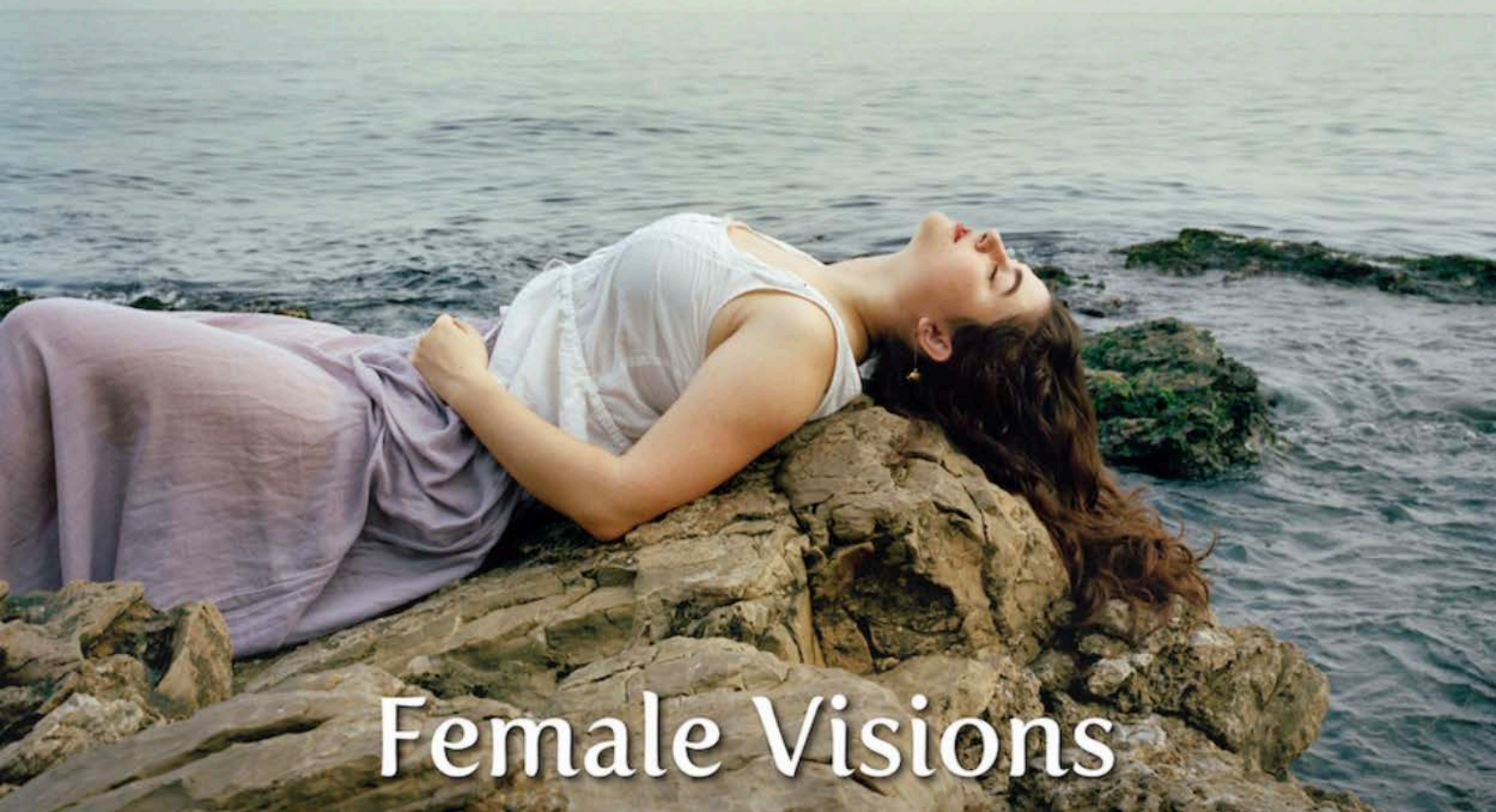


# ARTDOC

## Photography Magazine

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## Female Visions

**Cecilia Reynoso**  
Family of Colours  
and Emotions

**Rania Matar**  
Young women of hope  
and strength

**Katja Liebmann**  
Cyanotypes as  
Memories



© Rania Matar | Jana, La Maison Rose, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019

# Young women of hope and strength

Rania Matar

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The young women that Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar portrayed in her new book *SHE*, are all in their early twenties, are beautiful, not only in the formal physical sense but also in an emotional and even political sense. The portraits are personal expressions and tell a universal story of hope of the new generation. “The photographs became, for me, a way of focusing on my identity, and my daughters’ identities, but also on the shared humanity of strength and hope.”

One of the principal subjects of Rania Matar is identity, as well as a woman and as an immigrant in the USA. Was it hard for her to adjust to life in the United States? “I went to Cornell University in upstate New York to continue my architecture studies that I had started at the American University of Beirut. I was in the studio all the time, which was basically the same as in Lebanon. Beirut is a very cosmopolitan city so travelling to a new country wasn’t too intimidating for me. My biggest shock was the weather. I grew up in beautiful Mediterranean weather, and here I was in upstate New York in the cold and the snow. I eventually got used to it and saw how beautiful it was.”

But the reality check came later. After Rania Matar graduated and worked as an architect, she fell in love with photography. “9/11 was a big turning point. All the news coming from the Middle East was so negative. And it was divisive and one dimensional. And I started wanting to tell a different story. I decided I wanted to start showing something different from Lebanon. The people are kind and hospitable, and the American discourse became predominantly ‘them’ versus ‘us’. There was so much rhetoric about all the women being oppressed. It all felt very reductive. For me, it became important to tell another story. I never went back to architecture.”

### **Empowering Beauty**

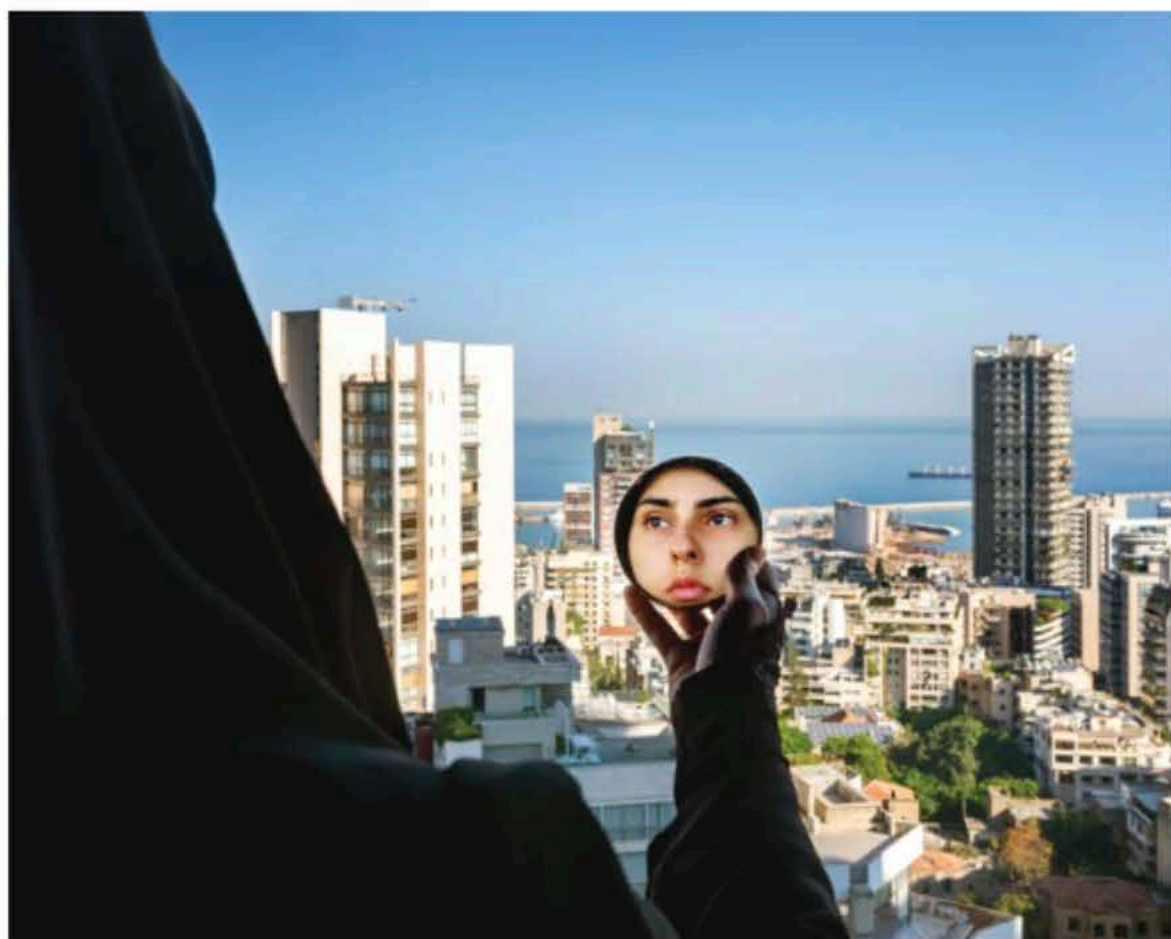
The young women in the photographs are all beautiful and strong but not in a classical, aesthetical sense, where beauty is the adoration of the physical body. In Matar’s photos, beauty appears to be the vehicle for inner strength. “I’m not looking for the physical beauty. I find that any woman at 20 is beautiful. I want my project to be



© Rania Matar | Lea, Aaley Grand Hotel, Aaley, Lebanon, 2021



© Rania Matar | Lea, La Maison Rose, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019

© Rania Matar | *Alae (In the Mirror)*, Beirut, Lebanon, 2020© Rania Matar | *Rayven*, Miami Beach, Florida, 2019

an empowering project. I wanted it to be very collaborative with the women. I realize how hard it is to be twenty as a young woman today. I see it through my daughters. They seem to all live a parallel life through social media. You're comparing yourself to an ideal that doesn't exist in real life. People post their happiest pictures only – it is not real life. That is why I want my photoshoots to be empowering. I want the women to feel beautiful. None of these women is a model. They're just young women I meet and I connect with, and I ask them if I could photograph them. They could all be my daughters."

#### Physicality

Even though the photographs are not about physical beauty per se, there is a strong sense of physicality in the pictures. "I have a lot of hair. I lost half of my hair due to stress a few years ago. My hair came back eventually, but I became obsessed with our sense of texture and physicality and what makes us who we are. I started photographing women in relation to the beautiful landscape of rural Ohio, where I was doing an artist residency. But I was obsessed with hair and with texture and with a sense of tactility. That's why I call it the physicality that makes us who we are. But I'm not portraying these women as passive in the landscape. I want them to preside over it, and they do. I hope that I am giving them the room to express themselves and to get out of their comfort zone."

#### Colour and composition

The portraits have a very subtle range of colours, all reacting to each other, and they are all meticulously composed. Rania Matar does not pre-stage her photographs in a pre-conceptual mode, but in a spontaneous and collaborative way during the photo session. "I don't stage anything beforehand. I really work with what's there. And I don't work with too much equipment. Besides my Mamiya 7II camera and one lens, I don't carry lights, reflectors, tripods, anything. I don't bring any props to a photoshoot. We're creating the stage together. Many times, I would go to places that I hadn't seen. Mostly we look for a place together. So, we're staging it together on the spot."

#### Sculptures

The portraits of *SHE* gives the viewer the impression as if the women are living sculptures in the environment, becoming a part of the surroundings. Sometimes their faces are even not visible. These features distinguish them from typical editorial portraits. "I'm not interested in making an editorial portrait. I'm more interested in collaborating in making art together, in telling each woman's unique story and having the women be participants in it. Sometimes they look at the camera, sometimes not. I'm not setting rules. Every shoot is very independent from the other."



© Rania Matar | Aya, Abandoned Building, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021



© Rania Matar | Farah, Aabey, Lebanon, 2020

“ I’m not looking for the physical beauty. I find that any woman at 20 is beautiful. I want my project to be an empowering project.

#### Beauty in decay

A lot of portraits from Lebanon depict beauty in decay. The women are often posed in surroundings of once bombed or half-destroyed buildings. “There’s a very schizophrenic aspect to Lebanon. I have a new picture in the new series. The woman’s name is Aya, and she’s wearing a beautiful dress, and standing in front of a decaying wall. This is very much Lebanon. There is still so much glamour and so much decay and despair all side by side. And it’s pretty incredible how they coexist. This is how I grew up. I grew up during a war, one day we’re hiding in shelters and the next one we’re going to the beach or skiing. This new generation however inherited the big mess, my generation and the older generation left for them. They haven’t lived the war, but it is part of the collective memory.”

#### Farah in the car

One portrait in the book shows a young Lebanese woman, Farah, in a car wreck, with flowers on the roof and inside as if she is sitting in a grave tomb. The photo could be seen as a metaphor for the dead-end situation of Lebanon, especially after the massive explosion in the harbour of Beirut. “That’s an important portrait. I had photographed Farah before; she’s in the book twice. In the first picture, flowers surround her. And two years ago, the fall of 2019, there were protests in Lebanon. The young generation was protesting against the government and the corruption. People who

were against the protests wanted to scare the protesters and burned their cars. One of the burned cars was Farah’s. She messaged me that they had burned her car. I was going to Lebanon a few weeks later, so I asked her to save the car so we can make the picture together to immortalize the moment. So, this was a very personal image to her (and to me).”

#### Where do I go?

From the project *SHE* arose a new project called *Where do I go?* The work is an organic progression from *SHE*. This project focuses even more on the situation of Lebanon. During recent trips to Lebanon, she found hope and inspiration through the younger generation of women. Instead of focusing on destruction, she found herself in awe of them, their creativity, strength, beauty, and resilience, despite all. She felt a sense of urgency in collaborating with them, giving them a voice, and the opportunity and power to express themselves. Many of the women have left Lebanon in this past year. “I feel like there’s such an urgency to telling their stories: their individual story, and our collective story. I saw graffiti on the wall that said in Arabic: “Where do I Go” and this became the title of this work. This is a turning point in this younger generation’s lives. They have so much to tell. I left Lebanon when I was their age, and there is now a new wave of emigration.” Despite the hardships, Matar feels the younger generation, and especially the



© Rania Matar | Nataly, Aramoun, Lebanon, 2021

women, still emanate hope. “They inspire me – they are holding the fort and still finding beauty in the country. They are creative and talented and have so much to offer. I photographed many of them in May last year, and even though the country was in an economical and political mess, there was still hope. But when I went back in the

summer, the situation in the country had gotten worse: there was a lack of power, electricity, gas and the economic situation was catastrophic. It felt like a tipping point and many young people were trying to find ways to leave the country. So, I’m still trying to hold on to the hope and strength I had been seeing because that’s all that’s left.”



© Rania Matar | Yara (with Randa's Roses and Cherry Blossoms), Beirut, Lebanon, 2018

#### Personal story

Matar’s own life is interwoven with her photography. “I left Lebanon for the United States when I was 20 to study architecture at Cornell University, so, my work is very much part of my sense of identity in both my cultures. On another personal note, my mother died when I was three.

She was 28. I am always fascinated with girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood in my work. My photography is very related to my being a mother and it follows my daughters through the year. They inspire all my work: from *A Girl and Her Room*, *L'Enfant-Femme*, *Becoming*, *Unspoken Conversations* to finally *SHE*.





© Rania Matar | Perla, Where Do I go, Kfarmatta, Lebanon, 2021

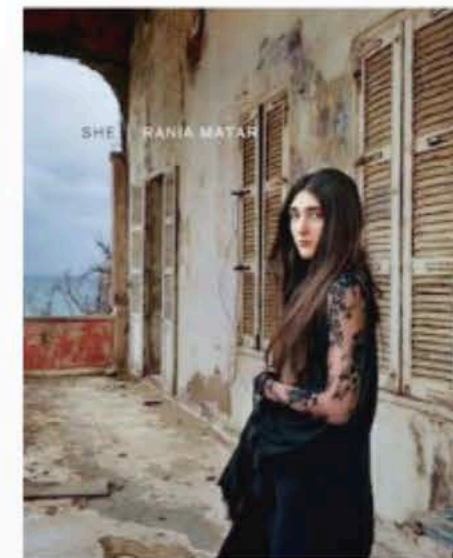
#### About

Rania Matar is a Guggenheim 2018 Fellow. She was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S. in 1984. As a Lebanese-born American woman and mother, Matar's cultural background, cross-cultural experience, and personal narrative inform her photography. She has dedicated her work to exploring issues of personal and collective identity, through photographs of female adolescence and womanhood. She works both in the United States where she lives and the Middle East where she is from, in an effort to focus on notions of identity and individuality all within the context of the underlying universality of these experiences. Rania Matar's work has been widely published and exhibited in museums worldwide, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Carnegie Museum of Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, and more. A mid-career retrospective

Link to her book *SHE* [www.raniamatar.com/books/she](http://www.raniamatar.com/books/she)

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of her work was recently on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, in a solo exhibition: *In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar*. She has received several grants and awards including a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship, 2017 Mellon Foundation artist-in-residency grant at the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, 2011 Legacy Award at the Griffin Museum of Photography, 2021, 2011 and 2007 Massachusetts Cultural Council artist fellowships. In 2008 she was a finalist for the Foster Award at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, with an accompanying solo exhibition. She is currently associate professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and regularly offers workshops, talks, class visits and lectures at museums, galleries, schools and colleges in the US and abroad.



© Rania Matar | The book SHE