

Ordinary Lives

Rania Matar

Quantuck Lane Press

October 2009

136 pages, 108 tri-tone photographs

ISBN: 978-1-59372037-7

Clothbound, \$39.95

In her recent monograph, *Ordinary Lives*, Rania Matar examines an area of the world where conflict is commonplace—Lebanon. The complexity of this region exists apolitically for Matar, as images are presented simply and exquisitely as the fleeting moments of everyday. The images in *Ordinary Lives* have two distinctive dichotomies: the innocence and benevolence of families living their lives amidst a landscape scarred by the various conflicts of the past, and the cosmopolitan city of Beirut contrasted with the poverty and entropy of the Palestinian refugee camps located within its borders.

The black-and-white photographs are sequenced in three related sections: “The Aftermath of War”; “The Veil: Modesty, Fashion, Decoration or Statement”; and “The Forgotten People”. These sections, though clearly separated by the photographer’s statements, contain pictures that evoke similar feelings of numbness to war. Beneath the crumbling structures, in between jagged spirals of barbed wire, and next to a wall blown apart by rockets and shrapnel, children play, women socialize, and teenagers go to the beach. On page 21 is a highly layered, Cartier-Bresson-like photograph of a young, veiled girl juggling. In the background a young man jumps rope. On the left side of the frame a Lebanese flag is strewn over a clothesline. The entire scene is played out within a crumbling high-rise structure set against the mountainous Lebanese landscape. All three elements seem as if they have been tossed in the air and are precariously balanced for just that moment.

Matar grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, and moved to the United States twenty-six years ago to pursue a career in architecture. After becoming a mother, Matar could no longer operate as a full-time architect, so she turned her attention to photography. Since then, she has regularly returned to her embattled homeland to look at the lives of women and children in the contexts of war and its aftermath, cultural polarization, and an unsure future. Matar worked with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and frequently visited the refugee camps around Lebanon. With each visit, she grew more and more comfortable with the people and eventually was able to form personal relationships with them. Matar’s intimacy and familiarity with her subjects are quite evident, but even more striking is the presence of the photographer who, as a mother of four, sees her own children in the faces she chooses to follow.

Matar has chosen to focus on the women and children of Lebanon, perhaps to liberate the pictures from any sense of politics or agenda. She photographs from a low vantage point, and her caring and concern can be felt in her photographs. Her subjects are the innocents; the children are hopeful and the women are protective. Her subjects exist in stark contrast



Rania Matar, *Barbie Girl*, Beirut 2006, courtesy of the artist

to the world around them, which has either passed them by or has been destroyed.

A major theme of the book, and hence its title, hinges on the pessimistic notion that war is ordinary. It is the acceptance of violence, and the normality of poverty and compromised living, that is most troubling in the pages of *Ordinary Lives*. A photograph leads off “The Forgotten People” with a grim example of the situation for refugees in Lebanon. A veiled, elderly woman displays her refugee identification card that, along with a headshot of the woman looking youthful and beautiful, indicates that she has been a refugee for forty-eight years. Now in their third or fourth generation, the refugees in this part of Lebanon have seemingly given up hope of freedom and are beginning to lose their identities.

The book concludes with an essay by 2004 Pulitzer Prize-winner Anthony Shadid, who sees hope in Matar’s images (in this instance, the book’s cover photograph):

...[A] young mother smiles as her infant girl, dressed in a Barbie T-shirt, raises her arms outward, as if embracing life. The infant’s emotions stand as an antidote for conflict.

—James Rajotte



Rania Matar, *Juggling, Aita El Chaab Southern Lebanon, 2006*, archival digital print, 24 x 36 inches, courtesy of the artist



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