

### INTERVIEW

# Growing up here and there

Rania Matar discusses her latest published photo study of young women

By Brandon Johnston  
The Daily Star

**B**EIRUT: It's easy to dwell on the differences between cultures and people. To draw upon the similarities, the nuances, can be more difficult. Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar addresses this idea with her latest book "L'Enfant-Femme."

Matar unveiled her new project Thursday evening at Papercup bookstore in Mar Mikhael. Four years in the making, "L'Enfant-Femme" contains hundreds of photographs, shot entirely on medium format film, featuring young girls between the ages of 8 and 13.

It explores this pivotal age of transformation, from girlhood to womanhood, blurring the lines between the cultural differences of the subjects.

"I began to photograph little girls in the Middle East and also in the United States," Matar told The Daily Star at the opening. "It was not meant as a comparison. On the contrary, [it's meant] to show that at the core we are the same."

Born and raised in Lebanon, Matar studied architecture at the American University of Beirut, before migrating to the U.S. during the 1982 Israeli invasion. After completing her studies in architecture, she began practicing photography—mostly documenting her four young children.

Following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Matar noticed that most of the media in the U.S. coming from the Middle East was negative—focusing largely on the differences between the Western and Arab world.

"The news in the U.S. was always them and us," she said. "All of a sudden I became very aware that I am them and they are us. I decided I wanted to tell a different story from the Middle East."

Traveling back to Lebanon after the 2006 war, she began her first project, "Ordinary Lives," exploring



Alia, 9, from Burj al-Barajneh Refugee Camp, Lebanon.

the idea of universality of people in Lebanon, rather than on the differences, which are often highlighted.

The idea for "L'Enfant-Femme" grew in Matar's mind while she was working on her second project, "A Girl in Her Room." She noticed how her daughter—an early teen and one of the subjects of the book—was

beginning to transform as she went through puberty. She realized that these transformations were strikingly similar to those she experienced at the same age.

"It just hit me, the universality of becoming a teenage girl," she said. "I was those girls, 25 years earlier in a different country all together, in a

culture everybody thinks of as very different, but I was the same."

The photos, similarly posed, are serious, with the subjects seldom smiling. Matar explained that getting the girls to pose seriously was not always easy. Growing up in the age of the selfie, the girls often became more serious when they real-

ized they could not view the photos immediately after they were taken.

"We are so programmed to smile for the camera," she said, "but when you ask them not to smile, the way they hold themselves says so much about them. What are they doing with their hands? What are they doing with their body?"

In addition to photographing American, Palestinian, and Lebanese girls, Matar began photographing the Syrian refugees she would meet often on the streets of Beirut.

"If you're walking in Hamra, they're always standing in front of graffiti walls. For me, it's almost like they are becoming another layer of history. They've become invisible to people," she said, adding that one of her next projects will focus mainly on their lives.

In order to further emphasize the universality of her subjects, Matar decided to not disclose her locations in the captions accompanying the photos. By doing this, the viewer is given only a few clues of the location of the subject, such as their clothing or surroundings. This forces viewers to focus more on the similarities than the differences. The locations are indexed in the back of the book.

"L'Enfant-Femme" opens with an introduction by Jordan's Queen Noor, who Matar had met previously in the U.S. After tracking her down, she agreed immediately to help with the project. Noor, who studied photography in school, seemed the perfect fit to write the opening essay, Matar explained.

Two additional essays by American author Lois Lowry and Boston Museum of Fine Arts assistant curator Kristen Gresh are also included in the book.

In addition to a future project on Syrian refugees, Matar is currently working on a series exploring the connections between mothers and their daughters. She also plans to revisit the subjects of "L'Enfant-Femme," juxtaposing how they've changed as they've grown over time.

Rania Matar's "L'Enfant-Femme" is published by Damiani Editore and can be purchased at Mar Mikhael's Papercup bookstore, or online at <http://www.raniamatar.com/books/lenfant-femme/>