

Her space, if not quite her castle

Rania Matar's new book 'A Girl and Her Room' provides insight into young women's mindsets

By India Stoughton
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Over a period of three years, Rania Matar photographed over 300 American and Lebanese teenage girls, each in her most private space – her bedroom. The series of images that resulted provide an insight into the mindset of these young women, suggesting a shared longing to express their individuality.

"The interesting thing for me about the bedroom is that this is the one place where they could completely be who they are," Matar recalls. "One of them actually wrote to me, 'I like to keep my room nice and simple because that's how I wish my life could be.'"

The project began almost by accident in 2009.

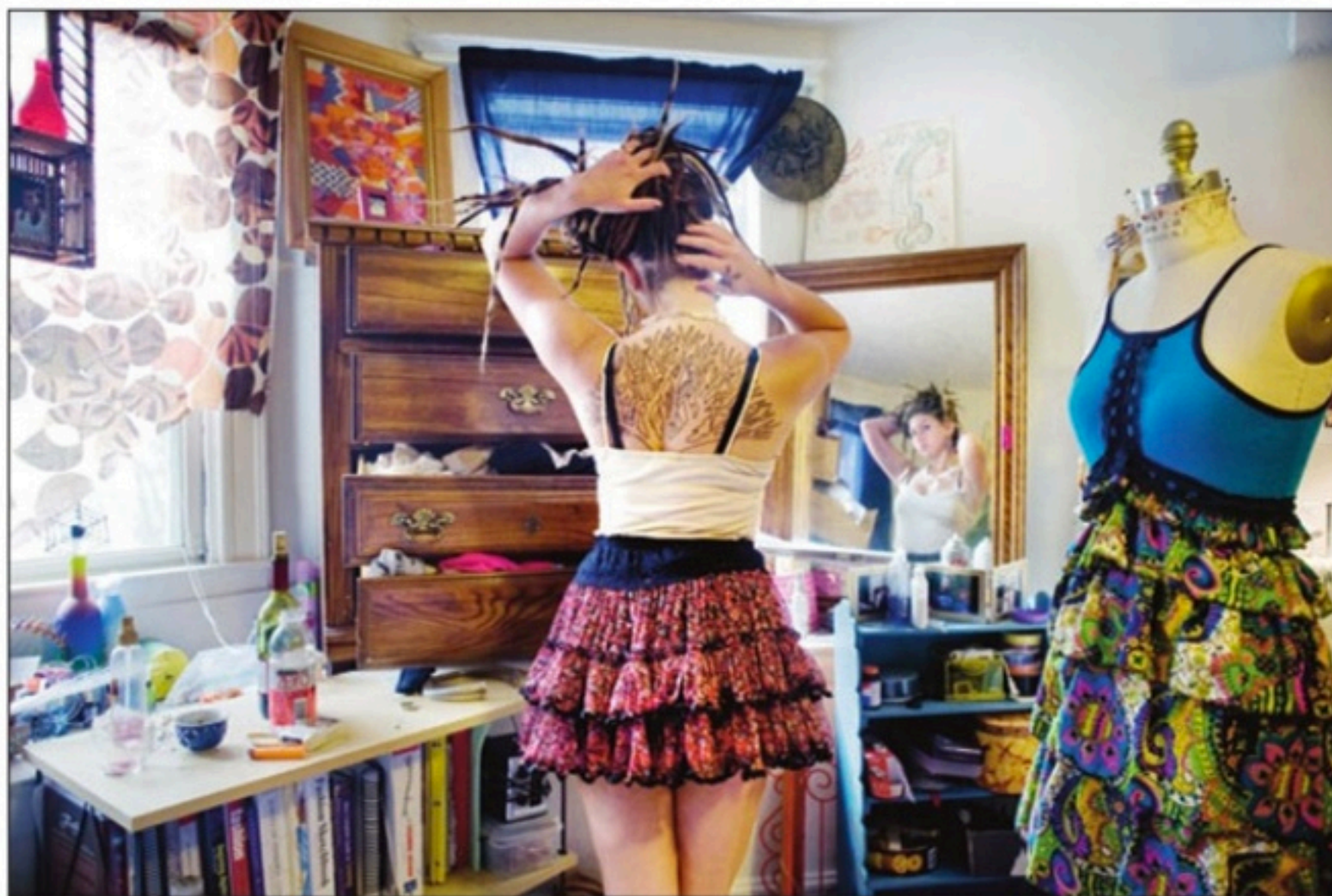
"I have a teenage girl myself and she was 14 at that time," explains the photographer, who has been living in America since 1984. "I started photographing my daughter when her friends would come over, and then realized that they were performing for each other – so I wanted to photograph each girl by herself."

"We did it in their bedroom because this is where they wanted to do it," she continues, "and I realized, 'Oh my God, I've stumbled on something here.'"

"I realized I really loved working with girls I didn't know versus girls I knew before," Matar says. "I went with a completely clean slate and I discovered them without any preconceptions ... It became extremely intimate and collaborative."

Three years on, the photographs have been assembled in Matar's new book "A Girl and Her Room."

Meanwhile her exhibition of the



"Shannon," Boston, U.S. (2010), Rania Matar.

same name is touring the world and recently debuted in Lebanon at Galerie Janine Rubeiz.

The exhibition provided a sample of Matar's work, displaying 14 photographs from among the hundreds published in her book. None of the photographs were labeled, leaving viewers to speculate about the girls' ages, backgrounds and, most interestingly, whether the photographs were taken in America or in Lebanon.

Matar says she wanted to hold on to this ambiguity to prevent the exhibition from becoming a comparison of girls in the two countries.

"A big part of who I am is being Lebanese and Palestinian," she says, "and this project is about identity for me. So I decided to photograph girls in Lebanon and in the refugee camps ...

I'm not doing a documentary about teens around the world."

While some locations are obvious, many are not. "It's not a comparison, because even if some [girls] have more stuff than others, in a lot of them the line is blurred," she says. "Even when I went to refugee camps, the girls felt like teenage girls anywhere – they may have less stuff on the walls, but they have the same kind of attitude."

Unlike the exhibition, the book does reveal the girls' locations. Yet the photos are laid out so as to both mirror and juxtapose one another. The arrangement simultaneously emphasizes the similarities between the teenagers themselves and the differences between their calculatedly individual surroundings.

Particularly striking is the book's cover image, a photograph of Christilla

– a pouty blonde lounging beneath a huge picture of Marilyn Monroe, her bare arms and legs mirroring those of the famous sex bomb.

The girl is surrounded by clothes and possessions – a heap of shoes and sandals, discarded bras, a shelf of DVDs and a widescreen television. The photo was taken in Rabieh, but could easily be a picture of a typical U.S. high school student.

Further on another picture provides a near-total contrast to Christilla's designer-branded room and studied cool.

Dressed in a boyish T-shirt, red hoodie and scrubbed face, Emma Plies reclines on her bedroom floor, almost camouflaged by an assortment of discarded clothes, shoes and belongings strewn wildly across the floor and heaped on shelves.

"I told the girls, 'Wear whatever you want to wear. Do your hair however you want to do your hair and keep your room however you feel it represents you the most,'" says Matar.

"I spent about an hour photographing Emma," she recalls. "I'm walking over clothes. I lost my shoes in there. Things are cracking on the floor, and all of a sudden I'm like, 'Emma – your room is on the floor.' So she lay down and I went up and photographed."

Full-page images – along with the girl's name, location, sometimes a quote about herself, her room or what it means to be a teenager – are interspersed among mosaics of smaller images, not unlike a contact sheet, which provide a sense of the range of women photographed.

"All the girls are interesting but visually, as pieces of art, there are some that stood out," says Matar.

"I actually have every single girl in the book, but not all of them have a full page. I wanted them all to be represented," she adds.

Three additional photographs, not part of the "Girl and Her Room" series, appeared in the recent exhibition, providing a clue as to Matar's next project. Each subject is a young girl, but these girls are closer to childhood than their teenage years, and are not posing in their bedrooms.

The images are part of a new project, says Matar, which will be "about the girl and her body-language, rather than the space. I'm calling it 'L'Enfant Femme' [The Child-Woman]."

In many ways, Matar's photographs are closer to documentary than fine art: Although the images are nicely composed, it's the subject matter, not the aesthetic, that's most compelling.

The photographs provide an interesting insight into the fierce individuality of teenage girls, and may well incite a feeling of nostalgia in female viewers. They might even provide some unusual ideas for interior decor.

Rania Matar's "A Girl and Her Room" (Umbrage Editions, 2012) is available from Beirut's Virgin Megastores.