Rose among the thorns

The Palestinian refugee who appears in all of photographer Rania Matar's projects.

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Rania Matar, "Samira, Jodi, Rania, Lebanon," 2011. The Institute of Contemporary Art recently acquired three photographs of Samira. Photo courtesy Rania Matar.

Samira lives with her family in Bourj El-Barajneh, a Palestinian refugee camp outside Beirut. Her sister now has a child; that makes four generations who have lived together in tight quarters there since 1948.

"Born in a refugee camp with no hope of going anywhere," said Boston-based photographer Rania Matar. Samira, 24, has been Rania's favorite model for almost 20 years. Her grandparents fled to Lebanon during the Nakba, a mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the Arab-Israeli war. Palestinian Christians were eligible for Lebanese citizenship, but most Muslim refugees, such as Samira's grandparents, ended up in camps. Her parents were raised there. So was she.

"These alleyways are congested with raw concrete block housing, and it's pretty rough," said Rania over Zoom. She was born in Lebanon, and visits often.

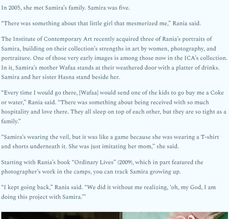
Starting in 1949 at Bourj El-Barajneh, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "Building work was undertaken randomly, with no opportunity to increase the foundations. Roads became extremely narrow and infrastructure was put under heavy stress."

Rania is also the daughter of Palestinians, but her parents were Christians who became Lebanese citizens. She led a more sheltered childhood, although she grew up during the Lebanese civil war. Her mother died when she was three, and her father raised her.

"He wanted to protect me during the civil war because the Palestinians were involved," Rania said. "He always told me, 'You're Lebanese. The Palestinian problem is mine and not yours.'"

The photographer is keenly aware of "the Palestinian problem" since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, killing more than 1,200 people, mostly civilians. More than 34,300 people in Gaza have died, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, since Israel invaded the territory.

But in her youth, Rania identified as Lebanese. She moved to the U.S. as a young woman in 1984. It wasn't until Sept. 11, 2001, and the surge of fear and rhetoric toward Arabs that followed, that her Palestinian roots stirred. That's when she first began visiting camps such as Bourj El-Barajneh to document the lives of women and children refugees.



Rania Matar, "Samira (in the Middle), Hasna, and Wafaa, Bourj El-Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut," 2005. Photo courtesy Rania Matar.

In 2005, she met Samira's family. Samira was five.

"There was something about that little girl that mesmerized me," Rania said.

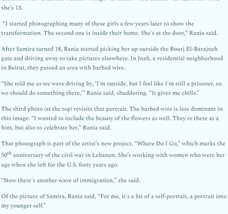
The Institute of Contemporary Art recently acquired three of Rania's portraits of Samira, building on their collection's strengths in art by women, photography, and portraiture. One of those very early images is among those now in the ICA's collection. In it, Samira's mother Wafaa stands at their weathered door with a platter of drinks. Samira and her sister Hasna stand beside her.

"Every time I would go there, [Wafaa] would send one of the kids to go buy me a Coke or water," Rania said. "There was something about being received with so much hospitality and love there. They all sleep on top of each other, but they are so tight as a family."

"Samira's wearing the veil, but it was like a game because she was wearing a T-shirt and shorts underneath it. She was just imitating her mom," she said.

Starting with Rania's book "Ordinary Lives" (2009, which in part featured the photographer's work in the camps, you can track Samira growing up.

"I kept going back," Rania said. "We did it without me realizing, 'oh, my God, I am doing this project with Samira.'"



Rania Matar, "Samira at 13, Bourj El-Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut," 2013. Photo courtesy Rania Matar.

In the second photo in the ICA collection, Rania and Samira reprise a picture from Rania's "L'Enfant-Femme" project (2016), featuring girls coming of age in the U.S. and Lebanon. The "L'Enfant-Femme" image was taken when Samira was 12; in this one, she's 13.

"I started photographing many of these girls a few years later to show the transformation. The second one is inside their home. She's at the door," Rania said.

After Samira turned 18, Rania started picking her up outside the Bourj El-Barajneh gate and driving away to take pictures elsewhere. In Jnah, a residential neighborhood in Beirut, they passed an area with barbed wire.

"She told me as we were driving by, 'I'm outside, but I feel like I'm still a prisoner, so we should do something there,'" Rania said, shuddering. "It gives me chills."

The third photo (at the top) revisits that portrait. The barbed wire is less dominant in this image. "I wanted to include the beauty of the flowers as well. They're there as a hint, but also to celebrate her," Rania said.

That photograph is part of the artist's new project, "Where Do I Go," which marks the 50th anniversary of the civil war in Lebanon. She's working with women who were her age when she left for the U.S. forty years ago.

"Now there's another wave of immigration," she said.

Of the picture of Samira, Rania said, "For me, it's a bit of a self-portrait, a portrait into my younger self."

What does the partnership of photographer and model mean to Samira?

Rania Matar, "Samira for Gaza," Samira wears a keffiyeh, the Palestinian scarf, in support of Gaza, 2023. Photo courtesy Rania Matar

"She knows I'm also Palestinian. She knows I'm upset by what's happening right now. So there's something about it that's also personal," said Rania.

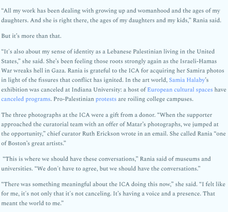
Then, too, there's the feeling of being seen. "I think it makes her feel like she's a young woman, not a Palestinian refugee," Rania said.

The photographer rang her subject up for a video chat, although it was late in Lebanon at the time we Zoomed. Samira speaks Arabic; her English is broken. Through Rania, I asked what this collaboration has meant to her. They spoke in Arabic. Rania translated:

"She said she loves seeing me. She wishes I could go photograph her every day so she could see me. She said I make her feel beautiful."

As they chatted, Rania exclaimed, "Oh my God," concern flooding her face.

"The ceiling fell in their place. The whole ceiling fell down," she said when they got off the phone. "They're staying with relatives."



Rania Matar, right, and Fadia, who runs the NGO (that introduced Rania to Samira's family), carry a portrait of Samira through the Bourj El-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp outside Beirut, Lebanon. Photo courtesy Rania Matar

Since Rania didn't realize for many years how Samira had become a signal subject for her, she only recently created a Samira page on her website.

"All my work has been dealing with growing up and womanhood and the ages of my daughters. And she is right there, the ages of my daughters and my kids," Rania said.

But it's more than that.

"It's also about my sense of identity as a Lebanese Palestinian living in the United States," she said. She's been feeling those roots strongly again as the Israeli-Hamas War wreaks hell in Gaza. Rania is grateful to the ICA for acquiring her Samira photos in light of the fissures that conflict has ignited. In the art world, Samia Halaby's exhibition was canceled at Indiana University; a host of European cultural spaces have canceled programs. Pro-Palestinian protests are roiling college campuses.

The three photographs at the ICA were a gift from a donor. "When the supporter approached the curatorial team with an offer of Matar's photographs, we jumped at the opportunity," chief curator Ruth Erickson wrote in an email. She called Rania "one of Boston's great artists."

"This is where we should have these conversations," Rania said of museums and universities. "We don't have to agree, but we should have the conversations."

"There was something meaningful about the ICA doing this now," she said. "I felt like for me, it's not only that it's not canceling. It's having a voice and a presence. That meant the world to me."

Rania isn't the only one whose voice and presence resonate in these photographs. So do those of a girl growing up in a refugee camp where the ceiling has collapsed.