

RANIA MATAR

When Rania Matar and her four children flew from the U.S. to Lebanon in July 2006, the photographer anticipated a fairly routine visit to her native country. For several years prior, she had been traveling to Lebanon, Syria and Turkey to document the impact of Islamic and Middle Eastern culture on women, children and families. On this trip, when Matar awoke the next morning, she found herself caught in the latest geopolitical battle that has plagued the Middle East for well over half-a-century.

"We were on one of the last planes to land on July 12, and when my kids and I woke up the next morning Lebanon was in a full-blown war," recalls Matar, who was luckily able to leave Lebanon and fly back to the U.S. from Damascus, Syria.

"As I was leaving, I realized everyone would be interested in the war, but that when it's over people would forget about its impact on the families living there, and the media will move on to the next big news. War is only half the story. The other half, the aftermath, is often forgotten and untold. I'm not a war photographer, and as soon as the war was over I went back to Lebanon to photograph the aftermath and how people were dealing with the loss of family and home."

Matar's searing and intensely personal documentation of the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon war, along with her other Middle East-based projects, have garnered widespread praise and recognition, with Matar winning



numerous awards and showing work in many one-person, group and juried shows throughout the U.S. and Middle East. She was recently awarded a grant by the Massachusetts Cultural Council for the Arts to further pursue her work in the coming year. Her latest exhibition, *Women of Islam*, will be shown at the Chicago Cultural Center beginning in 2008.

"The focus of my photography is on the Middle East, its women and children especially," says Matar, who gave up her career as a Boston-based architect eight years ago to spend more time raising her four children and even-

tually to take up photography full time. "Lebanon in particular is interesting to me because of its key location between the West and the Arab world, reflecting a blend of Western and Arab cultures, of Christianity and Islam, of Sunni and Shiite Islam, and of modernity and traditionalism," she adds. "With the Middle East in turmoil, Lebanon bears the brunt of unresolved issues in the region, issues that become magnified in such a small country."

Matar herself was born in Lebanon, and after starting her architectural studies at the American University in Beirut, she moved to the U.S. in 1984 where she completed her training at Cornell University. Upon deciding to pursue photography, Matar took workshops at the New England School of Photography and the Maine Photographic Workshops in Mexico with Magnum photographer Constantine Manos.

Matar's first serious project in the Middle East was an examination of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, where she accompanied a cousin who was making a documentary in the camps. She has also been working on an ongoing project documenting the symbolism and meaning of the veil worn by many Middle Eastern women.

"When I started photographing in the camps I felt that I found my real passion for photography as it gave me the ability to tell peoples' stories and show their humanity through images," says Matar, who insists that there is no political agenda in her work. "It was what drew me to photo-

journalism, or what I prefer to call fine art documentary."

By photographing the innocent who are caught up in war, Matar says she hopes to focus peoples' interest and concern on the devastating impact of war. It could be any war anywhere.

"Families and children are the ones who suffer the most," she emphasizes. "It's not their choice to be stuck in a war. The people I photograph want their story told, and what I'm trying to do is to show their humanity through my eyes. It's too easy to dehumanize a population. I'm interested in people as normal human beings and I'm just trying to show how people are working to put their lives back together after war, death and destruction.

"Sadly, people don't know much about the Middle East, and when you talk about Palestinians or Muslims, there's a stigma," she adds. "I think it's important to bring a higher level of awareness of what's happening in the Middle East, and to show people the humanity in different cultures."
—Richard Pitnick

■ PRINT INFORMATION

All are gelatin silver, printed by the photographer and signed, titled and dated. Editions are limited to 25. Sizes and prices are 11x14 inches, \$500; 16x20 inches, \$750. Prices increase as editions sell. Archival inkjet prints, sized at 24x36 inches and priced at \$1,200, are also available.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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BARBIE GIRL AND THE RUBBLE, HARET HREIK, BEIRUT, LEBANON—2006



BROKEN GLASS, AITA EL CHAAB, LEBANON—2006



BOY LOOKING FOR HIS THINGS, AITA EL CHAAB, LEBANON—2006



HANGING THE LAUNDRY, AITA EL CHAAB, LEBANON—2006



PHOTO IN THE RUBBLE, HARET HREIK, BEIRUT, LEBANON—2006



ROCKING HORSE ON THE BALCONY, AITAROUN, LEBANON—2006