

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Leech, Nick "We speak to Lalla Essaydi about her first solo gallery show in Dubai." *The National* (July, 2017).



We speak to Lalla Essaydi about her first solo gallery show in Dubai

The Moroccan artist uses carefully staged portraits of Arab women to investigate the complexities of her contemporary sense of identity as a woman, an Arab and a Muslim



Nick Leech | July 3, 2017 Updated: July 1, 2017 02:59 PM



The New York-based Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi admits that when it comes to the discussion and reception of her work, she has had to develop something of a thick skin.

Carefully staged portraits of Arab women that are often larger than life-size, Essaydi's photographs not only engage with the art of the past, but also combine traditional Arabic calligraphy, architecture and interiors to investigate the complexities of her contemporary sense of female, Arab and Muslim identity. In photographs such as *Bullets Revisited #21* (2013), which features thousands of carefully cut, polished and assembled cartridge cases, Essaydi reflects on the violence that engulfs the daily lives of so many women, while in other works she engages with the art of the past and the ways in which this continues to frame western views of the Islamic world.

1-87, Alserkal Avenue Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE | 568 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 USA

www.leilahellergallery.com

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Essaydi achieves this in pictures such as *Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Beauty #1* (2008) by echoing and critiquing the kind of western, erotically charged, 19th-century paintings of harems and odalisques that were identified as part of a colonialist "narrative of oppression" by celebrated Palestinian critic Edward Said in his influential 1978 text *Orientalism*.

Despite her profoundly political stance, Essaydi's work has frequently attracted criticism, and she has been accused of not only perpetuating western stereotypes, but also of aping the very works and artists she sets out to critique.

"People couldn't see the difference between my works and the original paintings, they couldn't see that I was trying to engage the viewer and to criticise the paintings in a very, very subtle way," the 61-year-old artist says from Marrakech. "In a sense, they didn't know how to read my work, but I'm an artist, not a militant, and I can't do away with the art." The most dogged criticism Essaydi's work, she admits, is the charge it has faced since the very start of her career.

Essaydi's professors at Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston had no problem with the issues she wanted to investigate: her sense of identity as a woman, a Moroccan, a Muslim and an Arab, and the prejudice and injustices of Orientalism, but they did take issue with the manner of her engagement.

"When I was studying for my master's degree, my professors said my work was too beautiful, that it could not convey the messages I wanted to communicate" she says. "But for me, beauty in art is very important, it's what attracts me to an artwork in the first place and so if I want to engage somebody, I'm not going to create something ugly and I couldn't change anyway because my work is part of me."

In art as in life, beauty has always held a double-edged appeal. Long-equated with perfection and the highest form of aesthetic achievement, beauty also arouses suspicion, associated as it was with seduction and temptation, and as it now is with being glib, old-fashioned and aesthetically irrelevant.

Despite the many charges, Essaydi's commitment to both her subject matter and her particular treatment of it has never wavered, and she has answered her critics with a more-than-decade-long body of work that has been exhibited in international venues such as the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum and the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington.

The artist's first solo gallery show in the UAE, Leila Heller Gallery's *Lalla Essaydi: Still in Progress*, features 15 works that span each of Essaydi's major projects from 2003 to 2013. The show's title is taken from a quote by Essaydi that gets to the heart of the complexity that informs her work.

"I wish for my work to be as vividly present and yet as elusive as 'woman' herself," Essaydi said in a 2015 monograph. "Not simply because she is veiled or turns away – but because she is still in progress."

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

It was a very personal response and a sense of dissonance that spurred Essaydi's engagement with 19th-century depictions of the Islamic Middle East by European artists such as Ingres, Delacroix and Gérôme.

"I always knew those paintings, but for me they were a fantasy, like a novel, something we know is not reality, but then, when after studying and after seeing what people thought about them in the West, I was driven to this kind of work," the artist tells me.

"A lot of people still think that's the way we live, but as an Arab woman, I don't recognise myself in those paintings," she adds. "That piqued my curiosity and made me think about my identity as an Arab woman, so in a way, I reencountered my own culture through Orientalist paintings."

The bodies of work represented in *Still in Progress – Converging Territories*, *Harem*, *Les Femmes du Maroc* and *Bullets Revisited* - reveal both the continuities and discontinuities of Essaydi's investigation.

All of the works include Essaydi's hand-rendered henna calligraphy, written with a syringe, that she uses to cover her subject's bodies and clothing like a veil, but whereas her earlier projects placed her subjects in a neutral setting, the latter use complex mises-en-scène, complete with traditional geometry, tiling and interiors, that often require years of planning to execute.

"When I started working, I started photographing women in amazing houses, but when I brought my work to the West, all people were seeing were the beautiful spaces – they weren't seeing the women and that was disappointing," Essaydi explains, reflecting on works that were often mistaken as the product of fashion or interior design shoots.

"I was curious why people couldn't see it, and it was only when people were starting to understand what I was trying to do that I was able to reintroduce architecture and colour back into my work."

Despite all of these details, Essaydi insists her focus is the women – friends, family and neighbours from her ancestral home in Marrakech – who remain her focus.

Essaydi organises gatherings of between 20 and 40 of these women every year in Morocco, during which the group spend anything from a week to a fortnight discussing their lives and the daily challenges they face.

It's only once these discussions are finished that Essaydi starts on the construction of that year's artwork, using transcriptions of the women's conversations as the basis of her henna calligraphy, rendering each project a different chapter in the artist's development and each her models a different page in the journal of her career.

"The photographic part of my work documents the experience I have with the women I work with," Essaydi explains. "I have absolutely no audience in my mind when I am working, I do it for me and the women I work with."