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Reformed Histories



Lalla Essaydi's (b. 1956) versatile practice has always encompassed a multitude of media such as painting, mixed media and video. But, since 2002, the Moroccan-born artist has embraced photography as a contemporary, multi-disciplinary outlet, one which has enabled the development of a unique, performance-driven process incorporating calligraphy, interior design and costume design.

The most recent example of this is *Still in Progress* at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, a show that draws audiences into a modern-day harem. Instead of being welcomed by coquettish odalisques averting their eyes, however, viewers are accosted by confrontational stares. Preoccupied with the role of women in the Arab world – and how infrequently they are represented in Western art – Essaydi evokes a conceptualised

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retelling of the figures, building a new pathway that enables the women to return and assert a female gaze through the lens. Converging Territories, Harem, Les Femmes Du Maroc and Bullets Revisited are seamlessly incorporated into the show, pieces that look to history as an influence, armed with sociocultural facts that reclaim a sense of authority and innate knowledge.

At first glance, the subjects seem to bask amidst opulence, mirroring poses adopted by 19th century Orientalist painters like Delacroix and Ingres. But the depictions go further than this – utilising real women and identities, the female body is taken back, subverting eroticised ideals with concrete figures, fixed with overlaid scripture. Les Femmes Du Maroc (2005-2006) is a retort to Les Femmes d'Algers by Delacroix. Whilst adopting a similar visual vocabulary, Essaydi intervenes by correcting historical inaccuracies – the masculine presence is removed, the bodies are covered and the ostentatious excess is watered down. Through this treatment, she divulges the eroticised and fetishistic viewpoint that occupied Western perception of the Middle East, calling for a re-appropriation of a period largely presented from a masculine standpoint.

The most visually striking feature of the compositions is the Kufic script, which covers the subjects and their environments. Calligraphy, a predominantly male-dominated art form, comes under the feminine domain through the use of henna instead of ink. At odds with the permanence of ink, the ephemeral nature of henna fades over time, giving way for new stories to be written over old ones; again, referencing a new age for identity, gender fluidity and reformed narratives.

Akin to her subjects, the calligraphy is not purely ornamental. Instead it reveals personal stories, derived from Essaydi's journal, where she recalls her experience as an Arab woman. The illegible writing is abstracted, becoming flexible and applicable to other women, thereby becoming universalised. Even though she remains behind the scene, the artist embeds a vital part of herself into each of the works. Through this revelation, written word becomes a way for her to break through conventions, adopting a sacred Islamic art form reserved for the service of the Quran to tell the story of Arab femininity.

Landscape is also a vital component within the images; the Harem (2009) series is set against the backdrop of Dar al Basha, Marrakesh. Patterns from the surroundings seem to bleed into clothing, alluding to an obscurity of the women. Ultimately, however, the figures resist a sense of disappearance into the textures of the architecture, and refuse to be seen as merely ornamental. Instead, they stare back, unshaken and resolute.

Despite exemplifying such a multi-layered practice, photography comes to the fore as a mediator for new storytelling. Deviating from the Orientalists, the use of technology allows a weight to be lifted; the uncropped white borders of the film infuse reality back into the seemingly fantastical works. What ties Essaydi's oeuvre together are the subtle disassociations planted into the photographs: between male and female, perceiver and perceived, past and present, public and private. Through these dualities, the artist creates multiple possibilities of interpretation – adopting visual tropes from historical practices, whilst utilising an informed sensitivity that takes steps towards a new existence.

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