

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Dualities inspire Lebanon images

By Mark Feeney
GLOBE STAFF
NOVEMBER 6, 2009

RANIA MATAR: Ordinary Lives

At: Gallery at Mount Ida College, 777 Dedham St., Newton, through Dec. 13. 617-928-4768, www.mountida.edu/gallery

Dualism, which has informed Rania Matar's life, also defines her work. Born and raised in Lebanon, Matar has long lived in the United States (she studied at the New England School of Photography and the Maine Photographic Workshops). The interplay of East and West is evident throughout the 26 photographs in "Rania Matar: Ordinary Lives," which runs at the Gallery at Mount Ida College through Dec. 13.

Matar took the pictures between 2003 and 2008, in Lebanon - itself an example of dualism, with a population that's Christian as well as Muslim. In her photographs, Matar has a fondness for cultural incongruity: duality as upended expectation. She never gets heavy-handed about it in any given image, but the cumulative effect can get a bit wearying.

In one image, we see a burka-wearing woman listening to an iPod. In another, a veiled woman at Beirut's American University stands in the foreground while two other women sit in the background wearing T-shirts and jeans.

Or there are the four women who sit reading newspapers, three in Islamic garb and one in a designer outfit.

Women and children in the Middle East are the focus of Matar's work. Some of her best pictures are of children. The innocence of the subject in "Girl and Rocket Hole" or "Barbie Girl" is painfully underscored by the rubble surrounding her. Both pictures date from 2006, when Israel invaded Lebanon.

Ten of the photographs show the aftermath of the invasion. Hung as a group, they're further distinguished by being in color (Matar usually shoots in black and white). They're 16 inches-by-24 inches. The rest of the images in the show are 24 inches-by-36 inches. We see personal items - a doll, a wedding album, crockery - found amid the war damage.

There's a deadness to these images beyond the presumed intention of the photographer. That is, we see these personal possessions for the indictment they are of war - think of them as talismans of collateral damage - but they remain visually inert. We see the objects, yes, but fail to sense the persons behind them. And Matar is a photographer whose images work best when populated.

The most important duality in Matar's work has to do with subject rather than approach. She's a realist with a rich po-



"Nun with a Blowing Veil" (above) and "Newspapers" (left) by Rania Matar are on exhibit at Gallery at Mount Ida College.



etic streak. Sometimes that streak isn't evident, which can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the subject matter. It's a bad thing with those color images, for example. But when her poetic side is on display it's invariably a very good thing.

Consider "Juggling." A girl stares intently upward, concentrating on the three balls she has tossed in the air (but which we cannot see). A soccer ball sits on the ground behind her. A man, even farther behind her, stares off in the distance. A Lebanese flag is wrapped around a clothesline. It's fact piled upon fact - and the overall effect is mysterious and beguiling.

Or there is "Looking Out." True, the back of the woman's robe and its sleeves are impressively brocaded; and the pattern on the curtain she holds half open is rich and elegant. Otherwise, though, the image could hardly be simpler: Woman gazes out of window. Yet the overall effect is arresting and magical. Magic and simplicity partner in a way that's at once inexplicable and irresistible.

The duality deepens - and Matar's bona fides as a realist are underscored - when we learn the woman is a war refugee, living with her family in a one-car garage. The greatness of a picture like "Looking Out" is that, drawing us in, it keeps us from looking away.