The Personal Gaze in Storytelling: An Interview with Photographer Rania Matar

“Where are the men in your photos?” a critic asked Lebanese photographer Rania Matar early in her photography career. Back then her response was panic and guilt over what she then perceived as an oversight in her documentary work. Since then her relationship with her subjects and work have shifted as she embraced some of the strength that can come from a more personal approach.

Although Matar came to a career in photography later in life, it was evident from the start that she had an interest in photographing the lives of women and children in ways that were closely tied with her personal history. Matar visited Lebanon after the war in 2006 to photograph the everyday lives of Lebanese families caught in the aftermath. In this work compiled for her first book, Ordinary Lives, Matar was documenting subjects from her homeland, providing an intimate glimpse into their day to day lives with an understanding that likely stemmed from her own experiences growing up in Lebanon. As New York Times journalist, Anthony Shadid described in the book’s essay, "Matar may not try to represent the soul of Lebanon, but her images understand that essence evocatively well... [They] are most spectacularly about endurance and resilience, the tapestry of life."

Documentary photography often places objectivity as the highest goal, not always recognizing the ways a photographer’s background can shape the framing and depth of a story. Matar’s history with Lebanon brought a unique understanding to the subjects in her book, Ordinary Lives, this understanding extended to her later
work as Matar became interested in portraying the lives of girls and young women in New England and the Middle East. As a mother with an understanding of both worlds, she is uniquely qualified to tell the story. Matar came to the United States from Lebanon in 1984 and began a career as an architect. She began studying photography at the New England School of Photography with the goal to better capture the lives of her four adolescent children. The inspiration for more recent projects like, *A Girl and Her Room* and *L’Enfant-Femme* came as she started observing and photographing her teenage daughter and her friends. The project gradually expanded to include work both in New England and in the Middle East as Matar brought her vision as a woman and a mother to the development of these collaborative portraits. The end result is part documentary and, as Matar describes, part autobiographical. As Anthony Shadid remarked, Matar’s images understand the essence of the subjects she photographs “evocatively well.” Perhaps this understanding comes in part by admitting and incorporating the autobiographical aspects to her work.

**Ann Hermes:** How do you think your gender informs the projects you chose to work on and the subjects you approach?

**Rania Matar:** I think the relationship between me as a woman and the girls I photograph is very different. I don’t think a man would’ve taken the same pictures. There is an intimacy there without the ambiguity in all this that might happen if it was someone from a different gender. I didn’t set out originally with my early work in Lebanon to start working with women, but at some point I realized I was only working with women. I later showed my work to someone and he actually asked me, “Where are the men in your pictures?” Originally I was horrified, and I went back and thought, alright, I’m going to photograph men now. But then I realized that I don’t really want to photograph men, and I’m drawn to women and to mothers because for me the work is somewhat autobiographical. And I thought much of what happens in the in the Middle East is the work of men and the women are the ones
holding the homes together and so for me it was how it started. Really I didn’t set out to work just with women but it came intuitively over time.

Lara, Maya and the Bra, Damascus 2006  Photo Courtesy of Rania Matar

**AH:** Do you think that your role as a mother of two daughters informs the projects you chose to photograph and the way you photograph them?

**RM:** Originally my daughters inspired the work. I have two sons as well, but somehow I was inspired by my daughter who, at 16 was transforming. She affected the early stages of the project in the sense that she was the one who inspired the work on “A Girl and Her Room.” And of course I’m a mother in the way I look at the girls, but the relationship between me and the girls was the relationship of the photographer and a model. I realized that this was important and I started looking for girls I did not know prior to the photo shoot. So I would meet them and start working with them and let the relationship develop that way. And I thought it was important for me not to be associated with the mother because then they would not be themselves. It started from there but on some level it also made me more understanding of my daughters. So it also worked the other way around in that it made me appreciate so much about teenage girls and how vulnerable they are and it made me more understanding of my own daughters.
**AH:** How did you go about identifying subjects to photograph for “*A Girl and Her Room*”?

**RM:** I had all of these photographs of my kids when they were little. And I was first inspired by my daughter but I didn't start with my daughter, I started a little bit with her friends when they would came over. As soon as the project narrowed itself to the idea that I wanted to photograph a girl in her room I started typically with girls that I knew, with friends of hers or daughters of my friends, and I realized that it was very limiting for me and for the girls. And I like going somewhere with a completely clean slate and discover the person from scratch without going knowing that I know her mother or she knows me. So it developed slowly like that, and if I had not slowly realized what I was shooting I might not have put it together.
AH: How did you relationship with the subjects play out as you were photographing them?

RM: It was very collaborative. I would work to get a sense of things in the beginning and take a couple of shots. I would put the camera down and then as we would start talking you could see their whole body relax and I would ask them to stay exactly like that and then I would shoot again. So it becomes intimate and they really let go and I think it’s up to me to create a setting where they’re comfortable around me and they are willing and cooperating and being themselves around me. It’s not easy on their part. Most of them completely got the project and it develops and keeps going. I spend some time with them in their homes because I don’t expect to get that kind of intimacy after just walking through the door.
**AH:** What do you parts of your experience do you draw from to help create a relaxed atmosphere with your subjects?

**RM:** I work well with people and I realize that it’s hard being in front of the camera. You have to let people know how to trust you and I don’t have a formula for that. I think you have to like to be around people and to be compassionate and to make people feel like you are not judging them. So I think it takes a lot respect and the sense not to take them for granted. There has to be a great sense of compassion and a need to help them have fun. I tell them, I want you to love these images, so the more you are yourself and willing to help me then the more you are going to like the image. So don’t hold back and don’t be shy. It’s very important to get to that point.

**AH:** Does your background in Lebanon along with your work photographing in the refugee camps there inform this work?

**RM:** I started this project in the United States and my earlier work was in Lebanon and I quickly realized in my work here that I was exactly like the girls I was photographing in the Boston area years ago. During my youth I was in Lebanon and growing up in a war, but at the core there is something so universal about that age and it was not just a matter of different times or even the locations, between the Middle East and here. This became important in all my work moving forward to include the two cultures and not to set them as comparisons of each other. I think
everything you hear on the news here is focusing on all these differences and for me it was showing the exact opposite, showing our similarities.

Lubna, Beirut, Lebanon 2010  Photo Courtesy of Rania Matar

**AH:** Do you feel like you helping to break down a stereotypical image of modern women in the Middle East?

**RM:** For me it was always “Us” and “Them” and I was wondering how I fit in here when I am “Them” and “Us” at the same time. My early work was meant to show the humanity of the Middle East and after 9/11. It became really important to me to show the humanity of the women in the Middle East. I think a lot that was coming from the news is very negative, and for me it was never about the oppression and the veil, but for me it was very important to focus on our shared humanity. I also had the access in both countries, I speak both languages and I could relate to both countries equally. This was allowing me to do something personal. I wanted to own it and do something that feels a bit autobiographical.
AH: How would you describe some of the tension in some of your portraits along with the sense of girls becoming young women.

RM: In my project “L'Enfant Femme” this was a little bit of what I was after again in both cultures. I think these young girls are starting to be aware of their womanhood and their sexuality. This was again inspired by my younger daughter, where all of a sudden I could see that her body was starting to change and her whole attitude and demeanor was changing. Some people have a harder time with this work. But for me the girls are innocent and are coming to terms with their sexuality, and there’s nothing wrong with that. And I think that people who project more into it are projecting their own issues on it. Because if you ask a girl to pose for you, that’s what she will do. I don’t know if it’s what I would’ve done at that age, but with the times as well and what they are exposed to there’s something different about it. The girls are innocent, but they are really starting to be aware of the fact that they are about to become women.

AH: Do you ever get feedback from the viewers or the subject about the way they are portrayed and represented?
**RM:** The girls loved it and the photos almost always became their profile on Facebook. The girls and the parents get it. I've never really had any complain or say anything bad about the photo. I've had people not agree to be photographed and I completely respect that, but once they were signed on they were fine and the girls enjoyed it and I made friends with the parents often. I take pride in the fact that the relationship I have with them is respectful and there's a trust. So I need to also uphold that trust. I'm not trying to show anything that was not given to me.

**AH:** Do you get a sense that the viewer takes away the impressions you intended?

**RM:** For the project, “A Girl and Her Room,” the book is out and it’s been exhibited in so many places and portrayed on blogs and I really feel like people got it. And I’ve exhibited in Lebanon and the Middle East and I’ve never heard any people get something different out of it. For me it’s important when I’m photographing the girls that I’m not judging them. I’m not trying to portray teenagers the way a lot of other photographers try. And I don’t think that’s good or bad, it just wasn’t my goal to show the rebellious teen. It was more my goal to capture the vulnerability, the humanness and the real person behind it and I think people could see that through the work.

Photographing people is not easy. I’m photographing older women now and I’m finding that this is a lot harder. You have to take the picture, not necessarily that people are offering you, but what you are really seeing beyond that. And I love the
quote from Henri Cartier-Bresson, "You have to try and put your camera between the skin of a person and his shirt." So I really think it's a matter of working with people, and treating them with respect, but also working to get beyond the obvious. And it takes sometimes a long time for you to get to that point with some people.

AH: I think it’s interesting how you mentioned that somewhere along the way you recognized that your work was autobiographical. That you are bringing yourself to the process of photographing others. Because many times photojournalist and documentary photographers make objectivity their goal and don’t want to recognize what they bring to each image that they take. And I think it’s interesting that you acknowledge what you bring to it and how your background changes the photo.

RM: It took a while to do that, and I realize that I don’t call my work documentary, which I used to at the beginning, because I don’t think of it like that anymore. I don’t mind going in and moving things around the room, not altering them entirely. I think at some point it became working in collaboration with the person instead of being there and disappearing. So at some point the work shifted a bit and that’s okay because we all grow as artists when we’re doing work. At first when someone asked me, “Where are the men in your photos?” I was really upset, but then I began to
realize that I need to follow my instincts and I don’t care what anybody is saying. I’m interested in photographing the women. I came to the realization that my work that is personal. And I think it just gave me permission to work on whatever I wanted to photograph. When you realize that, it’s a huge breakthrough.

Rania Matar’s work has shifted over the course of her relatively new career in photography, but she has come quickly to an intimacy and understanding that shines through her images. As a mother and a Lebanese American, Matar’s uniquely informed eye provides insight to the collaborative portraits displayed in A Girl and Her Room, L’Enfant-Femme, and Women Coming of Age. Matar has shown that a photographer’s images and relationship with a subject can gain greater depth by bringing autobiographical elements to the documentary approach. As Matar has described here, by lending personal history to the process, a photographer can strengthen the rapport on both sides of the lens and grow closer to portraying one’s subject and oneself truthfully through the camera.

Images from A Girl and Her Room were recently on display in the show, She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Her work has also been recognized by UNICEF’s Photo of the Year Award, The European Publisher’s Award for Photography and she was selected as one of the Top 100 Distinguished Women Photographers in 2008 by Women in Photography International. She continues to show work in galleries both nationally and internationally and is currently a teacher at Massachusetts College of Art and Design.