



Lebanon-born photographer Rania Matar (above) captures candid shots of girls such as Reem and Rania (both right), who were photographed in their room in Bethlehem in 2009. PHOTOS: RANIA MATAR AND SANA GALLERY

Make room for girls

Photographer Rania Matar focuses on women in war zones or the privacy of their bedrooms

Akshita Nanda

Rania Matar took her first photography classes a decade ago because she wanted to shoot nice pictures of her four children.

Now the 48-year-old Lebanese-American is winning accolades for her images of women in Middle Eastern war zones and private spaces.

"I don't want to do a documentary of the world, I want to do what's personal to me. Everything I am and everything I have done has led me to this," she tells Life! while looking over the prints hanging at Sana Gallery for her first show in Singapore.

She means that being born in Lebanon to a Palestinian father and Lebanese mother allows her insider access to ordinary

women living in extraordinary circumstances, perhaps the aftermath of Lebanon's 15-year civil war or the disputed territories of the West Bank.

Her black-and-white photos of defiant, laughing women and children in destroyed towns, shot on film, took second place in the 2010 edition of the renowned photography competition, Prix de la Photographie Paris.

Some of them are among the 30 prints on display until Jan 27 at the new Blair Road gallery, which opened last month to showcase art from the Middle East. The works are for sale, starting from \$3,800 a print.

The artist is no stranger to what she photographs. She grew up in Lebanon and her teenage hobby was collecting shrapnel as the 15-year civil war began in 1975.

Nine years later, she moved to the United States to study architecture at Cornell University. She was a practising architect and married to an engineer, pregnant with their fourth child in 2002, when she began studying photography at the New England School of Photography and the Maine Photographic Workshops.

"I needed a break," she says with a laugh.

That same year, struck by the anti-Middle East rhetoric prevalent after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she visited refugee camps in Beirut with a cousin who was making a documentary. Moved by the women she met, she began returning there every year and eventually curated a 2009 monograph, *Ordinary Lives*, which has travelled around Europe and America.

"As I started taking pictures in camps, I realised that I am not an architect anymore, I am a photographer," she recalls. "I was humbled by them. The wars in the Middle East are not started by women, but they raise their heads high and raise their kids."

As her first book was published, she began another series almost by accident. *A Girl And Her Room* features 300 young women from the US and Middle East, captured in their bedrooms between 2009

and the present day. It has travelled around the United States and Europe to rave reviews and the prints were collected in a book this May.

The series began with Matar wanting to understand the elder of her two daughters, Lara, now 18, as the girl shed her tomboy image for a more feminine identity in her teens.

The photographer captured Lara and her teenage peers on digital camera, realised they were most comfortable in their own bedrooms, and then began seeking out other models who would allow her to

observe and then capture them in a personal space "that was an extension of themselves".

"The series made me so much more understanding and tolerant of my daughter. Even the girls with tattoos and attitude are so vulnerable. They remind me of myself when I was a teen."

View it

ORDINARY LIVES

Where: Sana Gallery, 12 Blair Road
When: Until Jan 27, Wednesdays to Sundays, noon to 9.30pm
Admission: Free, by appointment only. Call 6689-7968 or e-mail contact@sana-gallery.com



None of the shots were deliberately posed. "I would put down the camera, start talking to them and then they would act naturally, play with their hair. I'd say, 'Hold it,' and pick up the camera again."

Among the images from this series on display here is Elham, a 2009 coloured study of a young woman in a Beirut refugee camp. It won the first prize in the portrait category of the UK-administered JM Cameron Award to honour female photographers in 2010.

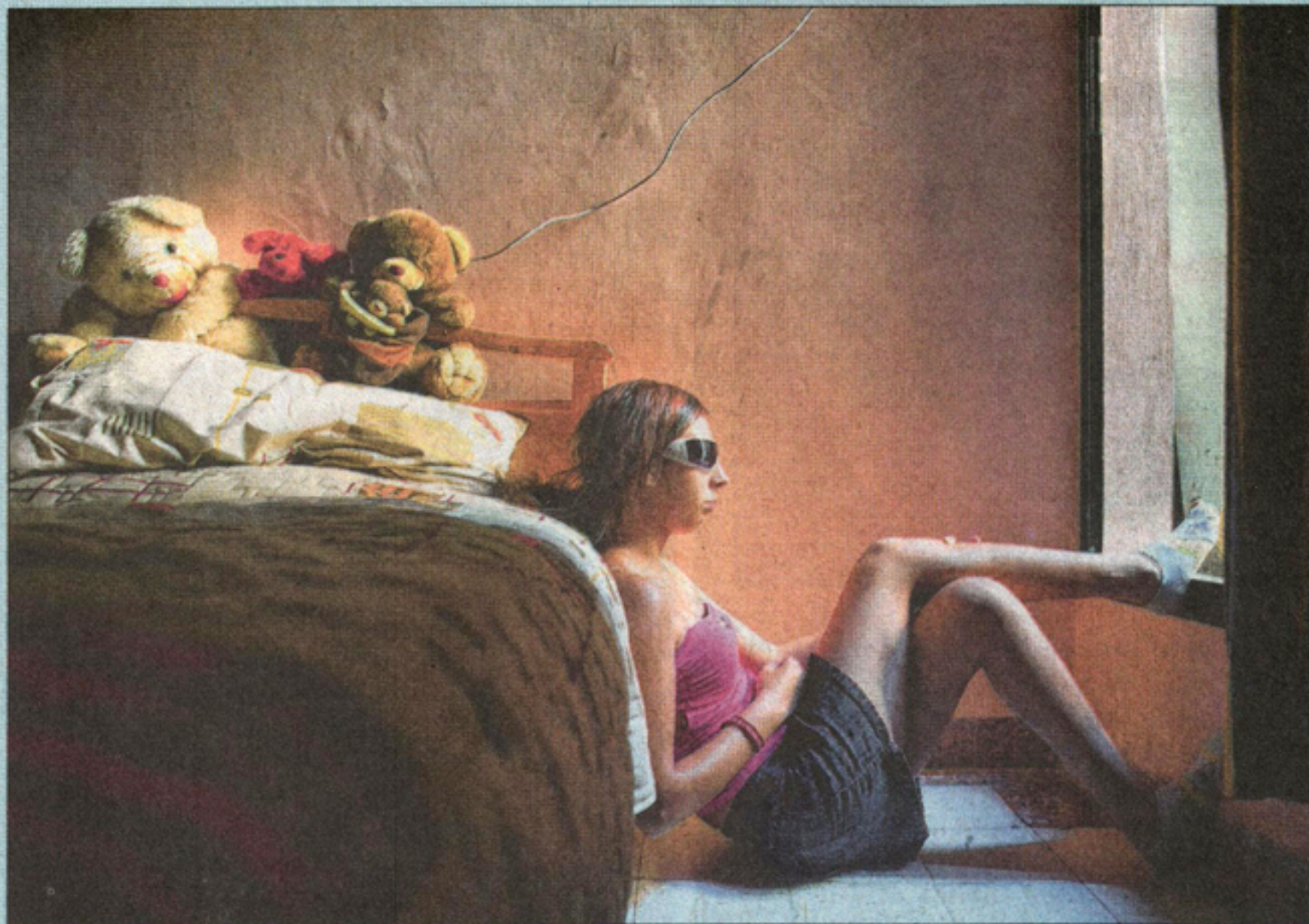
It contrasts starkly with images of American girls surrounded by posters and who loved books. Matar invites this comparison since it echoes the dichotomy of her identity and that of her daughters.

Currently working on another series featuring pre-teen girls, titled *L'Enfant Femme* (the baby girl), she is also starting to photograph boys and young men, so her two sons, aged 18 and 12, do not feel left out. However she is still doubtful whether this might result in work that can be exhibited.

"Girls like to be photographed, boys don't," she explains. "I'm still experimenting. Let's see."

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AKSHITA NANDA RECOMMENDS



arts picks

ORDINARY LIVES

Go beyond dramatic news footage and look at the people of the Middle East in this stunning collection from Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar. Her work captures the ordinary lives of women and girls in the war zone. It includes defiant black-and-white shots of laughing women in destroyed towns, as well as introspective colour portraits of young women carving out personal space in refugee camps.

Where: Sana Gallery, 12 Blair Road **MRT:** Outram Park **When:** Till Sun, noon - 9pm, gallery re-opens Jan 9 to 27 **Admission:** Free, by appointment **Tel:** 6689-7968 **Info:** E-mail contact@sanagallery.com