

EMILY AVERY-MILLER

Rania Matar

If you want a studio visit with Rania Matar, have your shoes on, your bag packed, and your passport up to date. Editing and printing may happen when she's in her home office in Boston, but for Matar, "making the picture is a fraction of the whole thing." How can that be? Peruse her vast catalog of portraits of girls and women in the U.S. and Middle East, and you'll see that this logic-bending paradox is exactly the magic that makes Matar's work so captivating. Matar wants us to see the model and her surroundings in the frame before we sense the artist behind the camera. And yet she succeeds at this because she connects to her subjects so deeply.

Matar started her photography career two decades ago. She enrolled in a photography class because she enjoyed taking pictures of her growing family. "I didn't know I would fall in love with the whole medium," she says, and it "quickly went beyond making Christmas cards of my kids." In the fallout of September 11, Matar recognized in the media and in her

communities "a rhetoric of 'them' versus 'us.'" As a woman who had left her home in Lebanon at age 20, and now had a home in the U.S., Matar's "hyphenated culture" gave her an insight that the world needed.

She traveled with her cousin to a Palestine refugee camp in Lebanon and took photos. "It made me think so much about where I come from and how much people don't know about this area," she said. The photography she started on her first trip to the refugee camp evolved to her first book, *Ordinary Lives* (2009), which highlights the lives of women and girls in Lebanon.

Early in her career, Matar says another photographer told her that she should achieve the same intimacy in her portraits and documentary photos that she did with her pictures of her own children. It's clear that Matar embraced this advice. *Nursing, Bourj El Shamali Camp, Tyre, Lebanon*, 2005 shows a mother sitting on a blanket and nursing an infant while a toddler reclines beside her, with her baby doll on her lap. While they are inextricably entwined with



Above: Photographer Rania Matar. Photo: Helena Goessens.

Below: Rania Matar, *Sana'a and Wafa's, Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut, Lebanon*, 2017, archival pigment print, 28.8 x 36". Courtesy of the artist and Robert Klein Gallery.

the world around them, these women and children hold worlds unto themselves.

This sense of both physical and figurative interiority was central to her next book, *A Girl and Her Room* (2012), which features adolescent women from the U.S. and the Middle East in the home spaces that they call their own. They lounge on their beds, beside walls covered in magazine clippings. Cosmetics and mirrors hint at teenage self-consciousness, while plush toys serve as reminders that girlhood is not far behind. Where the young women are physically goes hand in hand with where they are in their development.

In this way, the location of Matar's subjects is very important, yet it's also significant that she isn't the one in control of that space. The interiors of *A Girl and Her Room* are distinctively theirs. For more recent projects, like *SHE* (2021), Matar's models chose their settings and the clothes they wore. Making them feel comfortable was important to her, Matar says. Many of them were women the artist met by chance and asked on the spot if she could arrange a shoot with them. They hold precarious poses, perched on balconies or boulders but they are empowered rather than exposed.

The singularity of each portrait is only part of its power. When one is allowed to look so closely and clearly into the worlds of dozens of women or girls of a certain age, one starts to see what they share as well as what makes them distinct. Matar sees what she shares with them, too. The evolution of her projects recapitulates her own development, including the second round of development she is living



through her daughters. When shooting for *A Girl and Her Room*, which she started in the U.S., Matar felt compelled to return to Lebanon, where she had been living when she was the same age as her models. That journey brought it "full circle," as Matar puts it. Her subsequent projects trace phases of girlhood and womanhood chronologically, in step with her daughters and echoing her own transitions.

Matar's aesthetic echoes her experience. For example, the long flowing hair that drifts through many of her photos is a motif she (at first subconsciously) picked up when she started to lose her own hair. Texture in general is important to her, she says. She carves portraits of her homes from rocky New England



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meadows and concrete Lebanese cityscapes. In *Aya, Batroun, Lebanon*, 2019 the glassy water turns Aya's drifting curls into a craggy mountain. Her delicate hand softens the stone beneath it. The photo foregrounds texture to the point that form falls away.

Where is the boundary between a curve and an edge? Between a reflection and a portrait? Between the home one resides in and the home that resides in one's heart? Between girlhood and womanhood? Matar pushes one to ask these questions, and then pushes one beyond them. Her lens trains viewers' eyes to the sinewy strands that tether daughters to their mothers, that bind bodies to the Earth, that tie the experiences of

Above, left: *Lea, La Maison Rose, Beirut, Lebanon*, 2019, archival pigment print, 28.8 x 36" (this image is also the cover image for Matar's recent book, *SHE*, 2021). Courtesy of the artist, Robert Klein Gallery, and Radius Books.

Above, right: *Aya, Batroun, Lebanon*, 2019, archival pigment print, 28.8 x 36". Courtesy of the artist and Robert Klein Gallery.

Below: *Nursing, Bourj El Shamali Camp, Tyre, Lebanon*, 2005, archival pigment print, 16 x 24". Courtesy of the artist and Robert Klein Gallery.

a teenager in Brookline, MA, to one in Beirut. Matar's catalog sweeps the texture of human lives, where there is beauty both in the distinctions on the surface and also in the substrate that holds everyone together.

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