

MULTICULTURAL IDENTITIES: THE CAREER OF LALLA ESSAYDI

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The viewer gains new insight into Lalla Essaydi's working methods and creative production through a more nuanced understanding of the multiple cultures that have shaped her development as an artist, and continue to shape her ongoing work. Essaydi is an artist of North Western Africa, born and raised in the Arab state of Morocco, which is considered to be one of the more liberal states of the Arab world. Essaydi also lived as an adult for many years in the Middle Eastern Arab state of Saudi Arabia. Thus Islamic culture and Arab traditions are significant to her identity. Essaydi is also an artist profoundly influenced by Western traditions. Her experiences in Europe and America include her first formal artistic training in Paris, and an extended period of education—both undergraduate and graduate training—in Boston. Essaydi has been able to draw upon these diverse cultures in her work, fusing them together to create something very unique. She does a dynamic job of using her art as a medium to engage with audiences outside of the Arab world. Thus she seeks to challenge new viewers and break down stereotypes about Islam and about the lives of Arab women. This essay will point to the significance of Essaydi's multicultural background, focusing on her approach to her subjects, locations, materials, and work between America and Morocco.

Authentic Moroccan Subjects

Essaydi's experiences as both a North African and Western artist have shaped her perspectives in a different way than would be the experience of an artist from a single culture. "In a sense, I feel I inhabit (and perhaps even embody) a 'crossroads,' where the cultures come together—merge, interweave, and sometimes clash".¹ Essaydi is able to use elements of both Western and Arab culture in her work, fusing them together to create something unique. The artist shares with global audiences her images commenting on the lives of Arab women in her country.

Working in the United States presents certain challenges to the artist. When in her New York or Boston studios, Essaydi speaks about not having easy access to Moroccan subjects to portray in her work while in her home country she can call upon family and friends to readily serve as models. In American and European contexts, Essaydi also faces the challenge of the West's misconceptions about Arab culture and Islamic traditions. Orientalist nineteenth century art works were one of the earliest manifestations of this skewed understanding of Essaydi's cultural background. The image of the Arab woman and especially pushing back against the western (male) expectation of her service as a subject of sexual desire is central to Essaydi's work.

Authentic American Materials

In Essaydi's two latest series, *Bullets* and *Bullets Revisited*, scenes are created with bullet casings which transform the domestic interior space into a psychological realm charged with violence

¹ "Artistic Depictions of Arab Women: An Interview with Artist Lalla Essaydi."

within contemporary society.² Creating these series proved to be another challenge that Essaydi faced as a multicultural artist, for it is illegal in Morocco to own a gun and therefore it is illegal to acquire bullets and their casings. Thus it took over a year for Essaydi to gather the bullet casings in America, to assemble them in the work, and transport the materials to Morocco piece-by-piece. The bullet casings imply violence that exists in the contemporary society. Essaydi is using them as a response to the revolutions that began in the region in 2011. In an interview she states, “My response to it is to use something that is so beautiful but when you think about it is really significant of violence, and violence on women to protect the domestic space”.³ Rather than using pain to pull people in she uses beauty. Essaydi is determined for Western audiences to understand the unique experiences of the Arab women she presents in her work.

Essaydi works to fuse together the cultures that form her diverse background. Her broad range of exhibits exposes her and her ideas/art to the contemporary art world, making her an artist, who sweeps across cultures, educating through her art.

² http://www.houkgallery.com/exhibitions/2013-05-16_lalla-essaydi/

³ The Artery Arts Culture on WBUR RSS 20. Retrieved February 24, 2014, from <http://artery.wbur.org/2013/10/09/female-photographers-middle-east-boston->

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