

connection American

Susan Burnstine reports on an American-based photographer working in the Middle East

Rania Matar is a rare breed of photographer who has the ability to find hope in the face of darkness, regardless of how grim the circumstances.

Her recently released monograph, *Ordinary Lives* (Quantuck Lane Press, 2009), is a remarkable collection of images photographed in Lebanon that capture the resilience of the people in an environment marked by the scars of war.

The monograph includes three interconnected bodies of work, *The Aftermath Of War*, *The Veil: Modesty, Fashion, Devotion or Statement* and *The Forgotten People*. The first segment focuses on the aftermath of the Lebanese war, the war between Hezbollah and Israel and the war between the Lebanese army and suspected terrorists who infiltrated Nahr El Bared refugee Camp in Tripoli in 2007.

From that description one might think the images would be disturbing or bleak, but Matar looks past the negative aspects of these surroundings and allows the spirit of her subjects to rise in every frame she shoots.

Matar was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S in 1984. She worked as an architect before studying photography in 2000 when she fell in love with the medium instantly. In 2002 she returned to Lebanon, visited a Palestinian refugee camp and was shocked to see how many people were living in the camps, living so close to where she had grown up years before.

She felt compelled to photograph



Broken Mirror, Beirut, 2005

All pictures ©Rania Matar

the people in the camps and recalls, 'Everything I'd previously done and been somehow felt like it led me to this.' Matar says, 'I started shooting in the Middle East in 2002, in some ways as a reaction to the constant, negative news about the Middle East in the West, especially after September 11.'

Matar yearned to tell a different story about the Middle East. 'I went to a Palestinian refugee camp in

Lebanon, saw beautiful women and children living in terrible conditions and was humbled by their dignity, their resilience and the beautiful moments one can find even in less than ideal conditions. I started photographing the beautiful moments of daily life. Telling human stories through photography became my passion and, eventually, my career.'

The earliest images in the book

are from 2004, but the majority is from 2005-2008. The earlier work is from the refugee camps she visited and her second body of work, *The Veil*, slowly emerged when she was photographing a nine year old girl at one of the camps.

'She spent about an hour finding the perfect veil to match her clothes. She was braiding it, layering it, changing colours.' From that moment on, photographing women and the veil emerged as another aspect of chronicling womanhood in Lebanon. 'When I grew up in Lebanon hardly any woman wore a headscarf. Over the years, I started noticing a shift within the Muslim community. Lebanon is a melting pot of religious and cultural backgrounds and there are many types of female fashion. Women in Lebanon do not have to wear a veil. It is a pretty recent phenomenon and it fascinated me that women were often wearing it by choice.'

Matar grew up during the time of Lebanese civil war between 1975-1990. 'I was 11 when it started and like most children was resilient enough to learn to live with it, to avoid some areas, to miss school some days. It just became a fact of life and then there would be peaceful moments and life would be normal again and we all forgot about the war till it struck again.'

During a trip back to Lebanon in 2006, Matar was caught in the middle of another war, but this time she had her children with her. 'All my forgotten memories of the war I'd lived through growing up came back to me, all the horrors of it.'



Barbie Girl, Beirut, 2006

After escaping to Damascus, Matar returned to America safely with her children but felt compelled to go back to Lebanon to begin *The Aftermath Of War* series in September 2006. 'I wanted to show that war (any war) affects normal people like you and I and is very real. One could choose to

focus on the horrible conditions people were living in, or one could choose to look at the beauty one can find within those conditions, or the beautiful moments of everyday life going on: kids playing, mothers nursing their children.'

Matar lives in the Boston area with her husband and four

children and works full time as a photographer. She recently released a new body of work, in colour, *A Girl and her Room*, in which she photographed teenage girls from different backgrounds in the intimacy of their bedrooms.

raniamatar.com



Newspapers, Beirut, 2007

EXHIBITIONS USA

CHICAGO

City Gallery in the Water Tower

BRAD TEMKIN: ROOFTOP

Until 6 September

cityofchicago.org

Catherine Edelman Gallery

PROOF

Group show including work by Shelby Lee Adams, Julie Blackmon and Lynn Geesaman

16 July – 4 September

edelmangallery.com

NEW YORK

Clamp Art

DAVE ANDERSON: ONE BLOCK

15 July – 20 August

clampart.com

Keith De Lellis Gallery

NEW YORK:

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

Group exhibition of vintage photographs

15 September –

15 November

keithdelellisgallery.com

SAN FRANCISCO

Scott Nichols Gallery

THE SUMMER SHOW

Various artists

To 4 September

scottnicholsgallery.com

SANTA FE

Verve Gallery

Of Photography

JEFFREY BECOM, MAGGIE

TAYLOR AND NEVADA WEIR

To 28 August

vervegalleryofphotography.com

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