



Alumni Profile

From Her Perspective: Rania Matar's Intimate, Vulnerable Portraits



Looking at Rania Matar's photographs of women—young, adolescent, and middle-aged—feels like looking into their souls. The women's eyes let you in without pretense or a selfie smile. The experience is arresting in its intimacy.

In 2002, Matar, relatively new to photography, found herself in the Shatila refugee camp in southern Beirut. Shocked at the conditions, she began to take pictures and get to know her subjects, mostly women and children. "It was then that I got a valuable piece of advice," she says. "Someone who had seen the photos I took of my own children told me I needed to achieve that same level of intimacy in the camps. I had to overcome being intimidated. I grew more comfortable. Intimacy is a big part of the work."

Architecture was actually Matar's first professional pursuit. Born in Beirut, she studied at AUB from 1982-1984—the dangerous, difficult years. She then transferred to Cornell, graduated with an architecture degree, and moved to Boston.



In spite of the hard times, Matar remembers AUB with great fondness. "I think the brain is selective in its memories," she says. "Even though a lot of my friends left, and the conditions were dangerous, I remember it as good."

Like her own mother, Matar dated the man who would become her husband at AUB, and they moved together to the United States. "We thought it would be for a short time, but we've been here

since 1984.” Ten years after they left Lebanon, the couple had twins, a boy and a girl, followed by another girl and boy.

“I got into photography in 2000 because I wanted to take pictures of my kids. I ended up falling in love with the darkroom and the craft.”

September 11, 2001 brought another change for Matar. “The news at that time was so stark, showing a portrait of the Middle East that I knew to be one-dimensional. It was all about them versus us. I began to think about my identity in a new way. ‘Who am I?’ I asked. ‘I was them and us.’ ”

Matar wanted to tell a different story of the Middle East—one she knew from her own family and time there—so she began to return to Lebanon to take photos. Subconsciously, she focused on women and children. “The women were such a powerful force in the camps. People would ask me where the men were in my photos and I just thought, Oops, where are they?” When her older daughter was 15, Matar was ready to photograph closer to home again, and she began to focus on teenage girls. She would photograph her daughter with her friends and then each girl by herself, and eventually each girl in her own bedroom.

“I quickly realized,” she says, “how similar the girls in the United States were to the girls in the Middle East. Girls are girls—there is a shared humanity and sameness. Looking at my work, a viewer can forget what country they’re looking at.”

The photo that became the cover of Matar’s 2012 book, *A Girl and Her Room*, shows Christilla, platinum-haired, toenails painted, with her feet propped up on her DVD collection, looking not so different from the giant print of Marilyn Monroe on the wall behind her. “The picture is from Lebanon,” Matar says. “But no one believes Christilla is Arab. People tend to look through one lens. There are so many layers to women, here and there, and they’re all going through the same changes as they pass from adolescence

into adulthood. They’re wondering what life will be like. It was important for me to capture that.”

Another of Matar’s books, *L’Enfant-Femme* (2016), reflects girls from the East and the West at the stage of life of her younger daughter. “I look at their hands, their body language. It’s a fleeting moment for young girls. I call it beautifully awkward, or sometimes painfully awkward.” In Queen Noor’s introduction to the book, she comments that the photos “evoke a fundamental sense of cross-cultural understanding.”

As Matar’s photography continued to follow the stages of her own life, she moved on to work with mothers and daughters, showing the passage of time. *Unspoken Conversations* is a portfolio in which the mothers are aging and the daughters are on the verge of leaving home. They stand side by side, sometimes touching, but each on her own path now.

In 2018, Matar’s work received a brilliant stamp of approval in the form of a Guggenheim Fellowship, “appointed on the basis of prior achievement and exceptional promise.” Matar says it was an unbelievable honor; “It was so validating. It was someone saying to me that my work is good, and to go with it. It’s empowered me. I’m able to take more risks.”

Still in her Guggenheim year, Matar’s work has again taken a new direction, one that is “less about the portrait, and more about the tactility and relationship of the young woman to her background.” Indeed, in many of her recent photos, the texture, lines, and colors of the girls merge with similarities in the landscape to startling effect.

Matar is in what she calls an incredible year, including her first solo museum show in Fort Worth, Texas, that also traveled to Cleveland. Reflecting on her success she says, “It’s the dream come true, but realized dreams come with new realities—a wider audience and pressure to produce.” That’s a reality she’s willing to live with.

Editor’s Note: An exhibit of Matar’s work is planned for early 2020 at the AUB Art Galleries. We will keep readers informed.