



RANIA MATAR

The Middle East through women's eyes

BY VANESSA H. LARSON

The 10 Arab and Iranian photographers featured in “Louder Than Hearts” at the Middle East Institute’s gallery are not only all women, but their subjects are almost entirely female as well. This emphasis feels fitting for the first exhibition curated by Rania Matar, a photographer known for her nuanced, intimate portraits of women and girls in the Middle East and the United States.

The Boston-based Matar, a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient who has been widely displayed in museums, including D.C.’s National Museum of Women in the Arts, was also invited to

Resonant show features 10 female photographers

include her own work in the show.

It opens with six photos from her series “Where Do I Go? Fifty Years Later” commemorating the Lebanese civil war, which began in 1975. Matar — who was born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents and came to the United States at age 20, during the war — photographed young women who left the country in recent years amid its economic crisis and the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut port explosion.

“I almost look at them as self-portraits of my younger self,” Matar said in an interview in

Washington after the show opened. “I know exactly how they’re feeling, what they have to face — the choice to leave everything they have known.” (Visitors can scan a QR code for a 10-minute curator walk-through to hear Matar in her own words.)

The women in her photos seem calm and at peace, even defiant, despite the disorder and dysfunction around them. Matar collaborated with her subjects, capturing each in a spot in Lebanon to which they had a personal connection, in portraits that are staged without feeling contrived. One sits in the flower-strewn car-

cass of her car, which was burned during anti-government protests; another appears with her eyes closed, basking in the sun, as she sits in a red armchair surrounded by broken glass on an unfinished building terrace, an unspoiled view of the Mediterranean behind her.

On the adjacent wall, an installation of five photos and short phrases by Thana Farooq, from her series “How Shall We Greet the Sun,” provides a stark juxtaposition with Matar’s vibrant explosions of color. The Yemeni-born, Hague-based artist’s portrayals of female refugees in the Netherlands are shot in wintry browns and grays. It’s as if the color of the

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If you go

LOUDER THAN HEARTS: WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND IRAN

Middle East Institute Art Gallery, 1763 N St. NW. 202-785-1141. mei.edu.

Dates: Through Oct. 4.

Prices: Free.

Rania Matar’s “Farah (In Her Burnt Car), Abey, Lebanon” (2020), from the “Where Do I Go? Fifty Years Later” series. The subject’s car burned during anti-government protests.

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refugees' previous lives has been bleached out, emphasizing the loss of exile.

Matar, who began preparing the show in the fall, highlights Palestinian artists or subjects in several selections, with a deliberate emphasis on hopeful moments in Palestinian life. Particularly strong are five photos by Tanya Habjouqa, a Jordanian-born photographer living in East Jerusalem whose journalistic work has been published by The Washington Post.

In one image from 2013, a group of about 10 young women take a school field trip on a small motorboat off the Gaza coast, laughing and smiling with the boatman as a Palestinian flag flutters in the breeze. Behind the carefree ambiance are sober realities: The boat ride is the rare chance for the students to leave the enclave.

Safaa Khatib's 2018 series "The Braids Rebellion" tells a real-life story of underage female Palestinian prisoners in an Israeli prison who cut off their hair and in 2017 had it smuggled out to donate to cancer patients as an act of bodily resistance. Khatib, a Palestinian artist from the Galilee village of Kafr Kanna in Israel, photographed each of the unnamed women's braids, tied with pink ribbons, against a black background. A QR code links to audio of Arabic-language messages the prisoners' family members sent them via a radio program (with an English-language transcript).

Almost all the works are portraits of a kind, even if some, like the braids, are more symbolic. In depicting the Kurdish-led Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in northern Syria who helped rout the Islamic State, Iranian artist Newsha Tavakolian underscores their sacrifices: A 17-year-old fighter killed in the battle for Kobane is represented by a colorful scarf spread on the floor — the sole personal effect that was returned to her family after her death.

Two very different shots of women from the knees down convey startlingly different moods. Saudi American photographer Tasneem Alsultan — who like Habjouqa has also contributed to The Post — captures the excitement of a bride as she lifts up her voluminous wedding dress to reveal her hennaed ankles. In contrast, Heba Khalifa of Egypt offers perhaps the exhibition's most unsettling image: "Cactus" shows a woman's lower legs covered with pins and needles, highlighting body issues and social restrictions placed on women.

Many of the exhibition's subjects appear to have chosen how to present themselves. Shiva Kh-



TASNEEM ALSULTAN

Saudi American photographer Tasneem Alsultan's "Diversity Within Saudi Weddings," from the "Saudi Tales of Love" series (2015-ongoing). She is among 10 Arab and Iranian photographers featured in "Louder Than Hearts" at the Middle East Institute's gallery.

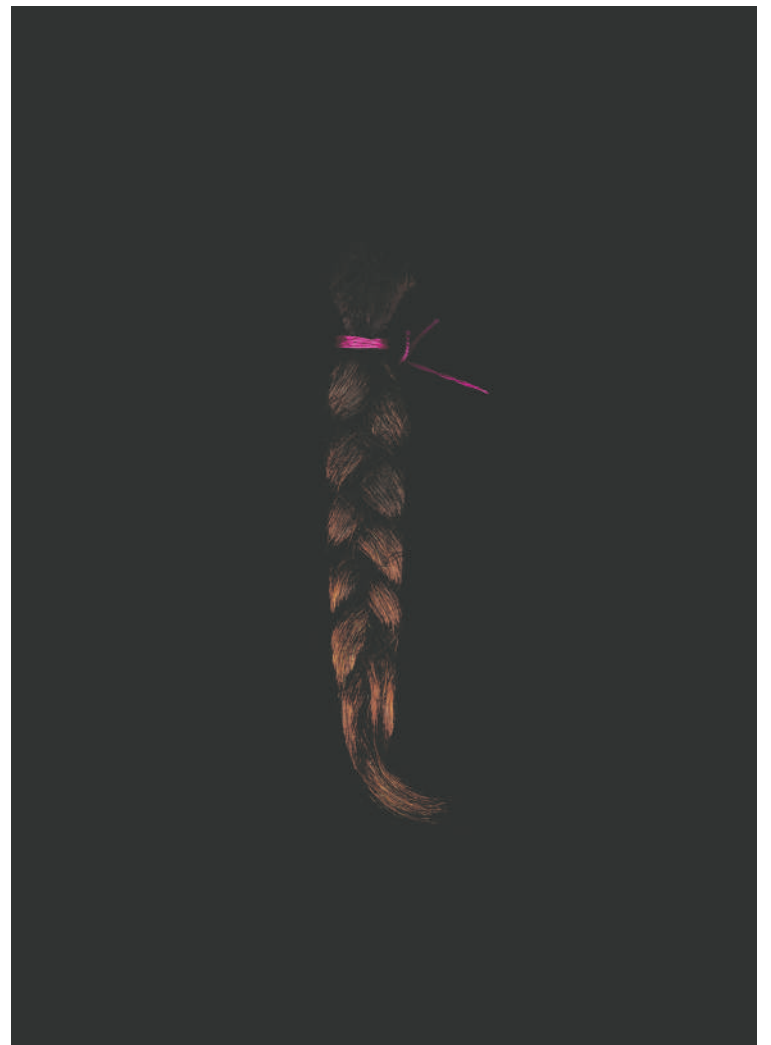


TANYA HABJOUQA/NOOR

ABOVE: Tanya Habjouqa, "Inner Resistance, Occupied West Bank, Za'tara" (2013), from the "Occupied Pleasures" series. RIGHT: Safaa Khatib, "The Braids Rebellion" (2018), depicting some of the hair that young Palestinian prisoners cut off and had smuggled out.

ademi's portraits of a half-dozen young women in Iran, who pose without hijabs, their hair dyed in a variety of colors, are paired with quotes about their choice of appearance. Although they look like they could easily have been taken during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protest movement that began in late 2022, all in fact date to 2019.

For Matar, the focus mainly on positive portrayals was intentional. "I feel like very often when we define the area, it's all about war, and despair and catastrophes, and this is when it's in the news," she said. "So for me to make something beautiful, about women, about humanity, about resilience ... it felt like it couldn't be a better time."



SAFAA KHATIB