

Winner of the Third Prize at “Lebanese Diaspora” International Art Exhibition, Rania Matar talks to LERC

Friday 16th April 2010

Interviewed by Elie Nabhan

Multiple award winner and selected in 2008 as one of the Top 100 Distinguished Women Photographers by Women in Photography, the focus of Ms. Rania Matar’s photography is the Middle East, women and children especially, and Lebanon in particular as the gateway to the region

Her images try to capture the universality of the human being, people who somehow hang on to their humanity and dignity, expressing their never-say-die spirit as they continue with normal life regardless of circumstances.

As a Lebanese emigrant living in Boston, in the United States, Ms. Matar’s images portray the complexities of Lebanon but seen through Western eyes.



Ms. Rania Matar

Recently Ms. Matar started a project teaching photography to teenage girls in refugee camps in Lebanon, with the assistance of non-governmental organizations, and to teenage refugees in Boston with the assistance of the Children’s Hospital.

As a full-time photographer, Ms. Matar had her work published in photography and art magazines, and exhibited widely in solo and group shows in the United States and on the world stage.

Her images are held in the permanent collections in many museums as well as in private collections.

Ms. Matar was the Third Prize winner for her photograph *Barbie Girl, Haret Hreik Beirut 2006* at the International Art Exhibition on *Lebanese Diaspora*, organized by the Faculty of Architecture, Art and Design and the Lebanese Emigration Research Center at Notre Dame University, Louaize, held in the Dome, Central Beirut, between 16th and 31st March, 2010.

EN: Why did you choose your prize-winning photo *Barbie Girl* for the exhibition on Lebanese Diaspora?

RM: Barbie Girl is part of a series *The Aftermath of War* and is the image I chose for the cover of my book *Ordinary Lives*. It was taken in September 2006 after the war between Israel and Hizbullah. Residential buildings were very heavily damaged so a wrecking ball was demolishing them. People who lived in them prior to the bombings spent their day waiting for them to collapse so they could find their belongings in the rubble.

What fascinated me was the resilience, friendliness and trust of people. Waiting for the buildings to collapse became a neighborhood event to which I was welcomed. For me, this image and the moment behind it represent resilience and humanity: the toddler wearing the Barbie T-shirt is facing forward like a Phoenix rising from the rubble, embracing life and bringing a smile to her mother's face despite all the destruction in the background.

EN: In this way do you feel that *Barbie Girl* relates to the theme of migration?

RM: I feel that the whole scene as it was unfolding relates to the theme of migration. People lost their homes, moved somewhere else and were waiting for their homes to collapse to the ground so they could find their important belongings.



Ms. Rania Matar's Third Prize winning photo *Barbie Girl*

EN: Have you exhibited the photograph anywhere else? Where?

RM: I have exhibited this photo widely, including in the US, in Lebanon and internationally. It is part of two museum collections: The De Cordova Museum and

Sculpture Park and The Danforth Museum of Art. It was also recently exhibited in Lebanon at Janine Rubeiz Gallery. I feel that this photo alone says so much about Lebanon and the resilience of people.

Barbie Girl has won a few awards including 1st prize at the New England Photographer's Biennial, and is part of the winning series of Aftermath at the Prix de la Photographie, Paris – Px3.

EN: Why the title *Barbie Girl*?

RM: Very simply because the little girl is wearing a “Barbie” T-shirt, which seems at odds with the background behind her. I wanted people to focus on the Barbie shirt as their eye will invariably take them to the background behind her.

EN: As a migrant yourself, did this influence your choice of photo for the exhibition?

RM: I submitted three photos for the exhibition. *Barbie Girl* was the one chosen for the prize. I tried to pick three images that for me represent Lebanon in some way: *Barbie Girl* for the reason I described, *Girl and Rocket Hole* which shows a little girl sitting on a very ornate sofa with a rocket hole in the wall behind her, and *Nun with Blowing Veil* as it also shows another aspect of Lebanon. Maybe since I have been living abroad, I have learned to see Lebanon with different eyes, the eyes of the Lebanese whose heart is in every one of those images, as one who understands and loves the people but also as an outsider who can see with bewilderment the dichotomies and complexities of Lebanon.

EN: Can you tell us the story of the individuals in the photograph? What is each one trying to say? The photo is concentrated on three people and not groups. Is there a reason for this?

RM: The whole scene before my eyes at that moment watching people wait for their homes to be destroyed was overwhelming to me so I took many images of that whole moment. This image stood out among the rest as it told the story of the three people in the photo. The little girl is oblivious to what is behind her, just happy to be the center of attention, the mother smiling as she proudly looks at her daughter -- making the image somehow eerie as you would expect someone to be crying when you see the surroundings, and the man in between them who brings you back to the reality of the whole scene.

EN: Surroundings appear important to you, so why did you choose a background of destruction for *Barbie Girl*?

RM: I look at the whole frame in each of my images. It is important to see people in their surroundings to tell their stories. In *Barbie Girl*, the background as the surroundings are particularly important as it places the images in the context of the aftermath of war. This photo would not be nearly so strong if you just saw a cute girl wearing a Barbie T-shirt with her mom smiling at her, had the background of destruction not been there to remind you of the circumstances. Now the little girl is more than just a cute little girl with a

Barbie shirt, she is a symbol of moving forward and rising above the destruction, a symbol of life over death.

EN: What is your message when it comes to photographing people?

RM: I hope to focus on the humanity of people and the beauty in daily ordinary lives.

EN: Can you describe the humanitarian, spiritual and social statement of your photography?

RM: I try to focus on the beauty of everyday moments of life. I photographed in the Palestinian refugee camps and in the aftermath of war in areas where people often did not want to venture to or know about. I was always fascinated to discover beauty, humanity, dignity and resilience in every one of those places. For me it was an important message to get across and I deeply hope that some of my photos can translate it.

Throughout my work in Lebanon, I was welcomed into people's lives, and humbled by their resilience and hospitality. Religion and political affiliations did not matter. In my photos I concentrated on the spirit with which people continue with the mundane tasks of daily life no matter what their circumstances, on their lives that are ordinary in surroundings and political climate that are often anything but ordinary.