



JENKINS JOHNSON GALLERY

## Lalla Essaydi: *Les Femmes du Maroc*

October 6 – December 3, 2011



Left: *Les Femmes du Maroc: Harem Beauty #1*, 2008 1/10, Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum and protected with Mactac luster laminate, each panel 60 x 48 inches.

Right: *Harem #10*, 2009, chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches

Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco is delighted to present an exhibition of photographs by internationally acclaimed Moroccan-born artist, Lalla Essaydi. The show will include work from three recent series: *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005-2008), *Harem* (2009), and *Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited* (2010). The exhibition will run from Thursday, October 6 through December 3, 2011. There will be an opening reception on Thursday, October 6<sup>th</sup> from 5:30 – 7:30pm. This will be Essaydi's first solo exhibition on the West Coast.

Lalla Essaydi incorporates layers of Islamic calligraphy applied by hand with henna, in tandem with poses directly inspired by 19th Century Orientalist painting. By appropriating this imagery, the works reflect the changing and “complex female identities” found in Morocco and throughout the Muslim world.

During the 19th Century, French painters such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme indulged their audiences with the trend for painting images of the middle-eastern harem and the eroticized Arab female body. Utilizing her perspective as an Arab woman living in a Western world, Lalla Essaydi, attempts to re-examine Arab female identity.

Set within Moroccan interiors including an unoccupied house, owned by the artist's family, a place to which Essaydi was sent as a form of punishment when she disobeyed, *Les Femmes du Maroc* represents an exploration of the imaginary

boundaries and “permissible space” codified by traditional Muslim society. Essaydi writes, “the presence of men defines public space, the streets, the meeting places. Women are confined to private spaces, the architecture of the homes.”



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“I am writing. I am writing on me, I am writing on her. The story began to be written the moment the present began.” Translated from the original Arabic, Essaydi’s personal writing subverts traditional Muslim gender stereotypes through the presence of the written word. The sacred Islamic art form of calligraphy, traditionally reserved exclusively for men, is employed by Essaydi as a small act of defiance against a culture in which women are relegated to the private sphere. Crossing a prohibited cultural threshold through the act of writing, *Les Femmes du Maroc* enables the artist and her subjects to engage in a simple act of self expression.

Essaydi’s latest body of work *Harem* diverges from her previous series: *Converging Territories* (2003-2004) and *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005-2008). *Harem* series is the visually colored, elaborate, architectural setting of the Moroccan palace Dar al Basha. She created fabric for the models that mimics the patterns within the palace, which is decorated with mosaic, stucco, stained glass and carved wood. The models are camouflaged with the decoration that surrounds them and rise from the traditional spaces they once occupied. Essaydi’s photographs depict the contemporary “culture of Islamic feminism.”

“The physical harem is the dangerous frontier where sacred law and pleasure collide. This is not the harem of the Western Orientalist imagination, an anxiety-free place of euphoria and the absence of constraints, where the word “harem” has lost its dangerous edge. My harem is based on the historical reality; rather than the artistic images of the West – an idyllic, lustful dream of sexually available women, uninhibited by the moral constraints of 19th Century Europe.” Lalla Essaydi, 2010

Lalla Essaydi was born in 1956 outside of Marrakech. This exhibition follows a recent solo exhibition in Zurich, Switzerland. Her work is represented in a number of collections including the Williams College Museum of Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; the Fries Museum, The Netherlands; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Kodak Museum of Art, Rochester, New York; The Columbus Museum Of Art, Ohio; The Kresge Art Museum, Michigan; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; The Colorado Museum of Art, Colorado; The Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis; the Jordan National Museum; the North Carolina Museum of Art; the Neuberger Museum; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; and The Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

Jenkins Johnson Gallery will be participating in Art Platform - Los Angeles September 30 – October 3 and the Texas Contemporary Art Fair, October 20 - 23, 2011.