

INTERVIEW

Documenting changes of womanhood

Exhibition charts journey of artist's perception of the female experience

By Maghie Ghali
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Rania Matar's latest exhibition "SHE" combines a retrospective of her past photography alongside two recent series, the latest also titled "SHE." Best-known for her photos of young girls transitioning from childhood to adulthood, the Lebanese photographer's work is often inspired by her personal experiences as a mother of two daughters.

The five series now on show at Galerie Tanit present a natural progression from this theme, capturing different stages of a woman's life. Her early series "L'Enfant-Femme" compares photos of girls taken before and after puberty, while "A Girl in Her Room" shows how teen individualism is expressed in their bedrooms.

A follow-up to "L'Enfant-Femme," "Becoming" explores girls' body language as they learn to become comfortable in their evolving bodies. The recent "Unspoken Conversations" and "SHE" both depart from documenting girls and veer toward Matar's thoughts on motherhood, relationships among female family members and young adult women finding a place in life.

"They're all separate projects but together they make sense because it ends up being about time passing, about growing up," Matar



"Wafa'a and Sana'a," Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp, Lebanon, 2017.

explained. "SHE" is also inspired by my daughter ... I'm fascinated in that age now. My girls – one is turning 20 next week and one is 23 – and I'm finding that it's such a hard age in this day and age.

"They're all so connected to their phones and computers and I'm trying to focus on the physicality of their hair, their texture and relationship to

the environment," she added. "It started when I was losing hair from stress and I became obsessed with hair and realized how much it was part of my personality and texture."

An ongoing series, "SHE" won Matar a Guggenheim fellowship, which she hopes to use to continue work on the project around the U.S. and Middle East. The 10 photos to

date capture women in their 20s with flowing hair, vulnerable expressions or body language, set against landscapes or graffiti-covered walls in Lebanon or the U.S.

"I wanted to focus on the environments that these young women are part of," Matar said, "which in Lebanon is often about the walls."

"This was one of the first ones I

took in Lebanon," she said, referring to "Nour," a photo of a red-haired young woman with her arms folded.

On the crumbling wall behind her, leaves and vines have been painted, along with child riding a bicycle.

"When I came to Beirut I started noticing these beautiful walls that are part of the fabric of the place and I saw this girl who [was] having lunch at the restaurant. I tried to capture all that vulnerability in my work because I feel it's almost empowering to be vulnerable because these girls go through so much."

Placed beside the photo of Nour is a snap of two women from Burj al-Barajneh, backs to the camera with their hijabs trailing behind them.

"The veil is just like the hair," Matar said. "It's part of their texture and how they ... present themselves."

The six works in her 2015 series "Unspoken Conversation" capture mothers and daughters, sometimes embracing or clasping hands, other times facing opposite directions.

Matar says her daughters leaving for college made her realize that their relationship was about to change. "It is probably the most complex series. I have two boys but my relationship to my girls is a lot more complicated, intense and nuanced," she said.

"There is also a sense of the passing of time and it's very present in this project. There's this bond. With some, you almost see them turning into one person. [In] others you see the love between them and others you [see] more of a separation," she added. "I think all of them on some level summarize every kind of relationship."

"SHE" is up at Galerie Tanit, Mar Mikhael, through June 1, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Photo courtesy of Galerie Tanit