



Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*, 2008

I am, an open book...Some chapters are written for me, by authors known and unknown...The more you read, the more I recollect, the more I understand that expectancy is a sharp blade tearing the pages and disrobing the soul. Sometimes it is troublesome and painful. A chapter is obscured by absence and nothing could make it radiant. Words written on paper thick enough for me to feel the blood flowing under the skin, under the paper..."

Reddish-brown henna dye is the material Essaydi uses to execute this Arabic writing on skin and fabric. In traditional Moroccan society, henna decoration marks important milestones in a woman's life, such as a girl's coming of age, marriage, or the birth of a child.

The artist dedicates several years to planning each one of her photographic series, and to assembling the textiles and subjects for them. Site installation then takes a number of days or weeks to complete. As the final record of Essaydi's process she photographs her compositions. She uses large-format photography and print film, rather than digital images. The artist describes this choice: "I work with large format. There is absolutely no manipulation whatsoever with my work. I shoot the film and we print in a darkroom the traditional way." The visual record of Essaydi's un-cropped film—including the brand name "Kodak"—appears in the borders of her works here on view. Together these elements lend to each individual photograph the quality of being made by hand.

Lalla Essaydi's photographs will be on view in the Sawhill Gallery from March 24–April 4, Mon–Fri 10:00am–5:00pm & Sat–Sun, March 29–30, 10:00am–5:00pm.

Additional Essaydi photographs will be on view in the Darrin-McHone Gallery, located at 311 South Main Street, Harrisonburg, until March 28, Mon–Fri 9:00am–5:00pm. Visit www.valleyarts.org for more information.

Event Sponsors:

- James Madison University's *Cultural Connections* Artist Residency Program
- Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity
- College of Visual and Performing Arts
- School of Art, Design and Art History
- Office of International Programs
- Middle Eastern Communities and Migrations Minor
- JMU Muslim Student Association



Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: After the Bath*, 2008

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF LALLA ESSAYDI: CRITIQUING AND CONTEXTUALIZING ORIENTALISM

sites.jmu.edu/lallaessaydi

Sawhill Gallery
James Madison University
March 24–April 4, 2014



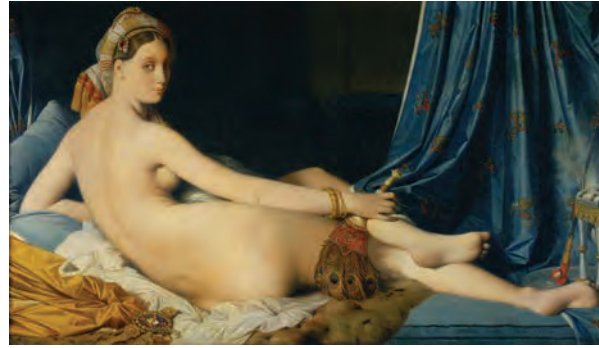
Lajos Geenen, *Portrait of Lalla Essaydi*, 2009

THE ARTIST

In my art I wish to present myself through multiple lenses—as artist, as Moroccan, as Saudi, as traditionalist, as liberal, as Muslim. In short I invite the viewer to resist stereotypes. – LE

Internationally exhibited artist Lalla Essaydi was born in 1956 in Marakkech, Morocco, in North Africa. Essaydi lived for several years in the Middle East, in Saudi Arabia, and then she traveled to Paris, France, to first formally study painting. In America she earned her Master's of Fine Arts degree in Painting and Photography, awarded in 2003, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The artist now travels between studios in New York and Boston, and historic sites in Morocco to carry out her work. The experiences of Arab women are the focus of her creative practice.

Foremost, Essaydi considers the lives of Arab women in twenty-first century Morocco. The artist's second major series, "The Women of Morocco," or "Le Femmes du Maroc" (French), is represented by the large-scale eight pieces in this show, executed between 2005-2008. Throughout her work, the artist considers the real-life experiences of Moroccan women, including her own and



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814

those of the friends and family who are represented in these photographs and who participated in the series' installation.

Essaydi compares these shared experiences to stereotypical images and ideas about Arab women first developed by Europeans in the 1800's. Such Western images often present Arab, Muslim women as exotic and beautiful subjects with tantalizing nudity. The figures Essaydi depicts here challenge these traditions through the artist's presentation of her female subjects for new audiences, audiences which now include women as well as Muslim and Arab viewers. Arabic-inscribed textiles in



the compositions call to mind a space centered in Islamic lands where textiles have been central to everyday life for centuries. The veiling and unveiling of the female subjects in Essaydi's photographs invite the viewer to consider the meaning and traditions of the veil, past and present.

ARTISTIC PRACTICE

The artist's practice combines site installation, painting, the textile arts, and the final documentary act of large-format photography. Arabic calligraphy, or beautiful writing, plays a central role in Essaydi's creative process. The inscribed lines of Arabic seen on women's bodies and on draped and worn textiles derive from Essaydi's own writing.



Arabic calligraphy written in gold and black ink in a Koran manuscript, c. 1300, Spain or North Africa

A sense for the content of this calligraphy is suggested by the following excerpted, English translation. It derives from Essaydi's Arabic texts inscribed on textiles from the artist's first series, *Converging Territories* (2002-2004): "I am writing. I am writing on me. I am writing on her. The story began to be written the moment the present began. I am asking, how can I be simultaneously inside and outside? I didn't even know this world existed. I thought it existed only in my head, in my dreams. And now here