

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25, 2012

Interviews: Rania Matar on A Girl and Her Room



A Girl and Her Room

For the past few years, we've been proud to exhibit Rania Matar's *A Girl and Her Room* series on the Photographer's Showcase and are now thrilled to be carrying the book of this series published by Umbrage Editions. In *A Girl and Her Room*, Matar focuses her lens on teenage girls and their relationships to their bedrooms, spaces they control, spaces that are often an extension of their burgeoning identities. Photographing girls from the United States and Lebanon, Matar's images are a sympathetic depiction, showing

both the confidence of the young women and but also the turbulence and uncertainty of the age. Matar approaches her subjects with kindness and a genuine interest in the lives of the girls she photographs. Whether shooting in affluent homes or refugee camps, a cluttered or spare room, Matar photographs the girls with a consistency of vision, working with them to create a photograph that looks to capture the real girl underneath the trappings and confusion of the age.

Rania Matar was kind enough to answer a few questions about this series and tell us about the designing of her new book.



from A Girl and Her Room

photo-eye: You started this series by photographing the friends of your teenage daughters, and then the teenage daughters of your friends. How did the series develop to focus on the girls in the context of their bedrooms?

Rania Matar: I had always focused on women and girls in my work previously and when my first book was about to be published, my daughter was 14 and I was ready to start photographing closer to home. I became fascinated with my daughter and how she was transforming before my eyes. I decided to photograph her and her friends. I started photographing them in a group situation when her friends came over, when they were getting ready to go out, etc. and I quickly realized that I didn't even recognize my own daughter and that those girls were all performing in front of each other and acting according to what they perceived as being "cool." I decided to photograph each girl by herself and originally asked a couple of girls to choose where they would like to be photographed. After a couple of them chose the bedroom, I realized I had a project. It was one of those YES moments. As soon as the girl was in her own surrounding, I could almost see the "real" person. She was amongst her stuff, in her comfort zone; she could just be herself and she just fit in there, as if the room was an extension of her and she was an extension of her room. I quickly realized that I was on to something interesting and fun and the project kept expanding. Every single room and every single young woman was unique and as such every single photography experience was too, for me as the photographer.

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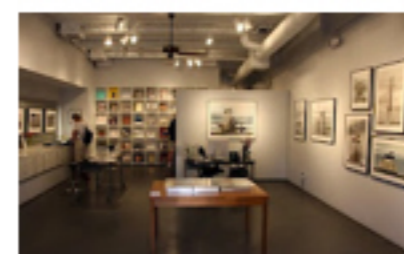


photo-eye Blog features write-ups, reviews and interviews on art photography books and photographers, as well as the latest photo-eye news.



from *A Girl and Her Room*

PE: How did the girls react to your request to photograph them in their bedrooms? They all seem at ease, but I imagine that it could potentially be an awkward situation for them. What did you do to make sure the photograph felt like a good representation of them as an individual?



Matar's model Christilla standing next to a print of her photograph, holding a copy of Matar's book

RM: Most of the girls I approached understood the project and were excited to be part of it. This work could have been what it is, if they didn't so gracefully and willingly cooperate with me. They let me in their most intimate and private place, opened their doors to me and let me photograph them. They trusted me and exposed themselves to me and as such to the viewers of this book and this work. I truly hope that I gave each one of those young women justice by representing them as truthfully as I could. I owed them that. I wanted to represent them without any judgment and allow them to be themselves. I think they felt that and as such allowed

themselves to let go and be part of the process. I spend a long time with each one of them so she was comfortable with me and so I could learn to really see the person and her space, and their relationship to each other. The photography session was collaborative and intimate as a result.

I started this work with young women I knew either as daughters of my friends or friends of my daughter but I quickly moved in a different direction, choosing to photograph girls I had no prior relationship to. I felt that it was freeing for me and for the young woman when the relationship was that of a model and a photographer, with no prior expectation and preconception from either us. It was like starting with a clean slate and it was up to me discover the young woman and up to her to open up. The relationship of a girl to her mother is often complicated and I felt that it was important here that I was perceived as the photographer and not the mother.

However, I am a mother and this is why I wanted to represent the girls as truthfully as I could and with all the respect they deserved. My daughter was one of those girls! In some way, they taught me to be much more tolerant as a mother to my own teens at home.



from *A Girl and Her Room*

PE: Based on the essays in the book as well as my personal reaction to this series, these images seem to bring out memories of adolescence in adult women. Is this a common response? Do you get similar reactions for men or have you found that they view the series differently?

RM: This has been a pretty common response among adult women; it's true. It did this to me as well in some strange way, which is why I decided to include girls from Lebanon as well. I ended up including the 2 cultures that saw me as a teenage girl and a young twenty year old. This is how this work became personal to me. When I photograph the girls, almost in all instances, I forget that I am not one of them, as if I am instantly thrown back in time. Then I pass a mirror and it is a call back to reality for me.

It seems that most women relate to this work, either because they were or still are teenagers themselves or because they have daughters, but it definitely seems to strike a chord. I didn't quite anticipate this but in some ways, I find this reaction touching and it validates this work for me. I was very moved by both essays in the book and am so grateful that both Anne Tucker and Susan Minot opened up in that manner and wrote such a personal almost unguarded essays. If my work brought this up and stirred those feelings in them, then I am extremely humbled and gratified at the same time.

I found that men look at this work somewhat differently. I think many feel that it is a little voyeuristic and many make comments such as "boys don't have the same relationship to their rooms" or "a man could not have taken those images." I think both comments are valid and probably true. For the most part, I found that men were fascinated by the images, the girls and their spaces but there seems to be a simultaneous guarded mixture of discomfort, awe and curiosity toward the images.



from *A Girl and Her Room*

PE: I'm interested in how the book came together. Some of the image pairings are striking -- particularly when a photograph of a well-off American teen is shown next to a girl living in a refugee camp. There are a number of interesting elements including the sequencing, the text from some of the girls and the several pages of collaged images. Did you collaborate with a book designer?

RM: I worked very closely with my book designer, Unha Kim. It was a wonderful collaboration and I felt that she understood the work and the direction I wanted the book to take quite well. I used to be an architect myself before becoming a photographer and design is very important to me. It was important to me to team up with a designer whom I would work with well, and Nan Richardson, my publisher found the great person for me to work with. I wanted the book to be a beautiful art book, but also to be fun, to be a book about teenagers but also a book for teenagers. The design had to express all of those elements for me. I felt that the subject of the book itself almost demanded that it have an aspect of fun to it, a sense of freedom from rigidity and structure.



Rania Matar

Pairing was important. I wanted to include the photos from both cultures but without them reading like a comparison or without a specific and obvious rhythm. The pairing and the sequencing were more visual than anything. The text from the girls was important to include in some instances but not all, so we included the quotes that were most special and unique. We decided to make them small and light to make sure text didn't compete with the imagery.

Lastly, I wanted to make sure every girl in the book was included. We originally started with a contact sheet idea and then Unha developed it to this real fun collage that is reminiscent of the walls in some of the bedrooms. Putting those images together like a puzzle and keeping track of all the girls was probably one of the most complicated parts of the design.

The whole design process was really teamwork at its best and I am grateful to Unha for being on the same page as me and to Nan for finding me the right person!

Purchase a signed copy of *A Girl and Her Room* [here](#)
See Rania Matar's work on the Photographer's Showcase [here](#)

POSTED BY SARAH BRADLEY AT 11:51 AM

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