

Rania Matar's Intimate Portraits of Girls On the Cusp of Womanhood

A new book of environmental portraits made in the United States and Middle East explores the shared experiences of young womanhood.



KEFA, GAMBIER, OHIO, 2018

Palestinian-Lebanese photographer [Rania Matar](https://raniamatar.com/) (<https://raniamatar.com/>) was only three years old when her mother died at the age of 28. Growing up in Beirut during the 1960s, Matar was raised by her father, with whom she was very close. In 1975, her father remarried. A month later, the Lebanese Civil War broke out. Over the next 15 years, the war would rage on, resulting in 120,000 deaths and the exodus of nearly a million people. 11 at the time, Rania Matar remembers the profound schism that emerged as a result. Her father was able to work, and she had the support of a blended family that included a stepsister of the same age. “There were moments where Beirut would reappear and life would go on. It was glamorous and beautiful. I remember my teenage years going out with friends, having boyfriends, going skiing and to the beach,” Matar recalls. “Then the war would happen and things would get so bad that we would have to leave the city every once in a while.”

In 1984 at age 20, Matar moved to the United States to study architecture at Cornell University. Although she barely remembers any feelings of culture shock, there was one thing that caught her off guard: the brutal winters of Ithaca, New York. But she quickly adapted and thrived, getting married and having a family of her own. Matar first took up photography to make better pictures of her kids and quickly fell in love with it. “Photography taught me to see the everyday in a beautiful way,” she says. “I had four children. My life was chaos, but as soon as I started looking through the viewfinder, I found so much beauty in that chaos. The work also taught me the importance of intimacy.”

Every Little Thing She Does is Magic

Blessed with two daughters and two sons, Rania Matar gravitated to photographing her girls as they grew from children to adults — a path that she recognized as one layered with complexities all its own. In a world that glorifies rites of passage for men, the story of female adolescence has gone largely unexplored.



YARA, CAIRO, EGYPT, 2019



CIEARRA (IN THE CONEFLOWERS), WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA, 2018

In her fourth book, *She* (<https://www.artbook.com/9781942185833.html>), Matar explores coming of age stories from a distinctly female vantage point. While we often encounter stories of male protagonists on the cusp of adulthood throughout literature, art, and film, we rarely see these stories told through the lens of femaleness on its own terms. Exploring the beauty and mystery of this very delicate period of transformation with tremendous sensitivity, this mesmerizing collection of portraits of young women in their late teens and early twenties reveals a distinctive sensuality liberated from the hypersexualization that many young women face.

After receiving a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship for the work, Matar was able to travel more widely through the United States and Middle East to conduct her project while also capturing a shared humanity that transcends all boundaries of time and place. Drawing inspiration from her daughters, now in their 20s, Matar focuses on young women who are setting out into the world on their own for the very first time.



SARAH, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2020

“I’m discovering how hard it is to be a young woman today,” says Matar. “We tell them, ‘You can be anything you want in the world’, but at the same time, there’s still the pressure of having to prove yourself. I was watching my daughters navigate leaving home, so I wanted this to be a collaborative experience with other women going through that. I wanted them to feel like they’re living in the moment, and to feel beautiful and powerful.”

I’m Every Woman

After four decades in the United States, Rania Matar recognizes that she’s neither American nor Palestinian-Lebanese, but both at the same time. “I always have one foot in each country,” she says. But it wasn’t until September 11th that she became fully aware that her very identity as a Middle Eastern woman was politicized in her adopted home.



RAYVEN, MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA, 2019

“Up until that point, I wasn’t thinking about where I was from. I was working, we bought a house, had kids, and I had become an American citizen. But after September 11th, my whole sense of identity was staring me in the face, especially with the rhetoric of ‘us versus them.’ I felt like, I am them and I am us! So what does that make me?”

Matar decided to find out. Using photography, she began to investigate experiences of girlhood in the United States, in the Middle East, and in Palestinian refugee camps, focused on a shared identity that also was aligned with where her daughters were developed mentally. “Yes, I am photographing different individuals but there’s something about growing up and becoming a woman, going through all the physical and psychological changes that we all share,” says Matar. “It became important to show another idea — one that unites us, rather than divides us.”

Who's That Girl?



MARIAM, KHIYAM, LEBANON, 2019

In photographing girls and women in the Middle East today, Rania Matar is creating an expansive lexicon of female identities that rarely get much attention in the West. “The depictions of women from the Middle East are very one dimensional. People think of women there as oppressed, and it’s all about the veil — but there are so many different layers to us,” Matar says. “In *She*, there are women who are veiled and others who are not. They are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Druze. The ambiguity is important to me.”

One of the themes that reveals itself throughout the book is the notion of crowns, be it a regal mane of hair or an exquisite veil. Matar, who was dealing with personal stresses at the time, had lost quite a bit of her own hair and found herself reveling in the many ways in which these young women presented themselves. In Matar’s photographs it is clear the veil is as much a statement of beauty and style as hair itself.



Miss Rosen

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer focusing on art, photography, and culture. Her work has been published in books and magazines, including Time, Vogue, Aperture, and Vice, among others.



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ALAE (IN THE GOLDEN WATER), KHIYAM, LEBANON, 2019

An abundance of glamor and intimacy (photographs from) the simple expression of being at home in one's body anywhere in the world. With her architectural training, Rania Matar's eye for setting plays a vital role, as she uses space as an active participant in the portrait. "Sometimes they have an idea of a place that means something to them. Sometimes we come up with something together. And sometimes it's as simple as meeting in front of a

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tree and not having to go anywhere,” she says. “I want these women to feel they have agency in the process. I never know how far they’re willing to go. I leave that to them so we can discover it together.”

By Miss Rosen

Miss Rosen is a New York-based writer focusing on art, photography, and culture. Her work has been published in books and magazines including Time, Vogue, Aperture, and Vice, among others.

Rania Matar: She (<https://www.artbook.com/9781942185833.html>) is published by Radius Books, \$60.00.



NOUR #1, BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2017