

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

LALLA ESSAYDI

STILL IN PROGRESS

June 7 – August 15, 2017



Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc Harem Beauty #1*, 2008, c-print, 3-101.6 x 76.2 cm each, edition of 15

“I wish for my work to be as vividly present
and yet as elusive as “woman” herself
– not simply because she is veiled or turns away–
but because she is still in progress.”

- Lalla Essaydi: *Crossing Boundaries, Bridging Cultures* (ACR Edition, 2015)

Leila Heller is proud to present *Still in Progress*, the first solo exhibition in the Middle East by the New York-based Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi. Spanning her major bodies of work from 2003 to 2013, the exhibition includes work from series including: *Converging Territories*, *Harem*, *Les Femmes Du Maroc*, and *Bullets Revisited*. Essaydi’s photographs are the result of a complex performance-based process comprised of painting, calligraphy, interior design, costume design, stage directing, and finally photography. This meticulous process of image making is crucial to Essaydi’s oeuvre. The uncropped white borders of the film emphasise that she fabricates her settings and identities, mocking the Orientalists’ invented fantasy scenes, yet hers are based on historical, social, and cultural facts.

In the series, *Converging Territories* (2002-2004), Essaydi develops a unique working method and set of visual devices that include applying a deliberately indecipherable calligraphic form alluding to Kufic script using the medium of henna to her subjects’ faces, bodies, and environments. In the series that followed, *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005-2007), Essaydi arranges her subjects in poses directly inspired by 19th century Orientalist imagery reminiscent of paintings by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme.

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Essaydi uses intricate calligraphic text drawn in henna instead of ink to fill everything from the walls to the fabrics her Odalisques wear. This layer of calligraphy conceals the uncovered parts of the female bodies and in this sense assumes an allegorical dimension: even their bare skin becomes her canvas as she covers their ankles, legs, arms, wrists and faces in row upon row of tight script. What is key here is that the art of calligraphy itself is traditionally a male-dominated realm, yet Essaydi appropriates it with the ultra-feminine medium of henna (used by women to create decorative patterns for special occasions such as weddings). "By reclaiming the rich tradition of calligraphy and interweaving it with the traditionally female art of henna," she explains, "I have been able to express, and yet, in another sense, dissolve the contradictions I have encountered in my culture: between hierarchy and fluidity, between public and private space, between the richness and the confining aspects of Islamic traditions."

In the *Harem* series (2009), Essaydi continues to explore many of the themes characteristic of her earlier work, but in an entirely new setting: the harem quarters in Dar al Basha, a vibrant architectural palace in Marrakesh. The artist designs fabrics for the subjects that mimic the patterns within the palace, picking up on details from the mosaic, stucco, stained glass, and carved wood. Through this combined use of space, calligraphy, henna and costume, Essaydi explores the function of women as decorative features within the context of vernacular architecture. She explains, "The women then, become literal odalisques (odalisque, from the Turkish, means to belong to a place)." As such, she is portrayed "caged" amongst other acquisitions in the "cabinet de curiosite" of the male dominion, the harem. This very physical and psychological environment of the home and harem haunts the artist, in the sense that it constitutes the space and the culture of her childhood within her.

In *Harem Revisited* (2012-2013), Essaydi's subjects are clothed in elaborate caftans and their environments are now covered with richly adorned fabrics. These vintage textiles, which were created between the 17th century to the early 20th century for use in wedding ceremonies, to decorate palaces and the harem area, were all generously loaned to Essaydi from the Nour and Boubker Temli collection.

Coinciding with the *Harem* series, Essaydi began *Bullets and Bullets Revisited* (2009-2014). Upon closer inspection, however, every item, from clothing to the walls, is made up of carefully cut and polished bullet casings. The use of this unexpected material, and one that's charged with associations with death and violence in contemporary society are juxtaposed with Essaydi's historical scenes, rendering them as objects of beauty within these delicate tableaux. In these series, thousands of bullet casings are meticulously sewn together to create a mantle of gold that is draped from ceiling to floor. Essaydi productively uses the bullet as a disturbing metaphor with its continued relevance. In this later series, we see a shift in Essaydi's aesthetics, as she moves away from the bounds of traditional architectural spaces to a new Byzantine-like luxury

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showcase like space where beautiful Odalisques are adorned in shimmering materials against equally dazzling mosaic backdrops, giving an aura of warm-hued wealth and luxury. Here, Essaydi has lifted her veiled beauties out from their backdrops very much puts them at the forefront, glittering and glimmering in all of their glory. It is this military juxtaposition of carefully cut and polished bullet casings that builds up these glamorous trompe l'oeil images. Despite this apparent blinding beauty, where ammunition is even hand sewn on the models' clothes, jewels, and beds, Essaydi explains that "beauty is quite dangerous, as it lures the viewer into accepting the fantasy" yet she brings the viewer into a much more perilous world -- that of the contemporary moment with its current and on going war and destruction.

About the Artist:

Lalla A. Essaydi (1956) grew up in Morocco and now lives in the USA where she received her MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/TUFTS University in May 2003. Recent exhibitions of her work have been staged at The Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington DC; The Baku Museum of Modern Art in Azerbaijan; The World Art Bank Program, Washington DC; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Bronx Museum, New York; the Tampere Art Museum, Finland; Bahrain Museum/Ministry of Culture; Williams College Museum, Williamstown, Mass.; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, and the Bahrain National Museum, Manama, Bahrain. Her work can be found in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The British Museum, London; The Louvre, Paris; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar; and The Art Institute of Chicago, among many others. In 2015, ACR Edition released her monograph, *Lalla Essaydi: Crossing Boundaries, Bridging Cultures*.

About the Gallery:

Since its establishment over three decades ago in New York, Leila Heller Gallery has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in promoting creative dialogue and exchange between Western artists and Middle Eastern, Central and Southeast Asian artists. It has garnered a reputation for identifying and cultivating the careers of artists leaving a lasting impact on contemporary art and culture. Currently representing a diverse roster of Western and Middle Eastern artists, the gallery is also active in the American, European and Middle Eastern secondary art markets. In November 2015, Leila Heller Gallery opened its first international location in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. At 14,000 square feet, the state of the art gallery features three exhibition spaces, making it the largest gallery in the UAE. Showcasing leading regional and international artists, many of whom will be presenting their work in the Middle East for the first time, the gallery is dedicated to supporting the evolving practice of established artists.

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