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ARTS AND CULTURE, CATHOLICISM

At the ICA, striking photo of Three Nuns

Posted by Michael Paulson November 24, 2008 12:28 PM



This photograph by [Rania Matar](#), a Lebanese-American artist living in Brookline, is among the works now on display at the [Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston](#) as part of an exhibit of the work of four promising Boston artists competing for the James and Audrey Foster Prize. In Saturday's *Globe*, art critic Sebastian Smee examines the photo, called "Three Nuns," as part of [a review of the exhibit](#). An excerpt:

"Matar was born in Lebanon and took these photographs on travels back to her homeland. Her images feature many women wearing black headwear, although not all of them are Muslim; many are Christian Maronite nuns.

As a collection of images, Matar's fairly small display argues for the human richness and complexity of Lebanese society even in a context of destruction (several images show battered buildings and rubble). But there are individual images that stand apart and have a genius all their own.

The best is a photograph taken this year in Beirut called 'Three Nuns.' It shows three Maronite nuns in black garb standing in front of a congregation praying with eyes closed. All face the same way, toward Matar's camera.

The nun on the left regards the camera sourly, with pursed lips and contemptuous eyes. The middle nun looks at the camera, but with an expression of calm equilibrium, while the nun on the right has caught some of the mood of the congregation: Her tilted head suggests dreamy, divinely inspired detachment.

The photograph is the result of what looks like astonishing serendipity, but Matar obviously had to put herself in an awkward position before serendipity could strike. The photograph is the best in the room."

(Photo courtesy of [Gallery Kayafas](#).)