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THREE FEMALE MOROCCAN ARTISTS TAKE ON ORIENTALIST CLICHÉS

The exhibition *Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism: From Spain to Morocco, Benjamin-Constant in His Time* offered the Museum the opportunity to add works by the three contemporary Moroccan artists included in the show – Yasmina Bouziane, Lalla Essaydi and Majida Khattari – to its fledgling collection of contemporary art from the region. One of the fastest growing art markets in recent years, contemporary Middle Eastern art is also one of the most exciting art scenes in which women artists figure prominently. Western museums are increasingly collecting art produced by artists hailing from countries often associated with Islamism, conservatism or seemingly incompatible norms.

The photographs of Bouziane, Essaydi and Khattari create an intelligent visual and conceptual dialogue with the French nineteenth-century artist's paintings. All three artists engage with the visual codes of Orientalism. The fact that they are women, Orientalism's favourite subject, affords them a unique position to subvert stereotypes from the inside, using the very visual constructs used to create them. Their position as outsiders and their biculturalism – the three live and work in the West – allow them to target both Western and Middle Eastern restrictive definitions of Arab womanhood. While Bouziane, Essaydi and Khattari all reappropriate Orientalist signs, they employ different strategies to transcend their inherent polarization.

Bouziane's self-portrait, *Untitled no. 6, alias "The Signature"* (ill. 3), uses humour to convey the artist's agency and the fiction of colonial photographic practices. The image, like the other works in the artist's "Inhabited by Imaginings We Did Not Choose" series (1993-1994), blurs the representational boundaries of three distinct themes: the "Oriental" woman, the modern-cum-Western woman and the colonial photographer. Here, the odalisque sits up and takes charge of the camera, returning the colonial postcard, and therefore the gaze, to the sender. By juxtaposing objects representing the East and the West – Oriental rugs and cowboy boots – and tradition and modernity – the

exotic dress and the electric fan – Bouziane defies the fault line drawn between East and West and probes the "Who am I?" of the diasporic subject.

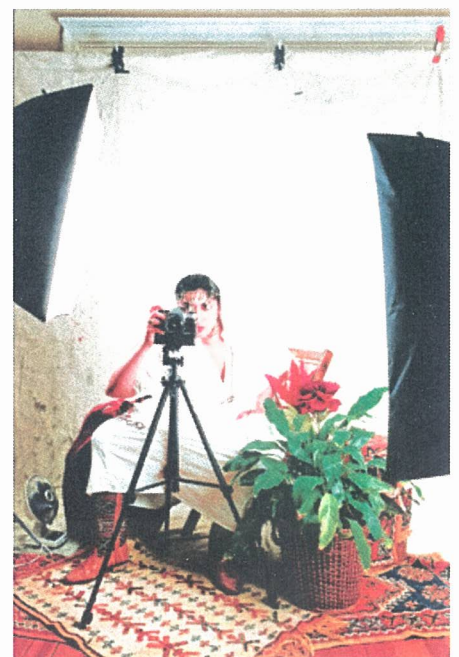
In *The Sultana* (ill. 1), with its reclining beauty and draperies, Essaydi evokes Orientalism in a bid to reappropriate her cultural imaginary from Western representations. Writing over the images in henna with indecipherable Kufic-like script, she displaces the voyeuristic gaze and asserts her right to self-representation, while the image's dove (a symbol of freedom), references to European art (i.e. Courbet) and sheer beauty dissipate the East-West divide.

Khattari also references Orientalist painting. *Tornado* (ill. 2) re-enacts a Delacroix study for *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827); however, rather than engage in postcolonial critique, the artist appears to relish re-creating the work's visual richness. The Franco-Moroccan artist reclaims Orientalism only to reclassify it as part of the tradition of the Other to which it lays claim. *Tornado* possesses another political resonance, because for Khattari, the story of the defeated Sardanapalus bent on violence and revenge serves as a metaphor for the fallen dictators of the now moribund Arab Spring.

Consciously shunning victimization, Bouziane, Essaydi and Khattari challenge typical representations of Middle Eastern women. More interestingly, their work shifts the discussion of East-West competition away from geopolitics by revealing its constitutive role in the formation of postcolonial subjectivities. Moreover, because plural identities impart an acute consciousness of the construction and mediation of images, the work of these three international artists transcends cultural politics, adding to global discussions on the transformative possibilities of representation.

VALERIE BEHIERY

1. Lalla Essaydi (born in 1956), *The Sultana*
From the series "Women of Morocco"
2008, chromogenic print mounted on aluminum, 1/15
76.2 x 101.6 cm
MMFA, purchase, the Museum Campaign 1988-1993 Fund
2. Majida Khattari (born in 1966), *Tornado*
From the series "Luxury, Disorder, Sensual Delight", 2012-2013
Ink jet print, 2/3, 120.1 x 179.9 cm
MMFA, purchase, the Honourable Charles Lapointe, P.C. Fund
3. Yasmina Bouziane (born in 1968), *Untitled no. 6, alias "The Signature"*
From the series "Inhabited by Imaginings We Did Not Choose"
1993-1994, chromogenic print, 1/10, 40.8 x 27.9 cm
MMFA, purchase, Peter Dey Fund



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