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PHOTO BOOK REVIEWS: LIVES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DIVIDE

By Matt Damsker

ORDINARY LIVES. PHOTOS BY RANIA MATAR.

Essay by Anthony Shadid, with poems by Lisa Suhair Majai. The Quantuck Lane Press, distributed by W.W. Norton and Co., New York, N.Y. 136 pages; 100 duotone prints; hardbound; \$29.95 (CAN \$50.00). ISBN No. 978-1-59372-0377. Information: <http://www.quantucklanepress.com> .

Rania Matar's theme of ordinary lives living under extraordinary circumstance may not be a new one for documentary photography, but her sensitive, questing eye more than rises to the challenge of keeping it fresh. In this case, her homeland is the subject: war-scarred Lebanon, a unique locus as the long-suffering gateway between the Western and Arab worlds. Matar, who moved to the U.S. in 1984, brings forth images of an everyday Lebanon that seems to survive mainly through the will of its women, captured here in the quiet dignity of their domestic travail. As they feed their children, hang their wash, huddle patiently in rubble-strewn locales or refugee camps, pray or protest, Lebanon's women are the animating force that prevails, and so there is life, hope and playfulness in the wretched streets.

Matar's camera captures its share of Pieta-like interactions between young and old as they strive and survive, awaiting the distribution of food, resting uneasily, bravely persevering; but these photos are equally fixated on the details that bring the scenes truly to life. The plates of food by a mother's feet as she sits, cross-legged, ready to serve; the rows of fabric in a marketplace; the bullet-riddled textures of half-collapsed walls that frame so much of the action as the children play--these photos blend their stillness and sorrows with the kinetics of irrepressible life.

Matar composes these images with a powerful chiaroscuro skill, from high and low angles, yet she lets the frame fill itself, so nothing seems forced or rhetorical, even when she focuses on Lebanon's affluent edge: the upscale shops and the Westernized customers who seem to have escaped all reality. They are, simply, there. And while a glamorous billboard advertising Gauloises becomes an ironic emblem for the bombed-out facades along the street, it is also an exercise in sheer visual information, an inert moment in time.

"Baghdad was resilient, even in its medieval heyday. Beirut, more so with every passing year, is resilient as well," writes Washington Post bureau chief Anthony Shadid in the book's eloquent essay. "Matar may not try to represent the soul of Lebanon, but her images understand that essence evocatively well... [They] are most spectacularly about endurance and resilience, the tapestry of life." Indeed, it is a tapestry that doesn't require too much elaboration, and so the compassionate curiosity and honesty of Matar's camera convey depth without diatribe, while the mournful yet hopeful poems of Lisa Suhair Majai perfectly echo the visual and spiritual values of the photography: "...because we are all, each one of us, / in love with the light."