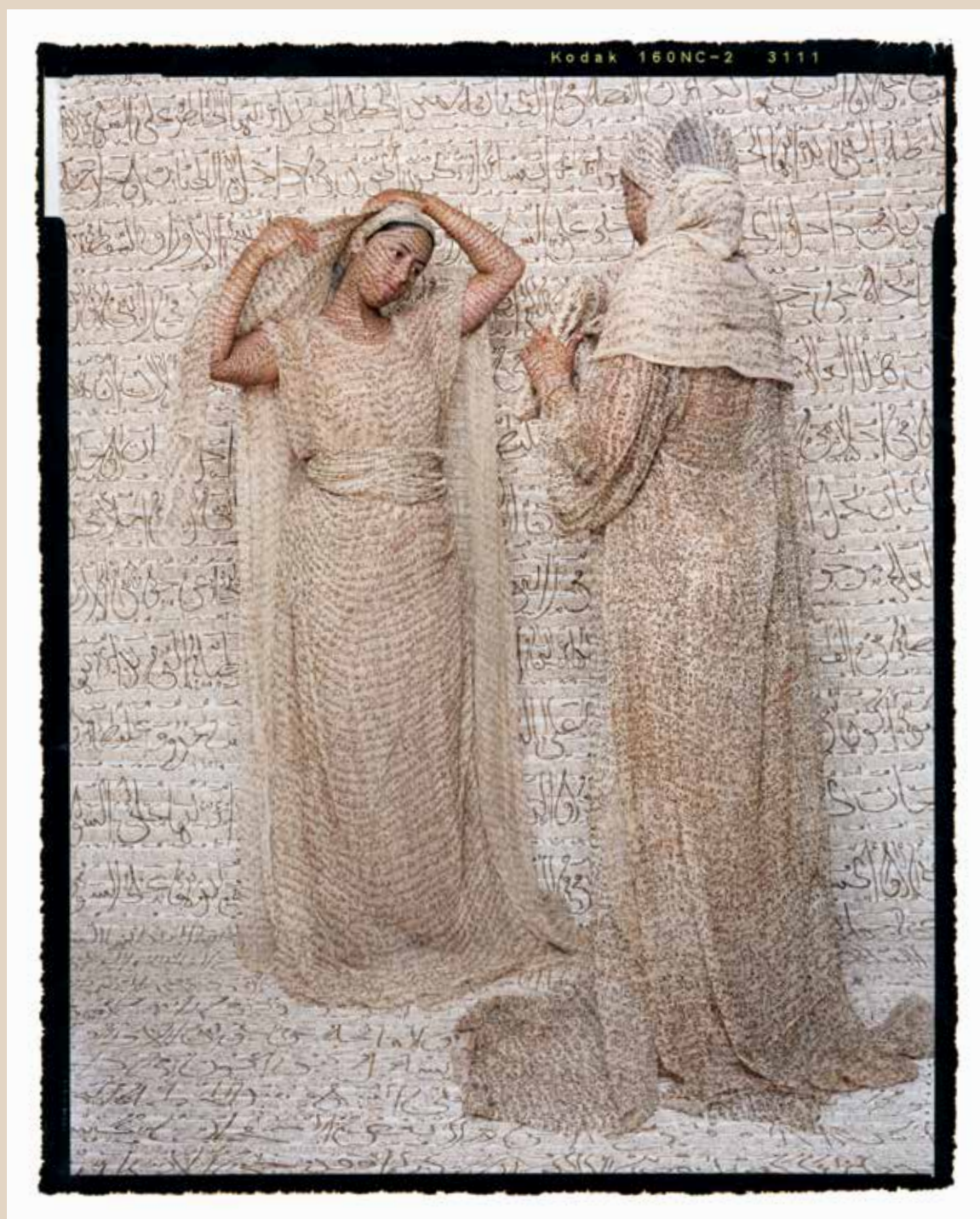




Lalla Essaydi: Writing Femininity, Writing Pleasure

Edited by John J. Corso | Essays by John J. Corso and Allan Doyle | Oakland University Art Gallery

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Acknowledgments

Lalla Essaydi is a friend and a fellow graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in partnership with Tufts University. So is Allan Doyle. This project has thus been a reunion of sorts, a chance for friends and colleagues to collaborate to offer new critical discourse to the growing literature on Lalla Essaydi's timely, exquisitely beautiful work. Foremost, I would like to thank the artist for her uncommon generosity and support in putting together this show, but also for her inspiring and powerful body of work, which invites new critical approaches to the interrelated analyses of writing and the visual arts. My utmost thanks and appreciation to Lalla Essaydi for this breathtaking work.

Sincerest thanks to Allan Doyle for his insightful essay applying a psychoanalytic approach to Lalla Essaydi's work. This essay makes a major contribution to the literature on Lalla Essaydi's work.

Several people made this exhibition and companion catalog possible, and I would like to thank them here.

Firstly, thanks to OUAG director Dick Goody for generously supporting this exhibition, mentoring me through the curating process, and encouraging me to bring this exhibition to Oakland University. Thanks, too, to Jacky Leow, Assistant to the Director, for her extensive help in producing the show.

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Introduction

Lalla Essaydi is one of the most important Islamic-American artists of our time. She lives in New York and Morocco, her country of origin and the setting for her fantastic interior tableaux of Moroccan women. She is well aware that Western art history has crafted its own fantasy of the East, especially of Islamic women. Today we recognize that those fantasies, which we describe as “Orientalist,” are problematic. Artists like Ingres, Delacroix, and others focused on exotic, often fictionalized subjects, as a way to subordinate the “wild” cultures of the East while promoting the “civilization” of the West. Essaydi understands this tradition; she was educated in Paris and Boston and is exceedingly familiar with the Romantic Masters. But she stages her critique in subtle, multivalent ways. Essaydi knows that these traditions have produced beautiful if prejudiced masterpieces. Moreover, she knows that the relationship between beauty and subjugation is itself a multifaceted one, a connection that involves power, knowledge of the other, and desire. Essaydi doesn’t shy away from these difficult conversations on the nature of beauty and desire, but rather she brings all of their intricacy into her performative photographs of women.

This exhibition brings together 20 large-scale photographic works, made from 2003 to 2012 and spanning five major bodies of work. In the earliest body of work, *Converging Territories*, Essaydi establishes the primary conditions of her aesthetic investigations: she photographs women elaborately adorned in henna script within exquisitely ornamented interiors. These works highlight the importance of writing in the creation of the self and of femininity. In her later series, *Harem and Harem Revisited*, Essaydi examines the relationship of women, writing, and the fantastic architecture of the harem. Finally, in *Bullets* and *Bullets Revisited*, Essaydi crafts heavenly interiors from shining gold bullet casings. The women in these interiors sparkle; occasionally they wear bullets themselves, and they appear larger than life and otherworldly. In all of these series, Essaydi establishes the relationship of writing to beauty and pleasure and its role in the creation and expression of femininity.

The two catalog essays that accompany this exhibition aim to expand the critical literature through psychoanalytic perspectives. In my own essay, I focus on the psychoanalytic concept of feminine writing. I argue that Essaydi’s photographs and the performances she uses to generate those photographs engage a sense of pleasure in writing that serves to disrupt the Orientalist fantasies with which her work engages.

The essay by Allan Doyle augments the existing literature by looking at the way Essaydi depicts the harem. He argues that by reiterating the harem in numerous ways, her photographs “simultaneously solicit and subvert the fantasy, exposing its paradoxical, fetishistic kernel.” Both essays aim to expand the approaches to Essaydi’s work by looking at the role of the feminine, of desire, and of pleasure within her dynamic, breathtaking oeuvre.

John J. Corso

Lalla Essaydi: Writing Femininity, Writing Pleasure

John J. Corso

1. Cushing-Martin Gallery. *Intersextions*. Easton, MA: Cushing-Martin Gallery, 2009.

2. Cushing-Martin Gallery. *Intersextions*. Easton, MA: Cushing-Martin Gallery, 2009.

3. See Benjamin Genocchio, "Lalla Essaydi: Les Femmes du Maroc," Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art. "Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism." *New York Times* March 7, 2010, sec. NJ; Metropolitan Desk; *ART REVIEW NEW JERSEY*: 14. See also Vali, Murtaza. "Uncovering the Arab World: Photography and Self-Representation." *Arab Studies Journal* 13/14, no. 2/1 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006): 241-246.

Lalla Essaydi takes sensitive photographs of Moroccan women, meticulously adorned in henna calligraphy, inside sumptuous domestic spaces. Born and raised in Marrakech, Essaydi was educated in Paris and Boston and has lived in the United States for several years. She often travels to Morocco, where she composes elaborate photographic tableaux within traditional Islamic domestic architecture. Her work has been the subject of major international retrospectives, most recently at the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian. The architecture, costume, and interior design of her sets reflect diverse traditions of Islamic and Moroccan culture. Essaydi collaborates with her sitters, applying traditional henna directly onto their skins. Since the henna treatments may take up to two days, the women pass the time by singing, eating, talking, and working together as a temporary artistic family. The henna applications Essaydi creates, however, differ greatly from traditional design. In lyrical hand, Essaydi scribes a variety of texts – often personal – drawing from a calligraphic tradition familiar to Arabic cultures. The texts are sometimes legible, sometimes illegible, but their paths weave background and foreground, sitter and scene, into a complex, written environment.

These written tableaux evince a scrupulous studio practice in which a community of women works to bring forth a product of intense beauty, realized through an artistic performance characterized by pleasure, or what psychoanalysts would describe as *jouissance*. Both beauty and pleasure are integral to the artistic performance and resultant photographs because they offer a feminist critique of gender and ethnic essentialism without participating in the binary oppositions that precipitate those essentialisms. That is to say, Essaydi's complex use of writing challenges the ways that critics have responded to her work, offering not only a critique of exoticist representation, but also rejecting what has been identified as persistent chauvinism within Orientalist critique itself. By looking at the principle of *jouissance*, and by examining its role in writing, this essay endeavors to recast Essaydi's work as a psychoanalytically inflected practice which empowers her sitters through the overabundance, aesthetic pleasure, and *jouissance* of feminine writing.

Critics plumb Essaydi's work to varying depths. At the surface level, many critics examine Essaydi's biography to highlight a direct causality between personal experience and artistic expression. They discuss a traumatic episode in which Essaydi was banished to an empty summerhouse as punishment for attending a Western-style nightclub with her brother.¹ For a month, she was isolated from her family, accompanied only by servants who were instructed not to talk to her. Essaydi has subjected this house to her photographic gaze; the result has been a provocative feminist exploration of the relationship between architecture and individual motility.

At the surface level of analysis, many critics identify formal resemblances between Essaydi's work and that of other artists, both past and present. Explicit references to the Romantics are apropos since Essaydi dialogs directly with the likes of Delacroix and Gerome.² Other critics remark on the similarities between Essaydi's photographic style and that of other Islamic women photographers, notably Shirin Neshat.³ These shallower comparisons inevitably collapse the vast cultural and historical differences within the Islamic world. Ironically, such comparisons reflect the sweeping Orientalist gaze against which Essaydi's work reacts.

At the deepest interpretive level, critics and historians have engaged the disciplines of feminism, Orientalism, and postcolonial studies to examine the structures of desire and the gaze in Essaydi's work. I hope to enter the conversation at this level. But where many scholars have focused on Essaydi's critiques of exoticism or misogyny, I hope to refocus the attention away from a putative criticality onto another critical force at play within the work: the force of pleasure achieved through writing.

Essaydi's calligraphy parallels a specific kind of writing developed extensively by French feminists known as *écriture féminine*, or *feminine writing*.⁴ Feminine writing sits outside the phallic writing that Jacques Derrida might discuss as "the system of metaphysical oppositions,"⁵ like "the metaphor of darkness and light (of self-revelation and self-concealment), the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics."⁶ By this, Derrida means that Western philosophers – from Leibnitz to Hegel to Saussure – have examined binary oppositions, in part, to explain the underlying principles that structure knowledge. But for Derrida, and deconstructionists generally, those binaries (secretly) privilege one of the two terms (e.g., rich over poor, rational over irrational, culture over nature, master over slave). Derrida understands the concealment of the power imbalance between oppositions to be a phallogentric condition of Western thought. He initiated deconstruction to make visible this power imbalance and to dismantle these unquestioned oppositions.

Feminine writing works from a similar desire to dismantle – but not to oppose – these binaries that permeate Western writing. To do so, French feminists have deployed deceptively complex strategies to write through, over, and around phallogentric language. They intentionally use the term feminine, but not to oppose it to the masculine. Rather, by refusing to take a subordinate position in the masculine-feminine binary, these feminist writers enable the feminine to work inside and outside the limiting dualistic relationship. Though not exactly deconstructive, this effusive strategy overtakes the restrictive binary by infusing an excess of meaning, and therefore overloading the weak oppositional structure. Rather than volleying within the phallogentric male-female see-saw, they overtake the entire structure through exuberance, play, and pleasure.

Developing influential critiques against phallogentric writing, four French feminist philosophers have submitted an alternative mode of writing: a feminine mode. Ann Rosalind Jones recognizes the contributions of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig to the discourse of feminine writing. Jones explains that feminine writing does not rebut phallogentric discourse. Rather, Jones tells "that resistance [takes] place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in the direct experience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father."⁷ Feminine writing is therefore the writing of *jouissance*; a supra-linguistic libidinal pleasure that exists before and in spite of the terrific power of phallic language and social repression.

The concept of *jouissance* plays a pivotal role in the theories of feminine writing, though it is a Freudian concept further developed by Lacan.⁸ We must distinguish herein between two kinds of *jouissance*, a phallic *jouissance* and a feminine *jouissance*. Phallic *jouissance* describes the desire to complete a lack, as in Freud's infamous description of the Oedipal complex. Writing on Lacanian difference, Stephen Heath explains the repercussions: "... male and female differ in consequence of the phallic function in castration, are in the position of a different relation to the phallus and castration; thus there can be no sexual relation, only a relation to phallic *jouissance*, in the woman as in the man."⁹

Lacan's interpretation leaves open the possibility of another kind of *jouissance*, a *jouissance* "beyond the phallus," a "jouissance of the woman" that both feminist psychoanalysts and Essaydi pursue in their respective works. This *jouissance* exceeds the phallic *jouissance* of the desire for the other; rather than a response to a lack, it instead conjures a pleasure in abundance, excess, indeed the infinite. Lacan writes: "When I say that woman is not-all [i.e., constituted as lack of the phallus] [...] It is precisely because I am raising the question of a *jouissance* which in regard of everything which serves in the phallic function is of the order of the infinite."¹⁰ As Griselda Pollock describes, this is a pleasure that moves beyond Oedipus, and as I will shortly argue, this *jouissance* of the woman is at play in the extended performance and objects crafted by Essaydi and her collaborators.

This particular experience of pleasure achieved through writing differentiates Essaydi's feminine writing from the writing of those artists to whom she is often compared. In *Harem #3 Triptych* (fig. 1),

4. By invoking this comparison, I make no claims for its universal application. Rather, I follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formula: I deploy an "International Feminism" here within my own Western, especially Franco-American context. That context is heterogeneous and, even within this essay, unsettled. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, no. 62, *Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts* (1981), 154-184.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [L'écriture et la différence. English] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 20.

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

7. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of 'L'Écriture Feminine,'" *Feminist Studies* 7.2 (1981): 248. We might understand Lacan's Law of the Father as language structured by the phallus.

8. Here, we must recall that Lacan "returned" to Freud by reinterpreting the Oedipal complex metaphorically. For Freud, the young boy, wishing to copulate with his mother, represses this desire out of fear of castration by the father. Lacan reinterprets this as a metaphor for the acquisition of language: the desire for the mother is the desire for unification, a unification which the acquisition of language (i.e., the law of the father) puts forever beyond his reach. The resultant lack is itself the pain of castration.

9. Stephen Heath, "Difference," *Screen* 19, no. 3 (September 21, 1978), 59.

10. Lacan quoted in *Ibid.*, 60.

11. Though there are perhaps more differences than similarities between this work and Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, I nevertheless am tempted repeatedly to see *Harem #3* as a mirror image of the ecstatic scene. Though I will not develop the comparison any further in this essay, the subdued iconography of ecstasy in this and other works would prove felicitous given Lacan's indication of *jouissance* detectable on St. Theresa's face.

12. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* [Jeune née.], Vol. 24 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 168.

13. Heath, *Difference*, 80.

14. *Ibid.*, 80.



Fig. 1. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #3 Triptych*, 2009. Three chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

we peer into a scene through three windows, each a photographic panel of the triptych. A woman lies languid on a divan while another woman hovers over her. (Perhaps she is a friend? More likely she is a caring attendant.) Both women have calligraphy scribed across their faces, and are therefore textually united. The scene recalls Manet's *Olympia*, but in place of an opposed prostitute and servant, these two figures recline together, relaxing on the same cushion, their bodies at the same level.¹¹ The supine figure closes her eyes and folds her arms back, while the other figure watches this private moment

not voyeuristically, but as a companion. Thus the two take pleasure in each other's company, simultaneously functioning as individuals and as a couple, as two beings united in a private moment. As in so many of Essaydi's photographs, this view of the harem shows women enjoying each other's company together, as individuals and as a community in fusion.

Feminine writing is a joyous writing, but it is also a writing that seeks to move differently altogether from the authoritative (male) voice characteristic of phallogentric writing. Betsy Wing explains the utopian motivation behind feminine writing: "Both [Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément] urge women to begin 'writing'; they believe this act will undo cultural repression and replace censorship of difference with a free and powerful inhabiting of this difference."¹² Heath describes the problem: language delineates sex roles and their ensuing oppressive conditions, "constantly making and remaking [sexual] difference at the expense of women."¹³ Language's role in establishing and maintaining difference means "it is thus possible, and politically necessary, to describe a 'women's language' that is the place of women's oppression, a linguistic masquerade of femininity."¹⁴

Early in her career, Essaydi, too, establishes language as a site for resistance. In *Converging Territories* #9 (fig. 2) and #10 (both 2003), Essaydi photographs a seated woman who surrounds herself in her own writing. Script covers her skin, her robes, and the whole interior in which she sits. Not only does her effluent writing break open the censorship to which Cixous and Clément refer. Importantly, she uses language – a feminine writing – to inscribe herself, to attempt to define her own state of difference outside of the patriarchal and phallic use of language that delineates constricting sex roles. Moreover, this writing constitutes her subjective body – not as an essential organism, but as a textual body.

The textual bodies that Essaydi deftly creates are not only appropriations of past historical texts, even while she quotes prolifically from the canon of Western art history. Essaydi does not appropriate that "same language" of art history simply to imbue it with new meaning. Rather, she literally writes through, in, and around that old language, restoring to it a polyvalence that phallogentric traditions



Fig. 2. Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #9*, 2003. Printed 2012. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

have long erased or truncated. In *Les Femmes du Maroc #1* (fig. 3), Essaydi provides a powerful response to Delacroix's *The Women of Algiers* (In Their Apartment) (1834). Essaydi removes the exotic furnishings and hookah, establishes a racial equality absent in the former, and surrounds all of the scene in writing. The language, however, does not seek to appropriate and critique racist, Orientalist iconography. Instead, Essaydi discards this language and speaks through it with an entirely different story in an entirely new language. Essaydi provocatively does the same to Gerome's 1866 masterpiece, *The Slave Market*. In her version, entitled *Les Femmes du Maroc #4*

(fig. 4), Essaydi similarly removes Orientalist details and replaces them with her own script. This is itself a radical intervention, since women in many Islamic cultures were long forbidden from participating in writing, especially religious calligraphy. Most importantly, Essaydi further rewrites the original scene by replacing the male characters with women.



Fig. 4. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #4*, 2005. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

printing.”¹⁵ Thus the process of writing the other is inseparable from the process of writing the self. This describes exactly Essaydi's process: by writing across the faces of these women, she prepares them to function as a medium for printing. After all, from their images the photograph is created, completing the transfer of the word and image from flesh to paper.

Even this sense of transfer is itself constantly challenged, since the pleasure of writing the self in Essaydi's work is never separate from the process of writing the other. Instead, she complicates the directionality of this written transfer, constantly interchanging the move from interior to exterior, printing medium to final print, author to text. In *Converging Territories #3* (2003) and the later *Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited #4* (fig. 5), two women stand next to each other, again covered by text. In the earlier photograph, the two women hold their backs to us, presenting only their feet and the



Fig. 3. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #1*, 2005. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

15. “autography, n.”. *OED Online*. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.huaryu.kl.oakland.edu/view/Entry/13441?redirectedFrom=autography> (accessed July 17, 2013).

16. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One* [Sexe qui n'en pas un.] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 208.

17. Ibid., 207.

18. Griselda Pollock, "Beyond Oedipus: Feminist Thought, Psychoanalysis, and Mythical Figurations of the Feminine," in Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard, *Laughing with Medusa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88.



Fig. 5. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc Revisited #4*, 2010. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

prominent vertical fold between their full-length burqas. In the later photograph, the two women face us, and their faces are partially covered. These two women each hold one side of their veils to form again a labial curtain that speaks in the manner of the bodily writing described by Cixous. In a chapter entitled, "When Our Lips Speak Together," Cixous writes: "I love you: our two lips cannot separate to let just one word pass. A single word that would say 'you,' or 'me.' ... closed and open, neither ever excluding the other, they say they both love each other. Together. To produce a single precise word, they would have to stay apart. Definitely parted."¹⁶

Essaydi observes the refusal to dissect the inside from the outside, to separate, as an act of feminine writing. This not one, not two status is achieved in the refusal to demarcate inside/outside, open/closed, together/apart. In these two photographs, the women are neither separated from their background, nor are they separated from each other. The language binds them all, and yet they can be read as both together and apart. The veiled women work together as one; words do not come between them, but rather join them. Again, Cixous writes:

We are luminous. Neither one nor two. I've never known how to count. Up to you. In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make you laugh? An odd sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one... And the strange way they divide up their couples, with the other as the image of the one. Only an image. So any move toward the other means turning back to the attraction of one's own mirage. A (scarcely) living mirror, she/it is frozen, mute. More lifelike. The ebb and flow of our lives spent in the exhausting labor of copying, miming. Dedicated to reproducing—that sameness in which we have remained for centuries, as the other.¹⁷

In this paragraph perhaps the most powerful current within Essaydi's work comes to light: the refusal to count, to separate, to sever from the Other. In the *Harem* (fig. 6) series, Essaydi covers the bodies of women in fabric that matches the architecture in which they reside. They are not one, and not two — their differentiation is a kind of arche-writing, not fully emerged, and not at all separated. It is a writing that exists wholly apart from the clean calculation that counts bodies, square footage, dominion and domain. In these haunting, camouflaged scenarios, Essaydi never permits the women to be othered. While the whole of Western art has treated the harem consort as the objectified other, here Essaydi neither allows her to dissolve nor allows her to become separate. She and her surroundings speak together, neither wholly apart nor fused.

In this sense Essaydi actualizes what Griselda Pollock calls a move "beyond Oedipus." Pollock worries that even feminist thinkers reinstate the problematic Oedipal thesis that Freud proposed: "none truly challenged the fundamental premises of its ultimately defining role around the theme of castration and human subjectivity which frames our concepts of sexual difference [...]" and



Fig. 6. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #2*, 2009. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

sexuality.¹⁸ She continues that the “exclusive dominance of the Oedipal model”¹⁹ means that the feminine is permanently defined “as absence or loss: Woman/Other/Thing, in Lacan’s formulation.” But by looking beyond Oedipus to Antigone and Polyneices,²⁰ Pollock follows the same strategic road as Essaydi: the refusal of difference and separation for an aesthetic of “partnership-in-difference” and “separation-in-jointness.”²¹ In *Harem #5* (fig. 7), Essaydi looks beyond Oedipus, but not by “reversing into its non-Oedipal opposite,” a move that Pollock cautions would only more deeply entrench the

problematic logic.²² Instead, Essaydi opens up the very debate Pollock indicts: the “debate on femininity/sexual difference.”

The figure in *Harem #5* goes beyond Oedipus in the way that Pollock describes: by radically opening “the field of human thought and culture to a feminine supplementary and poetic (sic) structure that is not defined Oedipally (absence/presence), and that, therefore, has nothing whatsoever to do with the Oedipal binary masculine (+)/feminine (-), and thus with our common sense, post-Oedipal understanding of gender as men and women.”²³ The woman here does not necessarily live in a world devoid of men, but she does inhabit a world in which women do not rely on Oedipal categories to constitute

their subjectivity. The subject is instead wrought through writing, which both aligns her with and distinguishes her from the geometric backdrop. She exists as difference, constituted through writing and apart from the architectural floor on which she rests. Her blackened feet further distance her body from the walking surface upon which she rests, yet she is wrapped in a flowing fabric that matches the tile pattern, forging a temporary kind of partnership in which she is neither wholly different nor the same. Rather, she is “separate in jointness.” Essaydi’s work thus uses feminine writing to forestall the radical separation of the other, redefining sexual difference through another critical paradigm.

Reading these feminists in a literal way leads many to believe incorrectly that feminine writing is essentialist and that the feminine exists prior to language. But this is an indelicate reading of the body’s role. Just as the phallus in psychoanalysis manifests primarily in language effects, so too must we understand women’s physiology as dealing primarily in language: neither the phallus nor a feminine equivalent exist as such prior to language, but both work always already constituted as metaphor. In addition to the aforementioned arguments by Pollock, Jane Gallop is especially helpful on this point. Gallop shows that a certain anxiety over what appears to be a problem with the body as a predeterministic force is really a “difficulty in accepting the body as metaphor, a demand that metaphors of the body be read literally.”²⁴ (This problem, I believe, continues to haunt Irigaray and Cixous to this day.)

A final work by Essaydi, from one of her later series, entitled *Bullets Revisited #1* (fig. 8), from 2012, includes a striking woman, striking because not

19. Ibid., 88.

20. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta. Polyneices is her brother, who is also the son of Oedipus and Jocasta.

21. Ibid., 96.

22. Ibid., 94.

23. Ibid., 94.

24. Jane Gallop, “‘Writing and Sexual Difference’: The Difference within,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1982), 288.



Fig. 7. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #5*, 2009. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



Fig. 8. Lalla Essaydi, *Bullets Revisited #1*, 2012. Three chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

25. Ibid., 289.

26. Ibid., 289.

27. Ibid., 285.

only are her eyes directly confronting the viewer (emphasized by the henna script around them), but she is garbed in gold and lying on a bed of gold mosaic. In fact, close scrutiny reveals that the mosaic tesserae are gold bullet casings, the bullet being a phallic icon par excellence. In this image, bullets are part of a highly ornamental setting. Neither the phallus nor the feminine in this image exists as some sort of a priority, but they both signify excessive time and artifice. They illustrate the point of the last paragraph: in this series, neither the body nor the phallic bullets have literal meanings, but both establish the necessarily metaphoric status of the body constituted through feminine writing.

Essaydi positions this woman in a state of permanent translation between realms: she is neither alive (+) nor dead (-), and therefore altogether she exists apart from the Oedipal model of phallic jouissance. Instead, this figure is translated to another realm, and we can discern this realm's otherness through multiple clues. Assailed by hundreds of bullets, her body cut into three pieces by the triptych format of the photography, she nevertheless remains alive and alert. Rather than evidence of death, the gold bullets create a heavenly light akin to that of gold-leafed Byzantine icons. Neither phallic presence nor lack, she instead harkens to a female jouissance entirely beyond, as Lacan might say, divine. In the image above, the figure serves as the antithesis of Ingres's "deboned" odalisques. Whereas Ingres paralyzed his odalisques by enfeebling their bodily proportions, Essaydi empowers this figure as a figure of exorbitance: the figure herself lies alert, powerful, and ready to confront her viewer. She attains this power through the process of writing, accretion, and Baroque adornment.

In fact, Essaydi presents feminine writing itself as the art of permanent translation, but she shows that it is a simulacral translation, as there is no originary from which it translates. Gallop explains why this status of simulacral translation is so important, insisting that "Not only is literature at the heart of sexual difference, but sexual difference is at the heart of literature as the absent original to which the translation must refer."²⁵ She continues: "I would accept the statement that literature is a translation of sexuality if I could add that we have no direct access to the original, that the best we ever have available is a good translation."²⁶ Gallop's conclusions parallel Essaydi's metaphoric explorations: "The common view of language – that which underwrites the expected refrain about literature's inadequacy to capture sex – is that language is inadequate to express human needs. But according to Lacan, language is not only adequate but overabundant: it presents a surplus."²⁷

Though her palettes and discriminating compositions might suggest at first glance a minimalist aesthetic, the *Bullet* series shows that the source of Essaydi's work is translation through overabundance. In *Bullets*, phallic language is reworked and reconstituted as a magnificent, effusive treatise on femininity. This excess, this surplus, is at the heart of the image's pleasure: Essaydi's work celebrates the very process of creation as the jouissance that gives life to feminine writing.

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The Photographic Harem

Allan Doyle

Viewing the large-scale photographs of Lalla Essaydi, one is immediately struck by their invocations of the grand tradition of French figurative painting. Their rich, saturated tones, stunning detail, and use of compositional strategies and formats familiar to students of European art history indicate her deep engagement with this cultural legacy. As much as they invoke this heritage, they simultaneously assert their status as photographs with equal insistence. Their bleeding edges even identify the type of film used to produce them. In their formal language, manufacture, and substance, these images suspend themselves between the painted past and the photographic present.

Essaydi's allusion to art history becomes more pointed in her overt references to the Orientalist canvases of French nineteenth century painters such as Jean-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix.¹ Drawing upon this iconographic tradition, Essaydi depicts the odalisque – veiled and unveiled – in spaces that evoke the harem, transforming this veritable ground zero of French Orientalist visual culture into her atelier.

As much as she invokes Orientalist paintings of the past, Essaydi also engages recent analyses of the Western scholarly tradition of Orientalism, namely Edward Said's volume of the same name. Inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of the relation between power and knowledge, Said argues that Orientalism was a cultural discourse that served the political interests of European colonial powers, particularly in the nineteenth century.² According to Said, European scholars, writers and artists discursively produced an Oriental subject that conformed to long-standing prejudices and stereotypes. They did so by deploying various methods of representation that, while claiming to undertake objective description of their object of study, in fact subsumed a vast geographic territory encompassing disparate cultures into a monolithic, mythic entity they designated as the Orient or East. This ideology relegated this imaginary Orient and its inhabitants to a state of eternal sloth and perpetual ruin that was subject to irrational violence and unfettered, perverse sexual behavior. So construed, the Orient was self-evidently in need of the civilizing benefit of Western control; even when confronted with resistance, the West now had a warrant for imposing itself on East for its own good.

Essaydi mimics the French Orientalist canvases that portrayed foreign bodies, particularly female ones in erotically charged poses and settings for the titillation of the European, presumably male, viewer.³ Such works have provided the photographer with the raw iconographic material out of which she fashions a revisionist history of her own devising. She was educated in the French emulative tradition that is based on the copying of canonical works of past masters. Her practice reflects her personal artistic development, as she was born in Morocco, lived in Saudi Arabia, and trained in painting and drawing at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Essaydi's emulation of French Orientalist painting involves repetition, but repetition with a difference. Rather than uncritically imitating masterworks of the French Orientalist tradition, she repeats its principal motifs while simultaneously laying bare their covert operations. The difference here is one of both medium and message. The truth claims of nineteenth century realism are exceeded by the astonishing detail of hyper-realistic, large-format photography. She challenges the pretense of objectively documenting the "real" Orient by underscoring the fabricated status of her *tableaux vivant*. This tension between the promise of the real and the exposure of artistic artifice produces a crucial difference between her practice and those of her aesthetic forbearers. Essaydi strips this tradition down to its fetishistic essence: the colonialist clichés of the odalisque, harem and veil. Through this simplification she reveals the function of these stereotypes to be the obscuring of the lack of an actual

I wish to thank John Corso and Iftikar Dadi for their helpful comments on this paper.

1. For Orientalism in art see Roger Benjamin, Auckland Art Gallery, and Art Gallery of New South Wales, *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997); Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Holly Edwards et al., *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000); *Miroirs D'Orients: Dessins, Photographies, Autochromes, Vidéo: [catalogue de l'exposition Présentée Au Palais Des Beaux-arts de Lille, Du 15 Mai Au 31 Août 2009]* (Paris : Lille: Somogy ; Palais des beaux-arts de Lille, 2009); Judith K. Brodsky and Mason Gross School of the Arts (Rutgers University), *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society* (New Brunswick, N.J.: New York, N.Y: Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art ; Distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2012).

2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3-14 *passim*.

3. In recent decades Orientalist painting has become popular with Arab collectors, a phenomenon which reveals the complexity of the intersection of geopolitics, history, and taste; for more on this topic see Roger Benjamin, Auckland Art Gallery, and Art Gallery of New South Wales, "Post-Colonial Taste," in *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997), 32–40; and Mercedes Volait, "Collections Moyen-Orientales de Peintures Orientalistes à L'orée Du XXe Siècle. Retournements Paradoxaux Ou Malentendus Tenaces?," in *Après L'Orientalisme: l'Orient Créé Par l'Orient* (Paris: IISMM: Karthala, 2011), 547–565.

4. According to psychoanalytic theory, males are traumatized by the realization that their mothers lack a penis. The fetish is an object that a male subject uses to obscure the traumatic specter of his mother's lack. It is, therefore, a faux penis that would metaphorically make good his mother's body but in its very existence, simultaneously signals that same absence. Unsurprisingly, the gender valence of a fetish object is highly unstable: assigned to a woman, it is used by men to signify feminine lack. The fetish is therefore, a deeply ambivalent object. For Freud's theory of the fetish; see Sigmund Freud, "On Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth Press: Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953), 152–159. For Lacan on the fetish, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996) 63–64.

5. Homi Bhabha has examined Orientalism and other forms of colonial discourse through fetishism; see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, *Routledge Classics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004).

6. In this regard one may compare Essaydi's position to authors in former colonies who chose to write in the language of the colonizing power in which they were educated. For a discussion of this phenomenon in the French context see Barbara Harlow in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, *Theory and History of Literature v. 21* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) xviii.

7. For the history of this term and its importance in modernist painting, see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 269; for its relevance to contemporary photography, see Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 143.

8. Carol Ockman has interpreted Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* in similar terms. See *Ingres's Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line*, *Yale Publications in the History of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 33–66.

referent, of a true Orient.⁴ Orientalist discourse has been characterized as fetishistic in that, despite its claim to knowledge and truthful representation, it is, in fact, a pure construction of the Western imaginary.⁵

Essaydi therefore employs mimesis here to open up a critical space without resorting to straightforward cultural critique, which would imply an external position of judgment. She is not simply replacing a false representation of the Orient with a true one. Rather, working from inside this discursive tradition, Essaydi takes up the stereotypical imagery that formerly served the colonizing ambitions of European powers in order to subvert it.⁶ Her chief tool in this reformist agenda is her imposition of bands of Arabic calligraphy that spread across the surfaces of her images. Recoding the Orientalist pictorial vocabulary, Essaydi interrupts established psychic relays between viewer and viewed. She places her viewer-reader between the competing demands of text and image just as she situates her practice between painting and photography. Faced with their inability to gain full access to the Oriental other, the viewer is made aware of his or her unconscious participation in Orientalist discourse. Essaydi therefore engenders a strategic ambivalence in her audience and thereby exposes the subterranean operations of human desire that undergird male Orientalist fantasies of possession and control.

Until the onset of modernism, the academic system of educating painters in France held up the creation of a history painting or *tableau* as the ultimate goal of the aspiring painter. This term, for which there is no strict English equivalent, was used to indicate a painting in which the artist had successfully subsumed all pictorial elements under a general structure, fusing them into a seamless totality.⁷ The pursuit of the *tableau* reached its zenith in the later decades of the eighteenth century and found itself under increasing pressure in the tumultuous aftermath of the French Revolution and with the onset Romanticism in the early decades of the following century. Maintaining the pictorial unity of the *tableau* against the destabilizing forces that threatened it with fragmentation became an increasing concern of artists.



Fig. 1. Jean-Dominique Ingres, *Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre. © Musée du Louvre / etc.



Fig. 2. Lalla Essaydi, *Grande Odalisque*, 2008, photographic print. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

Many of the most compelling works of the Romantic era manifest the opposing forces of fragmentation and a heightened need for unification. Jean-Dominique Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* of 1814 (fig. 1) is one example, registering the tendency towards the decomposition of forms in its anatomical distortions and defending against it in its enameled surface and stylized planarity. His figure awkwardly props herself on one arm. As she reaches down to touch her left leg, her oddly misplaced right knee floats besides her, seeming to belong to another body. The curving contours of her oversized thigh lead the eye to her elongated spine to which critics accused the artist of adding vertebrae. Ingres' odalisque is a jointless assemblage of bodily appendages that don't add up into a coherent, human form painted in near-photographic realism.⁸ The overall impression is of a body that can only be enjoyed piecemeal; when one attempts to bring its disparate members into rational alignment, its discontinuous structure becomes apparent.

The suspended fragmentation of Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* is made explicit in Essaydi's reworking of this archetypal Orientalist motif (fig. 2). This is a subject to which she returns repeatedly, moving from single images of a reclining female figure of her *Grande*

Odalisque of 2008 to multiple-panel versions. In the latter the fragmentation of Ingres' model is now visited on the pictorial surface as a whole. A tripartite format is applied to the reclining figure in another large odalisque, *Harem Beauty #1* (fig. 3) from the same year. Here, the segmentation of a seductive female body gives the impression of horizontal elongation, reminding us of Ingres' irrationally stretched spine. The viewer's eye



Fig. 3. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem Beauty #1*, 2008, photographic print. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

proceeds from one segment of the triptych to the other, reading the body part-by-part before having to mentally reassemble it into a single, animate entity.

One is immediately struck by the self-conscious simplicity and directness of Essaydi's photographs. She has stripped out Ingres' Orientalizing accoutrements and sensuous surfaces.

Her odalisques do not hold exquisitely detailed peacock feather fans. Nor do they lounge on unmade beds appointed with luxurious fabrics whose delicately rendered textures solicit touch. The photographer has removed these distracting elements and replaced them with bolts of monochrome fabric in which she drapes her models and their surroundings. Every visible surface, including the women's bodies themselves, has been laboriously inscribed with Arabic texts composed by the artist. The inscription of fabric with words or texts by women is a centuries-old practice in many Islamic cultures.⁹ Essaydi combines this tradition with henna tattooing, in which a vegetable dye is used to decorate women's skin with elaborate, decorative patterns.¹⁰

Essaydi has recently returned to this device, dividing a reclining female figure in her *Bullets Revisited #1* triptych of 2012. Here the typical trappings of Orientalist painting return with a vengeance. Rows of circular forms of glistening brass bring to mind the shimmering metalwork frequently included in Orientalist paintings to lure the viewer's magpie eye and provide notes of authentic, exotic detail. Essaydi, however, uses the glimmering metal to disorient the viewer's eye and dissolve the model into a dazzling geometric pattern. In time the viewer recognizes these circular forms as spent shell casings. With this disturbing association of beauty and violence, the photographer evokes the bullet's ability to pierce flesh and render bodies into pieces, making manifest the implicit violence of Ingres' dismemberment and reassembly of the odalisque. Essaydi's protagonist, however, claims this power as her own by wearing a single unfired high-caliber bullet as a pendant. Essaydi therefore conscripts the odalisque as a proxy for the photographer who is likewise armed with the photographic power to 'shoot' and fix the subjects of her camera's medusal gaze.

Ingres never traveled to the East. Even if he had, as a Western male he would have not been able to visit a harem. His detailed, highly realistic technique gave his canvas the air of verisimilitude; however, he used the motif of an Oriental courtesan more as a vehicle for aesthetic experimentation than to represent a specific individual. Indeed, the harem had been a key site of Orientalist fantasy for centuries. Unchecked by verification, the imaginations of European authors and artists ran riot, constructing fanciful scenes of sex and violence. As Malek Alloula has put it, the harem became the very "embodiment of the obsession" with the East, and "a simple allusion to it (was) enough to open wide the floodgate of hallucination."¹¹ Following the French invasion of Algiers in 1830, however, Eugène Delacroix was among a first wave of French artists to experience "the Orient" in person. Delacroix was granted permission to join a government-sponsored fact-finding mission to North Africa. Upon arrival he began to fill sketchbooks with notes, drawings, and watercolors with details of local landscape, architecture, costume, and customs.

After returning to Paris, Delacroix drew upon these studies for his *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, a large canvas exhibited at the Salon of 1834 (fig. 4). Delacroix's first-hand experience lent

9. For Islamic calligraphy, see Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); and Abdelkebir Khatibi, *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996). Fatema Mernissi has compared Essaydi's inscriptions with the tradition of *washi*; see Fatema Mernissi in Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes Du Maroc*, 1st ed (Brooklyn, N.Y. : New York: powerHouse Books; Edwynn Houk Gallery, 2009), 9. One might also view them as following in the tradition of *tiraz*, for which see Nancy Mickelwright "Tiraz Fragments: Unanswered Questions about Medieval Islamic Textils," in *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing* (East Lansing, Mich: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, 1991), 31-46.

10. It should be noted that traditions of henna tattooing are cultural practices linked to a variety of specific rituals and should not be conflated with other, permanent forms of bodily inscription. For a discussion of writing on the body with henna in regards to Essaydi, see Fatema Mernissi, *Les Femmes Du Maroc*, 13. For a discussion of the motif of tattooing in women's Orientalist travel literature, see Dúnlaith Bird, *Travelling in Different Skins: Gender Identity in European Women's Oriental Travelogues, 1850-1950*, 1st ed, Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 92.

11. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 3.

12. Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008) 140.

13. Linda Nochlin analyzes the function of absences in Orientalist painting in her important essay "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-century Art and Society*, 1st ed, Icon Editions (Colorado: Westview Press, 1989).

14. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*.

15. Essaydi as quoted in Essaydi, *Les Femmes Du Maroc*, 14.

16. For Henriette Brown, see Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation*, Gender, Racism, Ethnicity Series (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).



Fig. 4. Eugène Delacroix, *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Salon of 1834, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre. © Musée du Louvre / etc.

penetrate its shadowy depths. It is notable not only for what it includes, but also what it lacks.¹³ What Delacroix does not show is anything actually happening. Forcefully absent here are any indications of domestic labor or the quotidian experiences of actual Moroccan women. These women do not engage in the activities that commonly took place in harems such as spinning, sewing, or minding children. French aesthetic theory insisted that paintings of this size depict events or actions of historical consequence; here, however the artist refuses the anecdotal altogether, casting his figures in a static, claustrophobic silence.

In her *Les Femmes du Maroc #1* Essaydi revisits Delacroix's harem while introducing strategic differences (fig. 5). She places her models in an evenly lit, shallow space without darkened corners that would lure the penetrative gaze. The space is barren of objects and covered by monochrome fabric inscribed with texts. A departing figure on the right draws back the curtain, repeating the gesture of Delacroix's maid. The other women sit in frozen poses without any pretense of a natural arrangement or interaction between them. The use of material to form the architectural environment brings to mind the raw canvas of the painter but also the use

of painted backdrops in the studios of Orientalist photographers. Unable to document actual harems, nineteenth century photographers would use such devices along with local artifacts to lend an air of ethnographic authenticity to their salacious portraits of local women.¹⁴ While again positioning her project between painting and photographic traditions, Essaydi refuses any claim to be documenting an authentic space, exposing the constructed nature of her arresting scenes.

Unlike Delacroix's generic Orientalist fantasy, Essaydi depicts a space of deep personal significance. As she has explained, these photographs were taken in Morocco at a family home to which she was sent as punishment when she stepped outside gendered norms of behavior. Accompanied only by family servants, she was punished by silence. In interviews she has described how her decision to return to this former space of patriarchal domination is part of an emancipatory project in which she "seeks to destabilize conventional Orientalist expectations."¹⁵ Essaydi has revisited the Orientalist harem to challenge its enduring fascination. She was, however, not the first female artist to do so. Henriette Browne, a French genre painter, was able to enter and document harems in the nineteenth century and produced paintings that offered a corrective to prurient male fantasies.¹⁶ In canvases such



Fig. 5. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc #1*, 2005, photographic print. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

as her *A Visit: Harem Interior, Constantinople*, (1860), Browne focused on the daily life of the harem, presenting it as a calm, familial space.¹⁷

Although prominent critics reviewed her works, Browne's efforts failed to lessen the popularity of the fantasy of the seraglio as a site of unbounded sexual indulgence. As Reina Lewis has discussed, Théophile Gautier, one of the most important critics of the period, was an enthusiastic supporter of Browne's work. Nevertheless, Gautier remained an ardent Orientalist, utterly enthralled by stereotypical Eastern motifs and in particular, that of the harem:

Speak to me of the pascha! – The Sultan! ... Whose eye rests only upon forms the most perfect, never sullied by mortal gaze; forms which pass from the cradle to the tomb, guarded by sexless monsters in those magnificent solitudes which the boldest dare not seek to penetrate; and surrounded by a mystery and seclusion which offers no scope to even the most vague desire.¹⁸

As alluded to in Gautier's assertion, the Western fantasy of the harem offers two archetypal positions of men who have total access to its female inhabitants: that of the sultan or the eunuch. The economy of sexual desire found here is structured through the interplay of these two extremes of possession and lack of phallic power.¹⁹ As French literary theorist Alain Grosrichard has shown, however, each term in this binary defines itself through the other.²⁰ Grosrichard's analysis reveals that the enduring fascination of the harem fantasy is symptomatic of the paradoxical status of the sultan who is revealed to be a fetishist in denial of his own inadequacy.²¹ Grosrichard notes that despite his supreme virility, the figure of the sultan frequently emerges in French literature as a curiously impotent figure, one whose unlimited power ends up infantilizing and feminizing the despot. Rather than truly possessing the power he wields, he is figured as a mere function of the hierarchical organization of the harem. According to Grosrichard, the sultan covers over the lack that lies at the heart of the vortex of desire in which he sits. The harem fantasy allows the Western male to project his fears of impotence into a distant, imaginary zone of irrationality and excess where he can, via an identification with the sultan figure, exorcise them at the expense of the female other.²² In this way, the Eastern despot becomes an object of an obsessive identification for the Western consumer of Orientalist literature or visual culture.

The fetishistic kernel of the phantasm of the harem explains why any attempt to correct such stereotypical beliefs – such as Harriet Browne's accurate views of nineteenth century harem life – is doomed to failure. Fetishism is, after all, a refusal of knowledge. Mladen Dolar has observed that such a fantasy cannot be dispelled through confronting the fetishist with reality, but needs, rather, to be worked through.²³ I argue that Essaydi undertakes just such a working through in her photographic reiterations of the harem. Rather than engage in cultural critique that would attempt to correct the operation of Orientalist desire from without, her photographs are engineered to simultaneously solicit and subvert the fantasy, exposing its paradoxical, fetishistic kernel. Essaydi accomplishes this through the production of feelings of ambivalence in her viewer-reader.

Grosrichard notes the insistent silence of the harem: the sultan's demands must be executed wordlessly.²⁴ This is a fantasy of the enactment of power without even the minimal impediment of language. In contrast to the phantasmatic seraglio deconstructed by Grosrichard or Delacroix's painted version, Essaydi fills her spaces with language. According to the artist, calligraphic writing was traditionally a male occupation in Islamic culture.²⁵ Combining it with the feminine practice of henna tattooing, she confounds the gender polarities that structure the fantasy of the harem.

Essaydi composes these texts herself. In them she speaks of her feelings and reflections brought about by revisiting a space where she was punished through silence. By articulating her experience, Essaydi designates herself as an author, a unitary subject in control of her texts. Through the excessive nature of these inscriptions, however, she also vitiates the authorial voice. The manic,

17. For a color reproduction, see Pera Müzesi and Suna ve İnan Kıraç Vakfı, *The Poetics and Politics of Place: Ottoman Istanbul and British Orientalism*, Pera Museum Publication; Symposium Series 46. 1 (Istanbul : Seattle, Wash: Pera Müzesi; University of Washington Press, 2011) 50.

18. Gautier as quoted in Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 112.

19. I use the term phallus here to allude to the default position of superiority accorded to individuals identified as male within patriarchal culture (as opposed to simply denoting the male biological organ, the penis). For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, possession of the phallus is more specifically linked to the acceptance of the castrating effect of signification and entry into the social sphere or Symbolic. For Lacan's use of this term, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996) 140-144.

20. Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East* (London ; New York: Verso, 1998). Grosrichard's analysis receives confirmation in the travel writings of Gérard de Nerval who noted the predicament of the Sultan in his travels in Turkey in the mid-nineteenth century. Not permitted to marry and only allowed foreign slave women as his partners, Nerval describes this "melancholic" figure as somewhat pathetic. Despite his ability to elevate mere slaves to the status of sultanas, the sultan was himself the son of a slave. Nerval also noted that just as easily as his position was given to him, it could be taken away if the masses decided to depose him. Nerval concludes his description of the Sultan's paradoxical position with the telling exclamation: "Poor Sultan!"; Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage En Orient*, T. II, Seule éd. complète, His Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: C. Lévy, 1884) 8. For more on the despot and the veil in French literature, see Inge E. Boer, "Despotism from Under the Veil: Masculine and Feminine Readings of the Despot and the Harem," *Cultural Critique* no. 32 (December 1, 1995): 43–73.

21. Mladen Dolar provides a useful summary of Grosrichard on this point in his introduction; see Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*. xxii.

22. In this alignment of femininity and alterity I am drawing upon a tradition of feminist thought that identifies the need of patriarchal culture to posit itself as integral or whole (i.e., as not riven by castrating lack) through an opposing designation of femininity as other; for an overview of this oppositional, binary structure, see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 2011) 3-17.

23. Lacan's term for this 'working through' is traverser; see Dolar in Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, xxii.

24. Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 24.

25. Lalla Essaydi and Laurence Miller Gallery, *Converging*

Territories, 1st ed (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2005) n.p.

26. For a discussion of Roland Barthes' theory of the 'Death of the author' in Orientalist discourse, see Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 29.

27. For the history and shifting meaning of the veil Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Saqi books rev. ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2003); Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance, Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Berg, 1999); and Barbara Harlow in Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 63.

28. The entire passage reads: "Absence is painted on the veil. It is nothing other than the function of a curtain, whatever it may be. The curtain takes its value, its being and its consistency, from being precisely that on which absence is projected and imagined. The curtain is, if one may say, the idol of absence. If the veil of Maya is the most commonly used metaphor to express the relation of man to everything that captivates him, that is undoubtedly not without reason, but rather assuredly supports the sentiment that he has a certain fundamental illusion in all his relations woven from his desire." (My translation.) For more on a psychoanalytic understanding of the veil in relation to its social context see Matviyenko, Svitlana, "The Veil and Capitalist Discourse: A Lacanian Reading of the Veil Beyond Islam," *(Re)-Turn: A Journal of Lacanian Studies*. 6 (Spring 2011). For a feminist analysis of Orientalism and the veil in relation to post-structuralism and Lacan in particular, see Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

29. Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 14.

30. For the heightened materiality of Islamic calligraphic inscription, see Holly Edwards, "Text, Context, Architext: The Qur'an as Architectural Inscription," in *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing*, ed. Carol Garrett Fisher (East Lansing, Mich: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, 1991) 66-7.

31. Khatibi, *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*, 14. Essaydi's use of Islamic calligraphic tradition also raises the problematic status of representational imagery in Arab culture. Space prohibits me from exploring this issue at length here; however, on aniconism and Islam, see Terry Allen, *Five Essays on Islamic Art* (Sebastopol, CA: Solipist Press, 1988) 20; Oleg Grabar, *Early Islamic Art, 650-1100, Constructing the Study of Islamic Art vol. 1* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate/Variorum, 2005) 45. For the status of the image in Islam see Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

over-production of these texts and their shuttling in and out of legibility as the lines of letters disappear behind bodies or turn beneath folds of fabric, empties the "I" of the inscription.²⁶ Even if the viewer can read Arabic, he or she cannot become absorbed by the narrative, as his or her reading is constantly interrupted. The authority grammatically invested in the first person pronoun therefore becomes like the figure of the sultan in the harem, an emptied signifier that simultaneously embodies omnipotence and frustration, a sign of masked absence.

One might say that Essaydi veils her compositions in text. The veil is a highly contested, culturally complex phenomenon within contemporary feminist discourse that has been a symbol both of women's repression and empowerment²⁷ (fig. 6). For Lacan it is a powerful metaphor for the object of desire that one pursues in order to mitigate the fear of castration, the fetish. "Absence is painted on the veil," he writes.²⁸ In his essay on mass-produced Orientalist postcards, *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula aligns the camera of the Orientalist photographer and the eye of a veiled woman in terms that resonate with Essaydi's practice. The "womanly gaze" of the model, he asserts, is like "the photographic lens that takes aim at everything." Alloula continues:

The photographer makes no mistake about it: he knows this gaze well; it resembles his own when it is extended by the dark chamber or the viewfinder. Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen, *he loses initiative: he is disposed of his own gaze.*²⁹

The shift between the possession of the phallic gaze of the photographer and its loss described by Alloula takes another turn when a female photographer, particularly one of North African origin, is behind the camera. In Essaydi's hands, the camera is at once both a phallic lens in its capacity to fix the subject for our visual delectation and an apparatus riven by lack, a darkened chamber, a void. Photographic practice may, in this sense, be likened to a self-aware fetishism. Just as the fetishist fixates on a particular object that would make good the traumatic lack he found in the female body, the photograph fixes the flow of events in a state of silent, suspended animation.

Rather than painting absence on the veil à la Lacan, Essaydi inscribes it in the form of writing of variable readability. According to historians of the Islamic calligraphic tradition, it is a practice that divorces written language from its communicative function. The calligrapher is first and foremost a copyist like the student in the French academy who was taught to emulate past masters by copying their works. The repetition of pre-existing models in both cases results in an erosion of the original meaning of the model and an emphasis on material presence of the sign.³⁰ The calligrapher treats language in a concrete and decorative manner, emptying it of reference or meaning beyond its physical and formal attributes viewed with tradition in which it falls.³¹

Essaydi's strategic use of text juxtaposes the metaphoric and metonymic axes of signification. Her repetition of the stereotypical motifs and compositional structures of masterworks of French Orientalist paintings by the likes of Ingres and Delacroix falls on the vertical axis of metaphor, replacing one representation with another. Her veiling of these compositions in seemingly infinite strata of text that flicker in and out of legibility invokes the potential for narrative communication while continually frustrating its realization. She thereby places her would-be reader on the metonymic, horizontal axis, following one sign after another, but does not allow them to stay there. Literary



Fig. 6. Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc 25a*, 2006, photographic print. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

theorist Homi Bhabha has located the ambivalence symptomatic of the fetish and the play of metaphor and metonymy at the heart of the production of the colonial stereotype-as-fetish:

Within discourse, the fetish represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (masking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack). The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defense, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse.³²

Following Bhabha's insight, one may understand Essaydi's photographs as positioning their audience in a compromised position between the conflicting demands of seeing and reading. Returning to a site of her former imprisonment, the photographer confines her models within manufactured spaces of her design. There she reenacts the sequestering of a female body in silence that she suffered as a punishment. The photographs that result echo nineteenth century Orientalist views reliant on the stereotypical vocabulary of the odalisque, the harem, and the veil. At first glance, the resulting images seem to offer the viewer total, unmediated visual access to the familiar delights of the Orientalist harem. Essaydi, however, also breaks this silence and in doing so, shatters the fantasy of power and control. Metaphoric repetition is interrupted by the imposition of veils of signifiers that mediate the viewer's access to the bodies on display. The illegibility of these pulsating lines of text prevents the viewer-reader from being absorbed into their narratives, and thus the instantaneity of the image comes into conflict with the synchronic process of reading. The image is therefore fractured into irreconcilable modalities of representation and the viewer is cast into the role of the divided or split subject Bhabha describes as being at once both masterful and riven by lack.

Standing behind a camera in her harems fabricated from veils of text, Essaydi paradoxically occupies the position of the male Orientalist fetishist. She doubles his painterly practice in the representational medium *par excellence*, photography. So she demystifies the Orientalist's realist ambitions not by replacing the fetish with a more truthful representation but by exposing the absence that lies behind the occidental fantasy of a mysterious East that must be known and, thereby, dominated. Placing the viewer in a harem *cum* scriptorium, she presents the viewer with an impossible demand to see and read simultaneously. The sense of inadequacy this experience produces reflects the desire to know the other back upon its source, confronting the viewer with his or her own lack. Weaving absence and presence, verbal and visual, Lalla Essaydi therefore places the absence of a real Orient, the kernel of castrating lack that fuels the Western Orientalist fantasy, *itself* on display.

32. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question . . .," *Screen* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, n.d.), 27; see also Said, *Orientalism*, 240.

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Lalla Essaydi, *Bullets Revisited #1*, 2012.

Three chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, each 61 x 50.8 cm. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



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Printed 2012. Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, 180 x 223.5 cm. © Lalla Essaydi / Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.



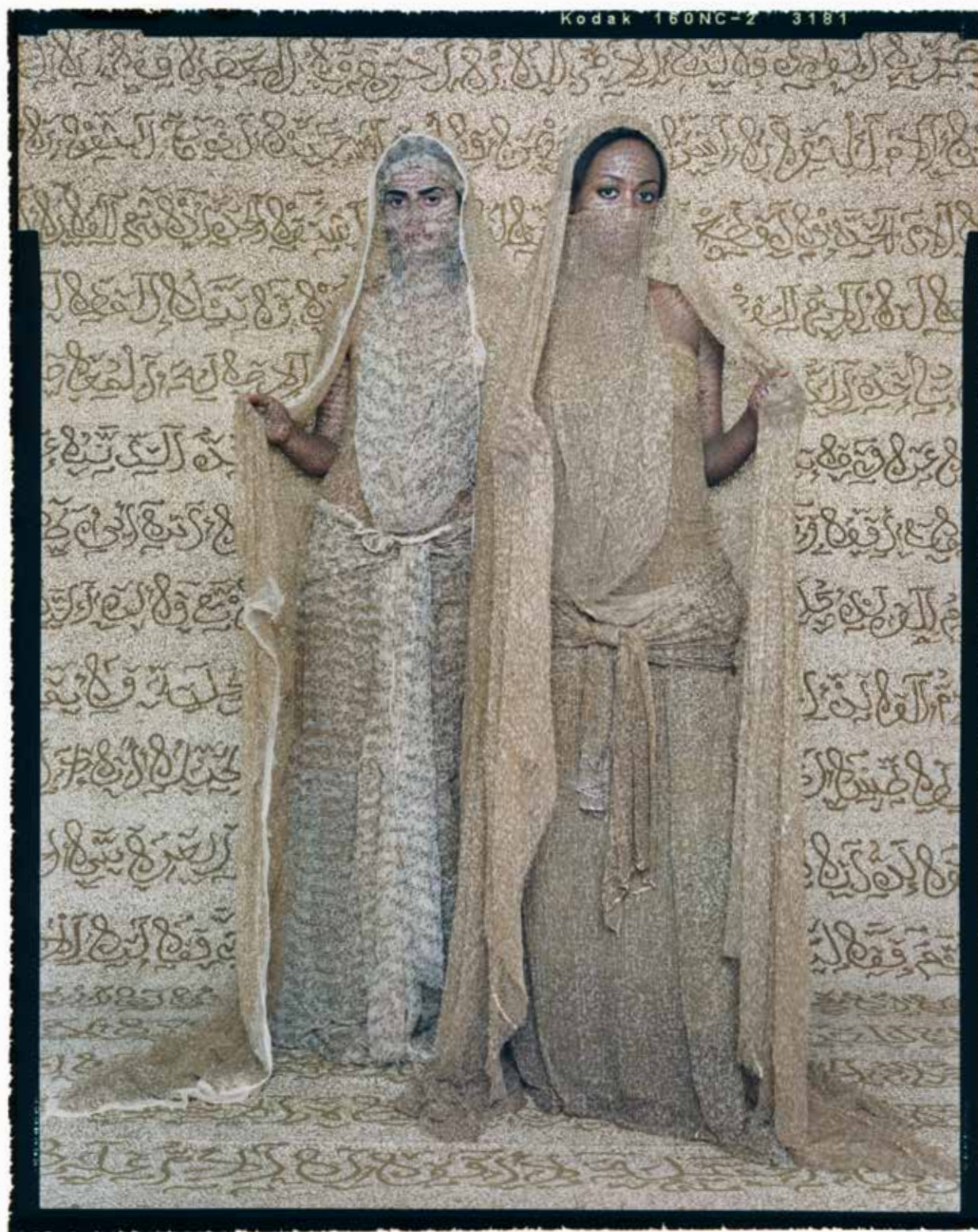
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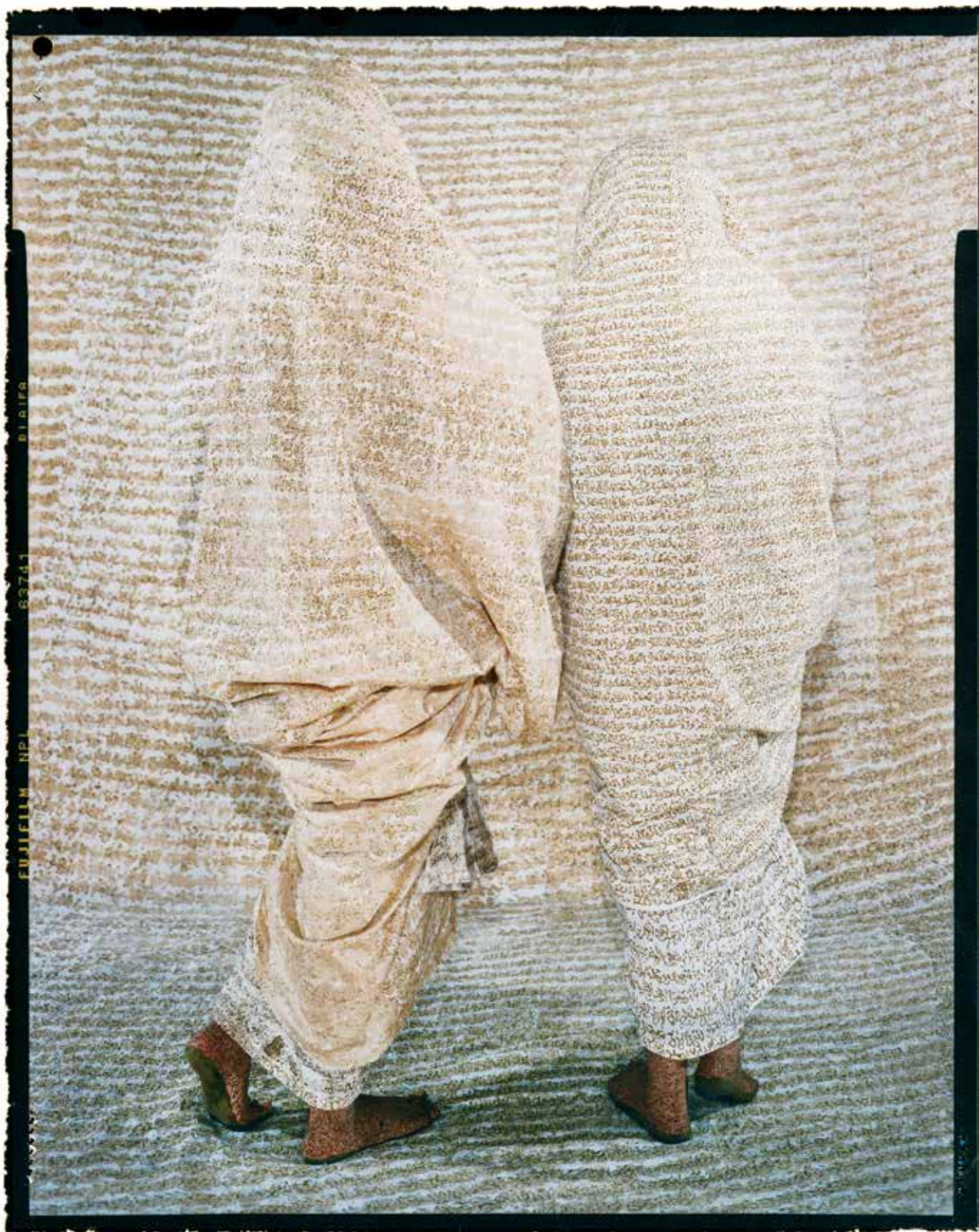


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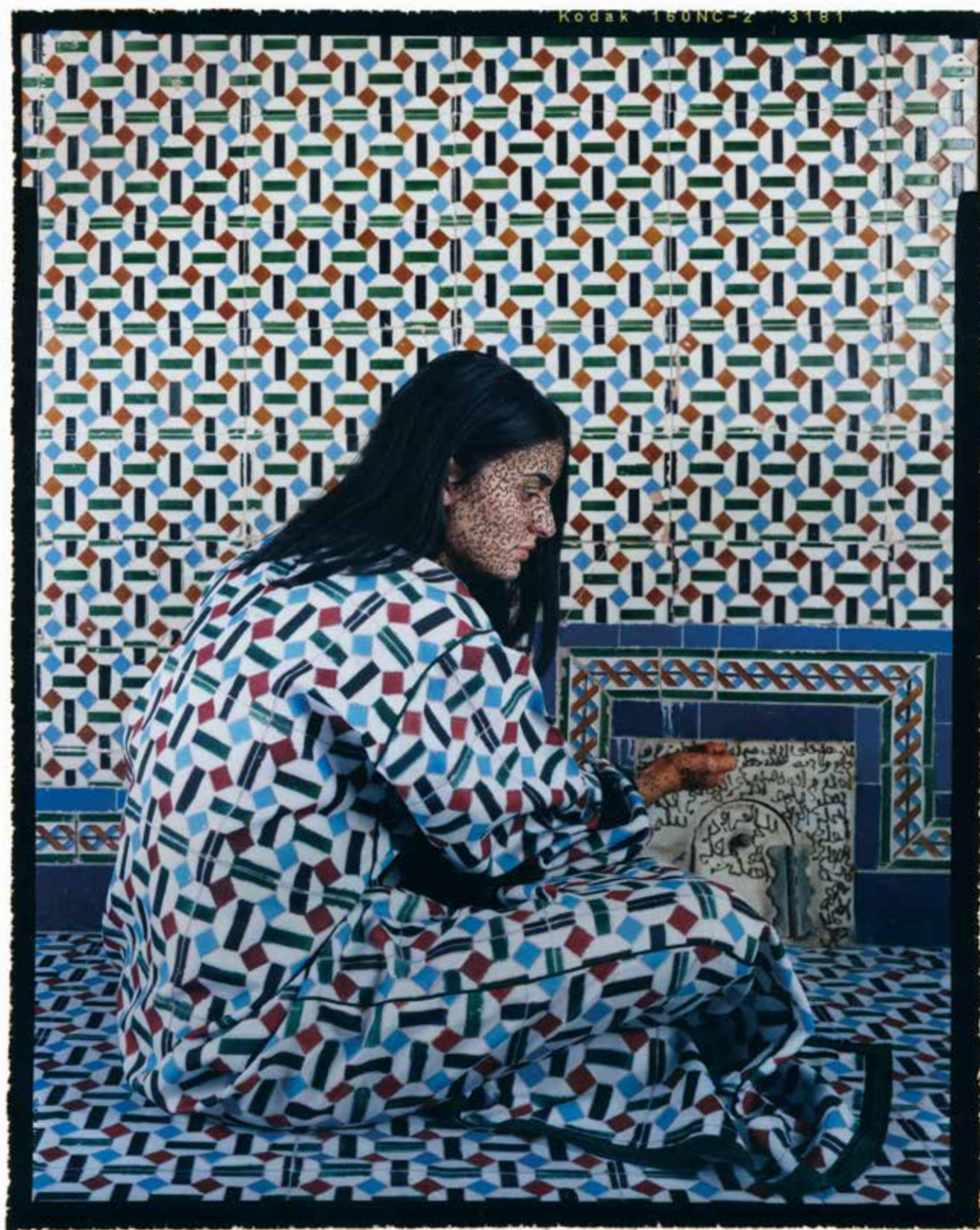
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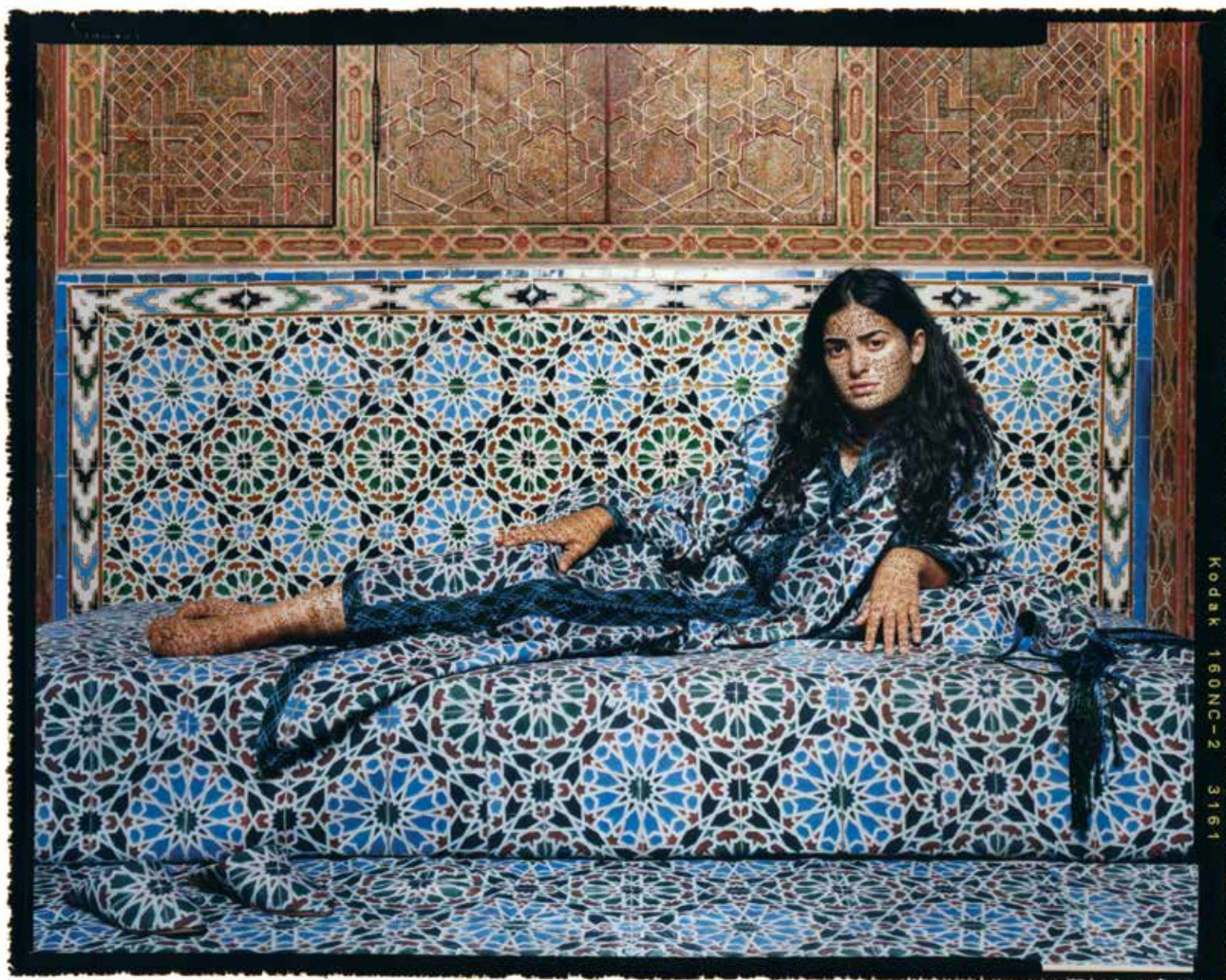


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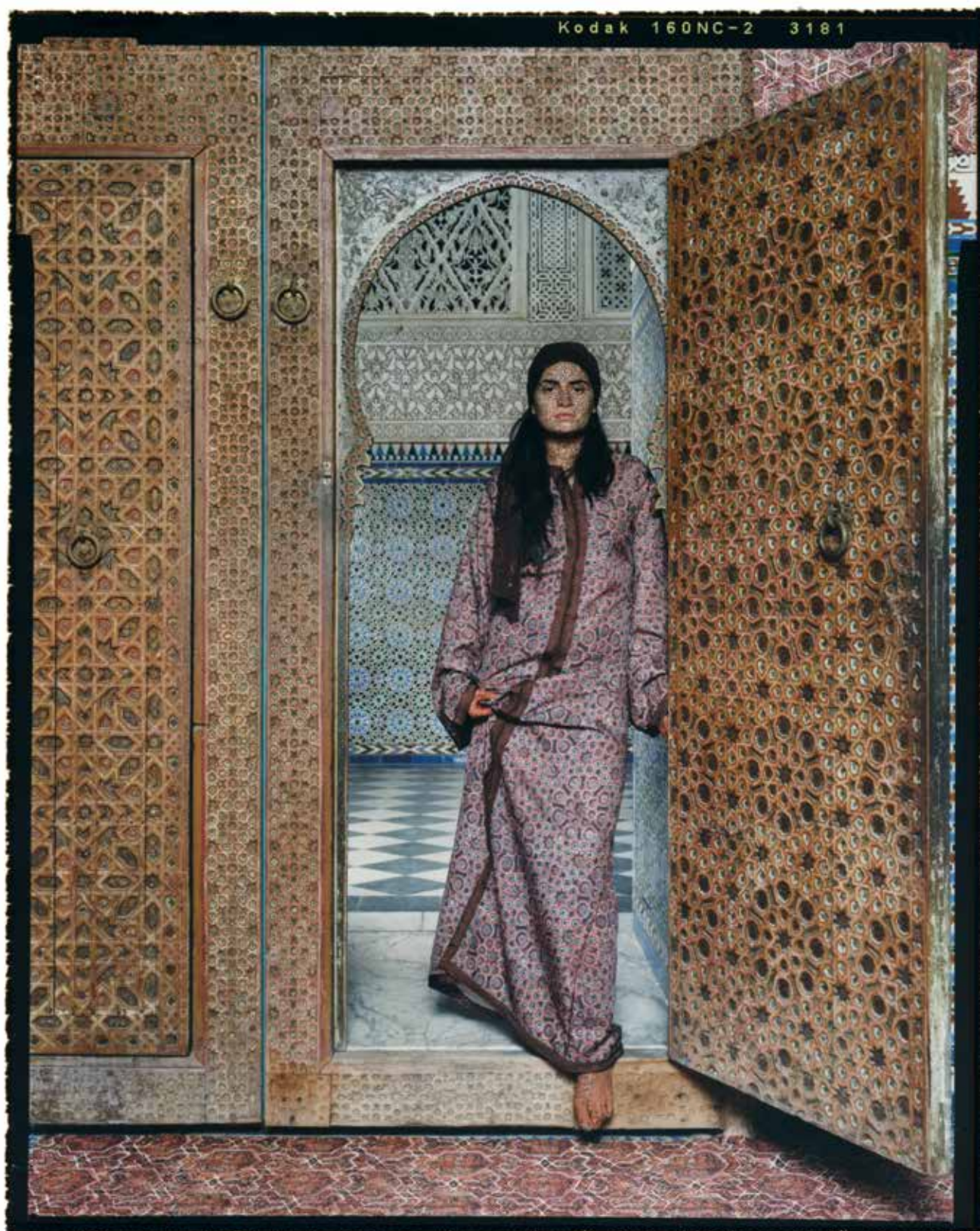
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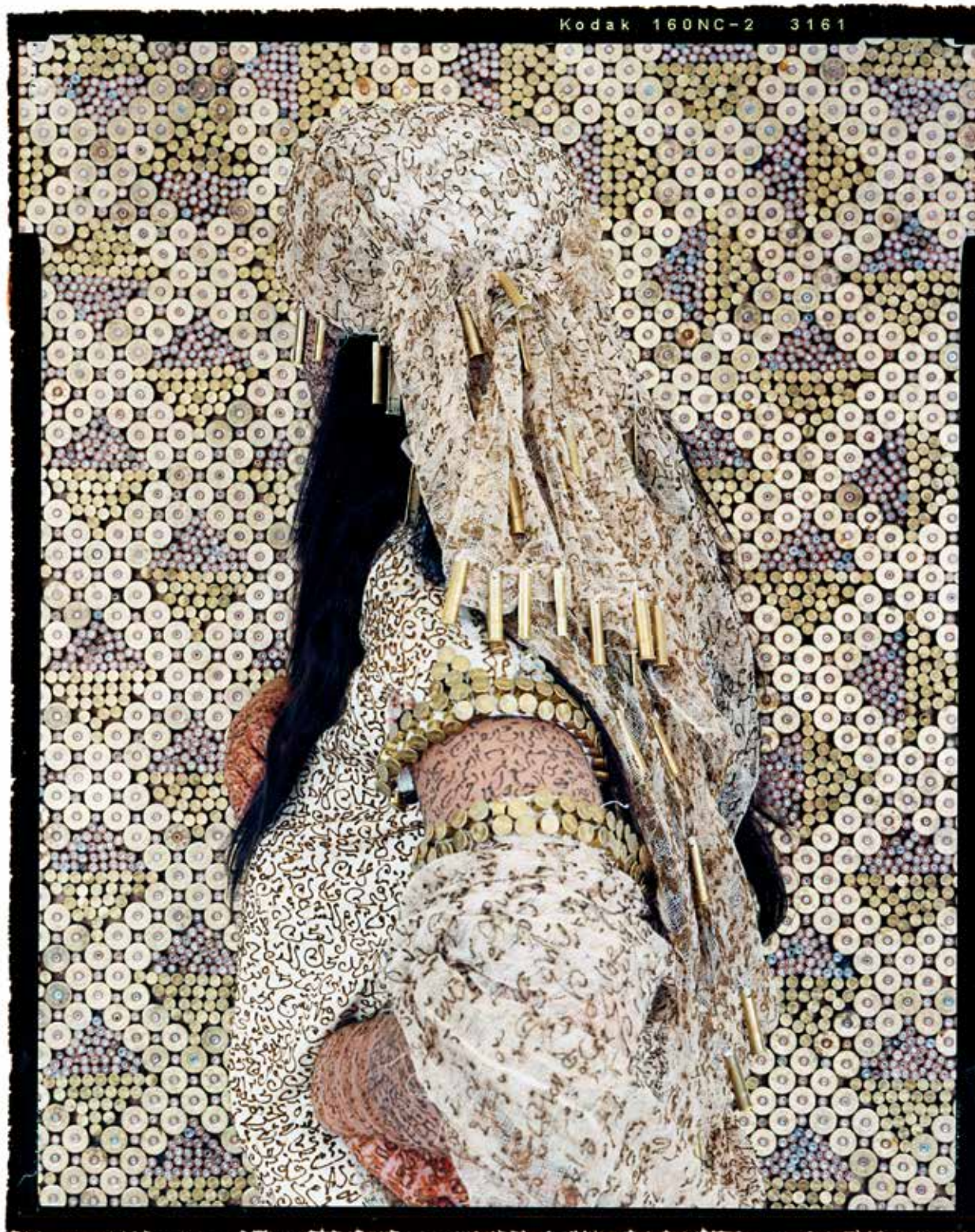
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LALLA ESSAYDI

Lalla Essaydi's career as an artist has encompassed painting, mixed media, and video, but most recently she has devoted herself to photography, and to sumptuous explorations of the image of woman in Islamic society.

Essaydi was raised in Morocco and spent many years in Saudi Arabia, and although she was educated in Europe and the United States, this experience of traditional Islamic life was fundamental in shaping her identity. Her first major photographic series was *Converging Territories* (2002-4), which depicted Islamic women and children in an unoccupied house where Essaydi was once confined for long spells as a child whenever she was disobedient. The series that followed, *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005-7), expanded this further, exploring the charged rhetoric of veiling and revealing that surrounds Islamic women.

Essaydi's photography provides a contemporary reflection on an iconography that stretches at least as far back as the Orientalist imagery of nineteenth century artists such as Ingres, Delacroix, and Gérôme. The women in *Les Femmes du Maroc* are entirely enveloped in Islamic calligraphy – writing, applied in henna, which adorns their skin, their robes, and the interiors that surround them. The text seems to entrap the women, and yet it is a form of decoration that marks some of the happiest and most significant moments of an Islamic woman's life. In a more recent series, *Harem* (2009), Essaydi has produced a series of pictures in a former harem in Morocco, often swathing her subjects in robes that closely echo the decorative tiles that wall the complex. "In my art," Essaydi says, "I wish to present myself through multiple lenses – as artist, as Moroccan, as Saudi, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short, I invite the viewer to resist stereotypes."

Lalla Essaydi lives in New York. A selection from her series *Les Femmes du Maroc* was published by powerHouse Books in 2009. Recent exhibitions of her work have been staged at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Mass.; and the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. Her work is represented in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and many others.

