Portfolio

RANIA MATAR

Reel Women

Adam Grundey Dubai

There's a lot for Rania Matar to be happy about right now. The Lebanese-Palestinian photographer — whose work mainly consists of projects that focus on beautifully composed, strikingly intimate portraits of girls and women in a particular period of their lives, (pre-pubescence, teenage years, and motherhood, for example) — launched her first big solo museum show, "In Her Image," at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, in December (it runs until June 17) and on April 12, an exhibition including work from a variety of her projects, "SHE," opens at Galerie Tanit in Beirut. And this week, she discovered her work had earned her a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship. "I'm over the moon," she said.

The museum show, she said, is "a big deal for me."

"It's the first time a curator saw the link in all my work," she told Arab News. "I work on projects. Like, I'll work on teenage girls in their bedrooms (in her project "A Girl and Her Room"). Or I'm working on pre-pubescent girls ("L'Enfant Femme"). Or mothers and daughters ("Unspoken Conversations"). I don't look at the big picture. But the curator who offered me this show literally saw it as a whole — about womanhood and motherhood and all that. And it made me embrace that. Like, 'Oh! Of course… That's what I'm doing.'"

"SHE" is also the title of her newest work — selections from which will be exhibited in Beirut. "We just couldn't come up with a better word to express that it's about womanhood at all ages," she explained.

Matar's work is, she said, "autobiographical on some level" — often based around the various life stages of her daughters, for example. "SHE" was inspired by a period of stress around 18 months ago when Matar began losing her hair (which has now grown back). "It made me realize that (my hair is) so much part of my physicality and identity, and I became fascinated with that," she said.

Apart from the autobiographical connection, another thread runs throughout Matar's work, she noted. "I look for that vulnerability. Not in a way to make the girls or the women look weaker. On the contrary; I think it's empowering on some level, to be able to expose your vulnerability. I think that's present in all my work."

Sara and Samira, Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut, Lebanon, 2018 An image from Matar's latest project, "SHE." TOP

Wafa'a and Samira, Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut Lebanon, 2016 An image from Matar's "Unspoken Conversations" project, which featured mothers and daughters together. RIGHT

Brigitte and Huguette **Ghazir, Lebanon, 2014** (ABOVE)
This was emotional. Huguette Caland, the mother, is one of the most famous artists in the Middle East. As you can see, she's getting older. She was no longer painting when I went to take that picture, but she's wearing the smock she wore when she painted. The daughter was very protective of her. I started crying. And when I started crying, they both started crying. So I put my camera down. And the mother, who had seemed distant until then, said, 'You're an artist. Emotions are important. Don't stop.' So she gave me permission to make that photo, which added such a meaning to it, for me. Most of the other stuff is about women more my age with girls who are the ages of my daughters. Here, it's the daughter who's my age, with the mother who's older. And the role of who's the caretaker has shifted.

Wafaa and Sanaa **Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut, Lebanon, 2017** (ABOVE)
We're flooded with pictures of veils. I'm so sick and tired of it. I want to demystify the Middle East a bit. When I first started photographing in the Middle East, it was after September 11 and I wanted to start telling a different story from the narrative we were bombarded with in the US by the mass media. I grew up in the Middle East; my parents were Palestinians and I was born and raised in Lebanon. What I was hearing on the radio was not what I experienced, even though I grew up during a war. I felt like the mass media often narrowed people to one dimension. Like, 'Women in the Middle East are veiled, oppressed…' And that was not what I knew. I never felt segregated in the Middle East because I was a woman. And it became important to me to portray that. I always tell people, even if I'm showing pictures of veiled women, it's not about the fact they're wearing a veil; it's about their identity and they just happen to be wearing a veil. This is a family I've been photographing over the years in the refugee camps. I adore them. They're twin sisters. They were originally facing me, in that pose. At one point, one of them was facing the other way, standing. And I went home and I couldn't get that shot out of my head. And I realized the better shot was of them not facing me, because of the textures of the headscarves. So I had to go back and ask them for that, which I usually don't do, but this time, I had to.