



Newspapers, Beirut 2007



Posters, Beirut 2005



Courtship by the Sea, Beirut 2005



Broken Mirror, Beirut 2005



Unveiled, Southern Lebanon, 2006

## Veiled references

Photographer Rania Matar's revealing insight

**V**EILS ARE DESIGNED TO CONCEAL—BUT IN THE CASE OF A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER RANIA MATAR, THEY ALSO SERVE TO REVEAL.

Matar, who lives in Brookline, produces photographs that show western viewers that women who choose to wear the veil as part of Muslim observance aren't so different from western women.

Her series of veil photos depict women wearing the veil, often juxtaposed with others in western dress. Matar, who was born in

with telling a story with photographs," said Matar.

She went to photograph it in the aftermath of the civil war; her cousin was filming a documentary about Lebanese refugee camps. "I was shocked they [the camps] were so close to where I grew up," said Matar.

It was then that she became aware of how much wearing the veil had changed since she grew up. "Even inside the camps, women had started to wear the veil. I saw a little girl putting on the veil. She spent an hour putting it on. It was the first time it hit me that it's an item of fashion—like my daughter doing her hair," said Matar.

Her photographs of women wearing the veil show a culture's grey areas. "Living here, I fall into the trap of looking at things in black and white. But there [in Lebanon], there is a very rich background," said Matar. "There are subtleties in each culture."

In Lebanon, she found women who were veiled but trying to move on with their lives and raise children. Matar found not oppression—as many westerners may assume—but college kids studying electrical engineering, and a woman who said she felt liberated by wearing the veil. "She doesn't have to worry about her appearance, and people accept her for who she really is," said Matar. "Women have a lot of pressure to look thin and pretty in the west."

Now, said Matar, the veil is a statement of modesty, fashion and devotion combined, as women are becoming more religious, and turning to Islam to support other countries. "Women

think a lot about the veil; because once you take it off, it's a failure," said Matar.

She hopes to publish a book of her photographs and is currently photographing the practice of wearing the veil among Muslim women in the U.S. "In Lebanon, I photograph veiled women who speak Arabic. Here, there is a huge variety, from North African to Russian, to Americans who converted to Islam, to women from Caribbean nations," said Matar. "There's lots of misunderstanding. It's easy to dehumanize people. But at bottom people are just people." ■



Lebanon, is familiar with that tension between old and new, veiled and revealed. (Growing up in a country with 18 religions, Matar herself is not Muslim and did not wear the veil.)

*Opposites in Beirut, 2007*

She began her architecture studies at the American University of Beirut. When the political climate worsened in 1984, she transferred to Cornell to study architecture.

"When I was pregnant with my fourth child I decided to take photography classes; I went to Lebanon in 2002 and fell in love