

## Lalla Essaydi: diagram of a harem, emotions too

Kimberly Chun, Special to The Chronicle

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Rhapsodized by painters such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and its representation evaluated by cultural critics like Jill Beaulieu, the harem continues to compel with its loaded pleasures and perils. Moroccan-born, New York City-based artist Lalla Essaydi was no exception - though her fascination is more deeply rooted and personal than most viewers'.

"Harem" - the 2009 series of photographs included in "Lalla Essaydi: Les Femmes du Maroc," the artist's first West Coast one-woman show - was conceived when Essaydi was inexplicably drawn back, repeatedly, to an opulent Moroccan palace that once belonged to the Pasha Glaoui.

"I was just so affected by the place," recalls Essaydi, 55, from her native country. "I didn't understand - I kept going back, and the specific place I loved was the harem area. I wanted to know the history of that space, if there was something specific that isn't written about."

Family members finally divulged that her father had grown up in the harem when the Pasha became her grandmother's guardian with the death of her father. He divorced her from her husband and sequestered the mother and son in the harem. "She was like a prisoner, no matter how luxurious the surroundings are," the artist explains, "and it became something direct to me."

That uncanny sense of connection evolved into a photo series. "I wanted to present a harem area that's not in the Western or Orientalist tradition," Essaydi continues. "It's something real and painful - it's life for these women, their kids and family. It's not always a beautiful odalisque laying down, ready for consummation."

The artist had her female figures melt into the background at Marrakech palace Dar al Basha - chameleons clad in clothing printed with the same gorgeous patterns on the surrounding tiles. They are one with the space, protected yet inaccessible, desired and hidden. Yet their eyes meet the observer's forthrightly: These objects of the gaze stare back knowingly, their skin inscribed in henna with the artist's own musings, her own poetry, ordinarily the privilege of men.

"With these women, I wanted them to be as bold as possible and a little bit mocking as well," Essaydi says. The pains she took for this series, like her others, involved the photographing of the tiles, the printing of the patterns on fabric and the construction of traditional handmade dresses. "I love a long process," she says with a laugh.

These series are the latest development in an unexpected career: The artist stepped out of her painting background and into her acclaimed photography work after living in Saudi Arabia for many years and then following her children to the States and school.

"I started this investigation into Orientalist paintings, which I always had a love-hate relationship with," she says. "From one side I loved the way they are portraying culture - they're beautiful and exquisite - but at the same time, I find their contents problematic. It

was really a journey into my own history and finding a voice and being all about identity."

For the 2008 series, "Les Femmes du Maroc," Essaydi returned to the old palace in Morocco where she grew up and photographed female family members in a space where she was punished for assuming she would be treated the same as her male relatives. Those women - and that old family home - were revisited in 2010's "Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited."

"I was trying to create a different memory for these women so somehow the house will take on another life, instead of having all these bad memories," she said, explaining that her subjects have also begun seeing themselves as more than simply housewives. "It's like," she offers, chuckling, "a club of women."

Reception 5:30 p.m. today. Through Dec. 3. Jenkins Johnson Gallery, 464 Sutter St., S.F. (415) 677-0770.  
[www.jenkinsjohnsongallery.com](http://www.jenkinsjohnsongallery.com).

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