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SELECTIONS

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Inverting the Orientalist Gaze | Lalla Essaydi

written by **India Stoughton**



Selections talks to six talented female photographers from the Arab world and Iran whose work spans the gulf between East and West, transcending language and culture to tell universal stories

Each of the six women interviewed in this issue deals with this in their own way, some choosing to address the gulf between East and West directly in their work, others approaching it more obliquely. Yet ultimately, each achieves a similar alchemy — using photography as a tool, they are able to transform and translate their personal experiences into a universal format, rendering their subject matter accessible to people of any background, challenging harmful stereotypes and championing new perspectives.

Lalla Essaydi, a Moroccan photographer based in the U.S., details how she employs the composition and tropes of Orientalist paintings to provoke viewers into new ways of seeing, overturning expectations and subverting Orientalist attitudes.

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Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi's photographs set out to provoke viewers into new ways of seeing by mimicking and subverting Orientalist tropes

Beautiful but reductive, fetishistic and steeped in colonialism and imperialism, Orientalist paintings invented a Middle East that never existed for an audience that wished to see its desires and prejudices reinforced. Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi hijacks this imagery to create photographs that deliberately subvert Orientalist views.

“My work reaches beyond Islamic culture to include the Western fascination, which we see so powerfully in painting, with the odalisque, the veil, the harem,” she says. “It’s obvious to anyone who cares to look that images of the harem and odalisque are still pervasive today, and I am using the female body to complicate assumptions and disrupt the Orientalist gaze. I want the viewer to become aware of Orientalism as a projection of the sexual fantasies of Western male artists, in other words, as a voyeuristic tradition, which involves peering into, and distorting private space.”



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Her photographs capture dark-eyed women in flowing robes, sometimes posed seductively, in mimicry of Orientalist fantasy and composition, at other times sunk into their own worlds. Some are covered in spidery calligraphy, made with henna and a syringe. Other blend into colourful backgrounds like chameleons.

Essaysi says her aim is not simply to expose the distortions of Orientalism, “but also to provoke the viewer into new ways of seeing. I want the projected space of Orientalism to vie with another space, one which shapes a new understanding. In my photographs, I have removed the nudity that is found in the paintings and created instead ‘real’ domestic scenes in which Arab women are engaging the viewer, disrupting the voyeuristic tradition, and dictating how they are to be seen... My aim is to disrupt the viewer’s programmed response by seeming to cater to, but in fact dislocating, expectations.”



Herself many things — a woman, a Moroccan, a traditionalist, a liberal, a Muslim — Essaydi sets out to capture the complexity of the Arab women who were historically reduced to nothing more than objects for the white, male gaze. “My work is highly autobiographical,” she says. “In it, I speak my thoughts and talk directly about my experiences as a woman and an artist, finding the language with which to speak from those uncertain zones between memory and the present, East and West... My photographs draw on my own specific experience in order to yield — in me as well as in the viewer — a richer understanding of my culture.”