



Photos: © Rania Matar

In her *Where Do I Go?* series, photographer Rania Matar deals with questions of growing up and identity for young women in Lebanon. In March the project earned her the Leica Women Foto Project Award 2022

“ALL THE IMAGES ARE ALMOST SELF-PORTRAITS.”

INTERVIEW

This March, Leica Camera USA handed out the Leica Women Foto Project Awards for the third time. Rania Matar is one of the winners. We spoke with her about her very personal winning project and the meaning of awards today.

LFI: You are a winner of the Leica Women Foto Project Award 2022. What meaning does this recognition have for you?

RANIA MATAR: I had submitted a brand new, for me very personal project and receiving the award was very validating. It's a stamp of approval, that encourages me to keep going with this work in the future.

LFI: What has changed for you since winning the award?

MATAR: I have travelled to Lebanon for three weeks and added more images to the series. I plan on going back next month. Because of the award, the project has received attention in the press, and has boosted my will to keep working on it.

LFI: What are your new projects?

MATAR: I am still in the midst of this project here in Lebanon; but as I also live in the United States and love to collaborate with women there,

I'm also working on a series I am titling: *Becoming: Here and There*. The work hasn't been published yet.

LFI: What role do photo contests play?

MATAR: Contests are a good way for photographers to get their work seen. However, photographers have to be selective in what they apply for. There are many contests available, and I tend to recommend to people to apply to the ones that can advance their career in one way or another; put their work in front of a juror they would love to show their work to, a curator, gallery, publisher, etc. Or important contests that provide visibility, validate the work and offer a grant. It can get overwhelming to navigate all the competitions now available and expensive to enter some of them, especially if they require the photographers to frame and ship their work.

LFI: What is your winning series, *Where Do I Go?*, all about?

MATAR: *Where Do I Go?* is a natural and organic progression of my project *She*, that has just been published in

book form by Radius Books. The past two years have been extremely difficult in Lebanon, starting with the 2019 uprising protesting corruption and inflation, then the coronavirus and months of lockdown that proved disastrous for the country, and finally the August 4, 2020 Port of Beirut explosions, that caused further catastrophic damage. The country has been spiraling into the abyss ever since. My focus shifted to Lebanon. During recent trips to Lebanon, I found hope and inspiration among the younger generation of women. Instead of focusing on destruction, I found myself in awe of them, their creativity, strength, beauty, and resilience despite all.

LFI: What role did the fact that you grew up in Lebanon play?

MATAR: The work is very personal. I grew up during the Lebanese Civil War and, in 1984 when things became untenable in Beirut and I was able to travel to the US to go →



“THERE IS MORE AWARENESS ABOUT THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN.”



to college, I left. There was a huge emigration of the youth happening at the time. It seems that the past year has seen a similar trend among the younger generation, with many trying to leave the country for college or work. It's tragic. The work feels like history is repeating itself – all the images are almost self-portraits.

LFI: How did you choose the women and girls for the series?



MATAR: There are some women I met who inspired me, others that I knew from previous collaborations, and others that I was introduced to. Also, before I go to Lebanon, I usually post on Instagram asking women to contact me if they're interested in collaborating with me. I'm grateful that they share their stories with me.

LFI: Your images often contain contradictions. Is life in Lebanon full of contradictions for young women?

MATAR: Lebanon is such a complicated place, full of contradictions for

everybody. I often refer to it as almost schizophrenic. It is beautiful and glamorous, but also tragic and decaying all at once.

LFI: You worked as an architect, but then decided to work as a photographer. What inspired such a change?

MATAR: I worked as an architect before I fell in love with photography – initially to take better pictures of my children. After September 11, with the divisive news in the US about the Middle East and the “them v/s us” rhetoric, I became interested in telling a different story of the Middle East, so I started taking pictures in Lebanon.

LFI: How do you think women photographers shape photography?

MATAR: Women bring another voice to the realm of photography, and often bring their own vision and voices about womanhood, girlhood, motherhood, becoming, through lived experiences. I think we are living in a great time, and things are starting to happen for women artists. I also teach photography and, in recent years, I've regularly had more women in my classes than men. There is also much more awareness about the historical underrepresentation of women. And then, just like this award proves, there are also more venues focusing on giving a voice and a platform to women artists, and to empowering them. We're on the right track!

INTERVIEW: Katrin Iwanczuk

RANIA MATAR Born and brought up in Lebanon, Matar moved to the USA in 1984. She studied Architecture and later Photography, at, among others, the New England School of Photography. She received the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2018. In 2021 her book, *She* (Radius Books), was published: a series of portraits that shows women and being a woman beyond borders limitations. Matar teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

LWFP AWARD Starting August 18, women photographers can apply for the 4th edition of the award. Information available at: leica-camera.com/en-US/leica-women-foto-project-award