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Feminine Mystique

The everyday moments Rania Matar chronicles in her striking photographs of children and women become personal moments that evoke universal truths.

BY CAROLINE CUNNINGHAM

Rania Matar's gorgeous images have an almost startling intimacy. She is objective, but also deeply empathetic, when documenting the multilayered narratives she uncovers—in the curated chaos of a teenage girl's room or children at play in a ravaged building—both in her immediate neighborhood and in Lebanon, the land of her birth. The subjects she chooses also reveal a great deal about Matar herself. In fact, it's almost impossible to separate the artist from the art because, in telling the stories of others, she is also telling her own.

And Matar's story is one that still echoes with the loss of her mother at an early age. It's a story about growing up under the shadow of war; Matar lived in the Middle East until she moved to the United States to study architecture at Cornell. It's a story about a duality felt by many immigrants with enduring ties to their homeland, about the contradiction

Matar's photographs resemble movie stills, capturing in a single moment the essence of a complex narrative that is unfolding just outside the frame. She has an intuitive sense for discovering the drama beneath the surface, and her luminous images are packed with unexpected emotional power. ABOVE: *Barbie Girl, Haret Hreik, Beirut, Lebanon* (2006). LEFT: *Christilla, Rabieh, Lebanon* (2010).



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ARTISTRY

of being just outside of something that is also central to one's being. And, above all, it's a story about the quest for meaning and connection in an uncertain world.

There's some serendipity to Matar's meteoric career that, over the past decade, has seen numerous exhibitions, books, and awards, including qualifying as a finalist for the prestigious Foster Prize at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston in 2008. She was taking a leave from her architecture practice when she enrolled in a course at the New England School of Photography to learn how to take better pictures of her young family. Although these photographs weren't taken with a public audience in mind, they allowed Matar to refine an artistic approach that has remained consistent, with evolving technical sophistication, over time.

Matar strives for an unobtrusive footprint, with no extraneous lighting or heavy equipment. She combines a discerning vision with an instinctive sense for composition and background geometry, and her images document the unexpected beauty that she finds around her, in even the most quotidian of settings. *Spiderman, Brookline, Massachusetts*, for example, elevates a simple playroom scene into a thoughtful commentary on



the inscrutable nature of childhood.

An absorbing pastime became a profession after Matar made a trip to Beirut in 2002. She was so moved by what she saw in the refugee camps there—shocking desolation and suffering juxtaposed with moments of grace—that she felt compelled to return with her cameras to photograph the story. The result was an astonishing portfolio of work that was greeted with widespread

acclaim, and led to the publication of her first book, *Ordinary Lives*. In *Barbie Girl, Haret Hreik, Beirut, Lebanon*, a beguiling toddler runs in front of a bombed-out apartment block. Matar's keen eye and deliberate use of tight framing make this image a poignant testament to the resilience of the human spirit—in Matar's words, "a symbol of life over death."

Matar then turned her gaze closer to home, to trace the enigmatic time

Matar's empathy and the sense of connection that she establishes with her subjects allow her to transform the quiet moments of vulnerability she uncovers as she makes her portraits of children and women into a compassionate commentary on the human condition. TOP TO BOTTOM: *Faith, Newton, Massachusetts* (2013); *Spiderman, Brookline, Massachusetts* (2004); *Soraya and Tala, Yarzeh, Lebanon* (2014). FACING PAGE: Rania Matar.

marked by introspection and discovery as her daughter, Lara, transitioned away from girlhood. Matar realized that Lara's bedroom, her private refuge, reflected this journey, so she photographed her daughter there. The project soon expanded to include girls from both the United States and the Middle East, and the resulting portraits—later made into the monograph *A Girl in Her Room*—record in luminous detail the vulnerable essence of these young women as they stand on the threshold between two distinct worlds.

Matar's next book, *L'Enfant-Femme*, will have an introduction by Queen Noor of Jordan, and charts the similar passage for young girls into adolescence. She's working on a series, *Unspoken Conver-*



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sations, which examines the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, and another about women in midlife entitled *Women Coming of Age*. She also continues to photograph what she refers to as "the forgotten children" in refugee camps.

Matar records the most personal of scenes, and transforms them into something universal. Henri Cartier-Bresson described the ability to capture these specific moments in time as being "a joint operation between the brain, the eye, and the heart."

In Matar's case, it's the heart that always comes first. •

EDITOR'S NOTE: Rania Matar is represented in New England by Carroll and Sons, Boston, (617) 482-2477, carrollandsons.net. Her work can also be seen at raniamatar.com

