

Photographer gets in the face of refugee problem

Rania Matar documents life in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon in the series 'A Forgotten Population'

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: The most painful problem twisting in the gut of Lebanon's political body may very well be the one that is most often ignored. Beyond corruption, feudalism, sectarianism, and regional strife, the question of what is to become of the country's 360,000 Palestinian refugees remains so difficult to answer, so difficult to even address, precisely because it is so inextricably bound to all of Lebanon's other issues. That question is, of course, not one but many, and all of them messy.

Will the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon ever earn their right of return? Will they ever be naturalized and incorporated into Lebanese society? Will they ever be given the passports to travel, the permits to work, or the basic rights to live with dignity? If the refugee camps, which were established by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, are to continue as is, will they ever develop semi-permanent dwellings or traversable road networks? Will it ever be the Lebanese Army, as opposed to a heated network of militias and political factions, who will police them and provide for the security and well-being of their inhabitants?

Few politicians dare to raise such questions in a country that hasn't risked taking a census since 1932 for fear of upsetting the fiction of proportional sectarian stability by knowing the actual demographic landscape of its citizenry. And while the Palestinian refugee problem is perpetually put off the political agenda, one generation after another is born and raised in squalid refugee camps, technically temporary since 1948, that are well-stocked with guns, tempers, and resentments, yet denied the services, products, and provisions to build a basic infrastructure.

Politicians may deem the Palestinian refugee problem too sensitive to touch. But for 41-year-old photographer Rania Matar, it is too important to ignore. Born in Ras Beirut and based today in Boston, Matar has been taking pictures in Sabra, Shatilla, Rashadiya, Ain al-Helweh, Bourj al-Shemali, and others for the past three years. Her photographs capture, with steeping intimacy, the lives that are being led in the camps, day to day, by the young, old, and everywhere in between.

Matar is not an activist. Nor is she part of a humanitarian house party (to use a term once coined by a writer based in Kosovo to describe the flood of young people who came to the Balkans in the late 1990s to work for NGOs and who, unable to actually do anything, ended up forming a kind of



geopolitical conga line of fun-loving, ineffectual war tourists). Her project is more cultural than political. Perhaps for that reason, she took an organized tour of a refugee camp only once (in Syria).

"It was awful," she says, in an accent remarkably close to that of actress and Spike Lee favorite Rosie Perez. "We were on this huge bus. So like 20 people get off and all of them lift up their cameras. I mean, I felt like we were going to the zoo with everybody taking pictures." Matar gained more meaningful entrance to the camps by going in with a guide who had grown up there. Then she hooked up with a number of people who are there working with NGOs, and she found that negotiating the interior of the camps with them was particularly helpful.

"This was a much better way for me to get access because I felt I was able to go to families that they helped," she says. "And, ironically, walking in the camps with a woman, it was much easier for me to photograph. It made all the difference. Automatically, I was accepted."

In her work, Matar deliberately straddles the line between fine art photography and documentary. Her photographs of Palestinian refugees, titled "A Forgotten Population," do not avoid but rather purposely engage such problems as the commodification of suffering and the aestheticization of tragedy - "the way certain modish photographers proceed in order to make human misery an object of consumption," from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer."

Those problems have dovetailed into contentious art world debates over the use of documentary images for years, even decades (Susan Sontag's "Regarding the Pain of Others" and David Levi Strauss's "Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics" are just two among many book-length critiques). Matar gets beneath them by delving deeper into her subject.

"At first I had a hard time taking pictures," she says. "It takes a long time to get past the fact that this is so sad, to be objective about it, and say, 'Okay, this is sad and I want to document it."

"It was very emotional for me at first, but I think every year the photos are more intimate, less posed. In the beginning, I'd be walking with someone who would call out, 'Come, come, come, she wants to take your picture,' and all the sudden I had a bunch of kids posing for me and making the victory sign. And I guess I felt I had to take those pictures. But now," she says, slipping into a sassier stance, "I don't have a problem saying, 'Look, you know what? That's nice but I think I know what I want to do.'

"I try to have people not looking at the camera, people not knowing I'm there, and I wait long enough sometimes for people to forget I'm there. The earlier pictures were not really getting life in the camps. They were just getting a bunch of kids posing."

Matar studied architecture at the American University of Beirut and then transferred in 1984, to Cornell University where she earned her degree.

"I worked in a firm for seven years and I'm registered and all that," she says. "And then, well, I had twins, so I started working from home. Now I have four kids, and by the time I got to my fourth, I wasn't able to do it. I worked with my husband and he really grew more than I was able to keep up with because of the kids. The projects were not interesting for me anymore. I was doing bathrooms and kitchens for people. I mean, it wasn't very rewarding."

Matar enrolled in night classes at the New England School of Photography in Boston and started learning the technical aspects of black-and-white photography and darkroom printing. She and her family return to Lebanon at least once a year. Her father is originally from Jaffa, which didn't mean much to her until she lived in Boston, returned to Beirut, and realized how close the camps are to her parents' house. After going to Sabra and Shatila, she decided she wanted to pursue

documentary photography. "It was all a little backward in that way," she jokes. This summer, she studied with Magnum photographer Constantine Manos in Mexico.

Matar has taken artfully composed nudes and has a full body of work about her children, called "The Magic World of Kids." She has just started on another project about Lebanon, for which she is trying to capture the country's extremes, again straddling a tricky divide between contradiction and cliché.

"Eventually, I'd like to do a book. Actually, I'd like to do two," she says, laughing. But for now, she is focused on the Palestinian refugee project, which would be the first of those two books.

When Matar comes to Lebanon with her family of six, they bring three bags for themselves, nine bags of old clothes to give to the people she photographs in the camps. And now when she prints her work - a long editing process of making contact sheets, work prints, and final selections, no small feat considering she typically takes five to seven rolls of film a day - she always brings the pictures back to give to her subjects. She has lately started writing down their stories as well.

"What I'm finding," she says, "is that literally everybody has a son, a husband, somebody who's died. So they really want to tell their story. I think they'd much rather I take their story down as I'm photographing them than just photograph them and move along."

Matar struggles with the idea of selling her work - on the one hand, it would feel like financial gain on the suffering of her subjects; on the other, it would allow her to cover her expenses and continue with the project. But she has lately warmed to the idea of showing her work.

"I realized, you know what? The reason I'm doing this is to show it and bring awareness and get the work out there."

Matar's images work in large part because they are piercing. Her architectural training has given her a sharp eye for texture and light - literally, for the strange building stock of the camps themselves and more metaphorically, for the sinewy structures of domestic life established among people through their gestures. Matar's photographs get beyond the shock of destitution, beyond sympathy, beyond a palliative pat on the back for a bourgeois viewer.

In one picture, a young man leans over an elderly woman with his hip thrust out in attitude. She smiles at him, tucking a sly cigarette behind her back. Between them is at least a generation. Yet one can see in the frame the spark of the vivacious woman she may have once been and the faint hints of the strong-willed man he may become. They are linked by a thread of familiarity that most photographers would miss.

"I'm becoming more numb, and I think that's why I'm able to do it," says Matar. "I met a guy who was an editor at Life magazine at one point, and he said something to me that kind of stuck. He said to me, 'If you want to help these people, it's your god-given right to get in their face and take their picture.' I try to keep reminding myself of that." She looks away for a split second. "It's not always easy."

For more information of Rania Matar's photography, check out www.raniamatar.com. In mid-September her work will be on view in a group show at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut.