



HER STORY

A NEW EXHIBIT SHARES THE SURPRISING, TOUCHING, AND OFTEN UNTOLD STORIES OF WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

BY KRISTON CAPPS

In times of strife, the resilience it takes to live a normal life is its own triumph. That's one of the persistent themes in "She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World," a survey of new photography at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. While many of the images on view reference conflict—explicitly, as it shapes the present day, but

also implicitly, in how it has defined art history—the works also insist on the normalcy, and the fundamental humanity, of the artists and their subjects. **Rania Matar, 52, Lebanese American.** Rania Matar's *Reem, Doha Heights, Lebanon* (2010) is a portrait of a subject told through her private space. The photo comes from the series "A Girl and Her

Room," which shows young women in their bedrooms in Boston and in Lebanon's cosmopolitan enclaves and refugee camps. The series, shot by the mother of four, reveals that as complex as cultural politics makes the transition from adolescence into adulthood for women in different places around the world, they endure it with a remarkably common posture and attitude.

Shadi Ghadirian, 42, Iranian. A hand grenade in a fruit bowl; a scarf hanging on a rack alongside a helmet. Shadi Ghadirian's "Nil, Nil" series (2008) juxtaposes the familiar and feminine with the jarring symbols of wars that have infiltrated Iranians' everyday lives. In *Nil, Nil #11*, Ghadirian tucks ammunition shells into an over-stuffed handbag.

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They stick out of the purse like lethal lipsticks. The piece is a reminder that everyone carries conflict with them, not just the combatants who wage war.

Lalla Essaydi, 60, Moroccan American.

Lalla Essaydi is reclaiming imagery from some of the most Orientalist and colonialist paintings of the 19th-century European tradition. *Bullets Revisited #3* (2012), for example, depicts an odalisque (a harem concubine). But Essaydi's photographs are profoundly contemporary and theatrical: She spends weeks drafting the texts, building sets, and decorating textiles to manufacture each precise new narrative, as in *Bullets'* shimmery recreation of a romanticized Morocco. The results take belittling stereotypes from European paintings and invest them with a sense of feminist propriety and agency. April 8–July 31, 1250 New York Ave. NW, 202-783-5000; nmwa.org ■

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Rania Matar's *Reem, Doha Heights, Lebanon*; Shadi Ghadirian's *Nil, Nil #11*; Lalla Essaydi's *Bullets Revisited #3*.

