

INTERVIEW

Capturing women's quiet courage

Rania Matar's latest exhibition reflects the photographer's development over time

By Maghie Ghali
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Rania Matar's latest exhibition, "An Image and Her Woman," reflects the photographer's development over time. Showing at the AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery and curated by Rico Frances, these 15 works come from four previous series, and Matar's work in progress "SHE."

Known for her candid photos of young women, focused on their developing identity and relationship with the world around them, Matar's new series looks at women showing courage.

"The new pieces are kind of in continuation with my other work," Matar told The Daily Star. "As my daughters reach their 20s I'm realizing what a tough age it is, especially with Instagram, so I started looking at their physicality."

"It's very much about collaboration and empowerment," she added. "It started about texture and vulnerability but at some point three of these photos were chosen to go into a show in Washington D.C. at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, called 'Live Dangerously.' I loved that that they saw this angle, so the project changed direction a bit."

For this project, Matar said that she wanted the young women she photographed to be a big part of the process.



"Aya, Batroun, Lebanon," 2019.

"It's not just about capturing a vulnerable moment. It's about them taking risks, letting the shoot develop naturally and having a conversation," she said.

"Some of them have girls getting in the water. Some are climbing on rocks or going into abandoned buildings ... They lead the process in some way."

The new works show the women with no make-up, in flowing dresses or garments, interacting with nature or forgotten structures. They are softly lit with warm, natural light and the Matar's use of contrast gives them a more dramatic, conceptually artistic feel.

Matar spots her models all over the place, sometimes out in cafes or

when walking around. Others contact her and ask if she would want to collaborate.

On such model is Aya Saleh from Tripoli, who met Matar in Batroun for a seaside shoot. The photo shows Saleh lying down on rock pools in a white dress.

"She climbed onto the [Phoenician Wall] rocks and we started tak-

ing pictures. Our feet were bleeding and were getting bit by mosquitos," Matar recalled. "I was looking at her reflections in the water and she asked if I wanted her to get in the water, which was full of insects. I said, 'As a mother I would say no but as a photographer I would say yes, so it's up to you.'"

"My friend had already been photographed by her so I thought it was interesting," Saleh told The Daily Star. "Rania photographs people exactly how they are, nothing is staged and she puts you in nature ... The next day we had bites and bruises but I really love the picture."

The photo "Alae" shows a woman in black hijab and abaya, semi-submerged in a stream somewhere in Khayam. The fabric rippling in the water, combined with the reflected light, creates a surreal effect resembling a painting.

Matar has taken many snaps for her new series, but wishes to wait before unveiling the whole project. Some photos from "SHE" didn't make the AUB show, such as two photos of Blanche Eid – one in a dilapidated building, another among some rock pools.

"We were going to a place by the sea and then we saw an empty building," Eid told The Daily Star. "I was wandering around it barefoot until Rania got the photo she wanted and then we went back to the sea."

"I can't see without my glasses so I was being led around the rocks and it was quite challenging. I've never really done something like that," she added. "She made me do things I never imagined I would do, like walking barefoot in a building full of glass ... but she always made sure I was feeling OK."

Photo by Rania Matar