

SUNDAYLIFE

Portraits tell quiet tales

Photographer Rania Matar's stunning images on view in Cleveland

By Anderson Turner
ABJ/Ohio.com correspondent

The visual arts often take a leadership role in improving a neighborhood economically and how it is perceived in the community. Further, the visual arts act as portals to perspectives and reminders that the world is broader than the region in which you live.

Transformer Station is a space for contemporary art in a historic Cleveland building that has been given a "minimalist" addition. Located in the booming Ohio City neighborhood, the space offers several exhibits a year including some organized

by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Currently on view is "In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar." The exhibit, organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art, features 42 large-scale color images made between 2009 and 2016 and surveys four different series by this Lebanese-American photographer, "L'Enfant-Femme," "Becoming," "A Girl and Her Room" and "Unspoken Conversations." Matar uses portraits to "examine the nature of female identity in girlhood, adolescence and middle age in the United States and the Middle East."

The photos are all of equal size and are presented at the same height throughout both of the

See MATAR, [D3](#)



"Maryam 9, Beirut, Lebanon," from the series "L'Enfant-Femme," 2011. [RANIA MATA/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY]

MATAR

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buildings' galleries, at the entrance and in one special location in the stairwell. The different series are mixed together, creating a sense of blurred lines between two cultures. It's often hard to tell the physical location of the person photographed. This is important, as the artist, who is of Palestinian descent and born and raised in Beirut, emphasizes the "underlying similarities rather than apparent differences across cultures," and looks for the "beauty in our shared humanity."

Matar has lived in the United States since 1984 and was schooled in art and architecture, but not photography. She began by photographing her children, and the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001, inspired her to use the medium to tell a "different story of the Middle East." She was further inspired by visits to Palestinian refugee camps beginning in 2002 where she felt a strong connection with the women there, especially the mothers. The artist's ability to form a connection comes through in the portraits and is part of what makes the exhibit so intriguing.

"Maryam 9, Beirut, Lebanon," is a 2011 photograph from the series "L'Enfant-Femme," which explores "how girls on the cusp of puberty often adopt stereotypical personas derived from mass media when posing for the camera." The image is of a young girl wearing a hijab, a long sleeve shirt and pants. She's got a serious look on her face, or at least a look that demands to be taken seriously, and she is standing in what appears to be her living room.

Maryam is wearing all white with a gray shawl and she commands the entire center of the image. Even though she is only 9 years old, the way in which she is photographed, combined with her demeanor, gives the composition a timeless feel. This image stuck with me, a father of two young women. It's reminiscent of the little flashes of the "people your children are about to become" that often only parents get the joy of seeing.

"Soraya and Tala, Yarze, Lebanon" is from the series "Unspoken Conversations," which "juxtaposes adolescent daughters and their middle-aged mothers to convey the complexity and universality of the mother-daughter relationship." This is the type of image that proves



"Leila and Souraya, Jounieh, Lebanon," from the series "Unspoken Conversations," 2015.

[RANIA MATAR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY]



"Molly 12, Brookline, Massachusetts," from the series "L'Enfant-Femme," 2011.

[RANIA MATAR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY]

the old saying "the apple does not fall far from the tree." The mother and daughter are photographed side by side, but the mother is standing in front of a white section of wall while the daughter is off to her side, with a large abstract painting in the background behind her. The daughter is wearing dark blue and the mother is wearing white.

Their placement, their clothes and the similar looks on their faces help define them together, but individually as well. It's a stunning image, both because of the physical beauty of the two subjects, but also because they and their house look

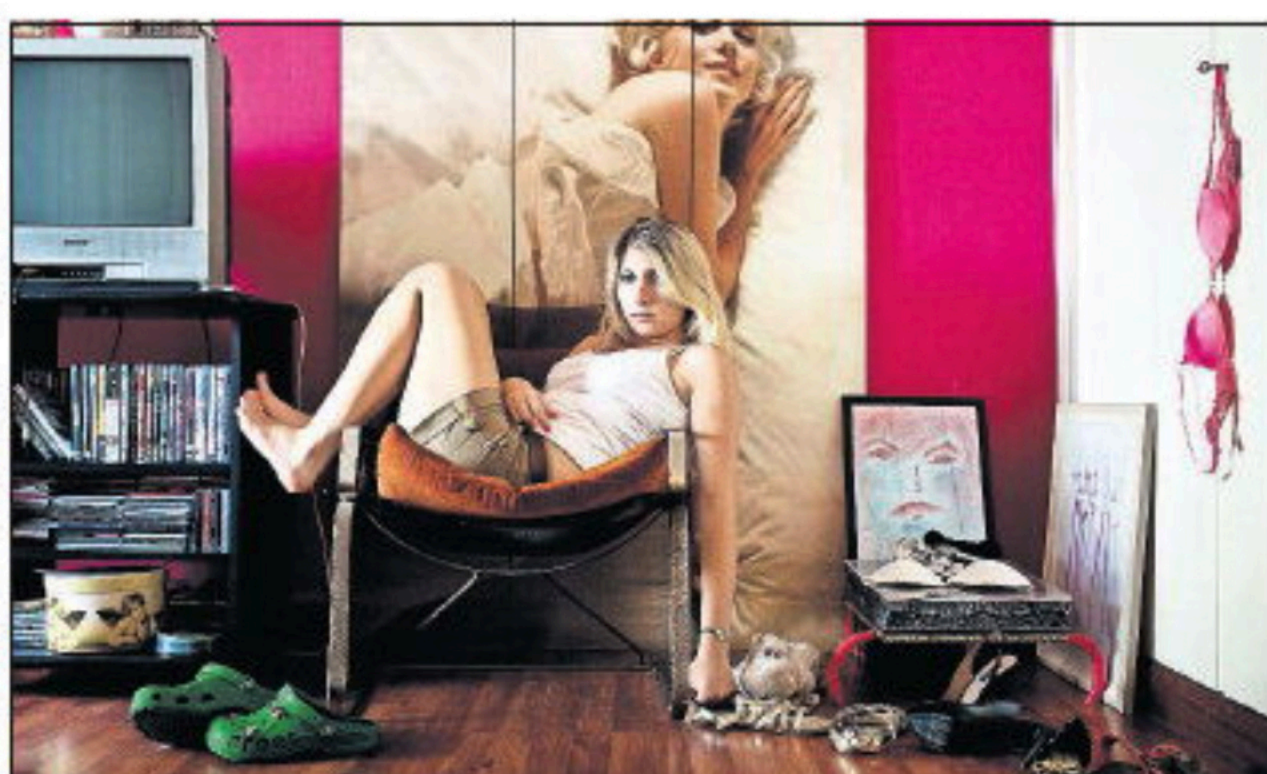


"Soraya and Tala, Yarze, Lebanon," from the series "Unspoken Conversations," 2014. [RANIA MATAR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY]

so Western, which flies in the face of preconceived notions about Lebanon.

"Siena, Brookline, Massachusetts," is a 2009 image from the series "A Girl and Her Room" which portrays teens in their bedrooms, and this is a photo of a teen with a capital T. The subject has a faraway look in her eye even though she is looking sideways at her laptop. There are images of models all over the wall behind her, which is interesting since it highlights the concerns parents have about children and body image. Perhaps most importantly, in the context of the other subjects in the exhibit, this image feels like the others regardless of the country of origin.

"Christilla, Rabieh, Lebanon" from 2010 is also from this series. The subject is sitting sideways on a chair with a large photo of Marilyn Monroe on the wall behind her. She is bookended by her television and what appears to be artwork she made, as well as a pink bra hanging on a closet door. Things litter the floor and like the image "Siena,"



"Christilla, Rabieh, Lebanon," from the series "A Girl and Her Room," 2010. [RANIA MATAR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT KLEIN GALLERY]



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