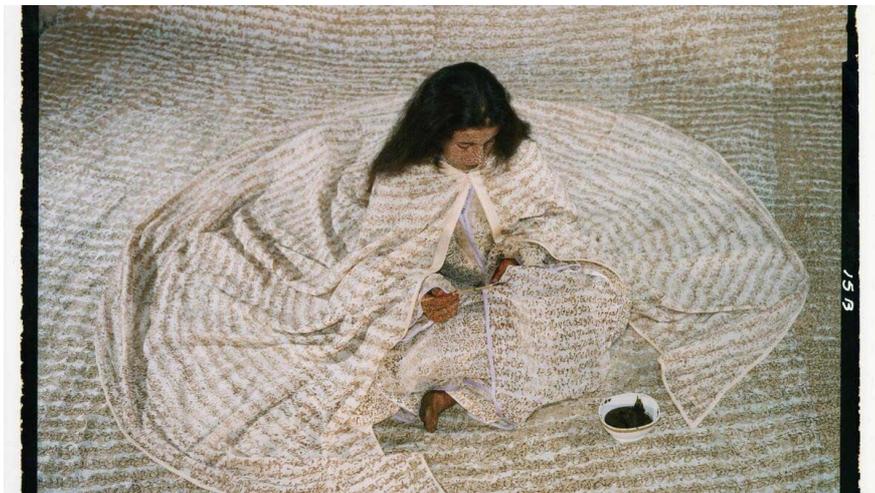


Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

Lalla A. Essaydi

Morocco (b. 1956)



Converging Territories

Work

Most of Lalla Essaydi's work has strong autobiographical elements, inevitably shared by other Arab women.

Converging Territories is a series of photographs depicting Islamic women in an uninhabited house, much like the one that Essaydi herself was once confined to for transgressing the Islamic rules on gender roles. Exploring her childhood through the distance of time and the Western perspective Essaydi has since gained, these photos make reference to the Islamic tradition that allows public spaces to be dominated by men.

While life for women in Morocco has changed over time, Essaydi's photos use private space as a metaphor for the social and psychological constraints that still exist. She also asserts her independence by giving the depicted women a voice through two art forms, the female art of henna design and the male art of calligraphy, a highly venerated and most respected element of Islamic art practiced exclusively by men. A self-taught calligrapher, Essaydi also imposes writing on the depicted women, covering their faces, clothing, even the surrounding space.

Given that calligraphy is associated with Islamic religion, the viewer is initially tempted to view this as an expression of the oppression of Arab women. Considering, however, that in the Islamic faith calligraphy has for thousands of years been an art form practiced exclusively by men, Essaydi is in essence rebelling, expanding her boundaries, and entering forbidden "space," giving herself and her women a voice. Intertwining calligraphy with the traditional female art of henna, she is also letting us know that she does not reject her heritage and still values parts of its traditional gender rules. She simply accepts them as the dichotomy that exists within individuals, within her and all of us, within her culture and ours.

Essaydi's messages resonate universally. While gender inequality may be more obvious in the Arab world, it exists around the world, with women continuing to struggle through social and psychological barriers. Ultimately, Essaydi invites all cultures to face their biases, resist stereotypes, and understand the complex identities of women and expand their role in society.

As a Western-educated Arab woman, Essaydi is grateful for the independence afforded her today. She also embraces her native culture and traditions, which, as is the case with all cultures, have greatly contributed to the person and artist she is today. Her experiences within an array of cultures and environments have empowered and enabled her to seek, decipher, identify, document, and share the value of both diverse experience and tradition in her personal and artistic journey. Her courage and determination in facing and delving into difficult issues of self and identity also sensitize us, the viewers, affording us the opportunity to better understand the experience of at least this Muslim woman, and recognize that we are not all that different after all; that the world is not divided into good and bad cultures, but cultures that are, to paraphrase American poet Walt Whitman, large and contain multitudes.

About the Artist

Lalla Essaydi was born in Marrakesh, Morocco, to a traditional Muslim family. While she is best known for her staged photographs of Arab women, she has also worked with oil on canvas, mixed media, and video. She left Morocco at the age of 16 to attend high school in Paris. Upon her return to Morocco, she married and moved to Saudi Arabia where she had two children. She eventually divorced and returned to Paris in the 1990s to attend École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. In 1996, she moved to Boston where her children attended college. In 1999, Essaydi earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Tufts University, and a Master of Fine Arts in painting and photography from the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2003. She works in Boston and Morocco, while her permanent residence is in New York City.

Essaydi's art has been exhibited in many museums throughout the United States and other countries, including England, Ireland, France, Germany, Syria, The Netherlands, United Arab Emirates, and Japan. Her work is also included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Columbus Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Williams College Museum of Art, the Fries Museum in the Netherlands, and many others.