

Lalla Essaydi (Morocco/U.S.)

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.