

LISA SETTE GALLERY

2005-2006

FALL/VOLUME 8





At first glance, the works of Moroccan photographer Lalla Essaydi seem overrun with text: Arabic calligraphy spills across, around and over nearly every element. The incessant, intricate pattern is both background and foreground, covering the central figures and the swaths of cloth hung behind them equally. Despite this, Essaydi's photographs are quiet rather than

Lalla Essaydi

clamorous, the brown lines of calligraphy slip across serene, sepia-clad, often veiled female figures and backdrops, speaking of a quiet determination. Merging unyielding self-expression with notions of silence and domesticity, Essaydi's work is a complex poetic critique of both Western and Arab notions of femininity.

Painting with henna, Essaydi applies the calligraphy when preparing for her photo shoots. In writing Arabic calligraphy, Essaydi reveals that she is "practicing a sacred Islamic art, usually inaccessible to women." The script is used for poetry and religious writing—texts concerned with meaning in the public sphere—and it is generally taught only to men. On the other hand, painting with henna is traditionally a woman's art; henna is used to decorate women's hands and feet for celebrations of puberty, marriage and motherhood. Essaydi's eloquent subversion of the two mediums examines the perceived division between worldly (or male) and decorative and domestic realms. According to the artist, her intention is that "The two are not so much in opposition as interwoven. The 'veil' of decoration and concealment has not been rejected, but instead has been integrated with the expressive intention of calligraphy."

When they are not portraits of female figures, Essaydi's photographs center on objects representative of female concerns: eggshells, lumps of sugar traditionally given to a new bride, and bouquets of white flowers. The artist, who had no formal training in Arabic calligraphy and

thus, she remarks, "I approached it as a drawing," has even inscribed eggshells and flower petals with roiling, intricate text. When the skin of her female subjects is visible—an exposed face, forehead or hand—calligraphy is applied directly to the skin. When the women are veiled, the veil and the figure's draped garb resembles parchment, less like clothing than great sheaths of calligraphic texts that Essaydi says continually expand as her work progresses and the writing transforms into a diary, words collected in her search for identity. Selected phrases from an English translation of her texts read: *Words written on paper thick enough for me to feel the blood flowing under the skin, under the paper... I am a book that has no ending. Each page I write could be the first.*

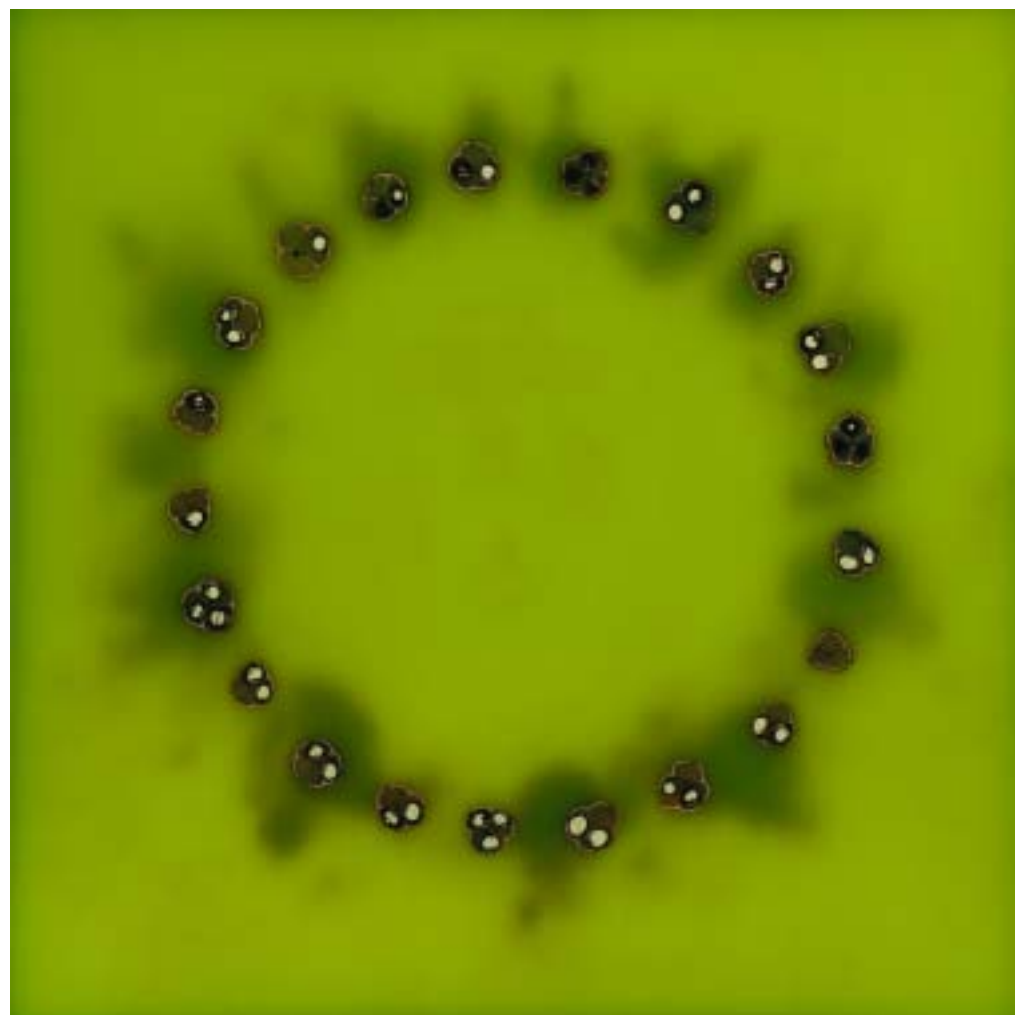
One might be tempted to see the writing in Essaydi's work as dominant, allowing figures to emerge only from within its obsessive girding, yet many of the images include a significant outlet. Calligraphy is startlingly absent on the bottom of a lifted heel, a shock of hair, an expanse of fabric or a flower petal, a hand holding a paintbrush or a pot of henna. Details such as these give the subjects individuality and authority; it is implied that the women themselves have created this sensuous landscape of text, and rather than being camouflaged by words they are generating them endlessly, with dignity and creative poise. Both Eastern and Western notions of Arabic femininity are disturbed as Essaydi undermines the cliché of the silent and selfless veiled woman.

A rejection of preconceived dictates about the artist's identity, and the nature of identity itself, presents a conflict in these photographs. In thousands of tones of sepia, the images are at once formally beautiful and palpably confrontational: the obvious mark of the artist's hand and her models' exact gaze seem to pose a question, perhaps even a challenge, for the viewer. One must acknowledge the purely painterly quality of the works while grappling with their narrative power as photographs.

As equal parts performance, dream and memory, Essaydi's photographs serve to tell a story. An empty family house in Morocco is the setting for her current body of work; as a young girl, when Essaydi acted inappropriately according to the rules of her traditional Islamic family, she was sent to this house as punishment, in a sort of solitary confinement. Having grown up in both Morocco and Saudi Arabia before receiving an art education in the U.S., Essaydi now returns to the site of her childhood confinements and sees the space as delineating both her Arabic background and her current life as an independent Western artist. Along with a network of friends and relatives, and over an extended period of preparation, the artist revisits and reexamines the formation of her identity and the identities of the women around her.

Essaydi's first intention is to write an aesthetic language both domestic and worldly, one that is capable of describing the self without restriction, imposition or punishment. Starting with the specific details of her life, memory, and coming of age as an artist, Essaydi applies this individual vocabulary to a larger project not necessarily beholden to gender or origin. Her more universal inquiry concerns the way that places, words and images come to effect one's perceptions of oneself and the world. Essaydi's abundant fluency in this endeavor is apparent in each of her photographs.





Mayme Kratz
Growing Orbit #5, 2005, Resin, Mexican buckeye seeds, 22" x 22"



Rimma Gerlovina & Valeriy Gerlovin
Laptop, 2005, Ektacolor C-print, 24" x 20"

JULIANNE SWARTZ

“Moving to New York from Phoenix,” says New York-based installation artist Julianne Swartz, “What I missed the most was the open expanse of sky—the light and space of the desert.” Swartz, who grew up in Arizona and received her BFA from the University of Arizona at Tucson, is one of a line of respected artists who have been inspired by the open skyline and intense light of the Arizona desert. Yet rather than basing her work on the particular qualities of the light itself, Swartz has appropriated light, the physical phenomena as well as the abstract concept, as yet another instrument in her toolbox of materials and techniques. PVC tubing, plastic pipes, mirrors, magnets, fans, camera lenses, soap bubbles, nostalgic pop songs, homemade metronomes and periscopes, broom closets and boiler rooms, electrical tape, and the concepts of space and time have all contributed to Swartz’s body of work, a collection of ingenious schemes and captivating mechanisms.

Resembling sophisticated science experiments, Swartz’s sculptures and installations avoid a clinical or computerized appearance in favor of inventiveness with plastic tubing and wire. The works’ straightforward presentation is as much a part of their attraction as is the fact that Swartz’s machines consistently reveal fascinating and unexpected aesthetic information about the world. Camera-Less-Video, for example, a tidy sculpture assembled of a lens, conduit, tubing and wire, projects a glowing, distorted image of the surrounding site; Swartz tells us that the piece is “a sculpture with the mechanics of a camera,” commenting, “I like to think of it as a viewing machine. It looks at what’s there in the site and makes it into something more ambiguous.” Our surroundings seem real to us, yet a simple construction of lens and ambient light can project another version of the world, its dreamlike twin, and cast into ambiguity our beliefs. Both versions are a result of the true functioning of the natural world. What we experience as real, Swartz’s work informs us, is only one of a myriad of possible variations and configurations. Swartz’s astute contraptions extrapolate unexpected and magical effects from the mundane details of the physical world, and suggest to the spectator that even those mundane details are miraculous.

“I am interested in the intersection of the physical and non-physical, and making what is not physical somehow palpable,” says Swartz. What is not physical, in Swartz’s work, is as varied in range as the physical facts of the universe—light, memory, sound, the passing of time and a sense of place are all concepts that Swartz explores, often using a collection of materials that could be purchased from the local hardware store. While Camera-Less-Video presents two distinct perceptions of one site, much of Swartz’s installation work draws attention to the way that museum and gallery-goers navigate a physical space. Small lenses and apertures give one intimate access to a place that would normally be inaccessible or unseen. By creating windows into private spaces, Swartz’s work encourages us to reconsider interior spaces and the connections between ourselves and the structures we live in.



Swartz’s spatial engagement embraces or encircles, in the form of a colored line or winding tubes or an image projection that delineates the area of both the artist’s and the spectator’s investigation. Like a train of thought, we follow as the line that Swartz creates takes us to mysterious parts of the building: corners, closets, and storage rooms are excavated (regardless of the space, Swartz tells us, “There are always nooks and places to explore.”). Often her path leads to a bright reward, the source of a shining projection or the origin of the line; in fact the reward is also in consciously experiencing the move from space to space, threading our observations of a place between public and private. Swartz’s work instills a curiosity about those places we take for granted by utilizing the shape of the spaces themselves, her installations make turns and jogs and openings that serve a purpose both material and lyrical.

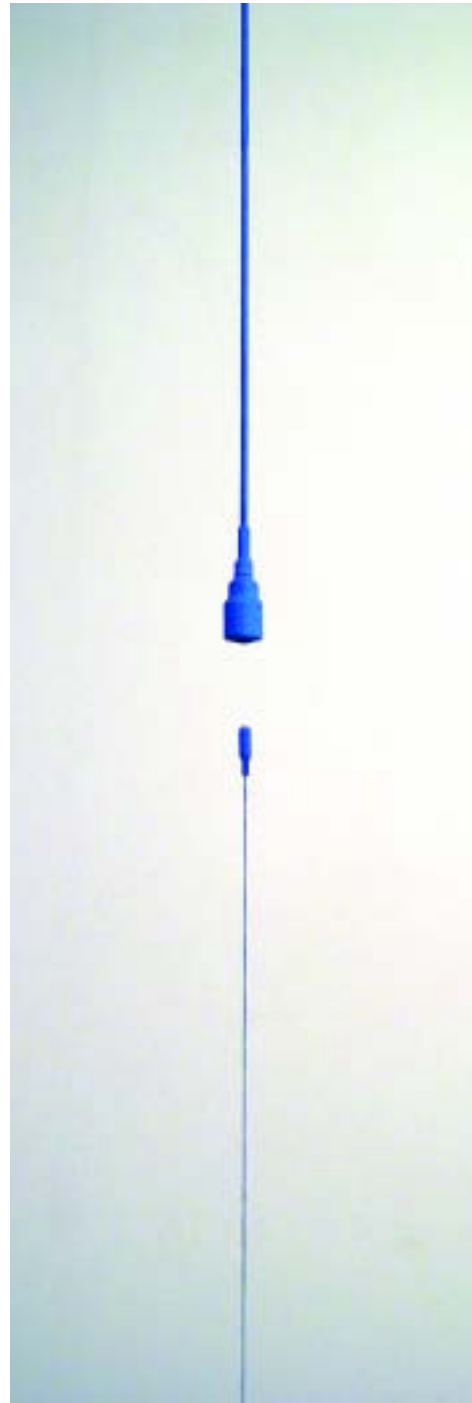
As a conduit between substance and ephemera, light is a particularly powerful metaphor for Swartz. “Light is one of my primary materials because it instills presence without physicality,” the artist has remarked. Light can create special effects—a curious glimmering behind a glass or the projection of images or movement across space—yet it is also one of the primary means by which we perceive the world. In her Spectrum pieces, Swartz examines light

Julianne Swartz
Bubble Portrait, 2005, Cibachrome, 24.75" x 37.25"

Julianne Swartz continued:

as a physical structure anchored in real space. A spectrum is after all a separation of the substance of light into its individual components, and in these works magnetically balanced rainbow-colored wires represent the frequencies of light, as they exist in the atmosphere.

On the other end of the spectrum, Swartz is capable of turning light into a primarily emotional substance. *Somewhere Harmony*, Swartz's piece in the 2004 Whitney Biennial centered in part on that familiar song that merges the mundane world with the fantastic: *Somewhere over the Rainbow*. Recorded loops of everyday people humming or singing this song traversed the museum space via transparent plastic tubes. Spectators could follow these tubes until they found an opening, where they could hear the nostalgic "material" being transported. Such work seems intended to create a working model of the prosaic and yet profound nature of physical senses and transformations, a machine of exploration and memory. Finally, Swartz's recent bubble photographs, part of a larger performance piece, capture a transitory instant in which the sun reflects off the swirling rainbow skin of a soap bubble. These brief sculptures are like madelines, encapsulating every instance of looking up in wonder at a huge blue sky.



Julianne Swartz

Blue Ray (detail), 2005, Magnets, thread, plastic wire, Dimensions variable



Luis Gonzalez Palma

Comienza Entonces A Llover (And then it Starts to Rain), 2004, Film, gold leaf, resin, 35" x 35"

Doug & Mike Starn

Black Pulse #4, MIS inkjet print, albumen, encaustic on gampi paper, 34" x 44"

Julie Heffernan

Focus on only the central figure portion in Julie Heffernan's portraits, and you might miss a tiny but essential part of these epic dioramas. The atmosphere in Heffernan's paintings is alive with images and symbols, and one must pay attention to the details. Things are moving, flitting, flapping, dropping, bursting into flame at the center of each of her tableaux. Yet becoming preoccupied with these activities, one might miss the bright, delicate blossom of a forest flower in the background, or the perfectly rendered but somehow unearthly landscape in which the commotion takes place, or a procession of small animals that observe from a drawing-room floor like awed spectators at a grand jubilee.

Heffernan's painting self-consciously invites our awed inspection—her lovely oily surfaces and stylistic elegance have more than a passing resemblance to gilt-framed museum pieces. Spot-on depictions of 18th century architectural detail and sensuous harvests evoke a familiarity that takes us off guard. But then we realize that we are not standing before still lifes but living portals into a world with more dimensions than our own, and we are dangerously close to falling in.

At the center of each diorama is the artist, the self-professed subject of the painting. She is supremely serene, a figure of calm control with milky skin and a placid gaze; she is both the cipher and the god of these teeming worlds. By the angels and jeweled birds that wheel nearby, it is clear that this naked porcelain deity originates the ornate spectacle around her. It is also apparent from her unwavering gaze that she could make all of it—the cornucopia piled at her feet, the alligators and tiny villages and cascades of flowers—suddenly disappear. While the portrait's subject may be omnipotent, it is not necessarily trustworthy; sometimes the artist shows up as a young boy, a set of Siamese twins, or a heavenly body, and frequently the central figure is replaced by a glittering chandelier or a column of fruits, or a shell-like costume, half-engulfed in flame. In these pieces one has the sense that the subject's human form has been commandeered by the restless symbols around it. To transpose one's own consciousness onto the red-haired, changeable self at the center of these portraits and experience Heffernan's subliminal Rococo tableaux from that vantage point is tempting, but it could be perilous.

Heffernan has said that she employs a technique called “image-streaming” to arrive at these fantastic settings—the scenes come to her at a state near dreaming. One can see the artist at hunt in these supernatural thickets; symbols and myths abound, floating in mid-air without the weight of worldly connection. Ripe fruit, dark woods, birds, flames and marine creatures are teased from their subconscious habitats and then suspended for display in places ruled by an aristocracy of symbols, an aesthetic hierarchy consumed with fertility, romance, sex, and the extravagant ornamentation to be observed in both raw biology and human civilization.

Of course Heffernan's realm is allegorical, a pastiche of our animal instincts and the mores of human society as they endlessly clash and churn. Heffernan's settings, the halls and

grounds of grand country-houses, suggest a life of sheltered opulence and beauty—one half wants to fall into the looking glass and become a shining beetle or cherub, to bask indefinitely in the lush eccentricities of Heffernan's alternate dimension. Her paintings could even be seen as a brazen enticement, promising life as a dream of hunting and rambling and bustles that turn into peacock's tails, and everywhere the fairy tale suggestions of sex and magic. However, if we've learned anything from the fables and allegories that Heffernan channels, it's that the most gorgeous of temptations is also the most treacherous. So perhaps it is safer to stand on this side of Heffernan's portraits and pay attention to the details.



Julie Heffernan
Self-Portrait as a Thing in the Forest, 2003, Oil on canvas, 58" x 66"



Kahn/Selesnick, *Liftoff* (detail), 2005, Archival digital print, 10" x 72"

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE 05/06

2005	
November 3 - 26 Opening November 3, 7 to 9 pm	Kahn / Selesnick
December 1 - 31 Opening December 1, 7 to 9 pm	Lalla Essaydi
2006	
January 5 - 28 Opening January 5, 7 to 9 pm	Julianne Swartz
February 2 - 25 Opening February 2, 7 to 9 pm	Julie Heffernan Gerlovin / Gerlovina
March 2 - April 1 Opening March 2, 7 to 9 pm	20-Year Anniversary Exhibition
April 6 - 29 Opening April 6, 7 to 9 pm	Mayme Kratz

LISA SETTE GALLERY

4142 North Marshall Way
Scottsdale, AZ 85251-3838
telephone 480-990-7342
facsimile 480-970-0825

Gallery Hours:
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Saturday 12 to 5 pm

Closed Thanksgiving,
Christmas and
New Years Day
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