

THURSDAY, MAY 10, 2012

photo-eye Book Reviews: A Girl and Her Room



*A Girl and Her Room*. By Rania Matar.  
Published by Umbrage, 2012.



**A Girl and Her Room**

Reviewed by Karen Jenkins

**A Girl and Her Room**

Photographs by Rania Matar. Essays by Susan Minot and Anne Tucker  
Umbrage, 2012. Hardcover. 140 pp., color illustrations throughout, 9x12".

I like Rania Matar's new monograph *A Girl and Her Room* more and more each time I move through this bright series of portraits of teenage girls, at home in their most private and personalized spaces. The initial pull of these often chaotic images of girls and their stuff yields to a nuanced look at that space

between child and adult, innocence and self-awareness. This series began close to home for Matar, who has photographed her own daughters from childhood to adolescence. Her observation of their shifting projections of self when in the company of other girls led her to start photographing their friends as well – other girls in their rooms. As this deeply personal project evolved, Matar's interest turned back to her own childhood in Lebanon and she began to also photograph teenage girls in the Middle East. There is no brash politicizing here; rather the images of the teens in Beirut and the West Bank are tied to their Western counterparts in a mash-up of cultural markings, from the hijab to Hannah Montana. They also foreground how a girl's room evolves over time – for the teens living in refugee camps those few treasured mementos of girlhood stand in higher relief against the backdrop of a borrowed space, devoid of the layers of a childhood spent somewhere else.



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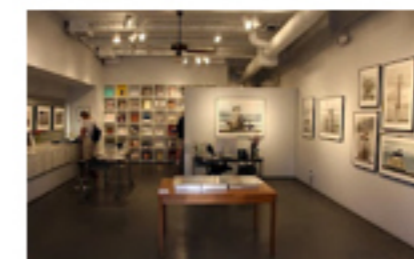


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Essays by the novelist Susan Minot and curator Anne Tucker each describe the power of Matar's photographs to pull the adult woman back to her own adolescence, in a somewhat wistful journey of vivid detail. In these images I see a familiar echo of my own evolving curation of walls and shelves – layers of magazine pages, photographs and scribbled notes mounted in a daily projection of my best or most idealized self. Minot and Tucker also acknowledge the fundamental power of Matar's entry into these rooms that typically command adults to "keep out." The photographs are of course telling of how Matar saw these girls in their rooms, but how did they see her, this woman they let in...Flattering stranger? A (not their) mother figure? Role model? Or perhaps as part of that vast, nondescript group of "adults," Matar is able to exploit a certain invisibility that lends to these images a powerful sense of transparency and lack of overt mediation.



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A few lines paired with each image give the girls' first names and home towns, but not ages; such figures seem far too concrete in the face of as all that Matar's photographs convey of the flux and uncertainty of this time. Yet most images are also paired with startlingly articulate statements on what it broadly is to be a teen, and specifically how it is to be Dima or Jess. Some statements point to the past, as if the girl's teenage years were far enough behind to afford her insight and nostalgia, however much of the photograph may say otherwise. I am not a mother, and do not know many teenagers, but did happen to find myself in a sea of them at a late night carnival while reviewing this book. And I am certain that Matar's insightful and generous depictions of the teenage girl's particular blend of bravado and vulnerability, enthusiasms and ennui colored my warm view of those I encountered and reminded me once again of the power of photography to shape my world view, even when I least expect it.—KAREN JENKINS

Read the photo-eye Blog interview with Rania Matar [here](#)

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KAREN JENKINS earned a Master's degree in Art History, specializing in the History of Photography from the University of Arizona. She has held curatorial positions at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, AZ and the Demuth Museum in Lancaster, PA. Most recently she helped to debut a new arts project, Art in the Open Philadelphia, that challenges contemporary artists to reimagine the tradition of creating works of art en plein air for the 21st century.

POSTED BY SARAH BRADLEY AT 10:51 AM

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