

# South End *News*

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## Photographing the human spirit

Sorrow and spirit  
on display at  
Gallery Kayafas

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Sometimes, even the best photographer knows when it's time to leave on the lens cap.

"I didn't think of myself as a photographer," says Rania Matar of her traumatic experience during the 2006 Lebanon War, a devastating military conflict that killed and displaced thousands of Lebanese and Israeli civilians. "I was just thinking, 'I need to get my children out of here.'"



In "Newspapers" the modern woman is the one obscuring her identity from the world.

Matar, a Brookline-based photographer, was traveling with her four children when she ar-

rived in Lebanon on the very day

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# Photo

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the five-week war began. Though her husband was already en route back to the United States following a family trip to Berlin, Matar had planned a brief sojourn to the country where she was born and raised before moving to America in 1984. She was greeted not by the familiar sights and sounds of her native Lebanon, but by the destruction and fear instigated by air strikes, artillery fire and other hallmarks of war in the latest episode of an Israeli-Lebanese conflict that has raged for decades. Matar was no stranger to the devastation experienced by Lebanese civilians; she grew up amidst it, and in 2002 she visited the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut to begin photographing the men, women and children (with particular emphasis on the latter two categories) who have been displaced by the constant conflicts.

But viewing the onset of war firsthand — and with her children by her side — was far more disconcerting than documenting rubble and ruins through the distancing lens of a photographer's camera. "It was a pretty traumatizing experience," says Matar, adding that maternal instinct kicked in "like a light switch." Via rental car, she fled to a Syrian airport to get herself and children on the first flight back to Boston. But once she crossed that Syrian border, the shutterbug impulse bit back hard: "The minute we arrived at the border and I felt safe, the first thing I did was jump out of the car, open the trunk and grab my camera."

The result is *Lebanon at the Crossroads*, which is currently on exhibition at Gallery Kayafas. The series of black-and-white photographs are culled from Matar's work during her pre-war visits to refugee camps and her return to document the post-war aftermath in Lebanon. Her images juxtapose the

devastation and ruin of a community under siege with hopeful snapshots of normalcy: "Soccer in the Alley," demonstrates the natural playfulness of children while "Girlfriends," shows that no black veil can suppress the act of female bonding. Matar avoids obvious images of grief and calamity, preferring to set her focus on the indomitable ability of the human spirit to continue with the minutiae of life — from the joyful to the mundane — even amid the most difficult of circumstance.

"I didn't want to [simply] say, 'Oh, look at the misery people are living in,'" says Matar of her decision to eschew certain clichéd representations. She concedes that she has been deeply affected, shocked and saddened by the conditions experienced by Lebanese civilians. However, as she formed bonds and relationships with her refugee camp subjects, she realized that human commonality — not condescending sympathy — was the message she wanted to convey to her audience. "The better I got to know the people, the easier it became [to view them objectively]," she says. "I started looking at them as human beings going on with their lives, instead of just feeling sorry for them all the time. At the end of the day, we're all human beings."

To that unified end, Matar also aims to discredit misconceptions that American audiences may have about non-Western women. "It's so easy to lump people together," she says. "It's important for me to show people who are often misrepresented in Western media. [Media] generalizes Muslim women as oppressed, illiterate, backwards people." For that reason, Matar's photographs document Lebanese women throughout all socio-economic strata, from refugees to those living in more "upscale, Americanized culture." Matar's inversion of popular preconceptions is particularly evident in "Newspapers," a piece that reveals

four women — three cloaked in traditional veils and one in a modern skirt ensemble — perusing their respective newspapers. Each veiled, Muslim woman cradles her paper low in her lap while the skirted woman holds hers high in front of her eyes; ironically, she is the one who eclipses her face and obscures her identity from the world.

*Lebanon at the Crossroads* also reveals the influence of American culture overseas: Children wear T-shirts featuring characters like Barbie and Spiderman, while Coca Cola and iPods maintain the same ubiquitous presence they enjoy stateside. "I didn't intentionally look for it," says Matar of the hints of Americanization that pepper her photographs. "But I'm very aware of it. Lebanon is a very schizophrenic country in the sense that people love America and American culture ... even if they may be upset at the [American] government."

Though Matar's work reveals an array of artistic subtleties, she has placed the highest priority on conveying the resolute, spirited efforts of Lebanese civilians to confront devastating circumstance. "I was really humbled by the resilience of the people," says Matar. So humbled, in fact, that she would later return her children to the same country from which they hurriedly fled in July 2006.

"Growing up in the U.S., my kids have just about everything they want," she says. "I thought it was very important for them to see this, and I think that they have really learned."

And with *Lebanon at the Crossroads*, Matar expands the opportunity to learn to all of us.

Lebanon at the Crossroads, *photographs by Rania Matar is on exhibit through Feb. 9 at Gallery Kayafas, 450 Harrison Ave., 617.4832.0411. Matar will discuss her work at Gallery Kayafas on Thurs., Jan. 17 from 6-8 p.m. For more information on the artist, visit [www.raniamatar.com](http://www.raniamatar.com) or [www.gallerykayafas.com](http://www.gallerykayafas.com).*