

artscope

RANIA MATAR: WHERE DO I GO?

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AFTER THE RUINS

MATAR'S PORTRAITS HOLD WAR, MEMORY AND THE UNKNOWN FUTURE

Can you capture the future in a photograph? The answer, of course, is no. You can, however, detail individuals on the edge of it. This is seen most strikingly in war photography where people living on a pinhead simultaneously grapple with an untenable reality, a chaotic past and an encroaching future more acutely than us who wander through galleries or scroll our phones.

Lebanese-born American/Palestinian photographer Rania Matar, in her new exhibition "Where Do I Go?," attempts to get as close to photographing the future as she can, not by divination, but by questioning.

Rania Matar, *Aya (Draping)*, Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon, 2022.

COVER STORY

RANIA MATAR: WHERE DO I GO? (حور ن يول)

RKG X SEA-DAR PROJECT SPACE
580 HARRISON AVENUE
FOURTH FLOOR
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

THROUGH SEPTEMBER 19

The show is the inaugural exhibit at the new RKG x SEA-DAR Project Space in Boston's SoWa District. Robert Klein Gallery, the famed institution dedicated to showing photographs, has collaborated with the Boston-based construction company, SEA-DAR, to establish a new space to view some of the world's greatest photographic images. It will house this collection of nearly 20 years of Matar's work until September 19.

"Where Do I Go?" is Matar's reflection on the Lebanese Civil War, the 15-year-long conflict fought out by an assortment of different domestic and international actors; just one example of the proxy warfare that constituted the jumbled map of Cold War intrigue. With this history, Matar's title is all the more provoking: Where does a state and its people move to next after such prolonged suffering and abuse? The civil war began 50 years ago. The Lebanese people have had little peace since, as the latest ongoing invasion by the state of Israel that began this past March has starkly shown.

In Artscope's May/June 2026 issue, "From Iran: A Visual Testimony," the Iranian photographer Azadeh Akhlaghi's current show at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, a collection of vibrant images that staged the violence and triumph of the past century of her country's history, was covered. Matar sets out to do something similar in "Where Do I Go?" But while Akhlaghi's photographs brought to life a history in graphic, painstaking detail, Matar ops for something more abstract, yet equally as impactful.

Matar focuses on Lebanese women, placing them in environments of war-blasted architecture and the natural world that has rooted there since. Each photograph encapsulates the economic, infrastructural and personal tolls of the war without ever coming across as agitprop. The only slogans found are graffiti sprayed on the walls of buildings that Matar stumbled upon in her scouting. The exhibition's title comes from one such painting.

In "Aya (Draping), Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon," 2022, a woman in a flowing white silk dress lounges in a velvet-appliquéd chair. Her legs hang over one arm while she holds her head back, eyes closed. The room around Aya is abandoned with the glass of its windows gone and the floor covered in dirt. A shock of green leaves from the trees outside enhances the room's earth-worn appearance. Matar is meticulous in the construction of her photographs. Many of those that constitute "Where Do I Go?" could appear in a copy of Vogue if not for the near photojournalistic context she makes the structure of each.

This is what sets these images apart. In a way, they are as if a war photographer, instead of capturing the conflict around them, was somehow able to inhabit the dreams of those living through it. Aethereal yet styled, trapped in the bounds of reality but envisioning beyond, the women here live in a liminal world scarred by what is



Rania Matar, *Alae (In the Mirror), Beirut, Lebanon, 2020.*



Rania Matar, *Petra with Miss Lebanon 1972, Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon (Wall Art by Brady Black), 2022.*

there when they open their eyes, an intimate exploration of themselves as much as the events around them.

These dreams and reflections are multifaceted; in the case of "Alae (In the Mirror), Beirut, Lebanon," 2020, literal. Gazing out over the cityscape of Beirut to the Mediterranean Sea, Alae's face is reflected in the compact mirror she holds. She is faced away from us, clothed in a black chador. The perfectly constructed shot places her in a metaphysical reality, where society becomes centered around the personal. The gradient blues of the sea and sky accent the focus of her contemplative searching.

The strength of these photographs is how Matar is able to encompass all aspects of the war without browbeating. "Rhea S., Piccadilly Theater, Beirut, Lebanon (#1)," 2021, goes beyond "Alae (In the Mirror)" by placing a woman in a dilapidated theater. The destruction here is one of neglect rather than bombardment. Sitting center of row two, Rhea stares ahead, a witness not to physical damage but economic, perhaps watching a film or play of the conflagration. The decaying theater, with its lines of torn, water-stained seats and flaking plaster ceiling convey how war halts public gatherings and stifles the economy.

But there are also respites to be enjoyed, as in "Tara (In the Flowers), Bekaakat Kanaan, Lebanon," 2022. Here, we are given the true lushness of Matar's photographs. In a green, floral print dress, Tara lays in a verdant meadow, cushioned by a sea of long stemmed white flowers that fan her dress out around her. The image is a welcome breather compared to the psychologically heavy scenes around it. The focus on the natural world reminds the viewer that the Earth replenishes after violence and pain.

"Petra with Miss Lebanon 1972, Gemmayze, Beirut, Lebanon (Wall Art by Brady Black)," 2022, stands as one of the exhibition's most striking works. With her arms hanging out of the interior window of an abandoned building, Petra looks towards the camera, her face half-hidden by a cascade of red



Rania Matar, *Rhea S., Piccadilly Theater, Beirut, Lebanon (#1)*, 2021.

Rania Matar, *Tara (In the Flowers)*, Bekaakat Kanaan, Lebanon, 2022.



hair. Through the window, over her shoulder, is a chipped mural of Miss Lebanon by Seattle-based artist Brady Black. Black has also spraypainted a frame designed with a faux-gilded appearance.

The layers of the photograph are deep: Two women who exist on either side of the conflict in a space ravaged by it; the age of Miss Lebanon created by Black leaving the exposed brick untouched, only painting the remaining plaster; the shock of Petra's hair and red painted lips and nails reminiscent of blood. It's a difficult image to look away from.

How we choose to represent historical events, especially those of immense violence and strife, will always be less painful than the event itself. This is because the goal is never to make that pain real again, but to make sense of its absence. Repeatedly in "Where Do I Go?" Matar asks us not to relive the past, but to confront the future, a more uncomfortable task given its base unpredictability. She reminds us all that a photograph can't tell us our fortunes.