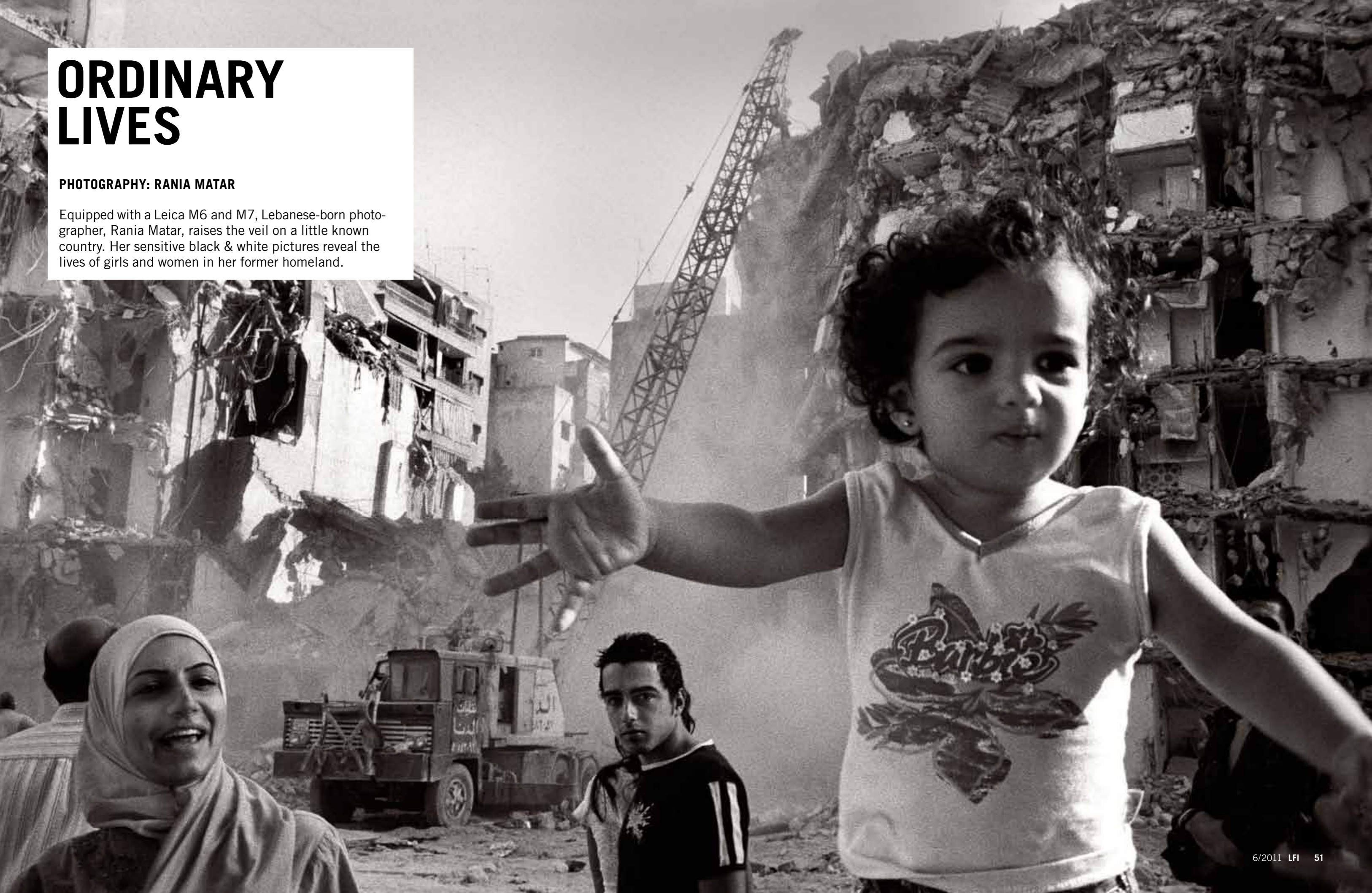


ORDINARY LIVES

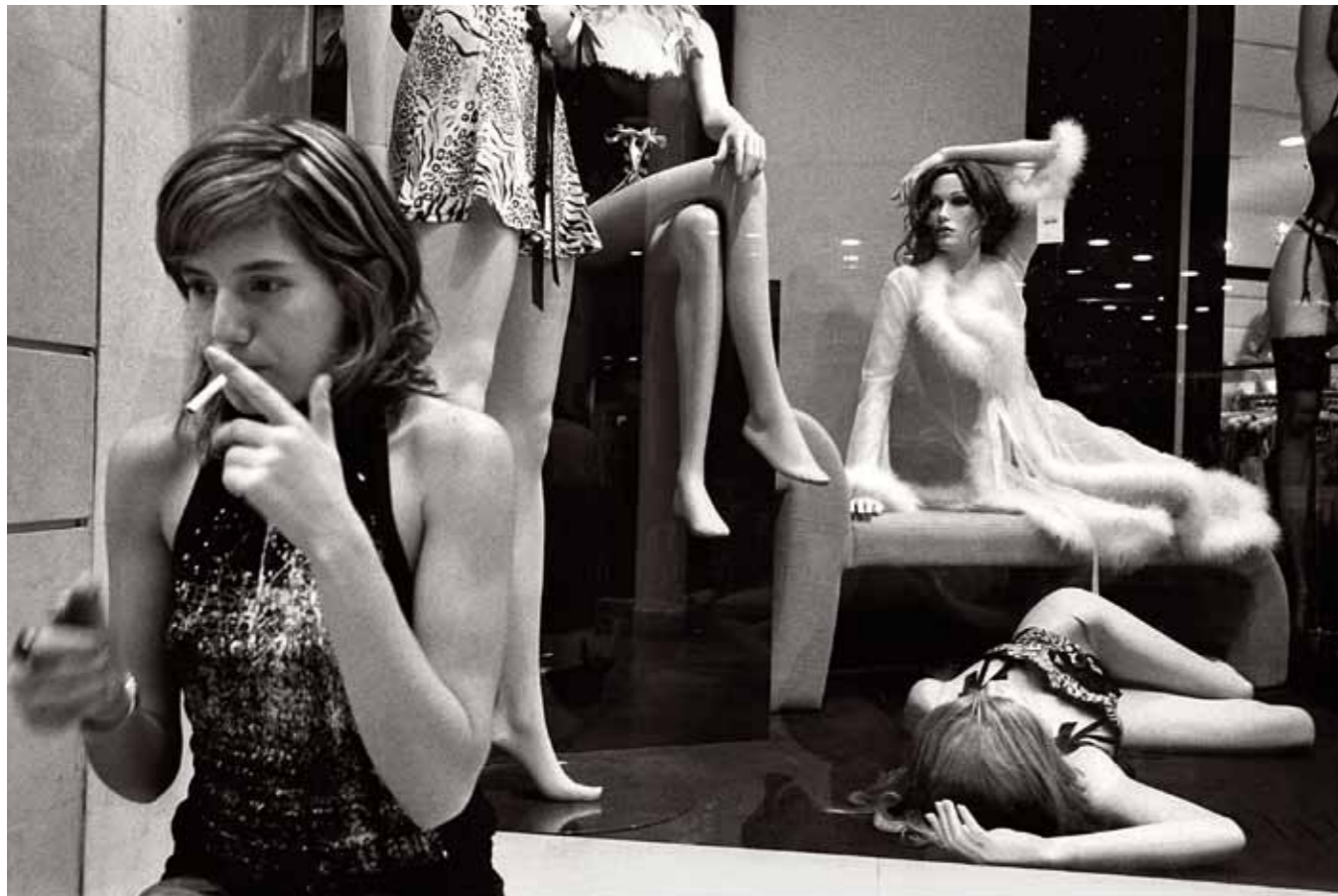
PHOTOGRAPHY: RANIA MATAR

Equipped with a Leica M6 and M7, Lebanese-born photographer, Rania Matar, raises the veil on a little known country. Her sensitive black & white pictures reveal the lives of girls and women in her former homeland.





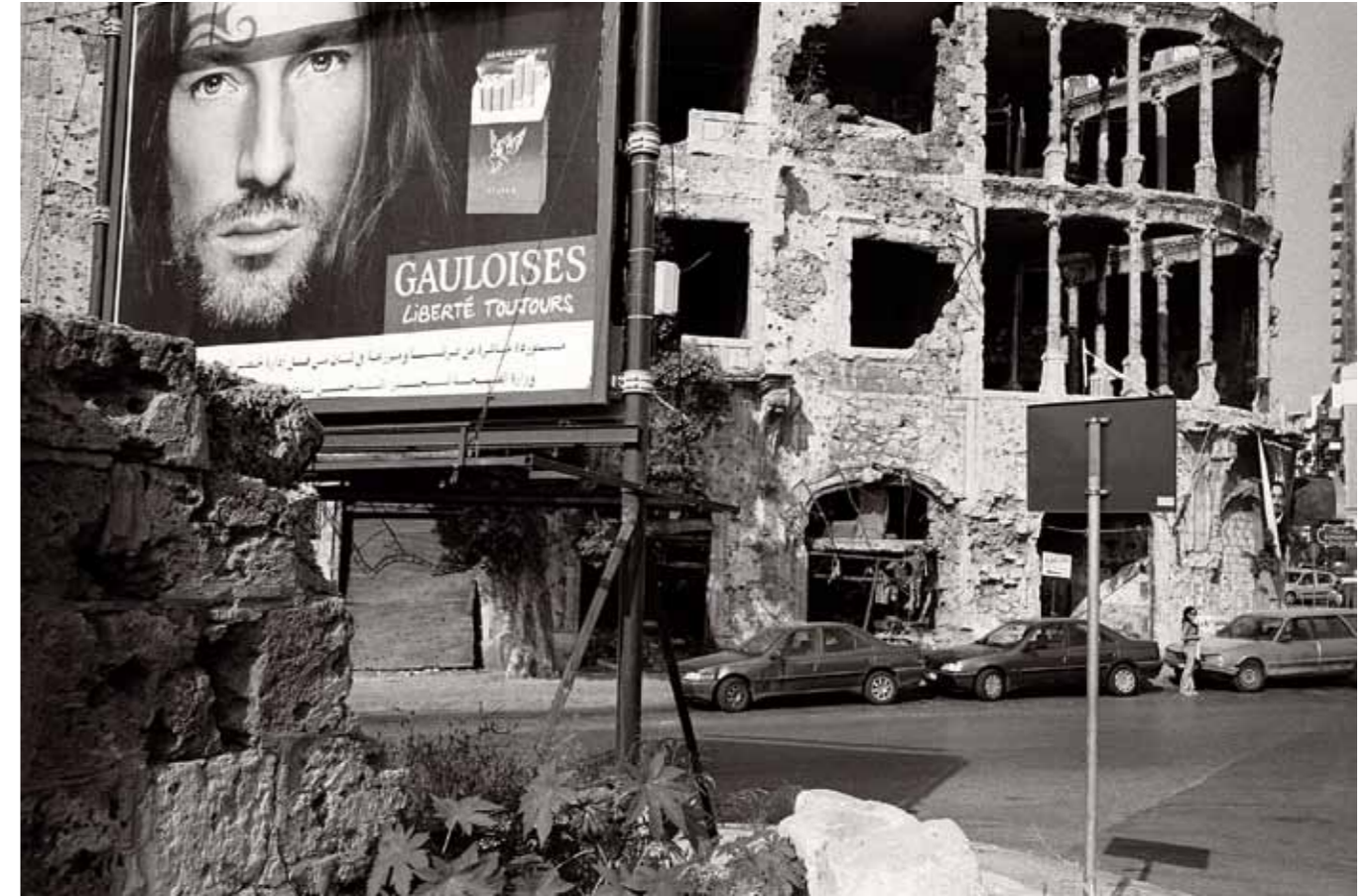
"I saw beautiful women and children living in terrible conditions and I was humbled by their dignity, their resilience, and the beautiful moments one can find even in less than ideal conditions" RANIA MATAR



"At first, I was mainly shooting street scenes and was very conscious of being an outsider and mindful of not wanting to invade people's spaces"



After the 2006 war in Lebanon, volunteer services organized activities for youths. The girl is learning to juggle, the boy in the background is skipping with a rope, while the Lebanese flag flaps on a washing line



"Every person who lived through this war has a story to tell. After it was over, I decided to return to Lebanon immediately to photograph the aftermath of the war"



It's not always easy growing up in two different worlds, living between contradictions – it can tear you apart. Rania Matar, born in Lebanon in 1964 and living in Boston since 1984, manages to keep the balance. She combines Lebanese roots with US life style, a professional life with four kids, and her architectural studies with reportage photography. In addition to explaining her creativity, it may also explain the intensity and composition of her pictures, taken with an M6 or M7, with Elmarit-M 28 mm f/2,8 Asph and Summicron-M 35 mm f/2 Asph lenses. Matar captured the daily lives of Lebanese girls and women in sensitive and respectful images, which were published in 2009 in the book titled 'Ordinary Lives'.

The photographs reflect Matar's empathy and are free of any judgement. She knows that "when you're on the outside, you can see things inside with fresh eyes." Using complex compositions and dynamic balance, the self-confidence, light-heartedness and relaxed attitude of women in Lebanon is evident – despite contrary circumstances. The images confirm that feminine sovereignty is not being destroyed by patriarchal, Muslim structures. "I looked for beautiful moments, using photography to tell human stories."

Following 9/11 in particular, the image of people from the Middle East has deteriorated, as Matar discovered. "I wanted to show that people in the Middle East are not bad in general," she explains. To do so, she's been attending workshops at the New England School of Photography, after studying architecture at Cornell University in Ithaca, New

York. "I fell in love with the medium immediately."

Matar frequently visits relatives in Lebanon. In 2002, she and a cousin went to a Palestinian refugee camp – one of many that have become ghettos over the years. "It was the first time I realized I wanted to tell someone's story through my photographs. I discovered the beauty of humanity in places I least expected it," she remembers. The camp and the lives of the women there held her captivated. "I wanted my pictures to intimately reflect real life. I began working with NGOs who introduced me to families; in exchange I allowed them to use my photos for fundraising purposes," Matar explains. Her work in the camps took on a new twist when she began photographing a particular girl. "She was nine years old and spent an hour looking for the perfect veil to match her clothes. I was fascinated by the fashion aspect of the veil. This aroused my interest in understanding its comeback and its different meanings."

When Matar was young, few women wore veils. Both the conservative trend of the last decades and the secular, fashionable aspect are the cause for today's increased use of head coverings. For many women, the material makes a fashion statement: the colour and style are adapted to the woman's outfit. It's a side of Muslim women that interests Matar. At the American University in Beirut she met a young woman with headdress. While her peers were wearing western-style clothes, she was clothed in black to her ankles, with a veil that only left her eyes visible – a Niqab. "This woman had grown up in the USA.



A nun wearing a fluttering veil looks into the distance from the terrace of Saydat al Nouriyeh convent in Chekka

She made the conscious decision herself because she wanted to lead a more religious life, and she felt freer with it. She was going to become a doctor," Matar recalls. She also explains the feeling that exists for many women behind the veil: "I don't have to dress for other people. I can be myself."

In addition to the portraits of daily life and the meaning of the veil, Matar's work has a third point of focus – the war. In 2006, she found herself with her children caught in the middle of the conflict. "All the forgotten memories and terror of the war I grew up with resurfaced." Matar documented how women dealt with the horrors of war. She knows how the women in Lebanon feel, and her background allows her to build close relationships with them, and gain their

trust. "After a while they begin to remove layers." Even after her book "Ordinary Lives" was published, Matar continued to nurture the contacts she had made over the years. She brought copies of the book to the camps. "People liked it and were happy to be in the book."

More recently, Matar began to turn her attention to young teenage girls and their rooms – their personal realms. The photographs taken over the past two years will appear in Spring 2012 in a

book titled 'A Girl and Her Room'. The same tenor exists in both books, Rania Matar explains. "My work focuses on people and humanity, on beauty and people's dignity – whatever the circumstances of their lives may be. In Lebanon, I discover places I hadn't known before." CARLA SUSANNE ERDMANN

Rania Matar: Ordinary Lives, 108 black & white photographs, 136 pages, Quantuck Lane Press, New York 2009, www.raniamatar.com