



by RANIA MATAR »

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- ▶ **Third Book of Poems from Arab American Poet Looks at Land, Loss**
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Rania Matar

posted March 25, 2010 - 7:43am by admin

Born and raised in Lebanon, Rania Matar moved to the U.S. in 1984. Trained as an architect at AUB and at the American University of Beirut and at Cornell University, she worked as an architect before studying photography at the New England School of Photography, and at the Maine Photographic Workshops in Mexico with Magnum photographer Constantine Manos. She currently works full-time as a photographer, and started teaching photography to teenage girls in refugee camps in Lebanon, with the assistance of non-governmental organizations, and to teenage refugees in Boston with the assistance of Children's Hospital.



Rania Matar

Matar's work focuses mainly on women and girls. Her previous work has focused on the Middle East on women and children, and her projects—which examined the Palestinian refugee camps, the veil and its meanings, the aftermath of war, and the Forgotten Christians: the Christians of the Middle East—intend to give a voice to people who have been forgotten or misunderstood. In Boston, where she lives, she photographs her four children at all stages of their lives, and is currently working on a new body of work "A Girl and her Room," photographing teenage girls from different backgrounds.

Rania Matar's work has been published in photography and art magazines, and exhibited widely in the U.S. and internationally. In 2009 *Ordinary Lives* was exhibited in solo shows at the Institute of Contemporary Arts/Boston, the Mosaic Rooms in London, Gallery Kayafas in Boston, Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Beirut, the Gallery at Mt Ida College Newton, and in group shows at the Southeast Museum of Photography in "Anthology", the Griffin Museum of Photography as one of the "Three Concerned Women", the Spagnuolo Gallery, Georgetown University in Select Contemporary Photography from the Collection of Lucille and Richard Spagnuolo, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia in "Best of Show" exhibit, and at the Danforth Museum of Art in the New England Photographers' Biennial.

Matar's work has won many awards in the past few years, including an artist grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, first prize in New England Photographers Biennial, first prize in Women in Photography International, second prize at Px3 Aftermath, Prix de la Photographie Paris, 3rd prize at the Art of the Lebanese Diaspora in Lebanon and honorable mentions at CENTER Santa Fe, Silver Eye Center for Photography, the Photo Review, Lens Culture International and My Art Space. In 2008 she was selected one of Top 100 Distinguished Women Photographers by Women in Photography, and was a finalist for the prestigious Foster award at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston with an accompanying solo exhibition.

Her images are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Portland Art Museum, Oregon; the De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park; the Danforth Museum of Art; the Kresge Art Museum; the Southeast Museum of Photography; and is part of numerous private collections including Anthony and Beth Terrana's, Lucille and Richard Spagnuolo's, Ed Osowski's, the John Cleary Estate, and the Emir of Kuwait Collection.

Her first book titled *Ordinary Lives* has just been released, published by the Quantuck Lane Press and WW Norton. [Read a review](#) by Mary El-Issa.

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Levantine Cultural Center promotes a greater understanding of the Middle East and North Africa by presenting artistic and educational programs that bridge political and religious divides.

ARTIST STATEMENT

The focus of my photography is the Middle East, on women and children especially. Lebanon in particular is interesting because of its key location as a gate to the Middle East, between the West and the Arab world. I grew up and lived in both Lebanon and the U.S. I am a Lebanese insider who speaks the language, knows the country, and understands its people, but also an outsider who can see Lebanon and its complexities through Western eyes, who can still be intrigued by the dichotomies that are shocking to the Westerner, but unnoticed by the locals.

The images are from four interrelated bodies of work: *The Aftermath of War*, a photographic essay of life in Lebanon after the numerous wars the country has gone through; *The Veil: Modesty, Fashion, Devotion or Statement*, studying the relatively recent spread of the veil and its meanings among Muslim women in Lebanon; *The Forgotten People*, portraying life in the decaying Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon; and a few images from a more recent project *The Forgotten Christians*, portraying a very devout Christian life in the Middle East. I also included a couple of images from this past summer from my trip to Jerusalem and the West Bank.

These images are not meant to represent all facets of Lebanon as a country, or to be political, but they focus on the universality of being human no matter what the circumstances are, of being a mother, a father, a child, or a young woman no matter what background or religion one belongs to. Girls have friends, bond, and giggle behind their black veils; mothers nurse and nurture their children in refugee camps; toddlers bring a smile to their mothers' faces regardless of surrounding circumstances.

Throughout my work in Lebanon, I was welcomed into people's homes and lives, and I was humbled by people's resilience and hospitality. Religion and political affiliations did not matter. In these photos I concentrated on people who did not lose their humanity and dignity despite what they have been and are still going through. I tried to portray them as the beautiful individuals they are, instead of as part of any religious or political group. I concentrated on the spirit with which they continue with the mundane tasks of daily life no matter what their circumstances: their lives that are ordinary in a surrounding and a political climate that are often anything but ordinary.

Rania Matar, Boston 2009



Keywords: Artists Photography Lebanese aftermath of war Artist Beirut Children hijab Lebanon Photography refugees veil

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