



## **LALLA ESSAYDI**

Morocco/U.S.

Lalla A. Essaydi grew up in Morocco, and lived in Saudi Arabia for many years. She presently lives in Boston, where she received her MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/TUFTS University in May 2003. She has exhibited throughout the United States and Europe and her work is found in a number of public collections, including the Williams College Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Kodak Museum, the Fries Museum, Netherlands, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the DeCordova Museum.

Her art, which often combines Islamic calligraphy with representations of the female body, addresses the complex reality of Arab female identity from the unique perspective of personal experience. In much of her work, she returns to her Moroccan girlhood, looking back on it as an adult woman caught somewhere between past and present, and as an artist, exploring the language in which to "speak" from this uncertain space. She works in numerous media, including painting, video, film, installation, and analog photography. "In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses -- as artist, as Moroccan, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. In short, I invite viewers to resist stereotypes."

### **ARTIST STATEMENT**

My work reaches beyond Islamic culture to invoke the Western fascination with the veil and, of course, the harem, as expressed in Orientalist painting using the odalisque. By re-visiting and re-interrogating the Arab female body, I am tracing and mapping a history often coded in misunderstanding. Through my photographs, I am able to suggest the complexity of Arab female identity, as I have known it, and the tension between hierarchy and fluidity that are at the heart of Arab culture. But I do not intend my work to be simply a mere critique of either Arab or Western culture. I am going beyond simple critique to a more active, even subversive, engagement with cultural patterns to convey my own experience as an Arab woman caught somewhere between past and present, East and West. In the absence of any specificity of place, the text itself becomes the world of the subjects – their thoughts, their speech, work, clothing, shelter, and a nomadic home. Henna is a crucial element in the life of a Moroccan woman. It is associated with the major celebrations in her life: passage into womanhood, marriage, birth of her first child. The texts, written in henna, are a diary -- incomplete, of course. The viewer and the writer become involved in a process of reading and revising, finding and losing multiple and discontinuous threads.