LALLA ESSAYDI

ملتقيات

CROSSROADS

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An exhibition of photographs by

LALLA ESSAYDI

13th - 25th October 2008

WATERHOUSE & DODD

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The entire exhibition may be viewed online at **www.artroutes.com** and all works are available for sale on receipt of this catalogue.

EuropeArabBank

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canvas

Europe Arab Bank

Europe Arab Bank is proud to support *Crossroads* which features the extraordinary photographs of Lalla Essaydi. We are delighted to be working with Waterhouse & Dodd on this project and to seeing this important body of work brought to new audiences.

Europe Arab Bank is committed to supporting the arts as part of our belief in the importance of cultural expression and the contribution art makes to societies across Europe, the Middle East and Arab world.

Antoine Sreih
CEO Europe Arab Bank

Introduction

We first saw Angela's work at her final show at the Royal College of Art last year where we were struck by the extraordinary creativity and the artistic interpretation of her pieces. Perhaps unusually for a student, she had already exhibited at The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition where her work was bought by Laurence Graff, named as one of the top ten art collectors in the world. Another of her pieces has also just been acquired by the Wellcome Trust Collection in London.

Angela often works on very specific projects. This catalogue is largely dedicated to the 'unravelling' of an Egyptian mummy, which is part of the collection of The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. We are extremely grateful to The Ashmolean, not only for allowing Angela unprecedented access to the mummy, but also for the loan of the actual mummy for the duration of the exhibition.

Exhibited alongside the work inspired by CT scans of The Ashmolean Mummy are a series of self-portraits that use MRI technology.

We leave the detailed analysis of Angela's work and the significance of the subject in the far more capable hands of Andrew Nairne (Director, Modern Art Oxford) and Dr Helen Whitehouse (Curator, Egyptian Collections, The Ashmolean Museum), who have produced thoughtful and illuminating texts for this catalogue.

Ray Waterhouse / Jemimah Patterson
Waterhouse & Dodd - Art Routes

An interview with Lalla Essaydi and Ray Waterhouse

RW: *You come from a painting background, how important and influential is that training for how you make your photographs?*
LE: My background in painting plays a very important role in my photographic work. For one thing, applying henna, is really a painting process. And because the Arab tradition of calligraphy, which has of course an expressive element, does not involve the kind of separation between image and text you find in the West, the calligraphic element in my work, especially as it is applied in henna, is in my mind closely related to painting. Also, my experience with painting influences the composition of my photographs, and my understanding of space in each medium. In painting, every space is a constructed space, every element is in some sense intentional. So when I began to incorporate Orientalist themes into my photographs - and here again, painting played a major role, because it was as a painter that I began my investigations into Orientalism - I created somewhat abstract settings for the work, settings that are deliberately reminiscent of Orientalist painting.

RW: *Where were the photographs from your two series 'Converging Territories' and 'Femmes du Maroc' shot and what is the significance of the setting?*
LE: The Converging Territories series is set in Morocco, in a large house, no longer occupied, that belongs to my family. Until fairly recently, I returned here for my photographic work. I wanted to set my work in the physical jspace where, in the house of my childhood, a young woman was sent when she disobeyed, stepped outside the permissible behavioral space, as defined by my culture. Here, accompanied only by servants, she would spend a month, spoken to by no one, a month of silence. So this literal space is also a psychological space, a space marked by memory, and an embodiment as well of cultural boundaries, a cultural space. Furthermore, it is important to realize that architectural and cultural space are profoundly interconnected in the Arab world, private space being traditionally the domain of women, public spaces of men.

But there is even yet another kind of space that figures in Converging Territories. For after having revisited this house many times in making these photographs, and thinking about my own complex relation as an artist to this space of childhood, I have become aware of another space, one less tangible and more ambiguous, that of the imagination, of self-creation.

My more recent photographic series, Les Femmes du Maroc, is set in my studio in Boston, where I work with Moroccan women who are, like me, residents of the West, but profoundly marked by our experience in our original culture. Women of the diaspora, a place of separation and displacement, we have chosen to engage with traditional Arab and Islamic art, as part of a renegotiation of

identity. Present too, in these photographs, is a continuous dialogue with Western art, most notably Orientalist painting. The series attempts to register at a place of converging difference: between East and West, absence and presence, nearness and distance, and to renegotiate identities through loss of place and new encounters.

RW: *The staging process and text preparation for the shoots must be extremely time consuming, almost a performance in itself. Do you consider the creation of the set as much part of the finished process as the photographs themselves?*
LE: The preparations for the photo shoot start up to six months in advance, when I commence writing on the fabric that covers the walls, the furniture, and the women's clothing. Much of this writing I do myself, although for Converging Territories, two women helped me inscribe the walls, while I did all the writing on the models and their clothing. For Les Femmes du Maroc, which is set in Boston, all the writing was done by me. It takes more than six months to prepare enough fabric, for once the henna has dried, it flecks off easily, so that some rewriting is required during the shoot, each time the women move.

Creating the photographs is in many ways performative and this process is crucially reflected in the finished work. I use family acquaintances as models, and take great pains to acquaint them fully with the thinking behind the work and their roles in it. I consider them partners in the creation of these photographs. Then, applying henna is a very painstaking process, and cannot be interrupted, so the models are unable to rest, sometimes for as long as nine hours. I do everything I can to make this process easy on them. In fact, I create a whole atmosphere around them. I provide them with food and drink, we play music, and tell stories, and each shoot is preceded by a day of rehearsing so they know exactly what to expect.

So as you can see, my work is very process-oriented. I believe the time I spend making the work is the defining aspect of being an artist. The process of making generates new perceptions and facilitates personal transformation, which in turn may yield new forms of expression. The arc of the entire process, from start to finish, is very liberating.

RW: *The application of henna to both cloth and skin clearly plays a large part in your work. What is the significance of henna and do you do all the application?*
LE: Henna is a crucial element in the life of a Moroccan woman. It is associated with the major milestones in her life and is a part of their celebration. It is first applied at the attainment of puberty to mark the passage into womanhood. When she is a bride, it is thought to enhance her

charms for her husband. And henna is again used to celebrate fertility when she has her first child - especially if her child is male.

RW: *I understand calligraphy is not normally practised by Arab women. When did you learn to use it? And is the calligraphic text which forms part of your diary in these images abstracted at all?*
LE: When I was growing up, calligraphy was not included in the school curriculum, although it could be studied via a private tutor. It has only recently been introduced in Moroccan art schools. I personally have no training in calligraphic art, and approached it as an artist would approach any new artistic medium, attaining skill through practice. I have developed my own method of transcribing my calligraphic text - applying henna via a syringe. The text is written in an abstract, poetic style, so that it acquires a universality reaches beyond cultural borders.

RW: *How autobiographical is your work? And is it difficult to bring other people into it? How important is your relationship with the models?*
LE: My work is highly autobiographical. In it, I speak my thoughts and talk directly about my experiences as a woman and an artist, finding the language with which to speak from those uncertain zones between memory and the present, East and West. The models I use are often women who have had the same relation to the physical spaces I've already described as I've had. But we also work with younger women so that the setting becomes a platform for the creation of new memories and understandings.

My photographs also draw on my own specific experience in order to yield - in me as well as in the viewer - a richer understanding of my culture. Of particular interest to me is what my photographic work has taught me about the importance of architectural space in Islamic culture. As I indicated earlier, traditionally, the presence of men has defined public spaces: streets, meeting places, places of work. Women have been confined to private spaces, that is, to those of the home. And as I also suggested before, these physical thresholds define cultural ones. Confinement in actual spaces can be the result of transgressing metaphorical boundaries, of crossing into prohibited cultural spaces. Many Arab women today may feel the space of confinement primarily as a psychological one, but its origins lie, I think, in the architecture itself. The women in my photographs are both held with an actual space, and at the same time are confined to their "proper place", a place of walls and boundaries, a space controlled by men. These women have become literal odalisques ("odalisque," from the Turkish means belonging to a place). One has only to look at the continuity between the henna on their bodies and the patterns of the surrounding tiles to see how they have become identified with their surroundings.

RW: *Is it correct to see your work as being in any way critical of aspects of Arab culture, and do you hope to bring about any enlightenment for Arab women. Or are such thoughts a possible view by Westerners?*

LE: My work reaches beyond Islamic culture to include the Western fascination, which we see so powerfully in painting, with odalisque, the veil, the harem. It's obvious to anyone who cares to look that images of the harem and odalisque are still pervasive today, and I am using the female body to complicate assumptions and disrupt the Orientalist gaze. I want the viewer to become aware of Orientalism as a projection of the sexual fantasies of Western male artists, in other words, as a voyeuristic tradition, which involves peering into, and distorting private space.

As far as bringing about enlightenment for Arab women goes, I would never lay claim to any aim so grandiose. For one thing, Arab culture is far from monolithic, and so I could hardly see myself as representative of all Arab women. But beyond that, art can only come from an individual artist, one with specific cultural imprints, to be sure, but also a unique take on the world. Any artist trying to speak for her people "in general" can only dilute her art with generalities. My work documents my own experience growing up as an Arab woman within Islamic culture,, seen now from the perspective of an artist living in the West, and maintaining close ties with her original culture. It tells the story of my quest to find my own voice, the unique voice of an artist. I am neither victim nor representative.

I believe I can, however, speak for Arab women in one respect. At least among those I have encountered, Arab women are having trouble with both worlds, Arab and Western. The Orientalist narrative is being projected on them from both directions. They are either weak and in need of rescue or jezebels who need to be brought under control. In my photographs, I try to clear away these projections so that -- here is my hope -they can be seen as the powerful presences in their own right.

In other words, Arab women are as complex and individual as any other people. They are not universally oppressed, subjugated, or depressed. Their identities are as fluid and eluding of stereotypes as anyone's. Which is not to say that there are not difficulties living in an old culture, with entrenched traditions, and hierarchical structures. But these women are possessed of determination and creativity, and (like people everywhere) a rich tradition of humor at life's absurdities. Perhaps by making visible the Orientalist gaze, my work can help us get behind it. Perhaps my work can help Western women discover all that they hold in common with women in Arab cultures, as well as discern, with more accuracy than has been possible in the past, the many differences.

RW: *You are a Moroccan woman who lived for 20 years in Saudi Arabia and now live in the USA. How are these influences reflected in your work and what is the significance of calling this show Crossroads?*

LE: To talk about Saudi Arabia specifically in this interview would only complicate matters.

As an Arab artist, living in the West, I have been granted an extraordinary perspective from which to observe both cultures, and I have also been imprinted by these cultures. In a sense, I feel I inhabit (and perhaps even embody) a 'crossroads," where the cultures come together -- merge, interweave, and sometimes, clash. As an artist, I am inhabiting not only a geo-cultural terrain, but also an imaginative one. This space continues to define itself, to unfold and evolve, and as an artist, I feel it is my job (and my passion) to try and understand it, and to make work that flows from this continuing investigation

RW: *The veil has become something of a western fascination. How do you like the veil to be interpreted through your images?*
LE: I use the veil to evoke the Western fascination, as expressed in painting, with the seemingly inaccessible interior realm, the private space, that is the precinct of women in traditional Arab culture. And my work especially refers to the three aspects of this interiority that figure in the Orientalist tradition - the veil, the odalisque, and the harem.

The veil is of also of interest to me because there is some evidence that Orientalism has played a role in the return of the veil in relatively recent times and also in the controlling attitude of Arab men toward "their" women more generally. When the West portrays Eastern women as sexual victims and Eastern men as depraved, the effect is to emasculate Eastern men, and to challenge the traditional values of honor and family. Arab men then feel the need to be even more protective of Arab women than before, preventing them from being targets of fantasy by veiling them. We'll never know for sure whether the return of the veil and of the rules that accompany it was a response to Orientalism, but it's hard to believe there's no connection. In a sense, what the West did was to erase the boundaries of public and private; in part, the Arab world responded by reinstating those boundaries in a way that would be clear and visible. Within the veil, the Arab woman has a private space.

RW: *A number of your pieces are created as diptyches or triptychs. What is you aim by segmenting some of the images?*

LE: Each series -- Les Femmes du Maroc and Converging Territories -- is conceived of as a book, in which the woman have become pages and chapters. Thus the segmentation of images. Sometimes the segmentation is to emphasize a particular theme, such as the presentation of three stages of a woman's life, and the association of the veil with a woman's coming of age (Converging Territories #21). In another instance (Les Femmes du Maroc # 27), I have used a triptych to elongate the body so as to exaggerate the pose of a reclining figure.

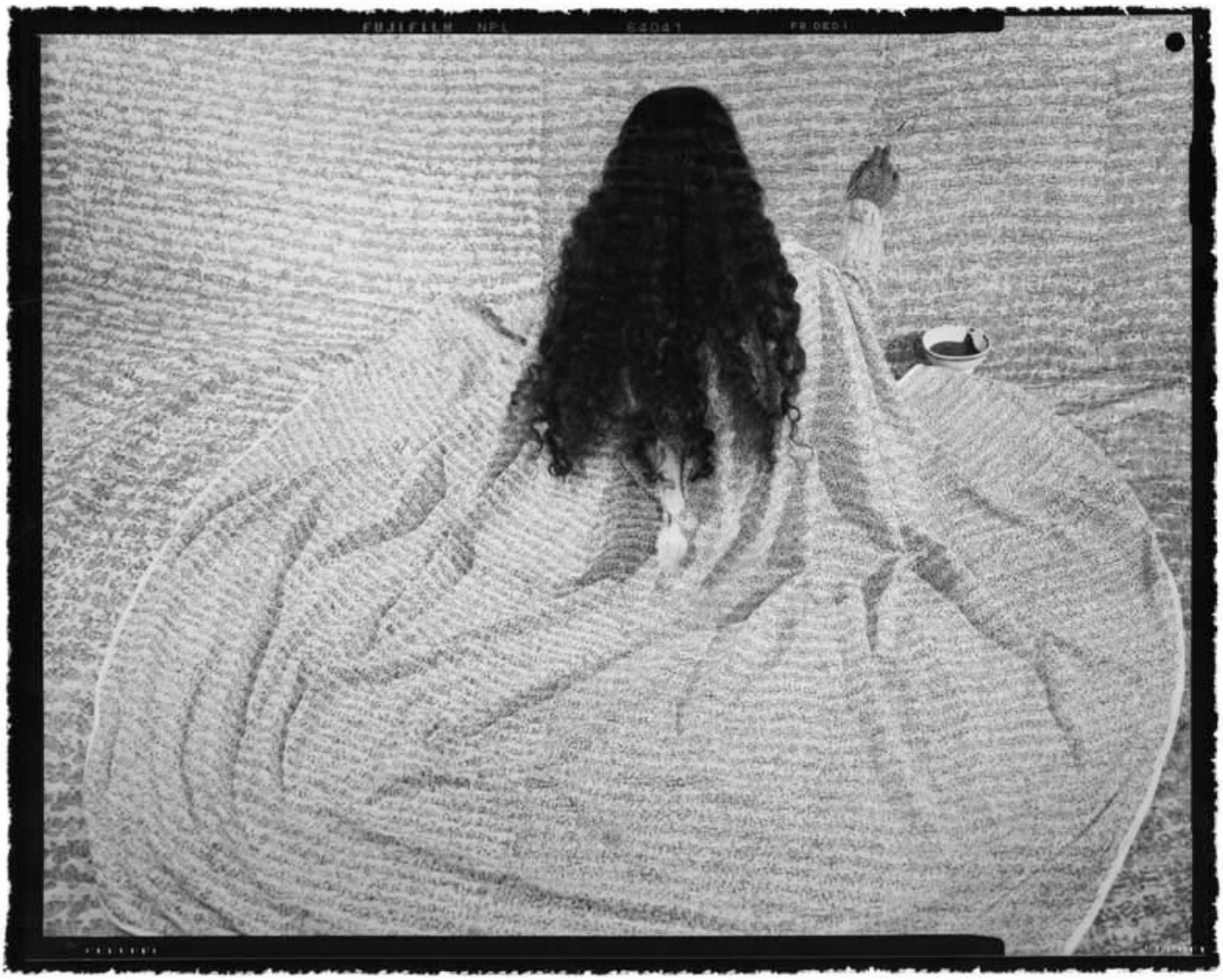
RW: *Are you deliberately re-interpreting Western Orientalist paintings?*
LE: When I look at Orientalist paintings, I am caught between admiring the beauty of the decorative elements, and being appalled at the portrayal of Arabs - women especially, but also men. Women are, as I have said, presented as passive sexual slaves or jezebels, and in either case, usually nude. Arab men are seen as weak, swarthy procurers. I don't want simply to expose such distortions, but also to provoke the viewer into new ways of seeing. I want the projected space of Orientalism to vie with another space, one which shapes a new understanding.

In my photographs, I have removed the nudity that is found in the paintings, and created instead, "real" domestic scenes in which Arab women are engaging the viewer, disrupting the voyeuristic tradition, and dictating how they are to be seen. At the same time, the photographs mimic Orientalist painting in composition, even in terms of the placement of the models within the space. My aim is to disrupt the viewer's programmed response by seeing to cater to, but in fact dislocating, expectations.

I want the viewer to become sensitized to the voyeuristic, sexualized gaze of the Western Orientalist painters, but at the same time be enthralled with the authentic beauty of the culture these artists encountered in North Africa. Everywhere - in architecture, in the decorative surfaces of spaces, on furniture and women's clothing, they found and recorded a world of exquisite beauty quite in contrast with the drab bourgeois world these men left behind them in Europe. It is this beauty I wish to reclaim. But to do so is tricky because such beauty is also dangerous. It is what lures the viewer into accepting the Orientalist fantasies of women as sexual slaves - in harems and in the slave markets. My challenge has been to try to separate the beauty of the cultural surround from that of the women themselves, so seeming passive and receptive, so eerily like the furniture and the welcoming spaces.

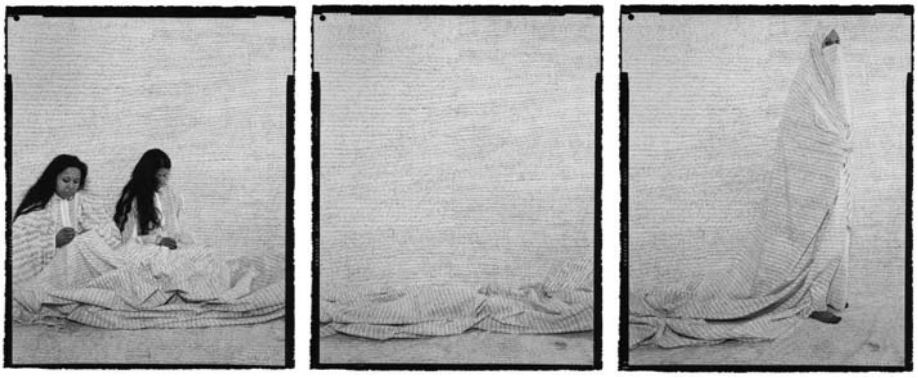
CROSSROADS

Converging Territories No. 43 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm


FUJIFILM NPL 64047 PRO160S

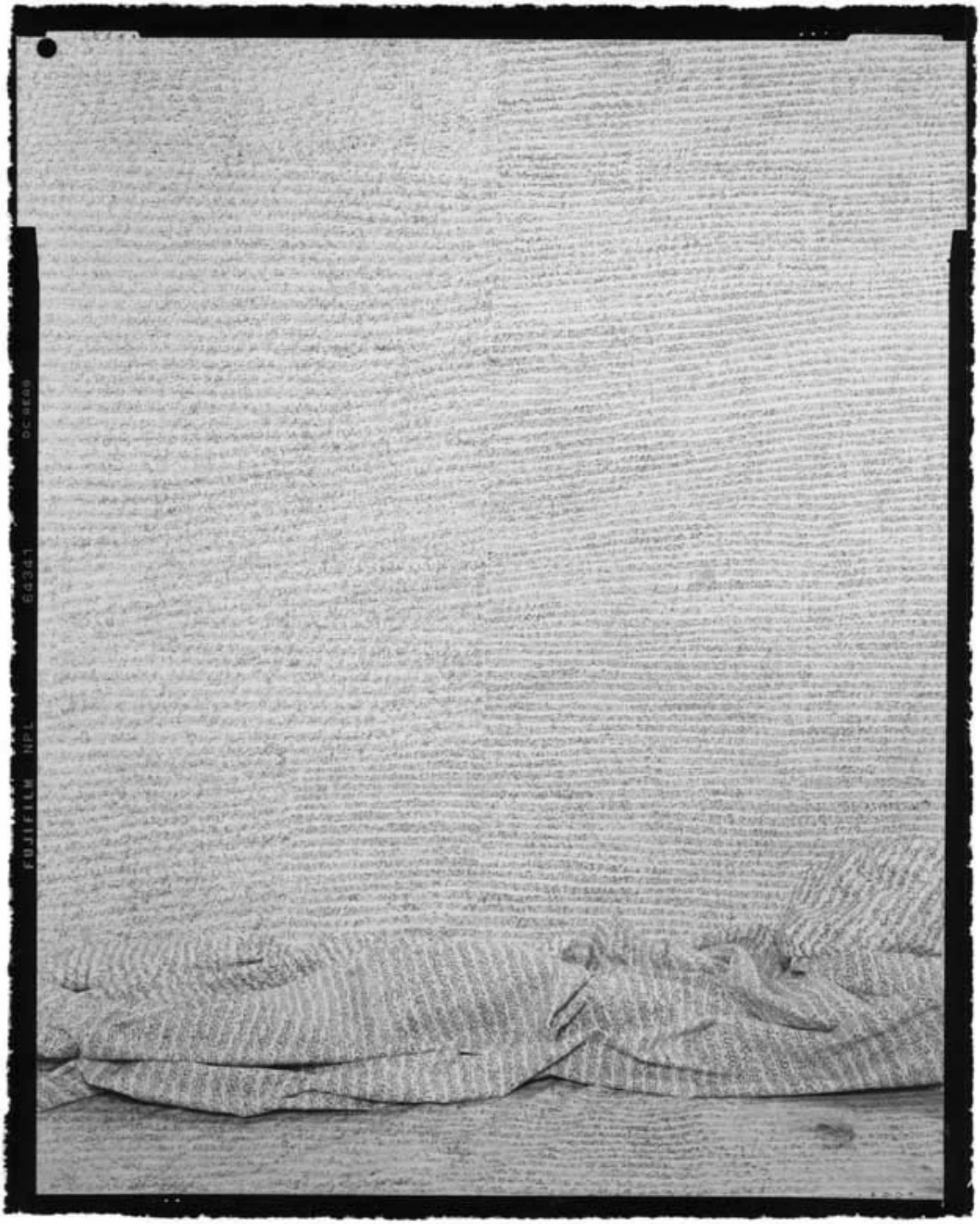
Converging Territories No. 2 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 40 x 30 in / 102 x 76 cm

FUJIFILM NPL 64041 F8 DEDE



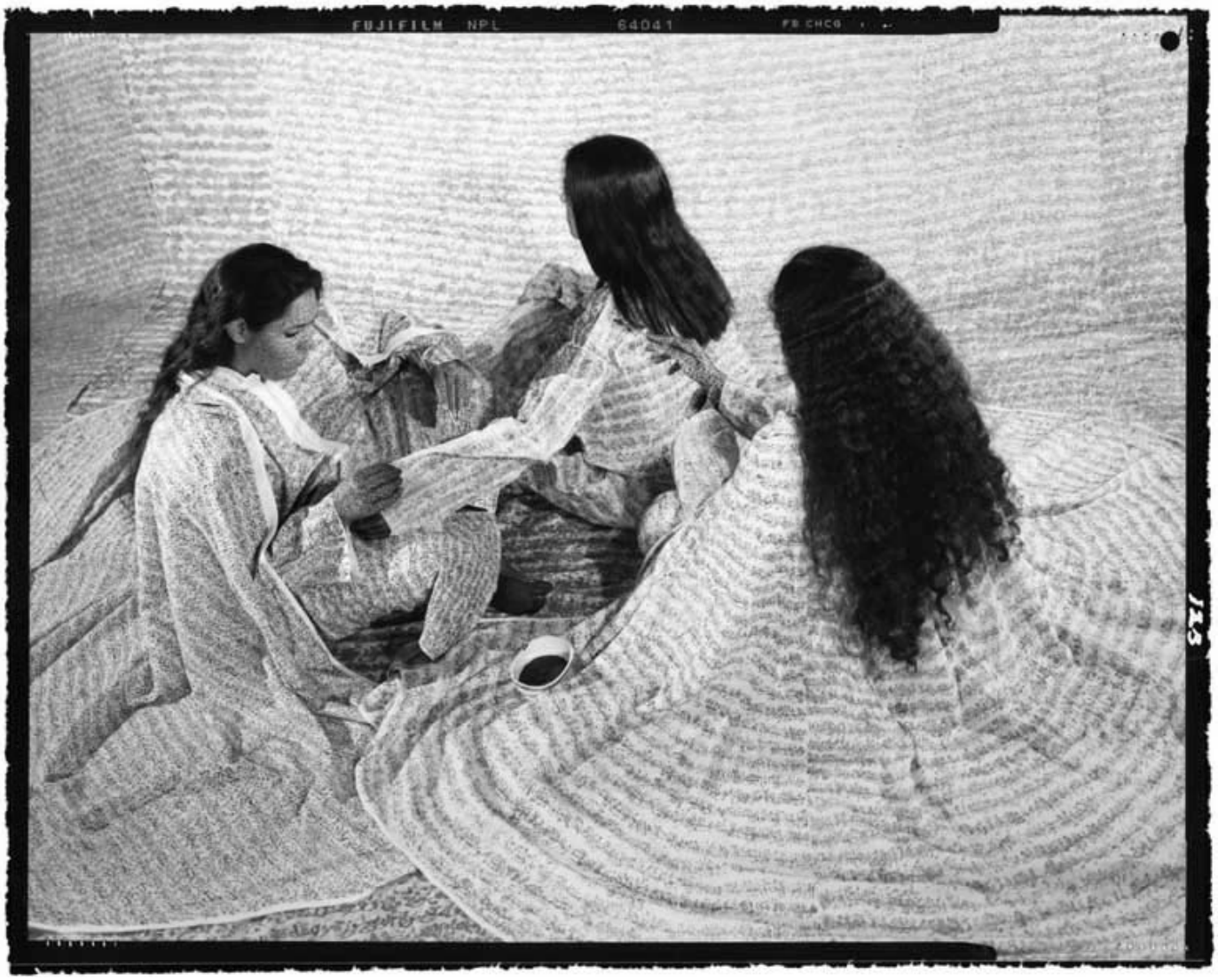
Converging Territories No. 22abc Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Triptych Edition of 15 Each 40 x 30 in / 102 x 76 cm




FUJIFILM NPL 64347 DC 6640


FUJIFILM NPL 64341 DC AEAC

Converging Territories No. 11 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 10 48 x 60 in / 122 x 152.5 cm


FUJIFILM NPL 64041 PB CHCG
123

Converging Territories No. 28 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 10 60 x 48 in / 152.5 x 122 cm


FUJIFILM NPL 64341 DC KEEB

Converging Territories No. 23c Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 10 48 x 60 in / 122 x 152.5 cm



Converging Territories No. 24abcd Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Four part Edition of 15 Each 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm

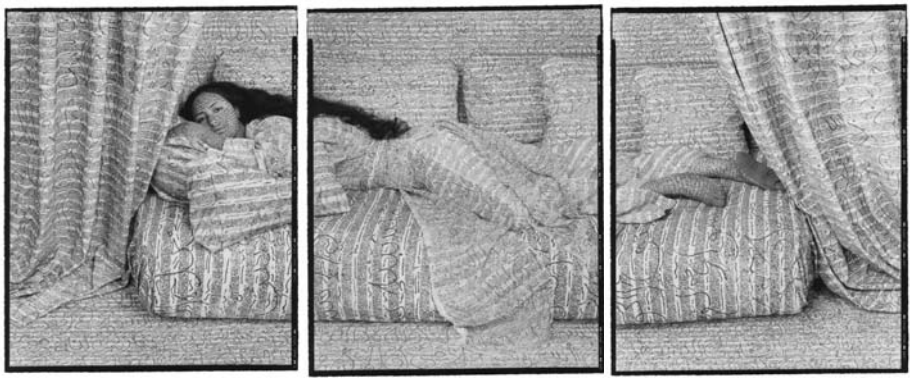


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Edition of 10 48 x 60 in / 122 x 152.5 cm

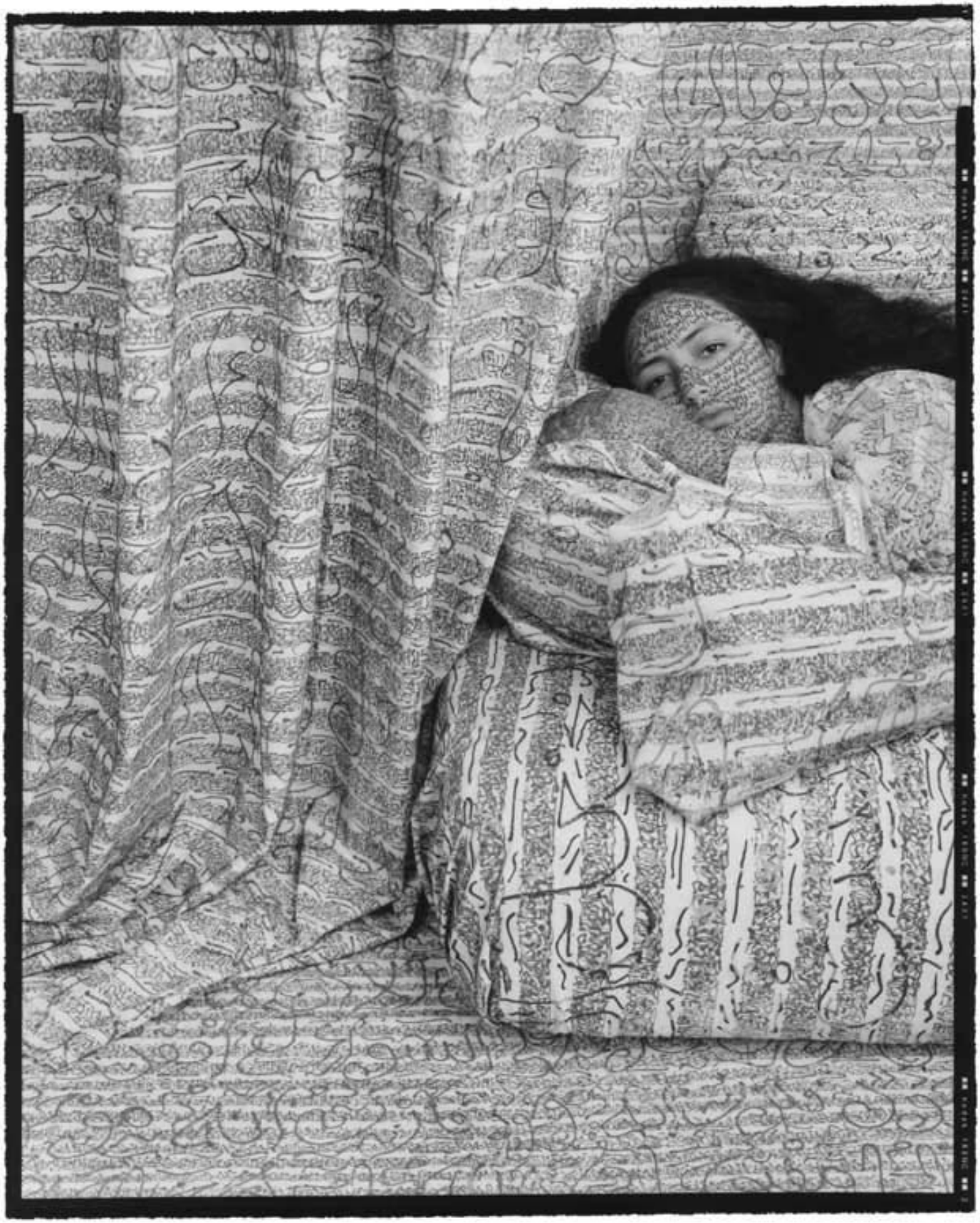

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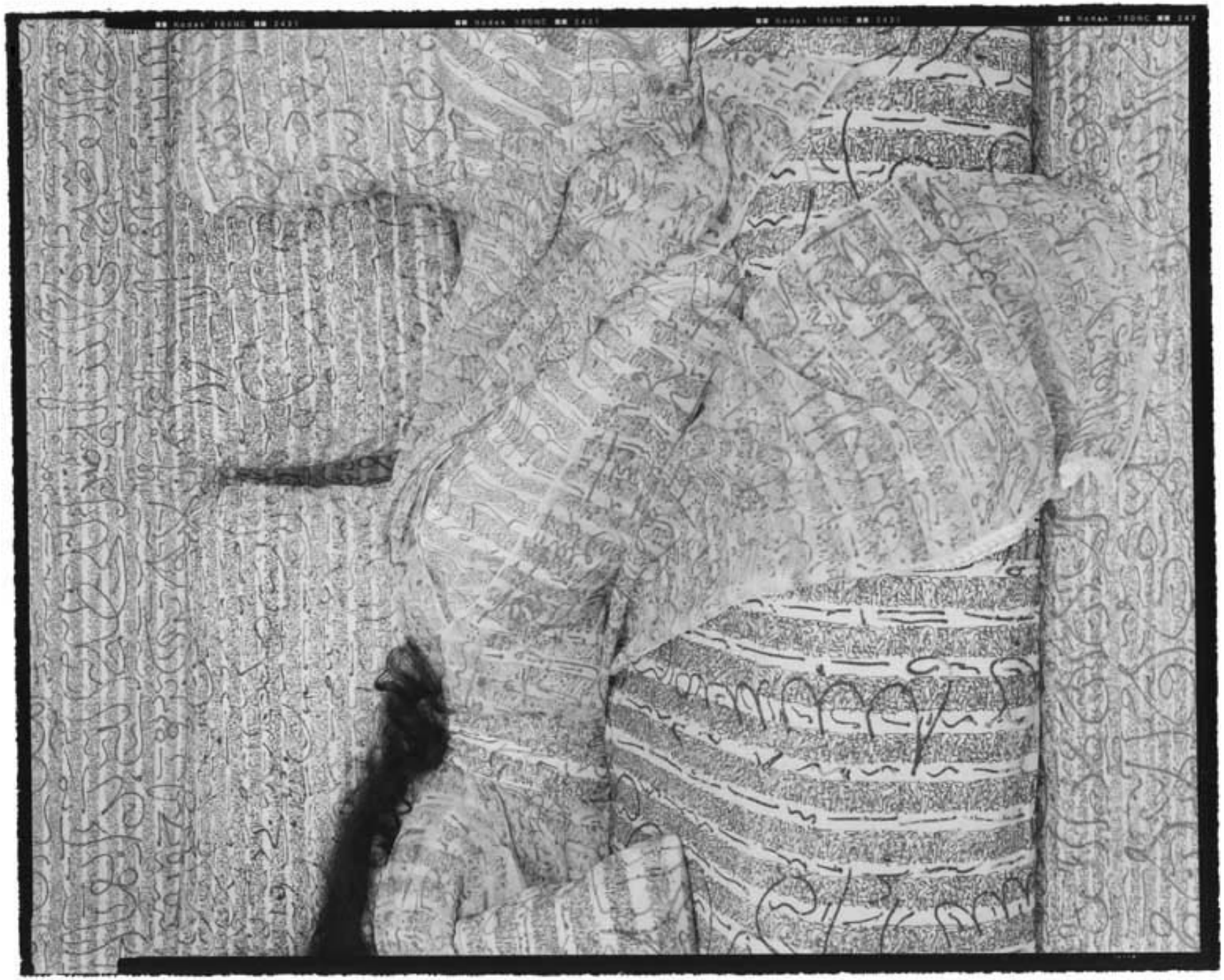
Converging Territories No. 31 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm

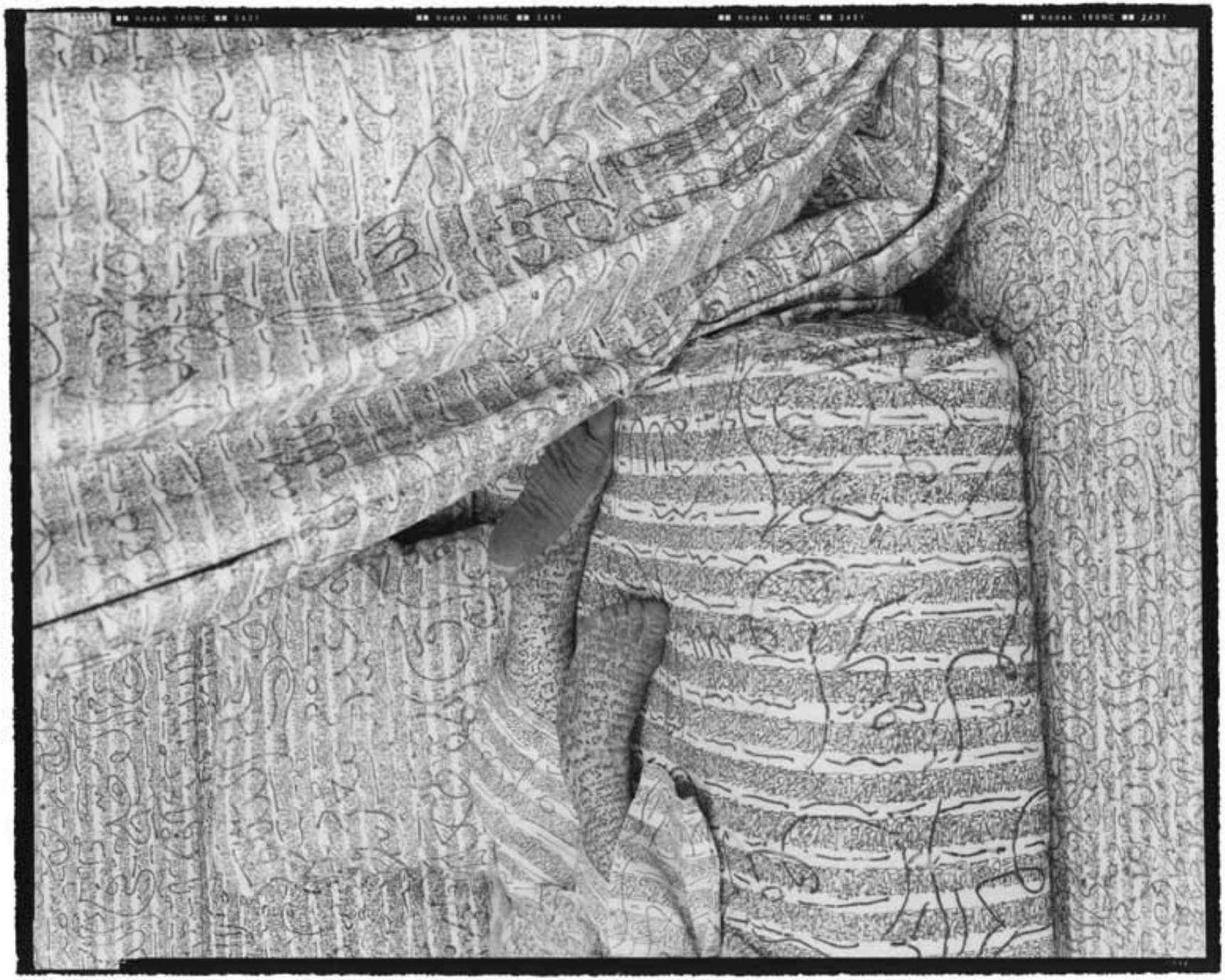

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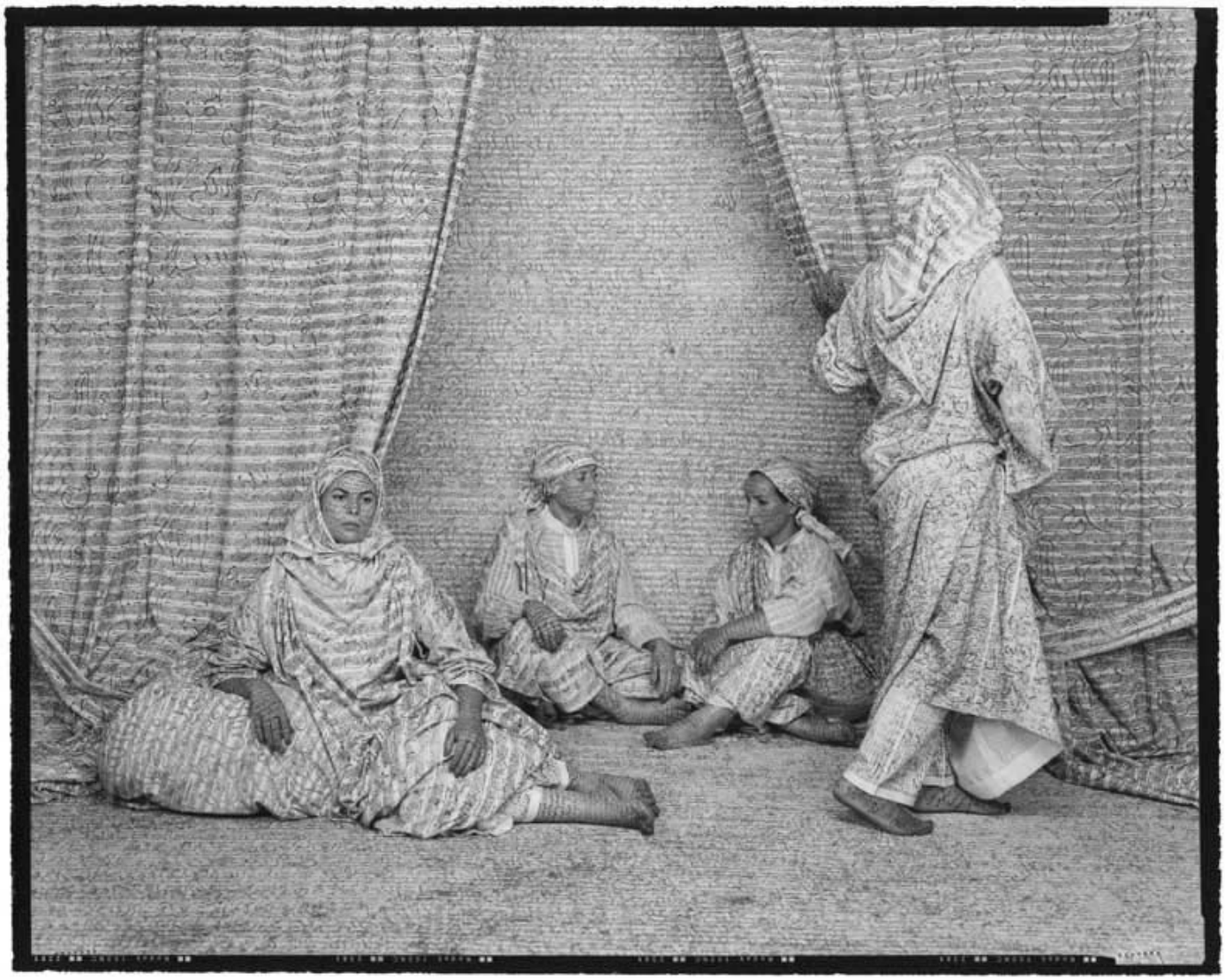
Les Femmes du Maroc No. 27abc Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Triptych Edition of 15 Each 40 x 30 in / 102 x 76 cm





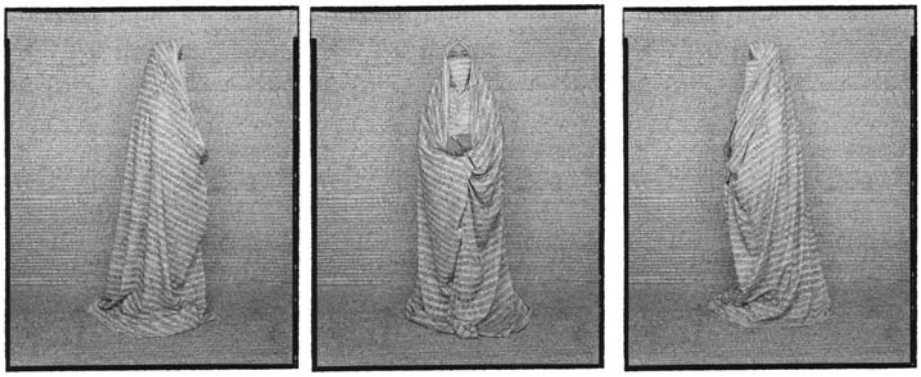


Les Femmes du Maroc No. 1 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm

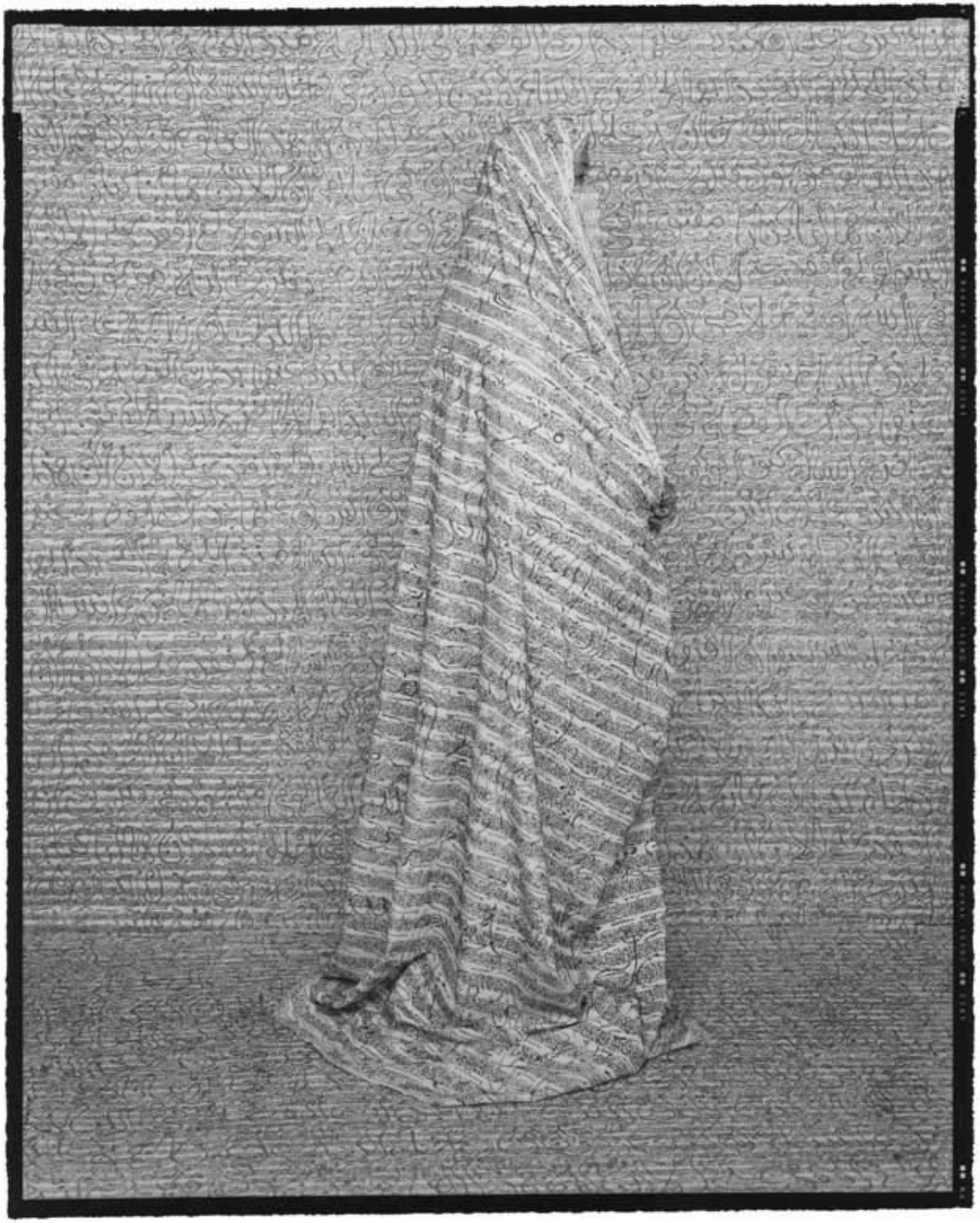


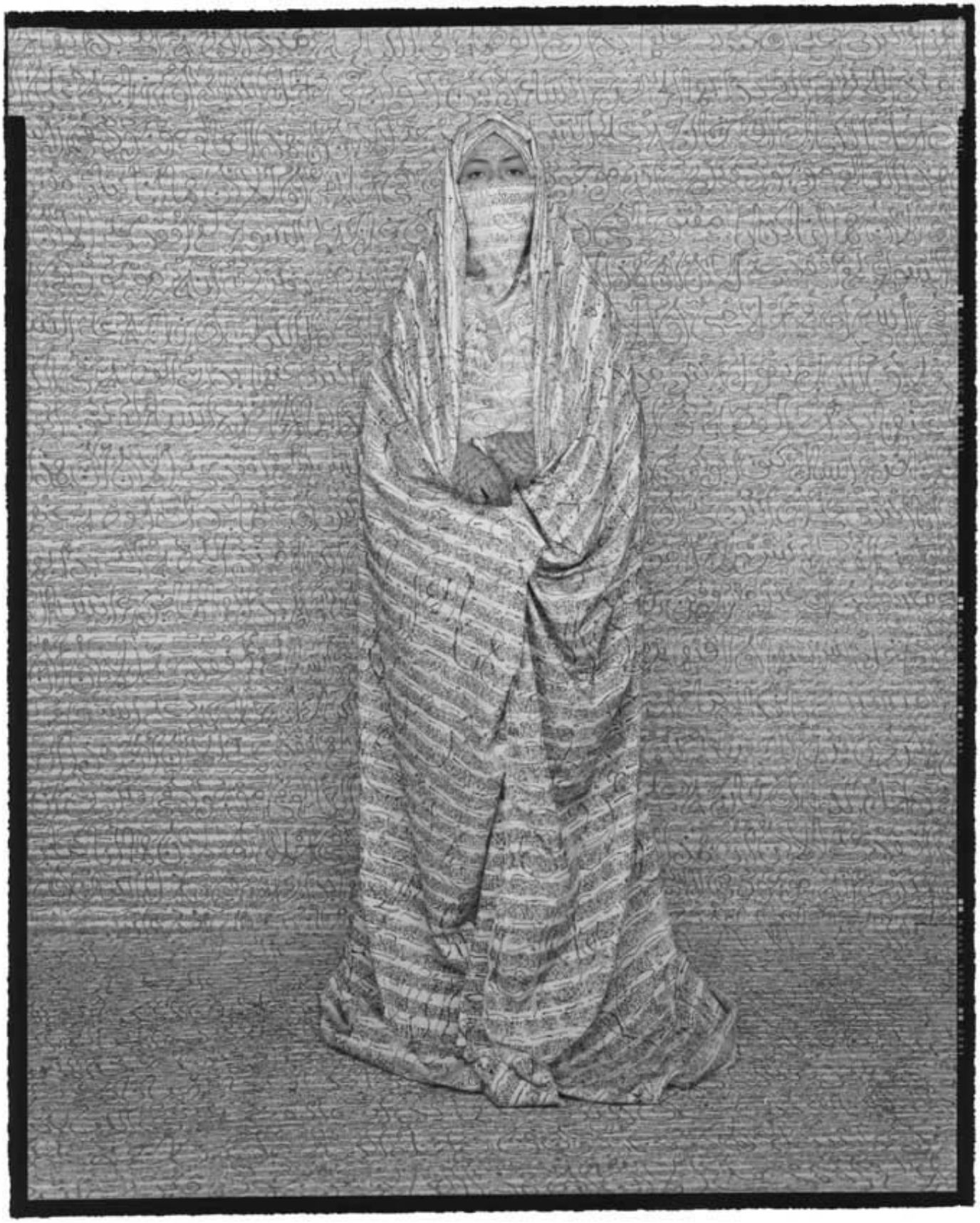
Les Femmes du Maroc No. 52 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm

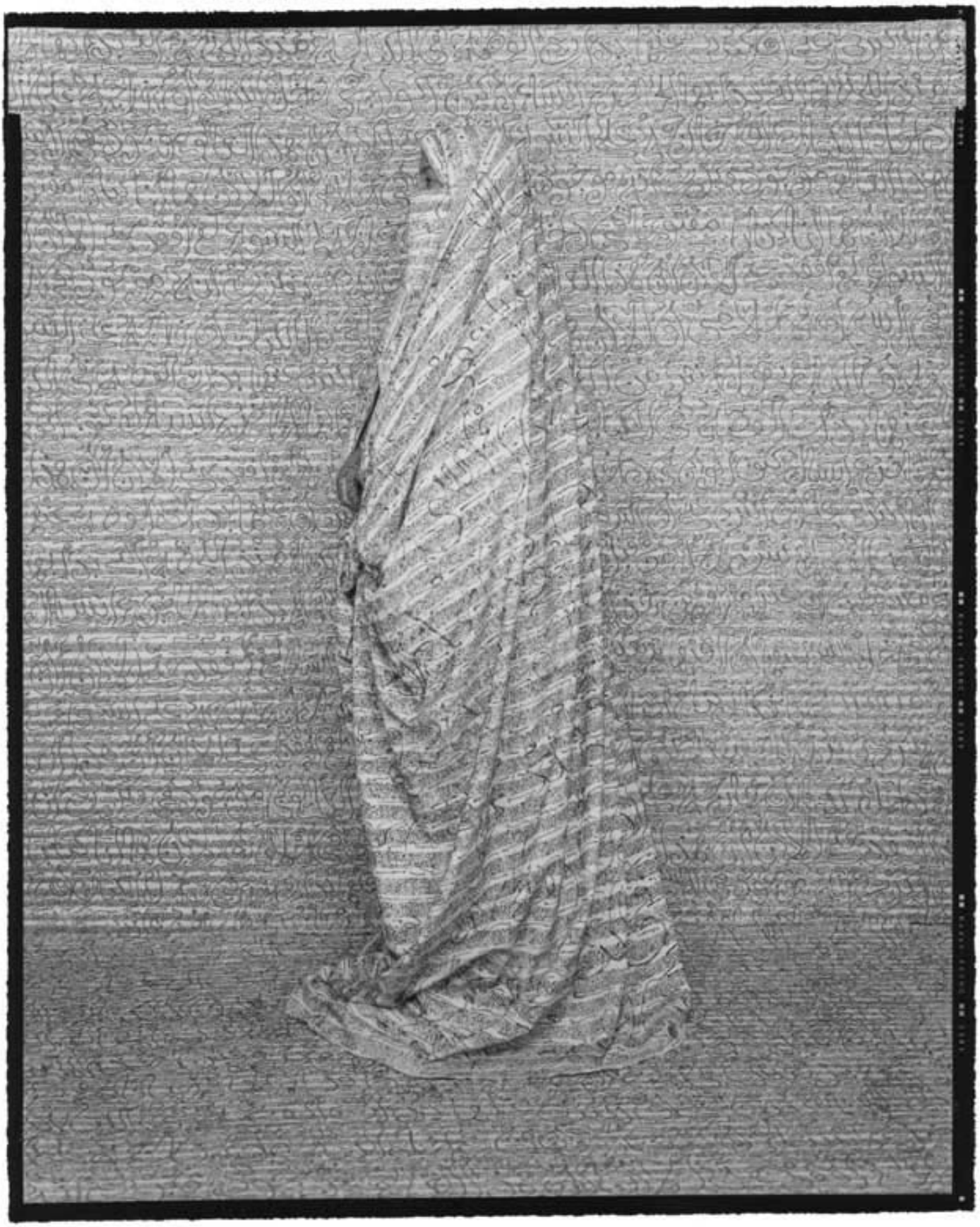




Les Femmes du Maroc No. 22abc Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Triptych Edition of 15 Each 24 x 20 in / 61 x 51 cm



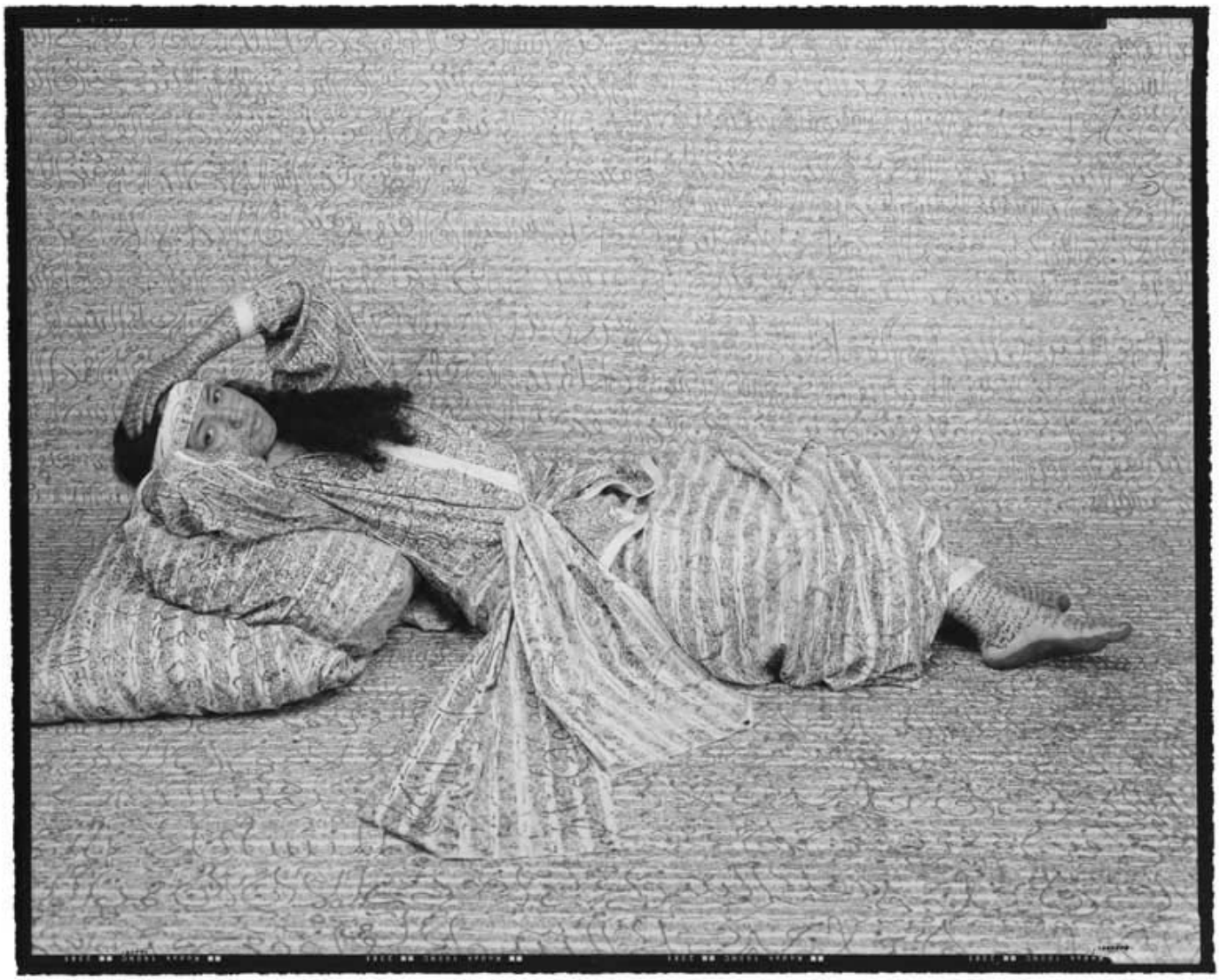




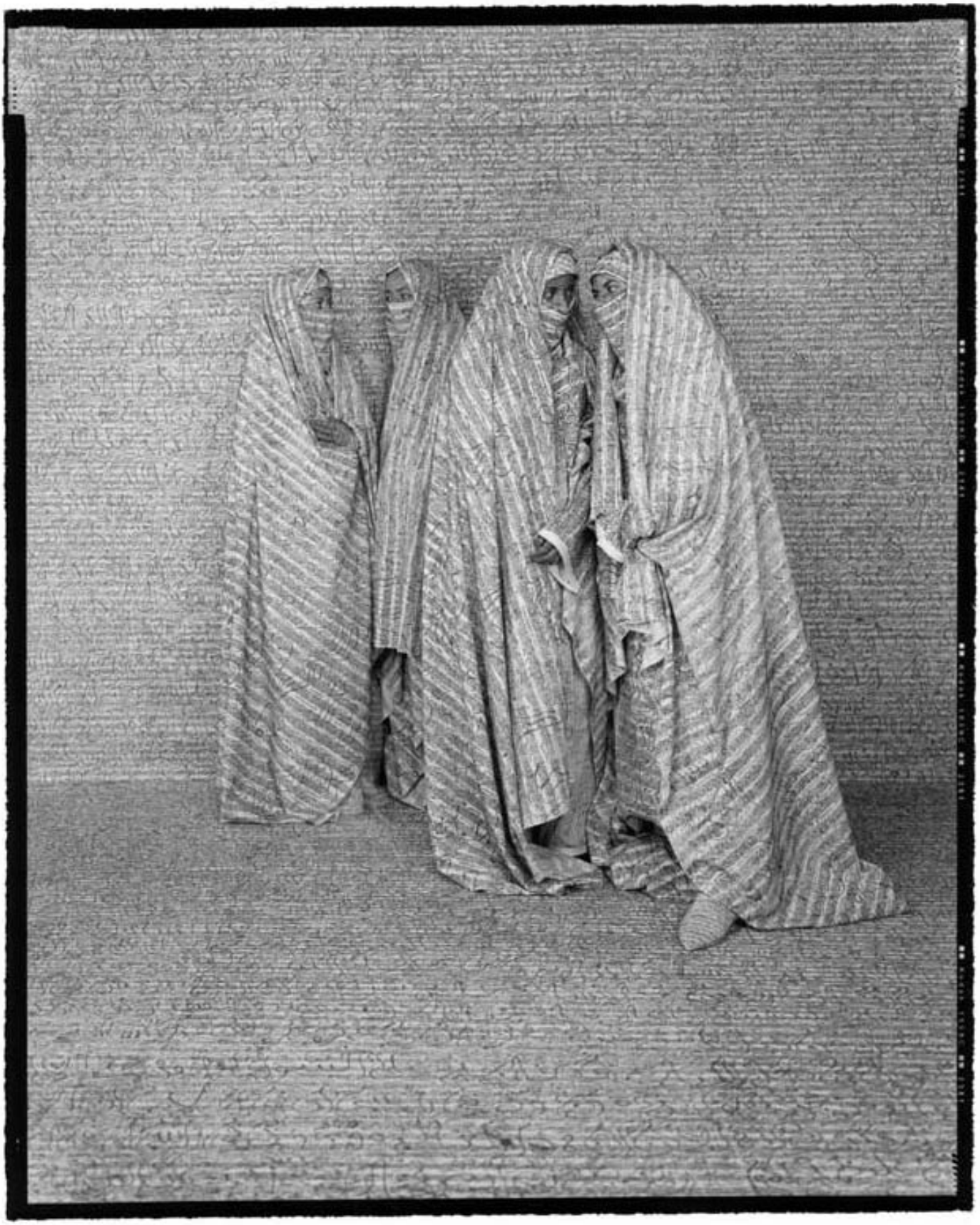
Les Femmes du Maroc No. 10 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 40 x 30 in / 102 x 76 cm



Les Femmes du Maroc No. 16 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 30 x 40 in / 76 x 102 cm



Les Femmes du Maroc No. 7 Chromogenic print mounted on aluminium
Edition of 15 40 x 30 in / 102 x 76 cm



LALLA ESSAYDI

1956 Born in Morocco
1994 Curriculum in Painting and Continuing Education, L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts,Paris, France
1999 Diploma in Photography and Installation, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
1999 B.F.A. Tufts University, Medford, MA
2003 M.F.A. School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Selected Exhibitions

2008 *Far From Home*, North Carolina Museum of Art, in Charlotte
Presumed Innocence: Photographic Perspectives of Children, DeCordova Museum
Les Femmes du Maroc, Anya Tish Gallery, Houston TX (solo)

2007 *Les Femmes du Maroc*, Edwyn Houk Gallery, New York (solo)
Contemporary, Cool and Collected, Mint Museum of Art, in Charlotte, NC
The Silk Road and Beyond: Travel, Trade & Transformation, Chicago Art Institute

2006 *Les Femmes du Maroc*, Schneider Gallery, Chicago, IL
Converging Territories, The New Britain Museum of Art
Converging Territories, Joel Soroka Gallery, Aspen, CO
Transgressions, Williams College Museum, Williamstown, MA
Converging Territories, Jackson Fine Arts, Atlanta, GA
Converging Territories, Lisa Sette Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
NAZAR in Berlin , IFA Gallery

2005 *Converging Territories*, Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, NY
Converging Territories, Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA (solo)
Nazar, show at Houston Photofestival, Houston, TX
The 2005 DeCordova Museum Annual Exhibitions, Lincoln, MA
Rewind/Re-Cast/Review, Photography show, The Ramapo College Art Galleries, Mahwah, NJ
In the Company of Women, Williams College Museum of Art, Willamstown, MA
About Face: Photographic Portraits from the Collection, Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL
8th International Photography Gathering, Le Pont Gallery, Aleppo Syria
Festival, Fries Museum: Through Arab Eyes, Leewarden, Netherlands
The Melting: An Evolution of American Culture, Rockefeller Art Center - Department of Visual Arts and New Media, NY
Nazar - Photographs from the Arab World, Noorderlicht *Photofestival*, Curated by Wim Melis, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands
The Melting: An Evolution of American Culture, Rockefeller Arts Center, State University of New York, Fredonia, NY
Lalla A. Essaydi, Schneider Gallery, Chicago, IL (solo)

2003 *Threshold,* A painting show at Mario Diacono, Ars Libri, Boston, MA (solo)
Converging Territories, Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA (solo)

2002 *The Boit*, Grossman Gallery, The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA (solo)
Invitational Show, Karsh Photography Exhibition, MFA (solo)

2001 *Photography Show,* Schneider Gallery, Chicago, IL (solo)
Annual Juried Painting Exhibition Show, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA (solo)

Collections:
The Williams College Museum of Art; The Chicago Art Institute; The Kodak Museum; The Fries Museum, The Netherlands; The Museum of Fine Arts Houston; The Columbus Museum of Art; The Kresge Art Museum, Michigan; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California; The Colorado Museum of Art, Colorado; The Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis; Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, Virginia

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