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Striking museum exhibits reveal everyday life

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Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar documents everyday Lebanon in 'Ordinary Lives' at the Arab American National Museum. (Rania Matar)

Two shows at the Arab American National Museum cry out for eyes and interest.

The exhibit of black-and-white photographs in "Ordinary Lives" on the museum's lower level are striking, while the paintings and mosaics in "Sacred Scenes: Icons of the Orthodox Church," which features the contemporary work of one of the world's foremost iconographers, are likely to not only impress but amuse.

"Ordinary Lives," which closes Aug. 31, spotlights the work of Lebanese photographer Rania Matar. She divides her time between Boston and Beirut, where most of the impromptu images in this small, dazzling show were shot.

In her artist's statement, Matar rightly assails the western media for all too often presenting a one-dimensional image of the Middle East that's heavy on explosions, chaos and death — particularly with war-ravaged Beirut. Matar, by contrast, says her intent was zero in "on lives that are just ordinary, in a country that is anything but."

The result is a series of images that catch their subjects unaware in private moments, all set against the shattered backdrop of modern Beirut. The juxtaposition can be jarring. Consider, for example, "Barbie Girl Beirut" — a marvelously unposed picture of a happy family, all smiles in front of a bombed-out apartment building.

Matar brings a sly eye to some of the dichotomies typical of the Middle East, as in "Newspapers." Here four women sit side-by-side in identical chairs, each reading a newspaper. Three are wrapped in all-enveloping black burqas, while the fourth — who sticks out like a sore thumb — is dressed in a fashionable woman's suit.

"I focus mainly on the people who did not lose their humanity and dignity despite what they have been and still are going through," Matar writes. "I try to portray them as the beautiful individuals they are." In this, she succeeds brilliantly.