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# RANIA MATAR FINDS INSPIRATION IN THE AMAZING WOMEN SHE PHOTOGRAPHS

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“It is a process and I take the collaboration part very seriously,” says Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar about her photo sessions with women. Focusing on their inner strengths and personal emotions, she often finds a bit of herself in each subject she photographs. Many of her past experiences and learnings find their way into her photos as she seeks to break stereotypes with her portrait photography (<https://www.thephoblographer.com/tag/portraiture/>).



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In every kind of art, it's not uncommon for the artist's emotional experiences to seep into the artwork itself. One might argue that it's not even a completed art piece until this happens. Rania's work is inspired by her daughters and her own life experiences. In many cases, the women she photographs are reflections of her past self. Reading about Rania's experiences makes me want to go back and look at my portfolio again: to see what part of me has found its way to my photos, and to chase my newer projects with the kind of passion she embraces in her work.

# THE ESSENTIAL GEAR USED BY RANIA MATAR



Rania told us:

- Leica M6 (<https://amzn.to/3uuPs01>)
- Leica M7 (<https://amzn.to/3uvduIp>)
- Mamiya 7II
- Fujifilm GFX 50R (<https://amzn.to/3JJv0iv>)



“I am not a very technical person, and I am a minimalist. I use one camera and one lens. I used a Leica M6 and M7 with a 35 mm lens for my earlier work in Lebanon, but otherwise, most of my work had been with a Mamiya 7II and a 65 mm lens.

THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: HI RANIA. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF AND HOW YOU GOT INTO PHOTOGRAPHY.

**Rania Matar:** I was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S. in 1984 to study architecture. I worked as an architect for a few years before I fell in love with photography – initially to make better pictures of my children (I have four of them). After September 11, however, with the very divisive news in the U.S. about the Middle East and the “them v/s us” rhetoric, I became interested in telling a different story of the Middle East and started making pictures in Lebanon. ⊗

As a Lebanese-born American woman and mother, my cross-cultural experience and personal narrative have informed my photography ever since.





Lea, La Maison Rose, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019

# THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: TELL US ABOUT YOUR ENTRIES TO THE 3RD ANNUAL LEICA WOMEN FOTO PROJECT AWARD. WHEN AND HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO APPLY?

**Rania Matar:** My publisher, Radius, sent me the email with the call for work by Leica, and I almost ignored it at first, but when I read more about it, I realized that it is right up my alley – a story told from a female perspective. My work is by a woman and about women, so I went ahead and applied. I am glad I did!



Farah in Her Burnt Car, Aabey, Lebanon, 2020



# THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: WHAT IDEAS AND EMOTIONS WERE YOU LOOKING TO PORTRAY WITH YOUR ENTRIES?

**Rania Matar:** Strength, beauty, resilience, power, and vulnerability all at once. I saw all this in the women in my images, and I wanted to portray it all. Those women inspired me. I also saw my younger self in them.



Mariam D., Ramlet Al Bayda, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021



THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: YOU MOVED TO THE  
USA NOT LONG AFTER YOUR TEENS.  
WOULD YOU SAY THIS SHIFT CONTRIBUTED  
TO YOUR OUTLOOK ON PHOTOGRAPHY IN  
THE YEARS TO COME?

**Rania Matar:** Yes, I moved to the U.S. when I was 20. At first, I was focusing on studying, then working, making a life here, and just moving away from the Civil War and all the problems in Lebanon that I was escaping. I was (and I still am!) grateful for the opportunities. It was not until after September 11 that my dual identity became my focus – on a personal and on a professional level. So yes, absolutely, my hyphenated Lebanese-American identity defines who I am, and it defines my work on all levels. I am also from Palestinian parents, so that part of me also played a role in my work.



Rhea (In the Mirror), Beirut, Lebanon, 2021

In my work and in my life in general, I am always looking to focus on what unites us rather than divides us, on our essence, our physicality, our vulnerability, on growing up and growing old – the commonalities that make us human, to emphasize underlying similarities rather than apparent differences across cultures ⊗ and to ultimately find beauty in our shared humanity.





Lara C., Koura, Lebanon, 2021



THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: WHEN  
PHOTOGRAPHING WOMEN FOR YOUR  
PROJECTS, WHAT ASPECTS OF THEIR



# EMOTIONS AND PSYCHE DO YOU LOOK TO SHOWCASE DIFFERENTLY FROM OTHER PHOTOGRAPHERS?

**Rania Matar:** I don't think about what others do. I am in the moment with a human being in front of me, so we create the stage together. I collaborate with the women I photograph. I follow their lead and their emotions, and we both push the limits of our comfort zones as the session evolves. It is a process and I take the collaboration part very seriously. I want the people I photograph to feel comfortable, to trust me, to enjoy the process, and to feel that they are part of it. So whatever emotions they bring, I want to make sure I give them justice.



Demi and the Broken Glass, Brummana, Lebanon, 2021

THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: EMPOWERMENT OF THE EVERYDAY WOMAN SEEMS A PROMINENT THEME IN YOUR PORTFOLIO. IS THERE A PERSONAL CONNECTION TO SOME OF THESE IMAGES?

**Rania Matar:** There is a very deep connection to those images. My work is inspired by my daughters and my personal life. It has followed my daughters through the stages of growing up. The latest series is also even more personal – the women in the images are not only the ages of my daughters as they make their way through life, but they are also the age I was when I left Lebanon. Many of them are now leaving, and I cannot help but see myself in each of them as I witness history repeating itself.



Perla (لويلين روح), Kfarmatta, Lebanon, 2021



THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: A SELF-EXPLANATORY TITLE, BUT WHAT MAIN IDEAS YOU WERE LOOKING TO EXPRESS IN YOUR LATEST BOOK 'SHE'?

**Rania Matar:** I will quote a passage from my artist statement:



“I am focusing in this project on young women in their twenties – the ages of my daughters. They are leaving the cocoon of home and entering adulthood. In earlier projects, I photographed young women in relationship to the curated and controlled environment of their bedrooms. Here, I am photographing them in the larger environment they find themselves in after leaving home, the global and complicated backdrop that now constitutes their lives in transition.



Nour, Beirut, Lebanon, 2017

I want to portray the raw beauty of their age, their individuality, physicality, texture, and mystery, create a personal narrative with them, and photograph them the way I, a woman and a mother, see them: beautiful, alive. The process is collaborative and evolves organically as the women become active participants in the image-making process, presiding over the environment and making it their



own. Given the space to express themselves, they are willing to experiment and go places neither of us thought possible just moments earlier. As a result, I find myself focusing on their strength and their majestic presence.

My work addresses the states of ‘Becoming’ – the fraught beauty and the vulnerability of growing up – in the context of the visceral relationships to our physical environment and universal humanity, but it is also about collaboration, experimentation, performance, empowerment, and about pushing the limits of creativity and self-expression - both for the young women and for myself.”

Again this work includes women from the U.S. and from the Middle East. In addition, as I had received a Guggenheim Fellowship for this work, I was able to travel more widely in both places.



Kefa, Gambier, Ohio, 2018

# THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: WHERE DID THE IDEA COME FROM FOR YOUR PROJECT 'UNSPOKEN CONVERSATIONS'? WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE?

**Rania Matar:** As I mentioned, my work is inspired by my familial life, by my daughters, and by the idea of growing up and growing older. When my first daughter left for college, I realized that my role as a mother to her was about to change, but also that she was now becoming an adult and that I was getting older. I turned all those emotions into a project. I saw myself and my daughter(s) in each and in the sum of all the photographs.





Soraya and Tala, Yarze, Lebanon, 2014 (Unspoken Conversations)

The response was overwhelmingly positive, and this work was included in an exhibition at the Amon Carter Museum of Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art: “In Her Image,” where the exhibition opens with the prepubescent girl of *L’Enfant-Femme*, moves to *Becoming, A Girl and Her Room* and then to *Unspoken Conversation*, following the trajectory in a woman’s life from pre-puberty to middle age.



Christilla, Rabieh, Lebanon, 2010 (A Girl and Her Room)

THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: THE PROJECT  
'WOMEN COMING OF AGE' INTERESTINGLY ⊗  
FEATURES A LOT OF OLDER SUBJECTS.

# COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THE IDEA BEHIND THIS? WAS THIS ONE OF THE TOUGHER ONES TO LOCATE SUBJECTS FOR?

**Rania Matar:** *Women Coming of Age* focuses on women at a transitional and vulnerable time in their lives: not the teenage years that have been the focus of my work in earlier years, but the other transitional, in-between years: the “middle age” years.



Rhea S., Piccadilly Theater, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021, #1

The choice of subject for this body of work was an organic one. I am a “*woman coming of age*,” just starting to feel like an adult myself as my older children were entering college and leaving home, my parents were aging, and my roles as mother, wife, and daughter were all being redefined. I have immediate knowledge



of how a woman perceives herself and is perceived, and realize that she is often undergoing similar transitions and can be as vulnerable as the young women coming of age that I have been photographing over the past few years.

The work is self-reflexive and somewhat autobiographical in nature and shows qualities that each woman, on each side of the camera, brings to it.

THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UNCOMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN YOUR HOME COUNTRY? WHAT SIMILAR CHALLENGES WOULD YOU SAY WOMEN IN THE USA FACE?

**Rania Matar:** My countries are both Lebanon and the United States. I have to say I turned what could have been considered a challenge into a personal advantage. As a woman, I have intimate access to girls and women and can collaborate with them more intimately than any man would probably be able to. So for me honestly, in the work I have been making, being a woman has been an advantage. I am finding also that it is a great time to be a woman artist and to have the incredible opportunity to give the women I work with a voice. ⊗



Yasmina, قوة (strength), Beirut, Lebanon, 2021

I am grateful for all the women who came before that have paved the way for us, women today, to be able to break new glass ceilings in the art world. One baby step at a time.



THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: WOMEN  
PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE BEEN  
UNDERREPRESENTED IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY



# INDUSTRY. WHAT MEASURES CAN AND SHOULD PHOTOGRAPHY ORGANIZATIONS DO TO CHANGE THIS?

**Rania Matar:** I think we are living in a great time, and things are starting to happen. Of course, there are still ways to go, but it is happening, and we are starting to feel the shift, so I am optimistic. There is much more awareness about the historical underrepresentation of women. Galleries are making a point of including more women artists in their rosters, and museums are exhibiting and collecting more women artists.

And then, just like this award and the Leica Summit prove, there are also more venues focusing on giving a voice and a platform to women artists and to empower them. We're on the right track!



## THE PHOBLOGRAPHER: ANY SUGGESTIONS FOR FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS TO HELP THEM MAKE STRIDES IN THE INDUSTRY?

**Rania Matar:** Make work that is personal to YOU only. Be passionate about it and follow your gut and your instinct. Don't think about the end result. Be in the project and in the moment.

Don't let others dictate what you do and how you evaluate your work. You are your best advocate. Make work that is so important and so personal to you that only you can do it, and do it in the best way you can, the way only YOU can – with love, respect, and passion.

As Diane Arbus (<https://www.thephoblographer.com>) said: *“The more specific you are, the more general it'll be.”*

Be proud of your work.

Respect the people you work with, the ones you photograph, the ones you meet in the industry, other photographers, and be an advocate for other women artists! ⊗





Lara B., Corniche, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021

## Artist Talk: Rania Matar



(<https://www.blinkist.com/magazine/posts/andrew-ng-book-recommendations-onboarding>)

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