

In Her Image

Rania Matar's portraits capture the universal essence of girlhood

All photographs by Rania Matar (Lebanese, b. 1964). Courtesy of the artist and Robert Klein Gallery

A Girl and Her Room: Siena, Brookline, Massachusetts 2009. Inkjet print; 71.1 x 106.7 cm



Becoming: Samira, 17, Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut, Lebanon 2016. Inkjet print; 61 x 48.7 cm

years later, often in the same location, to create the series *Becoming*. Pairs of photographs show tweens becoming teens. “Subtle changes in body language, hand gestures, feet positions and attitude are the focus of these photographs,” writes the photographer.⁴ Matar has been photographing Samira, seen in the CMA’s exhibition *In Her Image* at ages 12 and 17, since Samira was 5. She is a third-generation Palestinian refugee living at the Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp located near Beirut. Samira wears the hijab, “but not in any way that is modest or repressed,” Matar observes. “She is wearing it with tight jeans, tattooed eyebrows, etc. It’s all an expression of identity.”⁵

When her daughters became teenagers, Matar noted “how aware they were of each other’s presence, and how much the group affected the identity they were portraying to the world.”⁶ She decided to photograph young women alone, each “in the personal space she was curating for herself, where she was exploring her own sense of identity.”⁷ In the resulting series, *A Girl and Her Room*, the sitter’s bedroom becomes almost a thought bubble of the girl’s mind and self-image. The room of Siena, who lives near Boston, reveals a dual identity that fluctuates between adult and child. Walls plastered with magazine pages of female swimsuit models contrast with child-like animal-pattern bedsheets and a giant stuffed animal.



The final series of images in the show, *Unspoken Conversations*, juxtaposes adolescent daughters and their middle-aged mothers to convey the complexity and universality of the mother-daughter relationship. Matar, whose own mother died when she was three, began these dual portraits when her own elder daughter left for college in 2014. “I realized that as she was growing up, I was getting older, but also that my role as a mother was about to change,” Matar recalls. “Like the rest of my work, I am exploring through my photography what I find myself and my daughters going through. Observing mothers and daughters together seemed to me to offer versions of the same person separated by the years.”⁸

While each of the four series on view contains images made in the United States and Lebanon, an individual photograph’s location is not always evident. That fact reflects the penetration of Western culture into the Middle East, as well as the artist’s desire to focus on commonalities rather than differences between cultures, on universality rather than nationality. Rania Matar feels that the origin of her work is intuitive and introspective rather than social or political. “It certainly involves my cultural identity but also something more particular to my experience as a woman.”⁹

EXHIBITION

In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar

October 27, 2018–
January 13, 2019

Transformer Station,
1460 West 29th Street

Organized by the Amon Carter
Museum of American Art

PANEL DISCUSSION

From Girlhood to Womanhood: A Panel Discussion with Rania Matar

Fri/Nov 16, 7:00–9:00

Transformer Station

“I seek to focus on our essence, our physicality, our vulnerability, on growing up and growing old—the commonalities that make us human,” Rania Matar reveals.¹ The photographer expresses these shared traits through subtle yet telling portraits that examine the nature of female identity in girlhood, adolescence, and middle age in the United States and Lebanon. Matar’s images address her subjects’ identities but also reflect her own experiences.

Born in Lebanon in 1964 and raised there during the civil war, Matar came to the United States in 1984 to continue her study of architecture and has lived here ever since. She became a practicing architect, married, and started a family, then began photographing to tell her family’s story, recording her children as they grew. But the tragic events of 9/11 prompted Matar to begin telling others’ stories as well. “It seemed that the world had become divided into Them/Us,” she recalls. “As a Lebanese American, I wanted to tell a different story of the Middle East.”² This exhibition, the first survey of the artist’s work, includes photographs from four series between 2009 and 2016.

The series *L’Enfant-Femme* was inspired by the artist’s 13-year-old daughter. Matar began photographing that fleeting stage when a girl starts to become a woman, described in French as *l’enfant-femme*. Matar asked her tween subjects to choose their own poses, forbidding them only from donning

a “selfie smile.” Some girls displayed what the artist describes as a beautiful awkwardness. Others instinctively adopted stereotypically seductive postures, echoing the sexualized images of women that abound in mass media. *Clara, 8, Beirut, Lebanon* shows a young girl who assumed the pose of an odalisque—a recumbent female figure used in Western art as an emblem of exoticism and female sensuality. Initially, Matar was only going to photograph girls between the ages of 10 and 12 for the series. She had almost finished shooting Clara’s two sisters at the family home when she spotted their younger sister and didn’t want her to feel left out. Eight-year-old Clara, reflects the photographer, became “my muse for the project.”³

Matar returned to photograph some of the young women from *L’Enfant-Femme* between two and five

L’Enfant-Femme: Clara, 8, Beirut, Lebanon 2012. Inkjet print; 73.2 x 91.4 cm



Notes

1 Rania Matar, “*Unspoken Conversations*: Project Statement,” <http://www.raniamatar.com/portfolio/unspeken-conversations/index.php>.

2 Lyle Rexer, “Interview: Rania Matar,” *Photograph* (March/April 2018), 45.

3 Rania Matar, phone interview with author, August 31, 2018.

4 Rania Matar, “*Becoming*: Project Statement,” <http://www.raniamatar.com/portfolio/becoming/index.php>.

5 Matar, phone interview.

6 Rania Matar, “*A Girl and Her Room*: Project Statement,” <http://www.raniamatar.com/portfolio/girl-and-her-room/index.php>.

7 Rexer, “Interview,” 45.

8 *Ibid.*, 46.

9 *Ibid.*, 45.