

Rania Matar

// Orin Zahra

In 2019, NMWA presented the exhibition *Live Dangerously*, featuring photographs that portray and celebrate women in the natural world. Three works by Rania Matar (b. 1964, Lebanon) were on loan to the exhibition. These large-scale photographs, from her ongoing series "SHE" (2017–present), depict women in their early twenties in lush, colorful, textured landscapes in the United States and the Middle East.

Through generous gifts from museum benefactors in consultation with NMWA curators, all three photographs

are now part of the museum's collection. The purchase of *Rayven, Miami Beach, Florida* (2019) was made possible through the support of Sunny Scully Alsup and Elva Ferrarigraham, two members of the NMWA Advisory Board. *Yara, Cairo, Egypt* (2019) and *Lea #1 Beirut, Lebanon* (2019) were purchased with funds donated by the Heather and Robert Keane Family Foundation. Heather Keane, a museum supporter and avid admirer of Matar's art, learned of this effort through longtime patron Belinda de Gaudemar. These three acquisitions are testament to the networks of collectors,

Matar's personal trajectory from Beirut to Boston has shaped her identity and palpably informs her art.

patrons, and artists who continue to help the museum build and enrich its collection.

SHE

The Lebanese Palestinian American artist, born and raised in Beirut, is now based in the U.S. Matar's personal trajectory from Beirut to Boston has shaped her identity and palpably informs her art. When Matar embarked on "SHE," her daughters had left home to attend university and enter the workforce, leading the artist to pose questions about how women face societal expectations. Unlike her earlier series, which showed teenage girls in



Rania Matar, *Lea #1, Beirut, Lebanon*, from the series "SHE," 2019; Archival pigment print, 37 x 44 in.; NMWA, Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Heather and Robert Keane Family Foundation

Rania Matar, *Yara, Cairo, Egypt*, from the series "SHE," 2019; Archival pigment print, 44 x 37 in.; NMWA, Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Heather and Robert Keane Family Foundation

their rooms, the images in "SHE" reveal a more fully realized physicality. As her subjects mature, the women form complex relationships with environments outside the familiarity of their childhood homes.

Matar's figures are agents of creation: as sentient, self-fashioning individuals, they construct their own identities in collaboration with the artist. In *Yara*, the young woman stands partially concealed in the crevasses of a banyan tree. Matar had noticed that Yara's long limbs fit in total harmony with the trunk's vertical shoots. Originally dressed in long sleeves, Yara changed into a sleeveless garment from her own wardrobe to emphasize the relationship between her body and the curvilinear branches. Matar recalls, "It was as [though] she became one with the tree on her own."

Owing to her initial training as an architect, Matar is acutely perceptive of the character of a place, teasing out its unique qualities in her sensitive portraits. *Lea #1* was photographed at La Maison Rose, a dilapidated nineteenth-century mansion in Beirut, abandoned since the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). Lea stands in an exterior passageway overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Dirt and grime cover the ground, cracks in the walls reveal their material foundations underneath, and the once-pristine coral balustrade hints at the paint color to which the landmark owes its name. Signs of neglect and decay throughout the composition contribute to the photograph's melancholic beauty. For Matar, this image is a symbol of a new generation—young people who did



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not personally experience the war but have grown up with its collective memory.

Matar at NMWA

Matar's work has been featured at the museum in *Live Dangerously* as well as the 2016 exhibition *She Who Tells A Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*. Over the years, Matar has also participated in virtual and

in-person public programming with enthusiastic response from the museum's audiences. The photographs from "SHE" mark the first works by the artist to enter the collection, augmenting the museum's holdings of contemporary photography and work by artists from the Middle East and its diasporas. Of these recent acquisitions, Matar states, "I am immensely honored that the three photographs became part of the permanent collection of a museum that celebrates women. This work is by a woman and about women, about their majestic

beauty, their strength, their power, their vulnerability, their voice, all at once, and I cannot think of a better home for them."

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Text is adapted from the author's essay "Wanderesses" for the forthcoming book *Rania Matar: SHE* (Radius Books, 2021).