

Introduction of Rania Matar's SHE by J. Sybylla Smith for *Got Punctum?*

Welcome Rania, though we are neighbors and friends it is a rare treat to have this time together to focus on your creative practice and your latest monograph, SHE.

How I see your work could be titled Majestic Sovereignty.

I wrestled with the myriad associations your work brings to mind and settled on a single element - water. Water is about so many contradictory things - freedom, passage, diaspora, leaving, healing, and arriving. Yet all the metaphors and analogies your images evoke can be contained in this life-sustaining force.

By way of explanation, I want to begin by sharing a poem by a fellow Lebanese artist Kahil Gibran

It is said that before entering the sea
A river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.
Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.

Fear Kahil Gibran

Rania, you and your imagery defy simple categorization. Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan described you as a woman of two worlds in your book *L'Enfant-Femme*. Curator Kristen Gresh describes your work there as personal, poetic, precise, and perceptive." In SHE, Curator Orin Zehra speaks of you as a wanderess.

I see you as a gracious warrior. I believe your images create a bridge, a structure built of relationships, capable of providing a safe passage and an exchange of wordless communication, transported in both directions, simultaneously. You animate Persian poet Rumi when he states, "I have no words. Let the soul speak with the articulation of a face."

I love Mark Alice Durant's description in his essay, *Goddesses Everywhere*: Mark writes, "Matar's camera gathers and stores the reflecting light, and two years later, standing in front of her image in a gallery in Baltimore, Samir's, through Matar - or maybe the other way around - is offering answers to questions I have yet to formulate."

This circularity between yourself and your sitters, this flow, this exchange of emotion, builds a bridge - one where you allow your viewers to see themselves reflected in the face of a stranger. And your sitters, through your lens, see themselves connected to you, and to the wild possibilities of their yet-to-be-lived futures.

Photography is a cumulative art - there is power in the sequence of images, sitting side by side. Your images occupy space between a document and a portrait - they are actions based on feeling, they become a dynamic, a compilation of awareness and observation, and they form a kindred hood.

You have one consistent directive, don't smile... this one request provides an invitation, a portal, a passage, a bridge. Each sitter, each young womanly subject, steps through a doorway, leaving behind their role as subject and fully embracing the realm of content...they move from a place of performance, expectation, compliance, niceness - all the notions of being a good girl...pretense falls, a quieter, intimate, vulnerable interior space fills your frame, you provide a threshold, allowing yourself, your sitter, and your viewer to be in their being, their being will come, the coming will be, becoming, becoming the ocean.

Critic Jerry Saltz notes in *How To Be An Artist*, that "a work of art is an estuary of material, personal, public and aesthetic ideas. Let its water pass through its banks to reach you."

You invite us to see what is behind your image. You bring us a swirling river of content. We wade in it's beauty, sensuality, timidity, defiance, desirability, listlessness, and purpose. You provide the connective experience that bridges differences in culture, religion, geography, and nationality. You illuminate our collective humanity. As Kahil Gibran reminds us - none of us can go backward in existence. This is why I consider you a warrior. You move yourself, your sitters, and us through the tumultuous waters of becoming, individually and as a collective. Courageous, facing forward.

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