

Orlando Sentinel

# TRAVEL & ARTS

*New expanded section: More travel and arts coverage, plus added book reviews and puzzles inside*



The blurriness in some images, caused by reflections, encapsulates the uncertain times, says artist Rania Matar: "There was a blurriness in everything." Her photo "Cyrus, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2020" is on view as part of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum's "On Either Side of the Window" exhibition. **RANIA MATAR PHOTOS**

## A WINDOW ON THE WORLD

Reflective glances at a society separated by virus and glass



**Matthew J. Palm**  
*The Artistic Type*

**A**s the world divided itself into tiny, isolated "bubbles" during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, artist Rania Matar made an unexpected connection.

"I was staring across my yard at my neighbor in her kitchen, and I thought it was beautiful," says the Boston-area artist. "I had an a-ha moment."

During the next months, Matar would photograph hundreds of people through their windows — shielding from the invisible virus stalking the land. Her artistic documentation of the human response to the COVID-19 pandemic's forced isolation is on view in the 27 images



Faces reflect pandemic weariness in "Minty, Kayla, Leyah, Layla, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2020." The photograph by Rania Matar is on view at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum as part of the "On Either Side of the Window" exhibition.

of "On Either Side of the Window" at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College.

"These beautiful images emphasize the humanity of the sitters, the connection between them, and the particularities that make each human being unique," writes curator Gisela Carbonell in the exhibition catalog.

The connections were forged by the art; most of her subjects were unknown to the photographer before she showed up on their doorstep. Participants volunteered after Matar put out a call on social media, and the Boston Globe picked it up.

"I was overwhelmed with responses," she recalls. "Everybody wanted to be connected. Everybody felt isolated. They were happy to have someone come to the door."

Matar had been forewarned about the pandemic. Lebanese-American, she had visited her father in Lebanon in early March of

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## Palm

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2020 and found the country in the process of shutting down.

"I thought they were crazy," she says. "They were wearing masks, and sanitizer was everywhere."

Shortly afterward, the U.S. followed suit.

Although she usually works with film, Matar chose a digital camera for this endeavor.

"There's an immediacy to this," she says. "It was part of the experience."

She and her subjects would communicate through windows and over the phone as needed.

Often, the participants would leave her a treat on the doorstep: Chocolates, flowers, stones with inspiring messages.

"It was really very touching," she says.

The photos capture the conflicting feelings of the time; the artistic blurriness of window reflections calls to mind the uncertainty of those long weeks when the country was first shut down.

"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.," Cornell director Ena Heller writes



For her project, Rania Matar found volunteer subjects through social media. Here are "Sydney, Nathalie and Sunny the Dog, Weston, Massachusetts, 2020." **RANIA MATAR**

in the catalog. "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."

As the project continued, the collection as a whole took on an additional dimension.

"You could see the change of season and feel the passing of time,"

Matar says. An early image features a pregnant woman. Later, the woman is revisited — baby in her arms.

The passage of time also revealed people's changing behaviors during the pandemic.

"In the beginning, people would welcome me in their sweats and pajamas," Matar says. "Eventually, people started dressing up so there's an element of performance."

Besides the camera switch, Matar adapted in other ways.

"I had to learn to get that intimacy from the subjects without being close to them," she says. "There was a physical barrier between us."

Along with the artistry, the exhibition shines a light on our shared humanity.

"Art has the power to heal; it helps us put ourselves in others' shoes



Rania Matar photographed "Mia and Jun" in Allston, Massachusetts. **RANIA MATAR**

as we examine the past and figure out a path forward," Carbonell writes in the catalog. "These images are reminders of the resilience of people across the country and around the world."

For Matar, pursuing "On Either Side of the Window" was part of her own resilience.

"It has kept me invigorated and connected," she says. "Eventually, when all this is over, I would like to look at the work with some distance ... and see what I see then."

She expects she will still find the strange dichotomy of an even stranger time.

"No matter what everybody's individual story is," she says, "we were all living a common story."

## 'On Either Side of the Window'

■ What: Rania Matar's photographic portraits during COVID-19

■ Where: Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College, 1000 Holt Ave. in Winter Park

■ When: Through May 9

■ Cost: Free

■ Info: rollins.edu/cfam

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