## LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

"At LA Museum, A Powerful And Provocative Look At 'Islamic Art Now'." NPR. (May 5, 2015).



## At LA Museum, A Powerful And Provocative Look At 'Islamic Art Now'

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In her 2008 work *Reclining Odalisque*, Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi shows a woman covered in calligraphy. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Art galleries are generally quiet, hushed spaces, but at the Los Angeles County Museum a show called Islamic Art Now is sparking some heated discussions as visitors ponder the photographs, paintings and neon sculptures on display.

Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi has covered every inch of a reclining odalisque with graceful Arabic calligraphy. The woman is staring right at us, and viewers wonder: Is the writing protection? A shield? Imprisonment?

Translating the calligraphy, curator Linda Komaroff



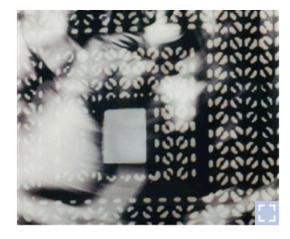
doesn't see it that way. "I see it more as: This is who I am. See me for who I am. Read me if you like, but this is me," she says.

Egyptian-German artist Susan Hefuna's *Woman Behind Mashrabiya I* is a black and white image of a shrouded woman looking out from behind a pierced screen. We can't really see her, but she can see us. Is she protected? Trapped?

"It's very mysterious — and deliberately so," Komaroff says. "It's this notion about: Do we really understand? ...

To me, a lot of these images are a challenge to an

American audience to maybe rethink what their



Curator Linda Komaroff says the woman in Susan Hefuna's *Woman Behind Mashrabiya I* is "very mysterious — and deliberately so."

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

perceptions are of women in the Middle East, women in the Islamic world. Maybe they're not that different from us after all."



Click here to see a larger version of Mitra Tabrizian's *Tehran 2006*.

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The women go to college, hold political office, drive, yet still wear chadors.

"A lot of the artists that you see in this gallery, they have double consciousness,"

Behdad explains. "Many of them are caught between a certain tradition ... and that tradition for the most part is Islamic — Islamic culture — on the other hand, they are secular and they are very much Westernized."

These artists are from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Kuwait, Israel. According to the show's catalog, they are Muslim, Christian and Jewish. Many are expats. In fact, Behdad questions the title of the show — *Islamic Art Now*.

"I think the subtitle of this show is actually a more accurate description — artists from the Middle East," Behdad says. "Because many of these artists — I think the overwhelming majority of these artists — are actually not Muslim in the very traditional sense of the word at all. They are incredibly secular. Many of them live in the West. If you called Andy Warhol a Christian artist would that make sense?"

"If you called Andy Warhol a Christian artist would that make sense?"

- Professor Ali Behdad

Komaroff disagrees. She acknowledges that "Islamic" is a loaded word, but says that in its broader meaning, it applies here. "When we use the term 'Islamic art' we're not talking about Islam, we're not talking about religion," she says. "... All the artists here are from this world that was initially shaped by Islam, by an Arabic alphabet, but has evolved into something so much more and much more complex than standard views of either religion or violence. It's about beauty as well."

Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East is indeed about beauty. It's also about values, religion and a clash of cultures. And its provocative, dramatic, powerful images linger in the mind.



Amir Mousavi's 2011 work *Untitled*, #8, from the series *Lost in Wonderland*.

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