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ABOVE: *Maya and Isa, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2007* **OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Alae, Ramlet Al-Bayda, Beirut, Lebanon, 2020*

AN INTERVIEW WITH **RANIA MATAR**



WOMEN
FOTO PROJECT

AWARDEE
2022

by DAVID KNOBLE

Rania, *thanks so much for taking time between your trips to talk with me about your work. First, can you tell me a little about where you grew up and how it led you to think about working in photography?*

Rania Matar: Sure. I grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, during the Lebanese Civil War and left in 1984 to attend Cornell University in the United States to study architecture. I also took a lot of art classes and combined both art and architecture for my thesis. Ironically, I did not seriously get into photography until much later and worked as an architect for a few years after I graduated. I have four children, and when I was pregnant with my fourth child, I started taking evening photography workshops at the New England School of Photography.

I fell in love with the craft. For all my assignments, I started making photographs of my children, as I saw them growing up. This work defined all my work moving forward – it taught me to see the beauty in the everyday and the mundane but also to seek intimacy in my work. That work was from the early 2000s, but Leica just recently published a portfolio of this work.

David Knoble: *I love this image of your children with cucumbers in their eyes, they almost glow! So, how did you make the transition from taking images of your children to the types of images you are known for today?*

Rania: After September 11, 2001, the news felt very divisive and the rhetoric of “them versus us” was predominant in the narrative. It made me question my whole sense of identity. I am from the Middle

East, and I am American – how did I fit into that alienating narrative? People from the Middle East were generally portrayed in a one-dimensional manner, and I wanted to tell a different story. In 2002 I went to a Palestinian refugee camp right outside Beirut with my cousin who was doing a documentary and was surprised by the conditions people lived in so close to where I grew up. I realized I wanted to tell their stories. They were forgotten. My early work was very tentative, and I had to learn to work on getting the proper access.



Getting the right access to places one wants to photograph is half the battle, the rest is up to the photographer to make the best of it. My work has evolved, but getting the right access and working intimately with people has remained my priority.

David: *Did you receive any advice as you were working in those camps?*

Rania: One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was from Peter Howe, who was the executive director at “The Digital Journalist” back then. After he saw my portfolio which included the images I made of my children alongside the early work from the refugee camps, he told me I had to get that same intimacy in my photographs with all the people I work with. This has been the focus of my work up to this day. At that moment, I found myself having this incredible and unique access to the women in the refugee camps, and I was in awe of them. I started focusing on women, mothers, and children. After all, I was a woman and a mother.

The work in Lebanon evolved into four projects that became part of my first book “Ordinary Lives”. Once that book was released in 2009, I was ready to start a new project.



ABOVE: *Rianna (Venus), Bhamdoun, Lebanon, 2022* **OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Christilla, Rabieh, Lebanon, 2010*

My older daughter was 15 then and was transforming from a tomboy into a beautiful young woman and I became fascinated with her and her friends. I started photographing them when they came over and realized I was craving that intimacy again and asked to collaborate with each young woman by herself. After a couple of them picked their bedroom as the location, I realized that was my project “A Girl and Her Room.” The room was the cocoon, the place where they were exploring their sense of identity – it was the safe place where they can be themselves. And they offered me the gift of trust and access.

The project kept growing as I started reaching out to young women I would meet anywhere. I would explain my project to them and give them my contact information. I was delighted that they understood the idea of the project and almost all of them agreed to be part of it. I was doing this work in the US at first and then realized that I was exactly like these young women myself 25/30 years earlier in a different country and a different culture and I started including teenage girls in Lebanon as well – and in the Palestinian refugee camps. The work then felt more personal to me. It was about my identity and my daughters’ identity as well. I was focusing on shared humanity through girlhood, womanhood, and growing up.

David: *Your images are very artistic and unique. I understand you went back to Lebanon with this project in mind. Why did you expand it there as well?*

Rania: I found there was a certain universal nature to these images. Lebanese young women growing up had similar experiences to the young women I was collaborating with in Boston. Even though each woman has her own identity and individuality, there was a universality to growing up and going through the different stages of life. This became consistent throughout my work: focusing on both my cultures and identities, finding out commonality despite our differences, and doing that through the women.



David: *How does this compare to your earlier work in Lebanon and what makes it more unique?*

Rania: My earlier work was more documentary in nature. As my work evolved, it became more collaborative. I don't have any preconceived notions when going to photograph someone. It is their space, and we work together to create the story and the image. It truly is a collaboration.

David: *This image really speaks to me. This young lady is sitting in her room, relaxed, but still reserved almost like she is holding something back as she looks at you.*

Rania: This image became the cover of my book, *A Girl and Her Room*. I love that it throws people off. People in the US often don't believe me when I say that this is a woman in Lebanon. Again, for me, it is about breaking barriers and shattering stereotypes. In my experience, people here often think that all women from Arab countries are veiled, oppressed, etc. This image represents the exact opposite.

David: *Your images have moved over time from rooms to the outdoors. Can you tell me more about this?*

Rania: This was an interesting process for me. Most of my work up to the most recent project was inside the home, in the familial domestic space. From *A Girl and Her Room* (2009-2012), then *L'Enfant-Femme* (2011-2015), a project about the preteen inspired by my younger daughter, and then *Unspoken Conversations* (2013-2016), a series about mothers and daughters that started when my older daughter left for college, I worked inside. As my work is very autobiographical, once my children left home, I became interested in



exploring images made outside the home. The outside space and the landscape became the backdrops for the images, expressing metaphorically that transitional and significant moment in their lives, the moment they left home.

I was honored to be offered an artist residency in 2017 by the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio through a Mellon Foundation Grant. I fell in love with the rural Ohio landscape, and I started collaborating with young women (students) in that landscape that had become the backdrop for their temporary home for four years. The idea of moving outside was then created and it felt that it was my daughters' story again, during that transitional period of leaving home for the first time.

As with the rest of my work, I decided to also take this work to Lebanon. Over there, the rural Ohio landscape was replaced by typical Lebanese backdrops, layered walls, the Mediterranean Sea, etc. I applied for and was immensely honored to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for this work. This enabled me to travel more broadly within the United States and the Middle East for a year to create this work. It was a huge stamp of approval for me personally, and it made me more confident in taking creative risks in my work, creating

new work, and having the gift of time to make it.

My fourth book, *SHE*, was released in 2021 by Radius Books. The book was delayed because of Covid, and the silver lining is that I was able to add new images into the book from Lebanon that I made after the explosions of August 4, 2020. Those images became the base for my new work, but also made the book richer, I think.

David: *These are incredible images and one of my favorites is the young lady with the pink coneflowers in the foreground, in part because it is taken in my home state of North Carolina. In 2022, You won an amazing award from Leica Camera, aptly named the annual Leica Women Foto Project Award. Can you tell me about receiving that award?*

Rania: Yes. I am very honored to have received such an award from Leica recognizing me for my newest body of work still in progress *Where Do I Go?* I received a camera and funding to help me travel back and forth to Lebanon. Again, it was a wonderful stamp of approval for a new body of work that I had very recently started. I am immensely grateful for the trust Leica placed in me.

David: *Do you have any advice you would like to give young photographers today?*

Rania: I would definitely tell young photographers to make work that they deeply care about, work that they are passionate about. They should make work that is personal to them, and that they won't get bored focusing on for a long period of time. I would tell them not to worry about an audience yet, but to photograph for themselves. That is when photography is



ABOVE: *Lea, La Maison Rose, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019* **OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Rhea, Ramlet Al-Bayda, Beirut, Lebanon, 2021*

at its best. Like Diane Arbus said: “The more specific you are, the more general it will be”. I love that quote.

Another piece of advice would be to stay open to things that could happen along the way. Sometimes projects evolve and that leads to something else. Let it happen. And write about your work often – it helps you clarify your ideas.



David: *What do you see in some of your next work?*


Rania: My current project focuses specifically on Lebanon. There is a large wave of emigration out of the country at the moment, especially of the younger generation. When I left Lebanon in 1984, I was the same age as these women. Now, I am collaborating with this younger generation in Lebanon. Every image has a story – her story, our collective story. These women inspire me – they are goddesses.

David: *I love photographing at the coast, so I really like how you captured the movement and foam of the water in this photograph with this young lady. Can you tell us the type of cameras you use?*

Rania: In my earlier work, I used both a Mamiya 7II and a Leica M6 and M7. In most recent years, I used almost exclusively my Mamiya 7II which is like a big Leica for 120mm film. During Covid no one was developing film and I was working on a project photographing people across their windows. I felt that there was an urgency to this and to capture that moment in time, so I bought a new medium format digital camera, the Fujifilm

GFX 50R. Since then, I have very gradually transitioned to almost exclusively the digital camera.

David: *Rania, this has been incredibly interesting, and I appreciate you telling me so much of your story! I love the way you have taken your childhood and your family's and turned it into such visually stimulating projects. I want readers to be able to look for your newest book, SHE. How can they find it?*

Rania: Thank you, David. It has been lovely chatting with you! 

SHE is available in numerous bookstores but also specifically on the Radius Books website:

<https://www.radiusbooks.org/all-books/p/rania-matar-she>





ABOVE: Ciearra, Raynolda Gardens, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 2018 **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Tara, Bekaatat Kanaan, Lebanon, 2022



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Leica Camera congratulates the 2023 Leica Women Foto Project Awardees

Photograph by 2022 LWFP Awardee Rania Matar
leica-camera.com/en-US/leica-women-foto-project