



In 'Sally, Ella, Tori', a photograph from Rania Matar's On Either Side of the Window exhibition, she uses the reflection of tree branches to look like antlers above the heads of the women Photos Rania Matar

Photographer gives us a window on to the lives of those who felt trapped by the Covid-19 lockdown

► Rania Matar tells **India Stoughton** how project helped her to connect with people during first wave of pandemic

It's easy to forget, more than a year after the first wave of the coronavirus swept the world, just how isolating and strange the early weeks of lockdown were. Billions of people were suddenly confined to their homes, isolated from relatives, friends and colleagues. Long-awaited events – holidays, graduations, weddings – were cancelled. Worlds narrowed to the walls of homes that had suddenly become offices and schools, sanctuaries and prisons.

Last spring, when the first Covid-related lockdown began in Massachusetts, Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar felt an urge to document the strange and isolating period. Within the first weeks, she asked in a post on her Instagram page if anyone within a 48-kilometre radius of her home in the town of Brookline would be willing to be photographed through the windows of their homes.

"I got flooded with replies. I never expected that," she recalls. "It proved to me how much people were craving that same connectivity that I was."

Standing in people's gardens, safely distanced and wrapped up against the cold, Matar photographed dozens of strangers trapped behind glass, cut off from the outside world. With no idea how long the restrictions would last, she worked feverishly to document the strange period of limbo, sometimes visiting two or three homes in one day.

Launched this week, Matar's solo exhibition, *On Either Side of the Window: Portraits during Covid-19*, on show at Cornell Fine Arts Museum in Florida, provides a moving overview of a lost year, capturing people who weathered months of fear and uncertainty, and navigated stasis and change, isolation and connection, as the pandemic shrunk their worlds down to a few square metres.

Identified by name and location, some of her subjects look out at the world from which they have been cut off. Others keep their gazes fixed inside their homes, as though even their thoughts are locked away.

In *Sally, Ella, Tori*, a woman and two red-headed girls stare pensively out at their garden. A reflection of the view they are witnessing makes the bare branches of winter trees splay skywards above their heads like antlers.

Throughout the series, Matar plays with reflections in ingenious ways, incorporating them into her compositions. They play an evocative dual role in her portraits, revealing the world outside the window at the same time as they conceal the interior of the houses, creating a double-exposure-like effect. Her subjects, cut off from the natural world outside, are simultaneously subsumed by it.

The careful balance posed an interesting technical challenge. "What was interesting was the more light there was

outside, the harder it was for me to see the person in the window, so it's like the opposite of photography, where you need light to shoot," says Matar, who found it challenging to ensure she was not visible in the reflections.

As the months passed, leaves began to unfurl on the trees and plants burst into bloom. The photographs in the exhibition reveal the passing of time through shifting reflections of the changing landscapes outside people's windows.

In the spring-like *Austin*, a young woman in a pink dress is framed by the window set into her wooden front door. A bunch of bright tulips in the foreground match the colour of her dress and a spray of white blooms give the portrait a posed, festive feel. A scatter of bright yellow flowers reflected from the garden overlay her face, partially concealing her from view.

By contrast, *Marie* has an autumnal feel. A grey-haired woman is captured in profile, the red of her blouse echoing the fiery hue of the maple leaves outside her window.

Matar, who specialises in portraiture and has focused for many years on girls and women, decided that for this ongoing project she would photograph everybody who wanted to participate. To date, she has visited more than 150 houses, photographing women and men, children and old people, couples and whole families with their pets.

She took a ladder with her on shoots and would often circle the house looking for the best window to capture a striking photograph. "A lot of times I didn't know the people and I never knew what to expect, so it was really going there, experiencing what was happening at the moment and making the best of it," she says.

More than just an artistic undertaking, the project became a means of connecting with people.



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RAANIA MATAR
Photographer

"People were excited to actually have someone come to their door, so I would have little trinkets hanging there for me, and that was so touching," says Matar. "Somebody did a little painting for me. Somebody left a chocolate. Somebody gave me a bouquet of flowers ... There was something happening that was pretty important, for me and for the people on the other side."

Intimate and haunting, Matar's portraits convey a sense that despite being cut off from each other, her subjects are linked by a shared experience, immersed in a state of suspension, waiting for life to resume.

"There's always this rhetoric that defines a lot of my work because I come from two cultures that are seemingly at war with each other," she says. "I live in the US and all you hear about the Middle East is horrors. So in all my work, I'm trying to focus on that shared humanity."

"At that time my father, my parents, my friends were all in lockdown in Lebanon and I'm on lockdown here, so there was this shared experience that was very universal. There was none of that 'them-versus-us' anymore. The world shut down."

But as people began to adjust to life in lockdown, the way Matar's subjects approached the photo shoots changed. "Early on people were in their sweats and their pyjamas, but

as time went by, people started dressing up for the shoots and there was an element of performance," she says. "In the beginning, it felt like there was a heaviness, like time being still, and I think as we all adjusted to that, it became the new normal."

In one of the exhibition's most dramatic and evocative photos, *Mia and Jun*, the woman is dressed in a dramatic red evening gown and the man, behind her, wears a deep red shirt. They stand at their back door, hands splayed against the glass like prisoners desperate for escape.

Matar says while life appeared to be on pause, the people she photographed experienced birthdays and graduations, weddings and funerals over the course of the year.

Among the most moving images are a rare repeated portrait of the same person. Taken through an open window, *Susan* captures a pregnant woman in a long white dress, her face concealed by the curtain of hair she is brushing with a large green hairbrush. In the next photograph, taken through the same window, she stands breastfeeding her baby, her face bathed in sunlight, as her husband brushes her hair. The series is a poignant reminder that even in lockdown, life goes on.

A virtual tour of On Either Side of the Window is on view at my.matterport.com until May 9