

VISUAL ARTS



Photos by Rania Matar

Photographer Rania Matar lives in Massachusetts like Lindsey (2013), left, but was born in Lebanon like Samira.

Same portrait, opposite sides of world

By Alejandra Salazar

The relationship between Samira, a 15-year-old refugee in Lebanon, and 10-year-old Lindsey from Massachusetts might not be obvious at first sight. But their geographic distance — and the difference between their lives — is bridged by Rania Matar's camera.

Samira and Lindsey are portraits from Matar's "Becoming," a collection of photos on display at the RayKo Photo Center through Feb. 21. The images showcase the transition of young girls into young women, capturing them in private, personal settings throughout their teenage years. These girls represent adolescence and womanhood from two distinct places: Lebanon, the country where Matar was born, and

the United States, the country where she and her family live and work.

"I am from both these cultures, and I am the same person," Matar said. "This whole rhetoric we keep hearing — the 'them and us' — for me, it's such an artificial label."

Matar lives in Boston, but throughout her travels, she's photographed girls across a wide range of classes, cultures and faiths, making this exhibition especially timely. Lebanon was not included in the list of Muslim-majority countries in President Trump's recent immigration and travel ban, but the images, which feature Muslim girls across Lebanon in their homes, public city spaces and refugee camps, still resonate strongly.

"Becoming" is made up of

Becoming: 12:30-9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Through Feb. 21. RayKo Photo Center, 428 Third St., S.F. <http://raykophotocenter.com>

straightforward, centered pieces from Matar's past photography projects: portraits of young girls in their rooms, of girls and their mothers, of girls revisited and documented over time. Instead of getting a "selfie pose," Matar strives to capture the girls at their most natural.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to discern who is from Lebanon and who is from the United States. And that's the point.

"I am trying, photographing girls and women, to show that I don't care if the girl is wearing the hijab or veil or

not," Matar said. "At the end, she's also a girl growing up, and that happens anywhere."

Ann Jastrab, RayKo's gallery director, finished installing "Becoming" on Jan. 21, the day after Trump's inauguration and the day of the Women's March. Samira and Lindsey were the last to be hung on the wall.

"It was really powerful," Jastrab said. "It was like, 'OK, time to go. Now I'm ready to go march. I've got all my girls up, and we're going to do this.'"

"Becoming" is the latest to join a long list of RayKo's ranks of women-driven shows, whether as the artists or in subject matter. It's a tradition Jastrab established after noticing a lack of outlets for female photographers to showcase their work. But this latest exhibition is on display

amid the center's potential closure in April, which means it could be the center's last solo gallery show.

Jastrab addresses this possibility while standing in front of Matar's "A Girl and Her Room," a giant asymmetrical photo grid that serves as the show's centerpiece. It's an entire wall covered with portraits of 50 young women, each staring out at the gallery from their most personal spaces: their bedrooms. As with the rest of "Becoming," the piece is simple, documentarian and timely.

"If we were going to have one last solo show," she said, "it should be Rania's."

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