

Normal lives, extraordinary circumstances

Rania Matar's 'Ordinary Lives' renders the mundane exceptional through their settings

Emily Holman
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BEIRUT: "Ordinary Lives," the new book by Lebanese photographer Rania Matar, is an intelligently titled work. The photos within depict people whose everyday lives have been disrupted by terrible circumstances. The moments she captures are ordinary, though their setting renders the mundane remarkable. The title is a tribute to the bravery of Matar's subjects, whose fortitude – even in the oppressive confines of a decaying refugee camp or in the heart of war – is extraordinary.

The first photograph of the collection, for example, depicts a woman, a girl and a boy. The

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woman sits in a plastic chair, calling out to someone with a glint in her eye. Giggling mischievously, the girl leans on the chair with an ease that implies the woman is a close relative. The boy is absorbed by the task of eating an apple.

In the background is a cavernous wreck of shattered buildings that seem to be collapsing at the exact moment of the snapshot. The street is cluttered with bricks, windows, balconies, shutters.

Like the other photos in this book, this tableau hints at stories that tease and intrigue the reader's imagination. Though the images are all black-and-white, no common theme unifies them, apart from the beauty in which they are rendered.

Another photo shows two intersecting washing lines. Each is lined with pegs but no clothes have been hung out to dry. Above the pegs hangs a large square frame. It too is empty, surrounding the bare expanse



One of Matar's studies of beauty and war.

of a wall pierced by bullet holes.

Sometimes the black-and-white images emphasize the barrenness that seems to govern these people's existence. At others, one thinks of what might have been lost by narrowing the chromatic range.

One photo finds a woman standing at a window, her back to the camera. She is clutching the curtain that she has pulled to one side, as though the vista outside the window makes it neces-

sary for her to hold onto something for support. A sequined sunflower pattern adorns her back, which jars with the fear that dominates the mood of the scene. In such a photo, the vividness of color could, by magnifying the juxtaposition, add dimensions to the piece.

"Ordinary Lives" compiles three of Matar's photo projects and at times the book comes dangerously close to being repetitive. The final photos of the first

project all circle the issue of feminine beauty in the context of war. Girls peer into broken mirrors, and gaze ardently at ads or beautiful clothing. They have their eyebrows waxed and hair brushed. The effect of the study is to detract from the impact of photos that, individually, are strikingly unique.

On the whole, however, compiling photos from three different projects is effective. Comparing the works is intriguing. Matar's second project examines the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf). The impact of the photos is accentuated by their contrast with the more Western-looking photos that preceded them.

The repetition of themes sometimes works rather well.

|| The black and white images highlight the barrenness governing subjects' existence

Having seen 20 photographs dedicated to the *hijab*, for instance, it is instantly noticeable when a woman in *hijab* appears in the midst of another project. The head covering is the binding element in the series, yet the photos leave the spectator to focus upon the woman beneath, rather than the *hijab* itself.

One photograph shows a *muhajiba* woman walk past a row of five enormous posters, each depicting a famous Lebanese face. Their faces are immensely naked in contrast. The effect is to suggest a critique of the practice of wearing *hijab*, even while demanding the tradition be respected.

Interspersed among the photographs are short bits of writing, all of them well-written and informative. Especially challenging are the two poems by Lisa Suhair Majaj.

The *New York Times* journalist Anthony Shadid has also contributed an essay to the book. A commentary upon Matar's images, Shadid seizes upon the opportunity to also reflect upon the nature of journalism itself, in which lives are too easily obliterated and a death necessarily becomes a statistic. He pays tribute to Matar's ability to capture the "ordinary lives" of the people who prove themselves resilient even while facing daily terror and trauma.

Debates rage about war photographers. Susan Sontag once famously opined that war photography is a sickening art that ought to be banned. "Ordinary Lives" is a challenge to such a view. Its photographs are framed with such humanism that, more than (mostly stunning) pieces of art, they are mementos of the subjects they capture.

They are, in any case, well worth scrutiny.

Rania Matar's "Ordinary Lives" can be found in select Beirut bookshops

