

Panoramas and Personas: Setting and Subject in Rania Matar's Photographic Works

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Abstract

In this research paper, I have investigated photographer Rania Matar's usage of the physical landscape, natural and/or artificial, in combination with the physical bodies of her subjects, to create dialogue with the viewer concerning circumstances of identity, social pressures, and culture. Matar's work imparts a unique approach to commentary on issues that are important to her and her subjects; said commentary is achieved through the skillful merging of person and place to form the desired narrative, and the method of delivery to the audience (photography as medium) solidifies her approach's success. Here I provide an introduction to the artist, as well as to specific influential historical/contemporary contexts, and examine six images from published collections to illustrate the effect of Matar's merging of the outside world and the inner world within her photographs.

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Artists have used landscape and setting in combination with their own bodies or the bodies of others to talk about conflict, displacement, and issues related to the self within a larger construct (natural, societal, and other). This blending of self and place is common, but the effect of such blending is not as often addressed—by creating a combination of body and landscape, be it a natural landscape or a setting created in a manmade, manipulated environment, there is unbound capacity for the exploration of relationships between the human and the not, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the unfamiliar. These juxtapositions, some of which are more comparable than contrasting and vice versa, open up avenues of self-understanding within the confines (or safety nets) of broader society, as well as allowing artists and audience members alike the opportunity to put themselves into another person's 'place' (literal and metaphorical). To consider the ways in which an artist has created their work, especially in their combinations of body and place, is to consider the people and the world outside of yourself, and to open up to the conversation the artist (and subject) are wanting to convey. Artists from all over the world, and throughout the centuries, have used this technique in effort to achieve this level of universality and communication, but one contemporary artist who exemplifies the blending of setting and self to create a larger dialogue is Rania Matar.

Rania Matar was born in Lebanon in 1964 and grew up in Beirut, before eventually moving to the US in 1984, where she has lived ever since (Matar, 2020). Matar studied architecture at the American University of Beirut and then continued her studies at Cornell University in New York once she arrived in the States (Liptrott, 2018). She developed her passion for photography over time and eventually went to the New England School of Photography and to the Maine Photograph Workshops (Liptrott 2018), moving from there to continue her photography and become an international success. Her photographs have been included in and accepted by many exhibitions and galleries in several museums, including “the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Carnegie Museum of Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, and more” (Matar, 2020); Matar also had a recent retrospective of her work on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Matar is a current Guggenheim Fellow (2018), the most recent of many awards and fellowships over her career, having also been a 2017 Mellon Foundation artist-in-residency at Kenyon College, and having received two Massachusetts Cultural Council artist fellowships in 2007 and 2011, respectively, along with other awards and accolades (Matar, 2020). She is an associate professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and has published three photography books: *Ordinary Lives* in 2009, *A Girl and Her Room* in 2012, and *L'Enfant-Femme* in 2016, each of which focuses on one of her collections and includes essays written on the topics in her work and her work itself (Matar, 2020).

Now in her late 50's, Matar has been creating work for several years and has been receiving awards and honors since before 2007 for her photography. One of her earlier exhibitions, *A Forgotten Population*, was shown at the Boston Public Library in Allston,

Massachusetts in 2006; this particular exhibition focused on images of Palestinians living in Lebanese refugee camps, some of the photographs then being collected for *Ordinary Lives*, and was met with highly positive reviews (Williamson, 2006, p. 28). One particular reviewer praised Matar's ability to illustrate "the larger design of human perseverance" through her art (Williamson, 2006, p. 28), meaning the people in the photos seem surrounded by difficulty and hardship but are framed within a lens of dignity and strength that Matar is so careful to include. This concept of highlighting a variety of social problems, but without using or manipulating her subjects to instill pity in the viewer, and instead creating images that act to put the viewer and the subject on an existential equal footing, is well-known in her work.

Another review from 2007 discusses some of Matar's photography which was selected for the New England Photography Biennial at the Danforth Museum of Art (Matar received the First and Purchase Prize for the contest involved in the Biennial, and her work was shown at the Danforth) (Hill, 2007, p. 11). Matar's works were chosen in part due to an interest in her methods of displaying the seemingly paradoxical—children playing among destroyed buildings, people having conversations amid chaos—and for the cultural, 'foreign' content. Shawn Hill, an instructor in Art History at the Montserrat College of Art, comments on the "current fascination with Islamic culture" of the time, especially among elements of the Middle East that were (and still are) deemed 'different' enough from US attitudes to warrant observation (Hill, 2007, p. 11). The photographs Matar submitted to the contest are also included in *Ordinary Lives* and are images of life in Lebanon, specifically Palestinian refugees. Combined with the uptick of interest that Hill points out, the contest judges were also taken with Matar's signature clarity, focusing on her subjects and using the surroundings as a means to inform the viewer and drum up awareness of crises of many kinds, without pandering or attempting to elicit pity (Hill, 2007, p. 11).

Matar has received recognition outside of the United States as well, with her work commented on by print/digital media such as *Al-Raida*, a peer-reviewed and feminist-based journal; this particular journal is published by the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon (Al-Raida, 2020). *Al-Raida* (which translates to "The Pioneer") has been in print since 1976 as the Institute's primary journal. The mission of the Institute and of the journal itself is to "give voice to women in the Arab region by enhancing understanding between the region and the world; highlighting scholarship on and by women in the region; promoting research on women's rights and gender issues; and serving as a platform for young voices and activists across the region" (Al-Raida, 2020). Matar has not published in the journal herself, but her photography and exhibitions have been reviewed by others, and the various underlying contexts of her work have been discussed. Cheryl Toman, a professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote an editorial for *Al-Raida* that included Matar's *The Forgotten People* collection. In Toman's article, she linked several artists with Middle Eastern backgrounds/content in their art and talked about the overarching theme of these artists who "channel their creativity... to develop tools of consciousness-raising and a means of actively participating in the history... of their own communities and countries as well as of the world in general" (Toman, 2009, p. 2). Toman goes into depth on Matar's *The Forgotten People*

as an example, reiterating Matar's inspiration found within the people she was photographing and their worldly situation, and the continual goal of Matar's work as a means to create awareness in others of the "obligation to right injustice." This includes her artist's statement, which explained her project was not necessarily political but instead meant to act as an image link for others so they would acknowledge the crises occurring (Toman, 2009, p. 2). Only from that point of acknowledgement can conversation move forward towards solutions.

Matar is not the only artist to create imagery that focuses on issues relating to the Middle East (and some that are also found in other countries like the US); Chad Elias, a professor of Art History at Duke University, published a book in 2018 analyzing contemporary art stemming from Lebanon that concentrates on "the contested memory of those years of civil strife and political upheaval" affecting the country between 1975-1990, during the Lebanese Civil War (Duke University Press, 2018). *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* includes content on multiple artists and stresses artworks that revolve around "Lebanon's disappeared," the people who have been 'lost' in some form or another during the various political, religious, and social disasters that have happened in the last century (Elias, 2018, p. 94). Elias stresses the idea that photography containing missing individuals has the ability to imply the constant possibility of return, that the person or persons within the image may be found again and become 'real', no longer only 2-D faces on print or digitized shadows. This factor is utilized by artists to "elicit acts of public witnessing and commemoration that bridge the disciplinary boundaries between aesthetic inquiry, political activism, and forensic investigation" (Elias, 2018, p. 94). Images of the missing are compelling because they are in a state of transition, a place of in-between existence, and in Matar's case the refugees she photographs are certainly displaced from their homes and in many senses are just as 'lost' as the initial thousands missing from 1975-1990. Some of Matar's subjects may know of family or friends who disappeared during that time, and Matar herself may have some similar experiences.

Living in Lebanon for 20 years, Matar would have been highly aware of the Lebanese Civil War and its disastrous influence on the country and people. The Lebanese Civil War was a "civil conflict in Lebanon emanating from the deterioration of the Lebanese state and the coalescence of militias that provided security where the state could not" (Kingston, 2020). Some of the core reasons for the political decay and "a growing crisis of insecurity" were issues surrounding the unsteady development of the country, religious conflict within the nation and others surrounding Lebanon, the devaluing of the Lebanese pound and subsequent economic collapse, and the rise of militant forces gaining immense power by threat of violence, all of which plummeted the country into chaos (Kingston, 2020). Chad Elias also noted the Amnesty Law passed in 1991 in his book, which essentially acted to erase previous and potential charges/investigation of "crimes against humanity and those which seriously infringe human dignity"; the idea was to create a blank slate, to allow the country to move forward and be reunified, but it also meant those who were killed, harmed, and 'gone' would never be found or receive justice (Elias 2018, p. 96). The Lebanese Civil War, and its continual effects, are just one

of many significant struggles that have affected Lebanon and its people, as well as surrounding nations.

These struggles are not all entirely historical, and bleed into the present. Matar's website includes a reference to the recent explosions in Beirut, which happened on August 4, 2020; the blast was initiated by a load of confiscated ammonium nitrate, stored by authorities at the port for the past six years before the current catastrophe that killed more than 200 people, injured over 6,500, and displaced 300,000 others (BBC News, 2020). Matar had set up an auction for some prints of her work to act as donations for relief organizations in Lebanon. The prints are sold out now, but through the brief descriptions attached to her webpage, and the overflowing amount of work that she has created over the past few decades relating to the Middle East, Matar's connections with her heritage and her concerns (and hopes) for a more harmonious, blended future are visible in every photo she takes.

Ordinary Lives is Matar's first photography book, consisting of both her images as well as essays written by her and Anthony Shadid and poetry excerpts by Lisa Majaj, and the main subjects of the work are women and children living in Beirut, in refugee camps, and other places within the borders of Lebanon (Matar, 2020). Many of these figures may be direct refugees from the Lebanese Civil War, or they may be descendants. The book was published in 2009, with the aim to focus on people living in a time and place that remains tenuous; Matar and others who have reviewed her book emphasize the careful efforts to portray the individuals in each photo with "strength, dignity, and humanity", especially considering the series of unstable situations that have affected the Middle East (Matar, 2020). Karen Hass, the Lane Collection Curator of Photographs for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, lauded the book and Matar's photography for its "rare intimacy and respect" towards its subjects, and Jill Medvedow, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (also in Boston, MA) praised Matar's skill to "reveal moments of order and domesticity amidst upheaval to capture the stability found within instability" (Matar, 2009). Those are just two of several reviews attached to the book, but they hold key aspects of the work, particularly the ideas of stability, intimacy, and dignity that Matar is able to portray in her photographs: the people, the women and children in her images, are surviving in a world that appears to be unraveling around them, but they continue to hold themselves together, and by doing so, hold their communities together as well.

Rania Matar states her intention in *Ordinary Lives* is to "focus on the universality of being human no matter what the circumstances are", while recognizing her unique placement as both an 'insider' and 'outsider'—being Lebanese and growing up in Beirut, she knows the language and the country, but she has also lived in the US long enough to be able to experience Lebanon and its culture from a Western perspective (Matar, 2009, p. 14). The book is an amalgamation of three different collections that each focused on slightly different areas, ranging from life in Lebanon after its several wars to the spread of Western ideas in commercial media and the growing interest in Islamic tradition; within all are images portraying the daily lives of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were (and are) existing within an ambiguous landscape, literally and metaphorically. Interspersed among the photographs are

poems by Lisa Majaj that recount the struggles being faced by the people in Matar's work, such as in "Arguments":

consider: beneath the din of explosions
no voice can be heard
no cry
consider your own sky on fire
your name erased
your children's lives "a price worth paying" (Matar, 2009, p.10).

Elias's explanation of the Amnesty Law ties with Majaj's poetry (names erased, children disappeared, voices silenced, etc.). Matar reiterates her intent to remain unpolitical, but there is a challenge in portraying people and places that have been so thoroughly derailed through governmental decay. She does, however, intentionally frame the individuals she photographs with explicit and implicit clues into their self-identities and their larger social/cultural placement, especially focusing on the interior lives of women and children. Two images will be examined here, though there are over 100 to choose from.

Figure 1, titled *Rocking Horse*, is an upwards shot of the exterior of a house, with a sliver of the natural landscape present on the left-hand side of the image (Matar, 2009, p. 66). A young woman and child are visible in the window on the upper floor of the house; on the windowsill rests a large toy horse with wheels. In the extreme foreground, a man's face is partially visible on the left, out of focus due to proximity to the camera. The image itself is in black and white, like all the works in *Ordinary Lives*, and there is a variety of textural detail that combines with monochromatic elements to emphasize the photo's crispness. There are loose wires that crisscross the front of the house, which is pockmarked with holes and crumbling material, and the landscape beyond is strewn with rocks and boulders, creating a ragged visual surface; even the man's face is lined, his forehead wrinkled and his short-cropped hair wispy like some sort of sedge, part of the environment. The young woman holds the child as the child sits on the ledge of the window, while both stare directly into the camera. The photograph is one of Matar's less styled portraits, but the eyeline of the subjects links with the viewer, and the formality of their posing reads as a planned image (however, the man's blurry face in the corner suggests he was not aware of the shot being taken). Matar's attached explanation of the image states that "people moved back to their homes following the war of the summer of 2006, often living in badly damaged buildings" (Matar, 2009, p. 130); that reality is visible here, with the stark destruction of the home and its continued occupation nevertheless underlying its importance as a point of life, domesticity, and peace. Matar's photograph illuminates the value of normalcy, however small the amount, in the fact that these people are still present in their home (whatever is left), and the inclusion of the toy rocking horse (as the image is named after) puts focus on the elements of life continuing even with challenges, behind and ahead. The family has remained, the child still has a childhood, and things move on.

Figure 2, titled *Rocket Hole in the Kitchen*, is similar in scope to Figure 1 but provides an even more intimate glimpse into family life, accomplished with the blending of setting with the

actions of the people in the image (Matar, 2009, p. 38). A young woman sits in the center of the photo, most in focus compared to the three children around her; on her left is a stove, and on her right is a large hole, which is taller and wider than the young woman, filtering in light from the outside. None of the people in the photo are looking directly at the camera, all facing different directions and engaged in different activities: the children are all at play, each with their own toy or diversion, and the young woman's hands are obscured by the yarn-like hair of a doll in a child's grasp. There is a contrast between the hard smoothness of the broken concrete wall, the veneered pattern of the stove, and the soft textural qualities of the blanket that is wedged between the bars of a window in the upper left corner. This photograph is positioned from a closer, more even angle, providing the viewer with the sensation of having sat down in the kitchen with the rest of the family, and there is a general air of softness created by the diffused light and shadow within the room. As in Figure 1, the hole in the wall brings the aftermath of war and violence into the family home, but the stove and children's toys provide that essence of determination to thrive regardless of hardship. This is a family that, like the previous one, is attempting to recuperate some semblance of an ordinary life (as the title of the book suggests), and seems to be succeeding.

Published in 2012, *A Girl and Her Room* is Matar's second book, containing essays by Susan Minot and Anne Tucker, and part of its origins lie in Matar's experiences as a mother, watching her two girls grow up and become their own people (Matar, 2012); for the project, she had the young women being photographed chose their props, decide their poses, and many of the images are accompanied by quotes from the subjects, all in an attempt to allow for freedom of expression of the self (Liptrott, 2018). Like *Ordinary Lives*, there is a heavy element of 'place', in that the setting is linked to the people being photographed and that setting is used to create an emotional space for the viewer to respond to, as well as receiving information about the subject themselves. Several of the images are from the US, mostly from Massachusetts or other northeastern states, sometimes directly paired with images from Lebanon, including works taken in refugee camps. Susan Minot (a novelist) and Anne Tucker (a now retired curator from the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX) both recognize what Matar has done in this book; Tucker exclaims, "what a variety of expressions are captured here—not just facial expressions, but self-expression in the objects they collect and how they arrange them," in reference to the subjects of each photograph and their accumulated surroundings (Matar, 2012, p. 12). Mehrnoush Shafiei, a writer/editor who specializes in Middle Eastern politics and culture, is another critic of many who appreciates the photographer's artistic direction and intention.

Mehnoush Shafiei wrote her review of Matar's *A Girl and Her Room* in 2013; in the review, Shafiei reiterates what the photography book is and how it is styled, but also points out the core goal of the work as she understands it, which is to create a complex 'portrait' of the girls through not only their physical selves, but also their surroundings. As Shafiei states, "one of the most interesting functions of the book is that it examines the highly complex relationship between object and self in the framing of identity and selfhood," and Matar's careful attention to the use of space in each photograph, along with the crucial input and guidance for design that

came directly from each of the models, is what helps create that object/person relationship (Shafiei, 2013, p. 80). The girls themselves, not Matar, formulated their individual settings for their portraits, allowing their bedrooms to speak for them and present who they are, as they wished to be seen. As already stated, *A Girl and Her Room* contains intermixed images from the US and Lebanon, and Shafiei makes note of how an anthropological interpretation of the photographs “reveals the high degree of overlap between the local and global in terms of self-representation and ideas of femininity,” among other aspects of gendered culture that are also at play (Shafiei, 2013, p. 79). There are repeated objects, and therefore repeated ideas, that are found in both US and Middle Eastern images from the book, including traditional ‘feminine’ items such as makeup, mirrors, and specific color schemes of pinks and purples; these tokens of gender, including items signifying adulthood like the bras visible in some of the photos, act as bridges between seemingly disparate worlds.

These girls may live across the globe from each other, but they are still affected and shaped by cultural concepts of womanhood and growing up that are universal. Shafiei sums this up nicely, stating the photography collection accurately displays the “set of associative expectations and tensions that accompany the very idea of being a ‘girl’”, and the accompanying quotations (taken directly from the young women in the pictures) illustrate that each girl, in each bedroom, is aware of the social roles and expectations placed upon them (Shafiei, 2013, p. 80). However, Shafiei also captures Matar’s other main purpose with the work, that goes beyond any universalism—each girl, and each representation of the transformation into womanhood as displayed by the personalized setting of the bedroom, are entirely unique versions of femininity (Shafiei, 2013, p. 80). The girls are linked by the exterior forces acting upon them, but they are all one-of-a-kind in the creation of their self-identity, as shown through a space they most connect with and that has grown along with them. Matar states, “I was discovering a person on the cusp on becoming an adult, but desperately still holding on to the child she had barely outgrown, a person on the edge between two worlds, trying to come to terms with this transitional time in her life and to adjust to the person she was turning into;” this blending of setting and subject create a visual conversation for deeper messages relating to personal growth and challenges (Matar, 2012, p. 128).

All of the photographs from *A Girl and Her Room* show this compliment of place and person blurred together to form meaning, but only two will be discussed. Figure 3, titled *Lubna* (the name of the subject), is a color image of a young woman reclining on a day bed underneath a window (Matar 2012, p. 18-19). The angle of the shot is faintly lower than the young woman, creating an upwards tilt that is heightened by the young woman’s pose, with her head slightly back and her eyes on the camera. The only substantial furniture present is the daybed, but surrounding the daybed is a variety of smaller items such as pillows, a backpack, a stuffed animal, and stacks of papers; the walls are painted a singular hue, but are also decorated with hanging pictures, more stuffed animals, and memorabilia. The colors in the image are vibrant: a deep robin’s egg blue for the wall, rich wood tones in the window shutters and the daybed, and pinks of all shades in the young woman’s clothes, bedding, and other objects around her. The

lighting is mostly artificial, directed from above and vaguely florescent, but sunlight weaves through the wicker screens in the window shutters, and the shadows of the room are soft. This image is a portrait, as are all the works in *A Girl and Her Room*, but the objects included with the young woman are what create a more complex, and more complete, picture of who she is. Many of the items, such as the stuffed animals and baby pictures, signify connections to childhood or adolescence that are still remembered and treasured (or else they would not be present); contrasted with the young woman's more mature appearance and the 'adult' nature of the room itself (the neutral furniture, the medium tone paint, etc.), there is a sense of time that fills the photograph, stretching from the past into the present. There are cultural contrasts as well, with Western imagery and ideas found nestled in with the young woman's Middle Eastern reality—the picture was taken in Beirut, and the girl (who is veiled) comments on her appreciation for her Muslim background and religiosity, but the items she has chosen to help represent herself include outside elements such as a Winnie the Pooh teddy bear, a Bart Simpson backpack, and images of Donald Duck and Betty Boop, among many other recognizable faces. The image, in total, has the sensation of a merging of time and space, with a subject who appears to be comfortable in the blended diffusion of aspects of her life that are visible to the audience, through her own manipulation of the setting to tell her story.

Figure 4, titled *Siena* (also named for the subject) depicts a young woman sitting on a bed, tucked into the corner of the room (Matar, 2012, p. 30-31). There are pictures of women on the wall behind her, and in the immediate foreground is a stuffed animal. The main colors in the photograph are pale creams and whites with dark flashes of black and red, distributed more across the top of the photograph and drawing the eye from the bottom of the image upwards. The angle here is at even height with the young woman, who had her head tilted slightly down and to the side, her arms half-crossed and legs folded. Like Figure 3, whose subject wears pink socks, a pink shirt, and has her eyebrows manicured and nails painted, there are elements of femininity to recognize; mostly this is found through the all the magazine clippings and cutouts of models and famous women, plastered on the wall behind the girl, who has dyed her hair with highlights and has also painted her nails. This photograph suggests the 'typical' struggles of being a girl and a teenager: social pressures concerning appearance, expectations to be met, and the open laptop on the left-hand side comments on how these challenges are no longer limited by location but are now digitized and globally spread. The young woman herself addresses her concerns, saying "when I was being photographed, what was running through my head was how the models on my wall are the people I strive to look like... Am I good enough?" (Matar, 2012, p. 30-31). The question 'am I good enough' is echoed throughout *A Girl and Her Room*, in more subtle or overt ways, but Figure 4's emphasis on the issue resides in its composition and the objects chosen by its subject to talk about her personal doubts.

Matar's third book, *L'Enfant Femme*, focuses again on young women, some barely into their tweens, as they are beginning to process their place in the world and how they will be perceived as they grow older. Matar worked on the project with Her Majesty Queen Noor Al-Hussein of Jordan, who provided the introduction to the book, and who mentions their similar

interests in multi-cultural examination and how they are both products of their experiences within two separate, but not exclusive, worlds (Matar 2020). Her Majesty comments how “Rania and I are two among millions for whom Western and Middle Eastern cultures do not constitute mutually exclusive worldviews destined for confrontation,” instead believing that Matar’s photography methods and choice of content act to create connection for all audiences across all backgrounds (Matar, 2016, p. 13). As Queen Noor states it, Matar “exposes the boundaries of American and Arab cultures in order to reconcile them,” a continual theme in all her works in some form or another, and Matar’s explicit request that the girls keep from smiling for their photographs has been singled out as a method used to “capture their developing self-awareness and individual personalities” in each shot (Liptrott, 2018). As with all her work, setting is still involved, though in a subtler vein than in her previous books; however, the sense of ‘place’ and its implementation as part of the portraiture in each photograph is unmistakable.

Kristen Gresh, an assistant curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, has a short essay in *L’Enfant Femme*, which puts emphasis on Matar’s ability to “capture girls’ developing identities at this key moment in their lives” and how Matar presents the “emerging sense of sexuality, femininity, and womanhood that girls this age begin to experience” (Matar, 2016, p. 143). Gresh reiterates how Matar’s “close-up artistic investigation into the psychological world of women and girls promotes cross-cultural understanding between Arab and Western societies and a more sensitive perspective on girls coming of age,” especially important now that so much of the world is linked through media and the stresses of growing up are more widespread than ever before, not to mention the challenges of combining thought processes and ways of being that stem from different cultures (Matar, 2016, p. 145). Lois Lowry has a short essay in the book as well; her background as a children’s writer makes her suited for acknowledging the tenuous in-between world being captured by Matar’s camera, and she makes comments on the startling consistency in many of the images where girls are attempting to appear older than they are, or end up seeming so based on their pose, their clothing, etc. (Matar, 2016, p. 16). She asks the question of where these ideas may stem from, then answers herself with “I think these girls have been schooled, as I was, by an age-old culture that teaches them to practice desirability” (Matar, 2016, p. 17), and notices Matar’s usage of surroundings—“messy bedrooms, cluttered street scenes, graffiti-sprinkled walls”—to establish a setting for this inward exploration each girl is experiencing, and that the audience is privy to (Matar, 2016, p. 18).

Again, only two images will be looked at here, but the entirety of images in *L’Enfant Femme* could be examined. Figure 5, titled *Madi 10*, shows a girl standing slightly off-center from the middle of the image, with a dresser behind her and a mirror reflecting the back of her head and the room in reverse (Matar, 2016, p. 36-37). A bathrobe hangs on the back of a closed door, and figurines rest on the surface of the dresser; besides the figurines and a candle, there is nothing else present. The girl’s clothing is the first focus of the image, the bright red of her sweater and the neon pinks and greens in her short skirt drawing the viewer’s eye, while the neutrals of the background and natural sunlight form a softened haze behind her. The girl’s pose is provocative: standing at an angle, her hand on her hip and elbow thrust out while she gazes at

the camera, an attitude is given off that suggests an attempt at maturity. The bright red of her sweater is mimicked in the shade of her lips, natural or not, and the curls in her hair appear artificial, all acting as additional trademarks of adulthood. While the girl is clearly young, the room is not a child's room, the furniture dark and bulky and the reflection in the mirror showing the headboard of a four-poster bed; everything looks too large for the subject, even the bathrobe on the door. However, at the same time, there are elements that feel child-like, including the soft pink tone of the bathrobe and the pastel porcelain of the figurines visible. Whether the photograph was taken in the girl's room or more likely her parents' room, there is a disconnect between the youth of the model and the physical world around her, as if she has to grow into her new reality (metaphorically and literally).

Figure 6, titled *Reem 11*, has a girl standing off-center as well, with her back to a wall that is entirely covered with a fashion ad (Matar, 2016, p. 94-95). The camera has focused on the girl, leaving the majority of the fashion ad cut out of the image, only showing the model from the waist down. The girl is dressed in jeans, with the floral pattern on her shirt mirroring the floral pattern of the outfit the model is wearing behind her. Facing the camera directly, the subject's hands are pressed to the wall, resting on the model's thighs; the image appears to be taken outside due to lighting and shadow, and the angle is fairly head-on. The attitude visible in Figure 5 is missing here, instead replaced with a feeling of want—the girl's pose is similar to the model's, and the placing of her hands over the model's thighs almost seems to say, "I want to be like this," enhanced by the girl's intent stare. The roses on her shirt are small compared to the flowers on the model's clothing, barely bloomed; the model's painted nails are copied in miniature on the girl's hands, but chipped and worn down. Blue is the first color the viewer sees, immediately attracting attention to the girl, while the rest of the image is pale peach tones and muted pinks. The girl is the only source of blue, making her isolated in the image and highlighting her small frame compared to the woman in the ad behind her. While not incorporating traditional landscape or setting like some of Matar's other works, the use of the fashion ad as a backdrop accentuates the enormity of the subject's future obstacles as she begins to navigate new avenues of life as a woman that will be both expected and unavoidable.

Beyond Matar's three photography books and the examples provided here, her website contains a vast assemblage of her work and a variety of collections she has built over the years, some finished and some still growing. The six images examined here are only a glimpse into the world as Matar sees it through her lens—each of her collections showcases new perspectives on problems both widespread and localized, as well as offering a chance for contemplating solutions created in solidarity, and all in her signature style of landscape and setting as extension of the self, of place as a conduit for furthering the humanity of a subject and meeting the audience with unwavering gaze.

Figures



Figure 1: *Rocking Horse*. Aintaroun, Southern Lebanon, 2006. People moved back to their homes following the war of the summer of 2006, often living in badly damaged buildings. (Matar 66)



Figure 2: *Rocket Hole in the Kitchen*. Aita El Chaab, Southern Lebanon, 2006. A family hangs out in the kitchen. The wall behind them has been blown up by a rocket. (Matar 38)



Figure 3: *Lubna*, Beirut, Lebanon 2010. “Because I was taught religion in school at an early age, religion is engraved in my mind. In everything I do. Once I turned seventeen and I started understanding things better, I drifted away from Islam as I had learned it. I came to realize that Islam is a way of life for me and doesn’t exist to make my life complicated—on the contrary. I am now comfortable with who I am and my veil is clear evidence that I am a Muslim. It has become part of me that I cherish at 99.9% of times.” (Matar 18-19)



Figure 4: *Siena*, Brookline, Massachusetts 2009. “When I was being photographed, what was running through my head was how the models on my wall are the people I strive to look like. I was wondering how we define beauty and where I am on the scale of beauty in relation to the pictures on my wall. Am I good enough?” (Matar 30-31)



Figure 5: *Madi 10*, Watertown, Massachusetts, 2013.



Figure 6: *Reem 11*, Beirut, Lebanon, 2014.

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