



By Design: Theater and Fashion in the
Photography of Lalla - Ephemera

By Design: Theater and Fashion in the
Photography of Lalla

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By Design: Theater and Fashion in the Photography of Lalla - Wall Labels

Fairfield University Art Museum

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Dancer #10, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Dancer #12, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Harem #14C, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Bullets #5, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Bullets Revisited #6, 2012

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Bullets Revisited #20, 2013

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with
UV protective laminate

Silence of Thought #2, 2003

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi photographed a young woman reclining in an interior space, a room in a large house belonging to her extended family. Essaydi covered the woman's body and her dress with writing done with henna, a temporary plant dye. She arranged her model so she lounges on a sofa and appears flattened and two-dimensional, turning her into a decorative element similar to the painted doors and the upholstered cushions upon which she reclines. However, the words written in Arabic script are meant to subvert the woman's silence and give her a voice. The use of writing done with henna adds a narrative and theatrical element to Essaydi's work. Furthermore, it highlights the sense of tension inherent in her photographs: she represents the confinement of women but also their agency.

Converging Territories #9, 2003

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi covered the studio set, the woman's clothing, and her body with Arabic script written with henna. Henna is a natural plant dye used by women during celebratory occasions and rites of passage. While Arabic calligraphy has long been restricted to male artisans, Essaydi arranged her female model so she is actively writing, a bamboo calligraphy pen in her hand and a bowl of henna at her feet. Essaydi sees the act of women writing with henna as subversive, using a material intimately linked to women to give them a voice. However, the text on Essaydi's images is never entirely legible, suggesting that these are women's private stories.

Converging Territories #24, 2004

4 chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi intentionally includes black borders around her photographs, which are the result of her photographic technique. She uses a large format camera mounted on a tripod in her studio, which requires that the film be placed in a holder, that blocks its edges from exposure to light and the edges print black. She intentionally includes the black borders to show that the image was not cropped or edited post-production. Henna was applied in the studio before the image was taken, rather than after the print was made. Essaydi took each of these four photographs separately, which required her to line up her camera perfectly. Her photographic technique draws attention to the fact that each photograph was carefully and meticulously constructed in her studio.

Converging Territories #2, 2003

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi's photography confronts many stereotypes about Muslim women, namely that the veil represents female oppression. While Essaydi's photographs superficially replicate the voyeuristic photographic images taken of veiled North African women by outsiders in the early twentieth century, she subversively combines the male-dominated art form of Arabic calligraphy with henna to suggest that contemporary Moroccan women's bodies exist in-between confinement and self-determination.

Les Femmes du Maroc #30, 2006

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

In this carefully staged photograph, a long white cloth frames the image like a theater stage curtain. We seem to have a rare view into an intimate interaction between Moroccan women in a domestic setting. One reads a book and the reclining woman listens to her. Essaydi spends hours applying henna to her models, their clothing, and the backdrop that surrounds them. The application of henna is a slow, painstaking process that requires intense concentration on the part of the artist and the patience of her models.

Dancer #8, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

The movement, dynamism, and playfulness of the swirling cloth adds to the visual power of this image. Dance is extremely important to Moroccan celebratory occasions, with women holding dance parties and playing music for each other. Professional female dancers (*shikhat*) are sometimes hired to perform at Moroccan weddings. However, these dancers have an ambivalent status in Morocco today; they add joy to ceremonial occasions but some judge them negatively, stereotyping them as sexually promiscuous women. Aware of these contradictions, Essaydi intentionally chooses subjects and themes with multiple meanings.

Harem #11, 2009

3 chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

The architectural setting featured in the *Harem* series is a highly decorative Marrakech-based mansion, once owned by Thami El Glaoui, a controversial figure who was made the pasha of Marrakech in 1912 by the Moroccan king. This was the beginning of the colonial period and El Glaoui supported French rule. Known as Dar el Basha, the mansion's ceramic tilework, carved plaster, and painted woodwork that adorns the walls and floors of its interior can also be found in mosques, Qur'anic schools, and homes of the elite in both urban Morocco and in Andalusian Spain. Essaydi replicated the designs that decorated the mansion's architecture onto the clothing she designed for her models to add meaning to the mis-en-scène that she created.

Harem #10, 2009

3 chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

As a crossroads between Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, Morocco has incredibly rich artistic traditions. The bright yellows and blues that dominate the tilework in Dar el Basha are unique to Amazigh (Berber) architecture in the High Atlas Mountains, which was the traditional homeland of the Glaoui family. A large indigenous population known as Imazighen (singular: Amazigh) lived in Morocco prior to the arrival of Arabs and Islam, greatly contributing to Morocco's artistic and cultural diversity. Essaydi's emphasis on this particular tilework pattern is meant to recognize Morocco's Amazigh heritage.

Harem #31, 2009

2 chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi dressed two women in garments that replicate the tile patterns behind them. They essentially become part of the background decoration. However, the meaning of the photograph is extremely ambiguous. The women become beautiful ornaments and almost become one with the background that surrounds them. But is this a confined interior space, a stage set, or a large open room? The movement, dynamism, and playfulness of this photograph defies easy categorization. We are uncertain whether the women are confined inside or whether these are two women celebrating a joyous occasion. This sense of ambiguity adds to the photograph's visual dynamism.

Harem Revisited #51, 2013

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi dressed her models in antique Moroccan dresses borrowed from the collection of Nour and Boubker Temli. She also included hand embroidered fabrics from the cities of Rabat, Tetouan, and Fes as well as wall hangings with arches called *haiti* that were commonly used as decorations inside the homes of the elite. Each city developed its own style of embroidery, which was impacted by the waves of Jewish and Muslim refugees who arrived in Morocco from Andalusia, bringing rich textile traditions with them, especially the art of silk embroidery and weaving. Essaydi skillfully combined patterns and embroidery styles to create interior spaces that exist outside of time and cannot be tied to a specific place, creating her own unique theatrical stage sets.

Harem Revisited #31, 2012

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi draped a rare silk belt from Fes (*hizam*) over the arm of the woman in the foreground. Worn over women's *qaftans*, such belts were gifted to new brides, and the act of belting a woman was an indication of her marital status. Until their decline from fashion in the early 20th century, such belts were so valuable that they were sometimes cut in half if a woman had two daughters and given to each as part of their inheritance.

Harem Revisited #47, 2012

3 chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

The antique textiles from the Temli collection are invaluable examples of a craft tradition supported by women that once flourished in Morocco. Essaydi was aware of the value of this collection and featured these splendid fabrics in her photographs to convey her pride in Moroccan textile arts. Her tableaux were not meant to be a deliberate recreation of the past. Rather Essaydi drew from her love of fashion and layered the *qaftans* in new ways, placing a light rose-colored *qaftan* with a repeating gold design over a bold pink print with white flowers. Such a combination would not have been worn by women in early-20th-century Morocco.

Bullets #3, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi's photography carries the tradition of Moroccan artistry into the future, as she recreates traditional Moroccan patterns using new materials to comment on contemporary life. Her choice to use bullets was a bold one. In these glittering photographs, Essaydi comments on the violence that many in the United States and Europe associate with contemporary Middle Eastern and North African countries. Ironically, Essaydi transformed bullets into sparkling garments and intricate backdrops so that they are no longer recognizable as weaponry, illustrating once again the ambiguity inherent in her work that makes it so compelling.

Bullets #6, 2009

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

The process of accumulating thousands of spent bullets was no easy task. The Moroccan government limits the purchase of bullets to hunters and regulates the number they are allowed to buy. When she began the project, she sourced empty bullet shells from southeastern Morocco near the disputed border with Algeria, an area heavily guarded by the Moroccan military. In the area, spent bullets dot the landscape of a former Moroccan military training ground, adding another layer of political meaning to Essaydi's photography. Essaydi created a rich background for her model by skillfully arranging sliced brass and nickel bullet shells of different sizes into patterns that recreate the wall mosaics used in Moroccan urban interiors.

Bullets Revisited #20, 2013

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Several hundred pounds of sliced bullet casings were used to create the woman's cloak in this photograph. The weight of this glimmering cloak was so heavy that it had to be placed onto the model's shoulders after she was sitting down and immediately removed after the photograph was taken. Essaydi's bullet cloak is a sculptural prop especially made for the studio. Its form recreates hooded cloaks called *silham*, which were once commonly worn in Morocco.

Bullets Revisited #38, 2014

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi often features the odalisque pose in her photography. The term odalisque comes from the Turkish word *odalik*, referring to a female slave or concubine in a sultan's palace. The image of the odalisque became a common trope in European stereotypes of the Middle East where they imagined that every home had a harem of female slaves waiting to please their masters. Viewers may feel that they are being allowed into the intimate, forbidden world of Arab women as Essaydi intentionally situates her images on the threshold between voyeurism and the confrontation of stereotypes.

Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Women **Writing, 2008**

Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with UV protective laminate

Essaydi posed two women with a massive amount of cloth between them. They both appear to be writing on it, and one is reminded of Shahrazad, the female storyteller from the epic Middle Eastern tale *Thousand and One Nights*. Shahrazad married a ruthless king who killed his new wives after spending one night with them. Shahrazad told the king a new story every night, and since he enjoyed them so much, he spared her life. Shahrazad was able to prevail against injustice through her own cunning and intelligence. By the 19th century, the tale had been translated from Arabic into English and was understood by a Western audience as an example of the exotic and enchanting beliefs found in the faraway Orient, its original meaning completely transformed. Essaydi is aware that the complex relationship between cultures often leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation, and she confronts this idea in her photography.

Video courtesy of the National Museum of
Women in the Arts