

The Aftermath

Photographs by Rania Matar Article by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo




Barbie Girl, Haret Hreik, Beirut, 2006

In the immediate aftermath of war, people were waiting for the destroyed and inaccessible buildings to fall down, under the compounded pounding of the wrecking ball, so they could retrieve their belongings from the rubble. They would wait all day and make an event out of it. Here this toddler is captured to appear larger than life against the background of bombed out rubble and onlookers like a phoenix rising from the ashes, even bringing a smile to her mother's face.

In the tradition of photographers who travel to war zones and disaster areas throughout the world, Rania Matar uses her camera to record the humanity of people living a semblance of ordinary lives within the shifting social and political environment of her native country, Lebanon. She focuses on life and resilience instead of death and despair. Although she left the country in 1984 to move to the United States, she returns to visit regularly, and has embarked on several photographic projects documenting life in Lebanon before and after the 2006 war. It is the mixture and clash of cultures and religions that makes Lebanon such a potent subject for Matar, as for her the country reflects a "blend of Western and Arab cultures, of Christianity and Islam, of Sunni and Shiite Islam, and of modernity and traditionalism."

Focusing primarily on women and children, Matar's photographic projects have included Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, the aftermath of war, and the increase in the wearing of the veil in recent years. Her photographs raise important issues without promoting a specific agenda; they pose questions rather than answering them. We wonder, for example, how the two women and young boy in Matar's photograph "Defiant" resume a "normal" life while bombed-out buildings crumble behind them, or how incongruous it seems (perhaps only to the Western eye) to see women wearing the traditional headscarf or veil while children sport Western-style T-shirts with commercial logos of Barbie and Spiderman. Matar's images can also be humorous, as in the photograph "Newspapers," where four women, three wearing traditional Islamic robes and head coverings and the fourth dressed in a Western-style suit, sit on chairs and read newspapers as if they are waiting their turn at a beauty parlor. In reality, the women are sitting in a tent set up by Hezbollah in protest of the pro-Western Lebanese government, and the only woman covering her face with a newspaper is the one who is not veiled.

Shooting with a wide-angle lens, Matar places her figures at the forefront of the picture plane, unavoidably close and exposed to our scrutiny. Her use of black and white rather than color gives the work an immediacy that is a hallmark of documentary photography. Matar's technical expertise, artistry, and humanitarian vision are evident in these powerful and revealing photographs that provide an insider's view of a country torn by war and struggling with changing religious and cultural values. 

Rachel Rosenfield Lafo is the director of curatorial affairs at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where she has organized more than fifty contemporary art exhibitions and written the corresponding catalogues, among them *Presumed Innocence: Photographic Perspectives of Children* (2007); *Self-Evidence: Identity in Contemporary Art* (2004); *Luminous Forms: Abstractions in Color Photography* (2004); *Photography in Boston: 1955-1985* (2000), and *Living Water: Photographs of the Sudbury River by Frank Gohlke* (1993). She has also been a visiting critic, panelist, and juror for many



The Dead Mother, Palestinian Refugee Camp, Beirut 2005

Two girls are putting on their veils as the portrait of their dead mother hangs in the background. The older girl is fourteen, and the younger who is nine just decided to start wearing the veil. She has a twin sister who chose not to wear it.



Defiant, Haret Hreik, Beirut 2006

Immediately after the war between Israel and Hezbollah, people in a southern suburb of Beirut went back to survey the damage and look for their belongings in the rubble. However, they also came to socialize and keep in touch with their old neighbors. They would bring plastic chairs and visit where their homes used to be.



Newspapers, Hezbollah Tent, Beirut 2007

Hezbollah set up tents in downtown Beirut as a protest against the pro-Western government. While the men sleep in the tents, the women come during the day for support. They meet in a large tent and organize speeches and events. There is a Christian faction, also against the government, who set up tents close by, and the women from each camp visit each other. Here a woman from the Christian camp is visiting and they are all reading the newspaper.

Rania Matar trained as an architect at Cornell University before studying photography at the New England School of Photography and the Maine Photographic Workshops. Her award-winning work focuses on the Middle East, women and children especially. Her images have been exhibited and published widely in the US and abroad, and are in the permanent collections of many museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Portland Art Museum, the DeCordova Museum, the Danforth Museum of Art and the Kresge Art Museum.