly, the work somehow appears to question the role of women in Arab society where the husband's mother looks after her son's interests and enjoys more power than any of his wives.

This is indeed an interesting paradox in Arab culture as the harem is where family life springs - society's central cell. Women have an important role within their household and are essential in passing their own as well as society's values to their progeny. The question arises: is the harem's most powerful figure and by extension, all women, partly responsible for restrictions Arab society places upon them?



Lalla Essaydi, *Harem Revisted #31*, 2012
 Chromogenic print, edition 1/15.
 © Lalla Essaydi. Courtesy of Kashya Hildebrand and the artist



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave*, 1839-1940
 Oil on canvas, 72.1 x 100.3 cm, frame: 94.6 x 122.6 x 7.6 cm
 Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop

Harem Revisited #31 (2012) features three girls draped in colourful kaftans as they all merge with their equally lavish and 'exotic' surrounds. The young odalisques stare confidently at the camera in what is a staged yet subtle power play. Subverting the Orientalist male sexual fantasy *Odalisque with as Slave* (1839-1940) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, a European who could have only imagined a harem, Essaydi's females are self-aware and despite an insinuation of hierarchies, a certain familial camaraderie shines through. In this regard, it is rather different to Ingres's passive, somewhat saphic and emotionally detached nude women who are mere objects of the male's lascivious gaze.



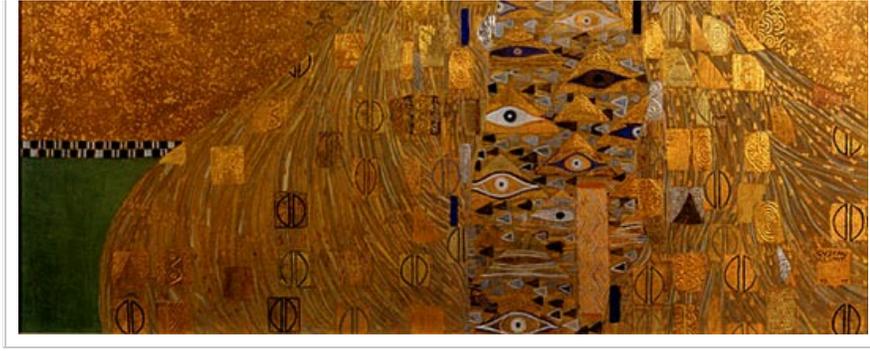


Lalla Essaydi, *Bullets Revisted #3*, 2012
Chromogenic print. Edition 4/15, 102 x 227 cm, (102 x 76 cm each), triptych
© Lalla Essaydi. Courtesy of Kashya Hildebrand and the artist



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in a Tomb*, 1521
Tempera and oil on limewood, 30 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the Yorck Project





Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, 1907
Gold, silver and oil on canvas. 138 x 138 cm. Courtesy of Neue Gallery New York

Bullets Revisited #3 (2012) presents another woman but here she is split in the three panels. Once again, the subject looks at the camera but she is lying down and looks somewhat stiff, uncomfortable and vacuous. Whilst the all-encompassing gold patterns make a visual association with Gustav Klimt's use of intricate gold patterns with a byzantine aura, Essaydi's subject mainly incarnates 'exoticism' and the ostentatious wealth of many Arab nations. The woman appears larger than an average person; the close-up shot making her look almost goddess-like yet confined in a small box. In fact, although everything looks bright and shiny, the reduced space resembles a coffin reminiscent of Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522). The image becomes even more sinister when one connects the work's title to the metal appliquéés, which are in fact bullet cases, carefully cut and polished to make the subject sparkle. The image thus exquisitely captures the co-existence of beauty and violence in the Arab world.



Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: Fumée d'ambre gris*, 2008
Chromogenic print, edition 14/15, 101.6 x 76.2 cm each panel
© Lalla Essaydi. Courtesy of Kashya Hildebrand and the artist



John Singer Sargent, *Fumée d'ambre gris*, 1880
Oil on canvas. 139 x 90.6 cm. © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

Le Femmes du Maroc: Fumée d'ambre gris (2008) features a woman in beige clothing; it is an appropriation of John Singer Sargent's *Fumée d'ambre gris* (1880). Both pieces present a woman sharing very similar poses, standing behind an incense burner, yet the approach is very different. Essaydi once again covers the woman's skin in calligraphy but here she goes much further, also covering her veil, clothes and even the incense burner and the wall behind her in writing.

Although Singer Sargent's composition is exquisite, it only speaks of a place and not about the subject as does *Le Femmes du Maroc: Fumée d'ambre gris*. In Essaydi's work, the woman shows an unrestrained body language and while calligraphy gives her a voice, here it looks like she has so much to tell on her own merits. At the same time, the saturation of calligraphy becomes abstract and decorative.

The exhibition's cohesive grouping of pictures presents well-balanced compositions blending foreground and background to perfection. The photographs are beautifully crafted and display many complex layers of Arab culture. Essaydi's referencing of Western art history, particularly Orientalism's prejudices, is interesting because she manages to subvert it through parody. Her focus on architecture and calligraphy - both considered high arts in the Arab world - to critique the role of women in Arab society is also quite clever.

LALLA ESSAYDI: BEYOND BEAUTY at KASHYA HILDEBRAND, London. 25 Oct - 21 Dec 2013

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