

## The Technical Aspects of Lalla Essaydi's Photographs

Patricia Drummond

**This essay will critically analyze the technical aspects of Lalla Essaydi's photographs, through the identification of the photographic processes and elements incorporated in the work. It will discuss how the technical decisions made by the artist are relevant to the conceptual aspects of the work and provide an introduction to, and basic explanation of, the technical elements and processes used by Essaydi, including the use of large format photography, color film, Color Services, LLC, and her emulation of the Polaroid. The significance of Essaydi's photographic choices make the work what it is. Through this critical analysis a greater understanding of not only the work but also the artist's intent may be gained.**

### The Photographic Technique

Un-cropped film and manipulated borders are strong elements in the work of Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi. She incorporates the language of darkroom and alternative photography through her use of an analog large format camera and the manipulated borders framing the imagery that reference the distinct aesthetic look, and possibly appeal, of a large format Polaroid photograph. The use of both techniques allows for a specific aesthetic appeal and lends to each individual photograph a quality of being made by the hand. The process-driven choices made by the photographer extend contemporary and historic photographic references to the images and enhance the conceptual subject matter in a manner that may not be as successful, or possible, with other photographic processes.

In her work Essaydi utilizes large format photography to capture her created constructions of female figures and Arabic calligraphy. The large color photographs, ranging in size from approximately six feet by seven feet to five feet by three feet, have extensive detail, such as in Essaydi's photograph *After the Bath*, 2008, from her *Les Femmes du Maroc* series. In this piece one can easily decipher between several sizes of text in the background and foreground. The all-over focus of the image in combination with the image's high level of detail is a photographically natural relationship that can be achieved using a large format camera. The detail within the composition reflects Essaydi's significant time spent planning and creating every element of each photograph, but most importantly it is her use of a large format camera, which allows for the great detail, complete focus and large scale. This combination of the scale, focus and detail can be seen as one of the main reasons for Essaydi's choice in using large format photography.

Though Essaydi seems hesitant in interviews to give detailed information about her process, one can garner further information from a careful visual analysis of her work. In several interviews the artist has offered a brief description of her photographic process, explaining that, "I work

with large format. There is absolutely no manipulation whatsoever with my work. I shoot the film and we print in a darkroom the traditional way.”<sup>1</sup>

While the use of large format photography is evident in the scale, focus and detail of her work (as above) it can also be found in the shape of the outer edges of the photographs. Clear indicators that Essaydi is using film in a large format camera are the two parallel places in each photograph where the edges push out from the sides or the top and bottom, depending on the orientation of the image. For example when looking at the photograph *La Sultane*, 2008, from the series *Les Femmes du Maroc*, the projection of the image into the black border surrounding the photograph is evident on the top and bottom of the image, at its right side. The projection is more noticeable at the top of this image because it extends deeper into the black border. The projection of the imagery into the black border can be found on all the photographs Essaydi displays on her website in the *Les Femmes du Maroc* and *Converging Territories* series except one, *Les Femmes du Maroc: #23*, which will be discussed later on in this essay.

These marks or changes of image shape are left on the film from the film holder when the photograph is exposed, creating an irregular rectangular shape. The film holder is a rectangular metal or plastic case that is approximately the same size as the film being used. The most common film size for large format photography is 4 x 5 film, which is named for its size (4 inches by 5 inches). Another common large format film size is 8 by 10 inches. The film holder holds two pieces of film that get loaded into it, one on each side, in complete darkness. The loaded film holder is then slid into the large format camera after the photograph is set on the ground glass in back of the camera and focused. Once the film holder is placed in the camera, and the slide removed, an exposure can be made. Since one film holder can only hold two negatives, photographers shooting with a large format camera often load multiple film holders and are more conservative with how many photographs they take, often spending a considerable amount of time selecting the composition of the imagery and focusing the camera. What then is the difference between a large format camera and any other camera?

### **Large Format Photography and the View Camera**

As explained by London, Stone and Upton, in their photography text book, *Photography*, “While modern small-camera films (1 x 1 ½ inches is the size of 35mm film) and digital cameras can make excellent enlargements, the greatest image clarity and detail and the least grain are produced from a large-size negative or capture area.”<sup>2</sup> A large format camera, also known as a view camera, is a camera often associated with older photographic processes. The iconic image of the photographer with their head and shoulders hidden under a black cloth behind a massive boxy camera on a tripod, while their hand sticks out the side with a shutter release, is one of the most known visual references of the medium. It is in fact this accordion-like camera with its wall

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen G. Shanahan, “A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi,” ed. Sarah T. Brooks, *The Photography of Lalla Essaydi. Critiquing and Contextualizing Orientalism* (Broadway, VA: Branner Printing) 2014, 23.

<sup>2</sup> John Upton, Barbara London, and Jim Stone. *Photography*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2008), 287.

of glass in the back that is used to make large format photographs. The design of the camera includes its front lens panel and back frame of ground glass, which is connected by a middle portion called the bellows that looks like a black accordion. The bellows, made of a malleable material that is light tight, allows for the many movements of the camera that make it so unique. Not only can the bellows expand from several inches to several feet or more, depending on the size of the camera, it also allows the maneuverability of the front and back panel to individually be moved up, down, left, right, front and back. These movements are referred to as the rise and fall, shift, tilt and swing, they allow the photographer to change and control the image in the camera giving them the ability to “change the area of a scene that will be recorded, select the most sharply focused plane, or alter the shape of the subject itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Large format photography is still used by contemporary fine art photographers, including Sally Mann, Gregory Crewdson, Marry Ellen Mark, Emmet Gowin and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. Though the equipment is cumbersome and the process painstaking at times, many fine art photographers still rely on this bulky camera for its unique abilities.

### **Analog Film**

A distinctive clue can be found in a number of Essaydi’s photographs that indicates she is using film and not a digital file to produce her images. On the outer edge of each image in the black border there are text and numbers that identify the type of film being used. In the piece *Outdoor Gossip*, 2008, from her *Les Femmes du Maroc* series, “Kodak 160NC-2 3091” can clearly be seen across the upper right border. Essaydi does relate in a number of her interviews that she uses film as opposed to digital files. However, she is hesitant or perhaps resistant to explain very much about her photographic process, never expounding upon the use of the view camera or film process.

Essaydi does not seem to have a tendency toward using only one film type. In her photograph *Converging Territories #10*, 2003, from her series *Converging Territories*, the text “Fujifilm” can be found on the upper left border of the photograph. Several of the other photographs displayed on the artist’s website, and in this exhibition, in the *Converging Territories* series also include the film brand text in the image border. From what is shown on Essaydi’s website in this series, it appears that the artist was consistent in using one film type for the whole project. This can also be seen in the photographs in the *Les Femmes Du Maroc* series with Kodak film being used.

Though the film type may not seem especially important, it does affect the quality of the image. Films vary in light sensitivity and grain; generally a photographer chooses a specific film for a reason. This choice is often based on what the photographer will be shooting, where they are shooting and how they are shooting. The Kodak NC film that Essaydi uses is known for its “consistently smooth, natural reproduction of the full range of skin tones” and “significantly finer grain at all speeds for improved scanning performance and greater enlargement capability.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “KODAK PROFESSIONAL PORTRA 160NC, 160VC, 400NC, 400VC, and 800 Films.”

Because Essaydi does not crop her photographs, “I started not only keeping the black border, but also creating it. If you use just the normal frame of black, you would have straight black lines,” each photograph has a distinctive black frame around it.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen, the film brand and or film number on the film is seen in the final photograph due to this lack of cropping. Leaving the brand and number visible is not uncommon. This visual element is just another part of the aesthetic language of photography, and more specifically the aesthetic language of large format and other film-based photography. The inclusion of the text in the border both provides the viewer with the information that Essaydi uses a photographic process that incorporates color film, and it informs the viewer that the image is un-cropped.

The fact that the photograph remains un-cropped may seem trivial, but in fact it tells the viewer that Essaydi took the time to create the exact image she wanted while photographing it. This revelation does not seem surprising when considering the time and effort put forth by Essaydi into the staging of each of her compositions. She completes her composition and choice of subject matter before and during photographing. There are no adjustments of scale or content left to be made in the printing process.

### **Color Services, LLC**

Essaydi chooses to have her photographs printed by a commercial company, which is not uncommon for professional artists. The exact level of Essaydi’s participation in the printing process is unknown. However, when Essaydi discusses the technical aspects of her photographs in interviews she often uses the term “we.” The company Essaydi chooses to use is Color Services, LLC.

Color Services, LLC is a company in Massachusetts, in the Boston area, that offers a range of services to artists, institutions, collectors and galleries. Founded in 1988, Color Services now offers its clients the ability to process film, both black and white and color, in six different film types. Color Services also makes prints of images, both from film and digital files, in sizes up to 72 inches by 120 inches, the largest Essaydi print in this exhibition is 88 by 71 inches. Their website also advertises exhibition fabrication, museum quality mounting and framing and conservation consulting.

How Essaydi prints her photographs, and how she develops her film (or has it developed) is particularly relevant to her process since she is using color film, specifically chromogenic color film, which requires development in C-41 chemicals. This color film is developed in the same chemicals used to develop the commonly used 35mm film that can be processed at your local drug store or supermarket. The availability of 35mm film and the number of places to have it processed have noticeably dwindled in the past fifteen years due to the ease and popularity of digital photography. Since the film Essaydi uses is color sheet film it requires a more specialized

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<http://www.kodak.com/global/en/professional/support/techPubs/e190/e190.pdf>, Accessed January 30, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>Shanahan, “A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi,” 22-23.

company for processing. The average drug store does not develop anything other than 35mm and most places today send that out to be processed at a different location.

When considering why Essaydi has chosen to use Color Services LLC, many factors may come into play. The aforementioned need of finding a company with the equipment and knowledge to process the film is one major factor. For Essaydi the location of Color Services LLC seems to be another factor. The company is located in Needham, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Essaydi first lived in Boston while completing her BFA and MFA degrees, and today spends time at studios in both New York and Boston. She photographed her *Les Femmes du Maroc* series at the Boston studio.

It could be asked why Essaydi does not maintain her own darkroom. The ability to maintain a personal color darkroom is not often found today. Not only are the chemicals extremely harmful, a specific type of ventilation is required, the equipment needed is becoming more difficult to find, the cost of setting up and maintaining a color darkroom is quite large and the training or education in a color darkroom is scarce with most universities and colleges dismantling their color darkrooms.

### **Visually Referencing the Polaroid**

As has been mentioned before, all of Essaydi's photographs except one, *Les Femmes du Maroc*: #23, (as displayed on her website), have a distinctive black border. Part of this black border can be attributed to the use of large format film. However, only a thin black line with smoother edges would appear on a print made from a large format negative without manipulation. The black lines do not always appear on large format photographs; their appearance is dependent upon three factors: whether the photographer crops the image while printing, what kind of negative carrier is being used, and/or if the negative or print is being manipulated. It is this first factor that gives *Les Femmes du Maroc* #23 its borderless appearance. Whether Essaydi only cropped the thin black edges or cropped some of the imagery is unknown, the lack of any black border and the photographs clean edges indicate that the photograph, *Les Femmes du Maroc* #23, was printed in a negative carrier that at the very least covered (blocked) the edges of the film while being printed.

The negative carrier is what holds the film negative and is placed in the enlarger to make a print. The negative carrier is a metal folder of sorts with a rectangular hole cut out of each plane, so that when the piece of film is placed in the carrier the carrier becomes a framing device to hold the negative but not block any of the image. Negative carriers may differ in how close the metal edge comes to the edge of the image on the negative. If part of the film is uncovered, that does not have an image on it, it will appear black on the print. Some photographers make and manipulate negative carriers to achieve a specific appearance, for example making the black border more prominent or manipulating the edges of the image.

“I started not only keeping the black border, but also creating it. If you use just the normal frame of black, you would have straight black lines. I go great lengths to make it look like a Polaroid by taking tape and removing treads from it. Everything is done in the darkroom,” explains

Essaydi about her photographs.<sup>6</sup> The Polaroid that Essaydi is referring to is not the vernacular polaroid with the white plastic frame. It is the large format Polaroid used by and marketed to fine art photographers that she refers to. These 20 x 24 inch Polaroids characteristically have dark borders that are irregular in form from one image to the next but provide the imagery with a dark black and at times brown, or even other colors if it is color film, border. These irregular borders are created by the chemicals used in the film that make the photographs instant, or close to instant, when the film is pressed together to activate the chemicals. This border or frame is an aesthetic trait of the Polaroid and visually points to the look and qualities of a Polaroid.

Essaydi explains her aim in creating this Polaroid look in her own photographs, “As for the framing, first of all, I love Polaroids. That’s the first time I tried to work in Polaroids. I have a few images but it’s very hard to work in large-format.”<sup>7</sup> Though the black borders in Essaydi’s work are not exact replicas of Polaroids they do bring to mind the aesthetic of the large format Polaroid. Essaydi’s other explanation of the black border, “Another thing that is very important for me is that, because we usually don’t frame my work – it is mounted – the black frame then becomes the frame of the photographs.”<sup>8</sup>

Through the use and appropriation of multiple photographic processes Essaydi is able to provide her photographs with the aesthetic and technical characteristics that she believes fit her work. It is these processes and characteristics of the photographic medium that give Essaydi’s work the visual documentation and appearance it has, while also allowing the photographer to present her work as she has chosen. Far too often a medium is used because it is what the artist is familiar with, instead of giving the work a process that fits the aim of the art and its concept. Through the use of large format photography, historically linked to documentary photography and travel photography, Essaydi not only incorporates the characteristics of the process but also the similarities of its history to painting and its representation, and depictive quality, that provided a large number of people with their only visual reference to other cultures, places and people. Essaydi’s aesthetic and technical choices have given her artwork a more enhanced existence, creating layers of meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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