

ARTS

Finding humanity among ruin

By Denise Taylor | September 13, 2007

One photograph captures a young, veiled Muslim woman in Lebanon listening to her iPod. The next shows the women of Hezbollah as they pause mid-rally in Beirut to kneel and pray. Yet another catches a mother smiling at her toddler's wobbling early steps - taken in front of a rubble-filled backdrop of destruction wrought by the 2006 Lebanon War.

Since 2002, Watertown photographer **Rania Matar** has pointed her lens at what she calls "the complexities" of life in her native country, and arts institutions worldwide are beginning to take note. Awards are piling up, museums are purchasing her work, and in addition to having her images exhibited on four continents, her photographs are currently featured in two local group shows.



But getting to this point was nothing the 43-year-old mother of four ever imagined aiming for. Nor was it easy or safe. In her pursuit of the full picture, Matar has found herself working her way into the confidence of the militant group Hezbollah, sharing strangers' most painful moments, and fleeing the war via a harrowing high-speed cab ride.

"Until 2002, I was an architect and I was doing fine arts photography as a hobby - just portraits, still lifes, and the like," she said. But a chance visit to the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut changed that.

"I was so shocked and appalled by the conditions I saw there that I returned and just started photographing and I never went back to architecture," she said. "It was really a turning point for me."

First, though, there was a delay. It took Matar a full year to "get over" the emotional toll of visiting Shatila, and only then did she return with her camera in her hands and the words of former Life Magazine photo editor **Peter Howe** in her head.

"I met him and he told me, 'You have to get close up. If you want to help these people, you have to get right in their faces,'" she said. "But getting the close-up shot is not always the easiest shot. In the beginning, a woman might start to cry and I would just put the camera down. Finally though, I realized that people did not mind me being there."

Working through nongovernmental organizations also gave Matar better access to camp residents, and through repeated visits, she earned their trust.

"I always gave people the photographs I took, and I always returned, so they'd know I wasn't just there to take something and leave," said Matar. "Later, I was able to go into people's homes and get pretty in-depth photos of their lives. My photographs became much more intimate, and it's those later photographs that I tend to show."

Those black-and-white images have also caught the eye of curators like **Leslie Brown** of Boston University's Photographic Resource Center, who was the first to show Matar's work.

"The kind of photographer that Rania is doesn't come around often," said Brown. "The quality and the light and the way she sees the delicate things that she does and tells these stories that need to be told is what makes her work so important."

Over time, Matar has widened her perspective to life outside the camps, documenting the resurgence of the veil for Muslim women as well as the Lebanon war. And always her focus is on the unexpected and the personal - be it the look of anticipation as a woman veiled head-to-foot awaits a Botox treatment for around her eyes, or the quiet grief of widows mourning the war dead.

"My work doesn't have a particular message. I'm just there to document the moment," said Matar.

While on a book assignment during supposed peaceful times, Matar found herself caught up in the 2006 "July War" - with her four children in tow.

"I arrived in Lebanon on July 12th at night and I woke up on July 13th and the airport was closed and the war was going on. It was horrible," said Matar.

Matar's family piled into two rented cabs and fled via the road to Damascus.

"It was very scary. The road had been bombed the day before and it was bombed the day after. It was eerily quiet. There was not one other car on the road, and the driver was just speeding like crazy. I really fell apart," she said. "I'm not a war photographer. All that mattered then was getting my kids out."

But after returning to Watertown and getting her children settled into school like any other parent, Matar went back to photograph the war's aftermath.

"There was so much destruction that you almost became numb to it. So I focused instead on how quickly people returned to reconstruction," she said. "I photographed a shoe salesman, and there he was with his shoes back out on stands again except that everything around him was destroyed. It was humbling seeing people pulling back to life like that."

"A lot of people when they photograph wars, they photograph corpses . . .," she said. "But I think there's a beauty in showing the humanity of people."

Matar's images are featured in "In Sights," an exhibition of work by the 10 recipients of the 2007 Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowships, as well as at the 2007 New England Photography Biennial, which awarded her one of the show's two Purchase Prizes. Her online portfolio is at raniamatar.com.