

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Madison Program Brings Internationally-Renowned Arab Photographer, Work To The City

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By **CANDACE SIPOS**

Early last year, Sarah Brooks was introduced to Arab photographer Lalla Essaydi's work through a pamphlet from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond.

It featured Essaydi's piece "Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque" — a critique of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' famous painting, "La Grande Odalisque," on display at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Essaydi's photograph, like much of her other work, features an Arab woman enveloped by calligraphy inscribed in henna on the cloth covering the subject, the walls and floor surrounding her, and all over her body.

"I was just absolutely blown away by it," said Brooks, associate professor of art history, from her seat in the newly-renovated Duke Hall. "I was so taken by it that then I investigated her career and what she was interested in. It was sort of a chance encounter with her."

Bringing It To The City

Now, Brooks is introducing the community to Essaydi through the James Madison University College of Visual and Performing Art's Cultural Connections Artist-in-Residence program.

"This is a project that helps to bring to campus and the community people from diverse cultural backgrounds," Brooks said.



Sarah Brooks (back, center), an associate professor at James Madison University and curator of the "Contemporary Photography and Visions of Arab Identity" by Lalla Essaydi, talks with exhibition seminar class students who helped her arrange the exhibit during the opening reception held March 7 at the Arts Council of the Valley Darrin-McHone Gallery. (Photo by Jason Lenhart / DN-R)



"Contemporary Photography and Vision of Arab Identity" will be on display at the Arts Council of Valley Darrin-McHone Gallery through March 28. (Photo by Jason Lenhart / DN-R)

Essaydi has loaned 14 pieces to the project, eight of which will be on display at the Sawhill Gallery in Warren Hall and six of which are featured at the Arts Council of the Valley's Darrin-McHone Gallery.

"It is a big deal for us," said Ragan McManus, executive director of the local arts council. "In our gallery space, we primarily host locally-working artists."

So, hosting the internationally-renowned Moroccan photographer's work is just that, a big deal.

"I think that [people who come see it] will learn a little bit more about Arab culture and, in particular, about women in Arab culture and experience some amazing photography," McManus said. "My hope is that people will gain a little bit more cultural understanding but also just [be] blown away by the aesthetic beauty of these things."

A Photographer's Work

The opening line of Brooks' introductory essay in JMU's catalogue about the project reads like this: "Lalla Essaydi's artistic work — fusing installation, calligraphy in henna, painting, the fiber arts, and the final documentary act of photography — offers contemporary audiences a unique and challenging lens through which to consider Arab culture and Islamic traditions, past and present."

For example, Essaydi creates the garments that her subjects wear and inscribes the calligraphy featured in her art, Brooks explained, avoiding reliance on digital enhancements to create an effect after a picture has been taken. In fact, she uses film photography, she added.

"Each piece is really this incredible summary of her artistic ideas," she said. "It's not that she walks out on the street and takes a photograph. She's thought about this for a year."

Essaydi often makes her work life-size or nearly life-size, and the pieces that will go in Sawhill Gallery are perfect examples. Some of them are 6-by-7-feet in dimension, helping to make them "imposing and beautiful," Brooks said.



Harrisonburg resident Daniel Robinson helps his 2-year-old daughter, Annabel, down the stairs after viewing the "Contemporary Photography and Visions of Arab Identity" on March 7. (Photo by Jason Lenhart / DN-R)

She pointed out that the themes presented in the works are important for an area with thousands of Arab immigrants here through a refugee program, for economic opportunity or for other reasons.

Where To Go

Essaydi's work is on display at the Darrin-McHone Gallery at 311 South Main St. until March 28. The gallery is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The works at the Sawhill Gallery at Warren Hall on JMU's West Campus will be exhibited from March 24-April 4, including March 29-30, with a public opening from 7:30-9 p.m.

March 25. The gallery is open from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday and those weekend dates.

Essaydi herself will speak on campus from 6:30-7:30 p.m. March 25 at the Grafton-Stovall Theater, 281 Warren Service Dr., Harrisonburg.

JMU is partnering with the Islamic Association of Shenandoah Valley to show a free film from 7-8:30 p.m. March 18 at Court Square Theater. JMU professor Dr. Abdelrahman Rabie will introduce the documentary, "Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World."

Syrian-American filmmaker Abraham Kasbo will visit Duke Hall to speak about making his documentary, "The Arab-American Experience," from 6:30-7:30 p.m. March 26.

For more information on all of the events surrounding this project and Essaydi's work, visit sites.jmu.edu/lallaessaydi.

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