



RANIA MATAR:
ON EITHER SIDE
OF THE WINDOW

PORTRAITS DURING COVID-19

Marcel Proust's oft-quoted "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" – which I am rather fond of using to describe works of art – has taken new meaning this past year. As all of us quarantined in our homes last spring and tried to see our environment differently, artists, unsurprisingly, took the lead in showing us how. Rania Matar is one such artist: barely a couple of weeks into lockdown, she started thinking about what this new reality can reveal to the photographer's eye. The result was a new body of work, *On Either Side of the Window*, a selection from which we are proud to include for the first time in a museum exhibition here at CFAM.

A Lebanese American whose work has often visualized and explored a dual culture and identity, Matar realized that the virus was "an equalizer." For once in her lived experience, we are "all in this together, in the same boat, with life at a standstill." Photographing people behind doors and windows, at the edge of a quarantined world they would very much want to, but cannot, leave, she tried to identify and depict intimate beauty and unspoken feelings.

What strikes me about the works is how skillfully they capture the ambivalence of opposites we have all experienced: inside/outside; alone/together; restful/active; relaxed/worried; etc. A prominent role in the compositions is assumed by the invisible barriers we cannot take down; they are given shape in the many reflections both on the inside and the outside of windows. Aesthetically beautiful, reminiscent of the artifice of painting, they are a constant reminder that this is not how life should be. Our vision is artificially blurred. We should be able to see without reflection; we should be able to reach out and touch and hug each other. And yet we cannot. On a different level, these barriers – and the ever-present

FOR RORR

encouragement the artist offers to connect across them – also carry another important message: in the current moment, defined by unprecedented polarization, we ought to try and reach out across difference, penetrate through what keeps us apart and, instead, find what we all still have in common.

Both messages are timely and important to emphasize in a teaching museum like ours. I am indebted to Rania Matar for giving beautiful shape to both hardship and triumph during this difficult time; to my team at Rollins for creating an exhibition that does the photographs justice; and to the Rollins College leadership and the Board of Visitors of the museum for supporting our vision.

Our special gratitude goes to the exhibition's sponsors, Wayne and Patricia Jones. Their gift to the museum, in honor of their 50th anniversary, has made this exhibition and publication possible. We congratulate them on their milestone as we recognize that their generosity enabled us to respond in real time with an exhibition that probes our reality, offers solace and builds empathy.

ENA HELLER, PH.D.
BRUCE A. BEAL DIRECTOR

A year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world in unexpected ways. The pace of daily life was altered, the experience of domestic spaces shifted, and families and individuals were isolated from relatives, friends, and co-workers. Important life events had to be postponed or cancelled: weddings, graduation ceremonies, and retirement parties were not possible at a moment when financial uncertainty and the risk of contracting the virus took center stage in our lives. Millions of people stayed at home, working remotely when possible and guiding their children through virtual education. Our homes became our schools and offices; the experience of indoor and outdoor space quickly changed for people around the world.

This exhibition presents a selection of twenty-seven new works by Lebanese American photographer, Rania Matar (b. 1964). These images capture the nuances of specific individuals while at home in quarantine while highlighting the connections created throughout the project. Responding to her need to connect with others, Matar captured more than one hundred people who agreed to pose for her, some who were acquaintances or friends, and many who became new friends in the process. Matar established a connection with her subjects, photographing them through a door or window. These beautiful images emphasize the humanity of the sitters, the connections between them, and the particularities that make each human being unique. As Matar explains: “I found that sometimes, difficult moments bring beauty and humanity to all of us.” And art captures these moments and shows the power of healing and understanding in moments of crisis. Evocative and insightful, the photographs capture a moment of “connecting across barriers,” that emphasizes the collaboration between photographer and sitter: “As the weeks went by and the “new normal” settled in, the portraits started transforming with the window almost acting like a stage and people on

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the inside becoming active participants in the photo session, bringing their ideas and their performances to the interaction we were creating.”

As challenging as this past year was, losing more than 200,000 people to the virus in the United States alone, these images are reminders of the resilience of people across the country and around the world. They celebrate beauty in all kinds of ways: in the face of young children, in the wisdom of older couples who have overcome hardships together, in the gaze of a lonely figure who faced the pandemic in isolation, in the smiles of siblings embracing, and in the uniqueness of each individual photographed.

Art has the power to heal; it helps us to put ourselves in others' shoes as we examine the past and figure out a path forward. This body of work not only documents the experience of these families and individuals in quarantine, it inspires us to imagine how others were affected and how they faced and overcame challenges. It inspires us to find ways to be closer to people in our lives, but also to reach out to those we don't know and to create community.

GISELA CARBONELL, PH.D.
CURATOR

RANIA TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR ARTISTIC BACKGROUND. WHEN AND HOW DID YOU BEGIN YOUR JOURNEY AS A PHOTOGRAPHER?

I was originally trained as an architect at the American University of Beirut and at Cornell University, with a strong emphasis on fine arts. I worked as an architect for a few years and then started taking photography workshops to initially take better pictures of my four children – that was in 2000. I fell in love with the medium and the craft. I always mention this early work as it paved the way to all my photography moving forward, helping me focus on the importance of intimacy in my work, but also on the beauty of the mundane moments of daily life.

After the events of September 11, when all the rhetoric about the Middle East on the news was “them vs us”, I started questioning my whole sense of identity as I was “them” and “us” and decided to start making work in Lebanon and in the Middle East to tell a different story of the area. The people were kind and beautiful and I wanted to focus on their humanity.

THE SELECTION OF WORKS IN THIS EXHIBITION EMERGED AS A RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. WHY WERE YOU COMPELLED TO CAPTURE PORTRAITS OF PEOPLE IN QUARANTINE?

I love to work with people. Even though I had 6 young adults at my house the first few weeks – my 4 kids and 2 of their cousins – I missed connecting with people and making photographs. It seems as if life went on hold in those early days/weeks – for everyone. I am always straddling my two cultures and identities, as a Lebanese/Palestinian and as an American, and at that moment, it felt like we were a “we”: all in this together, in the same boat, with life at a standstill and reduced to the confinement of home. This virus is such an equalizer, making us all re-evaluate our shared humanity, our fragility, and our

INTERVIEW WITH
ARTIST RANIA MATAR
AND CURATOR, GISELA CARBONELL, PH.D.

priorities, and I felt that I needed to tell that story in the way I know how to.

HOW DID YOU START THIS PROJECT? DID YOU KNOW ALL YOUR SITTERS? WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED IN THE PROCESS OF PHOTOGRAPHING THEM?

I was at first editing work for my upcoming book SHE and as I was spreading all the prints on my studio floor, I realized how many I had that dealt with the sense of being inside looking out. The idea started brewing in my head. I was also spending a lot of time in the kitchen staring out the window over the counter and I realized that I was always seeing my neighbor in her kitchen across both our backyards, also at her window and it was strangely and eerily beautiful.

I posted a photograph that I had made a few years earlier on Instagram asking people within a 30-minute drive from Brookline (where I live), to message me if they were willing to collaborate in having their portraits made through the window – while keeping the safe physical distancing. A new project about connecting across barriers emerged. The circle kept growing. It humbled me how many people were willing to be part of this, but also how important the human interaction we often took for granted, was – for both of us on either side of the window and of the camera. Despite the fact that we only communicated across a physical barrier, we really and truly made a connection. The sense of being inside or outside was blurred. I am outside and looking in, but seeing the outside reflected onto the person in front of me. Depending on where I stood, we could even overlap, connecting us on many levels, metaphorically and personally despite the physical barrier between us.

I guess the main challenge I faced – but that made the whole project so much more interesting for me – is how to maintain an intimacy in the portraits despite the barrier between us.

But luckily no one was in a rush, so I spent time with people, and it was beautiful. I think that was one of the silver linings of those early Covid days: no one was in a rush, and everyone craved a human connection.

HAVE YOU RESPONDED TO OTHER GLOBAL EVENTS IN YOUR WORK? HOW HAS THIS EXPERIENCE AFFECTED YOUR ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

I do respond to global events in my work – it makes dealing with them a bit easier. I literally became a photographer full time after September 11 as I mentioned earlier.

In 2006 I got stuck (with my four children) in the war between Israel and Hezbollah. We managed to escape but the experience traumatized me – it was awful. I decided to go back when the war was over (and my kids were safely back home in Boston), and photograph the aftermath of war. That was very important work for me.

In 2014, after noticing how many Syrian refugees were on the streets of Beirut, I decided to tell their stories through my photography. The refugee problem had not yet reached the magnitude it has since reached in Europe. It was not yet all over the news at all times, but in Lebanon, it had quietly started.

Then now... during the pandemic, I also needed to find a creative outlet and be able to tell the story of those unique moments we were living, and I was grateful that I came up with a project that made those days a bit more bearable.

On August 4, 2020, there were massive explosions in the port of Beirut. A large part of the city was destroyed, over 200 people died, 6,000 were injured, and 300,000 displaced. It was very important for me to react quickly and find a way to use my art to help. I partnered with Social & Economic Action for

Lebanon (SEAL) in offering 2 photographs to raise funds for SEAL's Beirut Emergency Fund. (SEAL is a Lebanese American non-profit non-political organization, and all funds will be used to support local non-governmental organizations and provide relief assistance). I was humbled by people's quick response, including the Cornell Fine Arts Museum who stepped up to the plate right away (thank you!). It was incredibly moving for me to witness people's generosity and kindness, helping me raise \$67,000 through the print sales alone in less than a week.

THE IMAGES IN THIS EXHIBITION ARE BEAUTIFUL, FULL OF COLOR AND LIFE, AND YET THEY CAPTURE THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES DURING A PERIOD OF ISOLATION AND UNCERTAINTY WHILE IN QUARANTINE. WORKS LIKE SUSAN, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, CELEBRATES THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE WHILE JAYNE, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, MAY SIGNAL THE LATER STAGE OF LIFE. WHAT DO YOU WANT VIEWERS TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE IMAGES, ESPECIALLY AS WE REFLECT ON A YEAR THAT HAS ALTERED LIFE AROUND THE WORLD?

While in the rest of my work I focus on girlhood and womanhood in a more linear manner, by collaborating with young women the ages of my daughters as they grow up and go through life, in this project it was important to include everyone. I thought of the virus as an equalizer. It affected everyone: women, men, kids, older people, babies. And many of us went through all sorts of milestones and celebrations while on lockdown: birthdays, graduations, weddings, funerals, births, etc. My daughter graduated online. From the people represented here: Susan had her baby; Sharon lost her husband; Julianna's wedding kept getting postponed; everyone had a story. My parents in Lebanon were also on lockdown. It was an incredibly unifying moment – it also brought families together,

as one can see in some of the images. I found people's resilience humbling and inspiring, as we all adjusted to the new normal.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE IN THESE PHOTOGRAPHS? THERE IS A STRONG SENSE OF COMPOSITION, COLOR, AND STRUCTURE IN THE IMAGES—IS THERE MORE TO THE JUXTAPOSITION OF PEOPLE AND THE BUILDINGS THEY INHABIT?

I have photographed people in their spaces in previous projects, and then later young women in relationship to the more global backdrop they find themselves in, in my most recent work SHE. This work almost combined everything. I am photographing people inside their homes, but I am outside. The windows and the doors became natural frames for the photographs, but the reflections of the outside on the inside made for more complex stories and ultimately, I am also photographing in relationship to the outside that is reflected in. In many ways this complexity reflects the complicated layers of the moments we are living in, and the blurriness of it all.

As time went by, the colors of the landscape started changing, so there is also a sense of the passage of time. The greenery became more prevalent, flowers were blooming, but also people were now more used to the “new normal” and they were dressing up for the shoots, turning the whole experience into a bit more into a performance, with the window or the door acting like the stage.

THERE IS A FASCINATING PLAY WITH REFLECTIONS AND LIGHT IN PHOTOGRAPHS LIKE MARIE, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND CYRUS, BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS. THESE REFLECTIONS ALLOW THE VIEWER TO SHARE YOUR POINT OF VIEW. IS THIS AN INTENTIONAL CHOICE OR IS IT THE RESULT OF YOU WORKING WITH

THE SITTERS AT A PARTICULAR MOMENT? HOW MUCH IS PLANNED AND HOW MUCH IS SPONTANEOUS?

Nothing was planned. I always show up having no idea what to expect, but as I mentioned above the landscape was changing and becoming more colorful. Also as time passed and I had a better feel for the project and what I was doing, but also as people were now starting to get out of their comfortable home clothing and their sweats, they often asked me what to wear. I would suggest they bring a few colorful options of clothes they like and feel comfortable in. As a result, they sometimes would have a variety of clothes to show me and we would work it all together once the shoot starts and after I become more familiar with the situation. There is often so much reflection that it takes a while to get it right in terms of placement of the subject (and of myself), and communication with the person inside is important. In the 2 photographs you mentioned, once I started shooting, I realized how much red was reflected both on Marie and Cyrus, and we selected red for them to wear. It is a collaboration and a treat to build the photograph together.

ARE THERE ANY ANECDOTES OF SPECIFIC PHOTOGRAPHS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE WITH US?

I have many but I will share a couple:

Julianna and Christian were supposed to get married in April and the wedding kept getting postponed. She wanted to be photographed at the window with her wedding gown, but Christian wasn't allowed to see her, the dress, or the photo. At some point, I photographed them together. She wrapped him from behind with her gown on (he couldn't see it), and he became emotional and started crying. It was a beautiful moment – I started crying too. They got married on Labor Day weekend and I could finally share the photograph.

As for Susan, I knew her husband Raffy from when he was little, and his mother used to sometimes bring him over when she babysat my kids. As my kids grew up and life changed for everyone, I lost touch with the family. He reached out to me on Instagram, when he saw my project, and asked me if I would like to photograph his wife, Susan, who was eight months pregnant. Of course, I did, and then I went back and photographed her after she had baby Violette. Not only was I honored to be part of this milestone with them and to memorialize it for them, I was also delighted to have reconnected with a family I truly cherished.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

I found that sometimes, difficult moments bring beauty and humanity to all of us. Many times, when I arrived to someone's house, I would find a little gift for me hanging at the door – chocolate, roses, cards, artwork, messages on beautiful rocks, etc. It was very touching and made me appreciate our need for connectivity and for each other, on either side of the window.

If we all come out of this healthy, I hope we remember what this time offered us on the personal level, but also on the global and political level. I hope that we can keep that empathy, kindness, and interconnectivity alive in us.

THANK YOU, RANIA, FOR TALKING WITH ME ABOUT YOUR PRACTICE AND ABOUT THIS BODY OF WORK.



Mia and Jun, Allston, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
36.8 x 44 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Marie, Cambridge, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Nadav, Brookline, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Austin, Boston, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
36.8 x 44 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Leyla, Somerville, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
25.25 x 30 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Lucy, Newton, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Susan, Salem, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Susan, Baby Violette, and Raffy, Salem, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
25.25 x 30 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Lucy, Boston, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
25.25 x 30 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Marina, Brookline, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
36.8 x 44 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Cyrus, Brookline, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
36.8 x 44 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Julianna, Lynn, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Jayne, Boston, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Diana and Chris, Watertown, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
25.25 x 30 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Anna and Sophia, Marblehead, Massachusetts
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020
36.8 x 44 in.
Image courtesy of the Artist



Orly and Ruth, Boston, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Wendy and Timmy, Newton, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Aliya, Worcester, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Ellie and Megan, Cambridge, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Cam and Jared, Netwon, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Seth and Eliza, Brookline, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Minty, Kayla, Leyah, Layla, Cambridge, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Sydney, Nathalie and Sunny the Dog, Weston, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Loretta and Camilla, Newton, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Sally, Ella, Tori, Hingham, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Linda, Watertown, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 25.25 x 30 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Tracy, Worcester, Massachusetts
 Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
 2020
 36.8 x 44 in.
 Image courtesy of the Artist



Cyrus, Brookline, Massachusetts (detail)
Archival Pigment print on Baryta Paper
2020

36.8 x 44 in.

Image courtesy of the Artist

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