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ART REVIEW | NEW JERSEY

Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

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“Lalla Essaydi: Les Femmes du Maroc,” an exhibition at the Jane Voorhees [Zimmerli Art Museum](#), draws attention to one of the most interesting if puzzling developments in contemporary art: a revival of exotic, often historical imagery of people from faraway places in the name of a critique of exoticism.

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A photograph from a series by Lalla Essaydi. Above, “Les Femmes du Maroc: Moorish Woman.”

Ms. Essaydi is a Moroccan-born, New York-based photographer who has risen to prominence for her beautiful, striking imagery dealing with the role of women in Islamic societies. But much like [Shirin Neshat](#), [Shahzia Sikander](#) and other successful expatriate female artists from Muslim nations, she trades in stereotypes, reflecting back at us our own misconceptions and prejudices.

The current exhibition of work by Ms. Essaydi, a touring show from the [DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum](#), in Lincoln, Mass., consists of 17 color photographs of Moroccan women dressed up and arranged into staged scenes appropriated from 19th-century European and American [Orientalist paintings](#). Among her sources are paintings by well-known artists like [Jean-Léon Gérôme](#), [Eugène Delacroix](#), [John Singer Sargent](#) and [Frederic Leighton](#).

The artist has scrawled Arabic calligraphy on her photographs. It is written in henna, which is used by women in South Asia and in some Islamic countries to decorate the hands, feet and body for marriage and other ceremonies. The calligraphy, loosely applied, is largely obscured by its presentation; for the most part it is illegible, even to those who read Arabic.

Though this is not a big show, the visual elegance of the works is overwhelming. They are beautiful and alluring; my immediate reaction on walking into the show was “Wow.” The impact can be attributed partly to the fetishistic and sometimes openly sexual aspects of the Orientalist originals, and partly to the decorative use of the calligraphy, which adds a pleasing patina of age.

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Edwynn Houk Gallery

“Les Femmes du Maroc: Grand Odalisque”

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"Les Femmes du Maroc #38"

Those who have studied art history will probably recognize several of the source images. "Les Femmes du Maroc: Grande Odalisque" (2008), showing a naked woman wrapped in a sheet on a bed, is an appropriation of [Jean August-Dominique Ingres's](#) iconic painting "The Great Odalisque" (1819). Ms. Essaydi's figure seems remote and unavailable to the viewer, unlike Ingres's temptress.

While Ms. Essaydi changes her source images, stripping them of their luminous colors, removing male figures or replacing them with women, and covering up the nudity, I am not sure that she always transforms them enough. Too often her photographs look like an exercise in voyeurism, replicating rather than revising the stereotypical imagery she is working with.

Take, for example, "Les Femmes du Maroc #1" (2005), based on a Delacroix painting, "Algerian Women in Their Apartment" (1834), depicting three Arab women as slaves imprisoned in an exotic and secluded harem. Ms. Essaydi simplifies the setting by eliminating the colorful draperies and props, but her picture still retains some of the languorous sensuality of the original Orientalist painting.

My problem with these photographs is that Ms. Essaydi, by retaining the basic compositions, gestures and general style of dress of the original paintings, often leaves her women stuck in the same Orientalist fantasy that she purports to critique. Instead of changing the way in which we see Arab women, these photographs revive old-fashioned stereotypes.

"Les Femmes du Maroc #4" (2005) is an instantly striking photograph based on ["The Slave Market" \(circa 1867\)](#), one of G r me's best and most famous paintings, which shows a slave woman having her teeth inspected by some prospective buyers. It depicts a degrading scene, the woman reduced to a piece of property. Nothing about Ms. Essaydi's photographic copy changes this.

In the exhibition catalog, Nick Capasso, the show's curator, argues that Ms. Essaydi presents us with images of women who are "empowered." That's the party line on these photographs. Sometimes I think it makes sense, as with "Les Femmes du Maroc: Grande Odalisque," but at other times it just doesn't work. I don't see how there can be anything empowering about images of women as sex slaves.

No doubt the use of text on the images is meant to give these women a voice, to show them as more than just passive bodies. But given that the text is mostly illegible, it becomes just another decorative element enhancing the aesthetic appeal of what are essentially clich d images of the East seen through the lens of Western desire.

"Lalla Essaydi: Les Femmes du Maroc," Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 71 Hamilton Street, New Brunswick, through June 6; (732) 932-7237 or zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu.