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## Listen to her story

An exhibition of photography by women from Iran and the Arab world, currently on at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts



"I thought you were only going to include photographs taken in the Middle East," one visitor to the *She Who Tells A Story* exhibition commented to curator Kristen Gresh, on seeing the work of Lebanese photographer **Rania Matar** -- "I did."

Observations like this show Gresh just how new the perspectives offered by the works in the exhibition are. Gresh is the Estrellita and Yousuf Karsh Assistant Curator of Photographs at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In *She Who Tells a Story* she has opted to showcase the work of 12 photographers from Iran and the Arab world, all of whom are women.

Matar, whose works from her series *A Girl and Her Room* are included in the 'Constructing Identities' section, was born in Beirut in 1964 but moved to the USA aged twenty. Her pictures of teenage girls in their bedrooms, surrounded by the paraphernalia of adolescence – nail polish, hair brushes, fairy lights, and much-loved cuddly toys – are intended to show the "normal people who are behind the scenes – the people growing up, living, teenage girls." Matar stresses: "these girls are growing up there [in the Arab world], they have the same dreams as American girls and that's important not to forget."

The surprised reaction shows that sometimes audiences in the West forget that behind the news scenes there are people here, just as there, painting their nails and mooning over celebrity posters.

Matar expands: “A lot of times in the West, the news coming from the Middle East is just negative. I am an American, but I’m also very much a Lebanese – it’s not that different at the core, you know... a woman might decide to wear the hijab in the Middle East, which you probably have less of here, but its people expressing themselves and finding their identity. The way it’s expressed might be different but it’s coming from the same place somehow.”

While Matar’s powerful, poetic photos of the prosaic nature of growing up might focus on the normal side of life, other works on display are dealing with what Matar calls “the heavier stuff” – war, politics, and oppression.

Another photographer whose work is on display is Egyptian **Nermine Hammam**. Her striking, digitally-manipulated pieces are photographs she took of soldiers - by whose youth and vulnerability she was shocked - in Tahrir Square during the 18-day revolution in 2011, layered onto pastoral postcards.

Photographs from **Tanya Habjouqa**’s *Women of Gaza* series offer windows into the lives of Gazan residents - largely women, often veiled - struggling to find pockets of normality in the claustrophobia of occupation. They are photographed having a picnic out of a car boot on a sliver of shoreline, and riding on a swing (a symbolically structured, finite, kind of freedom of movement). A gang of schoolgirls is shown taking the only kind of boat trip allowed – one limited by the few nautical miles it’s possible to go without reaching Israeli-restricted waters.

Amongst perhaps the most well-known are **Shadi Ghadirian**’s pieces from her *Qajar* series in which she photographs female subjects against the kind of painted backdrop used, as the catalogue explains, “for studio portraits in Iran in the nineteenth century. The women are each shown with an anachronistic modern object that in 1998 was either “forbidden” or restricted, ranging from a Pepsi can to a boom box, and including bicycles, musical instruments, books, and makeup.”

The exhibition has no very distinct curatorial direction; it is an array of work that eschews strict classification. Gresh has been criticized for this – she writes in the exhibition catalogue: “Though these photographers challenge stereotypes, the choice to unite them as a group has been seen by some, ironically, as confirming a stereotype.”

But, “the selection of artists is not an attempt to categorize, ghettoize, segregate, or create false commonalities, but, rather, an effort to show the strength and diversity of some of the most compelling contemporary photography from Iran and the Arab world.” It is the works’, and the pioneering photographers’ inherent diversity – “the mosaic of identities and cultures” - that is itself the curatorial thread upon which the exhibition hangs.

One of Gresh’s goals in representing the complexities and nuances of Middle Eastern and Iranian identities has been to combat the often reductive view of the region assigned to it by the politically dominated news coverage that is its most recognizable face in the West. She’s excited to be introducing this work to a new audience, having become acquainted with it herself during several years spent living in Cairo.

On the phone to NOW from Boston, Gresh comments: “Particularly given everything that’s happening in the Middle East, it’s easy for people to stick with what they see in the media, and so to sort of introduce the fact that

there is this great contemporary art scene, and particularly photography scene, is really exciting - to put culture and art before politics and violence.”

Is Gresh worried that audiences may see some of the superficial visual tropes usually associated with the region, such as the veil and Arabic calligraphy, and have a reductive reading anyway? “I have worried about that, yes, and so I’ve been very careful... for instance with labelling I just want to make sure that people have the tools necessary to look at it with an open mind.”

Aside from anything represented in the photographs themselves, simply the existence of this thriving scene that has for so long been overlooked by the Western mainstream is in itself challenging the West’s frequently narrow perspective on this much-misunderstood region.

Asked whether she sees anything paradoxical about the fact that people in the West often know so little about the region and its hydra of identities, yet their governments hold such relatively great sway over the politics of the region, Gresh replies: “Absolutely... I think just having these photographs that are presenting a mosaic of identities is also just helping to represent the multiplicity of perspectives... some of these photographs are rooted or tied to journalism and some are specifically perspectives of artists or photographers... and will hopefully prove enlightening for certain people.”

Coincidentally, the timing of the exhibition has been apt. It opened in the week after the Ghouta chemical attack in Syria, just as the media was filled with the furore of a possible US strike at the Syrian regime. For Matar, the timing has been strangely perfect: “it’s so important to show this voice coming from the Middle East that’s peaceful, that’s cultural, that’s artistic...”

Gresh agrees: “to see that there’s a thriving arts scene that is co-existing alongside everything else that is happening... and that reacts to, responds to, and reflects everything that’s happening... will hopefully reinforce the urgency of our being aware of this contemporary scene and help sort of bring that idea home that we don’t know very much about the art scene there.”

That these cultural voices presenting their visual offerings from the region are all female pleases Matar, as it confronts and tests the commonly-held view that women in the Middle East face blanket oppression and silencing: “There’s always the notion, which is kind of not true, that the women are oppressed there. Somehow all the wars and all the issues there at the moment are created by men – I don’t know if that’s an intelligent answer – but I kind of like that this is women speaking up in the way they know how to... Amidst all the violence it’s nice to have the voices of women, the work of women, it adds so much to it. You know people say, if women were ruling the world, probably things would be a lot quieter.”

*The exhibition will run until January 12, 2014. For more information, you can visit the website of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts [here](#).*