



## A GIRL AND HER ROOM

*A Look at the New Photography Series by RANIA MATAR*

*By Sarah Heikkinen*

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In her new series of photographs, *A Girl and Her Room*, photographer Rania Matar tackles the importance of the transitory period that is a woman's adolescence. Shown through the lens of someone who truly understands what it means to be sixteen years old, regardless of geographical location or economic situation, *A Girl and Her Room* gives its audience the ability to begin to see the complexities of an adolescent girl's mind as she struggles to "correctly" enter adulthood.

**Sarah Heikkinen: What similarities and differences did you find between the young women in America and those in the Middle East?**

Rania Matar: First let me know say that I had started this project in the United States where I live, inspired by my daughter, then 15, who was transforming before my eyes. As I started photographing those young women, I realized that I had been the exact same as those girls years earlier, growing up in Lebanon. The realization was moving to me, emphasizing the universality of being a teenage girl, regardless of place and time. It made me want to include girls in the Middle East, making this project personal to me. It is a project about identity: the identity of the girls I am photographing, but also mine as the image maker, and my daughters" who are straddling those two cultures.

There were more similarities than differences. Photographing in both cultures wasn't about comparing cultures, even though some people cannot help but do it. It was more about really showing the universality of being a teenage girl and the similar issues that girls go through regardless of culture, religion, and background, as they learn to deal with all the pressures that arise as they become consciously aware of the surrounding world, wherever this may be.

**SH: What do you think this says about the way those two societies value female adolescence?**

RM: I am not qualified to answer this, but I would say adolescence is usually an age any society has a hard time dealing with. This is what makes this age so interesting to observe and try to understand.

**SH: Do you think there are issues that should be addressed about how young girls approach adulthood?**

RM: I can only speak for myself here, as I am not an authority on the subject and I am trying to navigate my own complicated way as a mother of teenagers. However, from my experience as a mother of teenage girls and from working intimately with those young women in the privacy of their own spaces, I found that for the most part they are often more vulnerable, fragile, and scared that they are willing to expose to the world. It is complicated being a teenage girl. There is too much pressure to perform, to look good, to be cool, to fit in, to be thin, to be beautiful, to be popular, etc. I feel that it is important to validate those girls for who they are, and to constantly reinforce their self-esteem. Maybe just paying attention and understanding the fact that it can be an overwhelmingly complicated time for the young women themselves is a first step.

**SH: What was your reasoning behind exclusively photographing teenage girls? Would you consider including teenage boys in your project?**

RM: Even though this project was originally inspired by my older daughter, I am a woman and I was once like those girls that I am photographing—I am those girls I am photographing. So, this is somewhat autobiographical and personal. I do have two sons, and I am still deciding how to best photograph boys, as I find them equally interesting and fascinating. However, I found that the bedroom had a different meaning in a girl's life than a boy's. I did photograph two boys in their bedroom thinking it would lead to a similar project, but it didn't. What made this project successful to me was the strong intimacy I was able to develop with those young women, and also their intimate and inherent relationship to the space they created around them. The relationship of the boys to me, and to their space felt very different. I am trying to think about a different angle to photograph boys. To be continued...

**SH: How did you achieve such an intimate connection with these girls, most of whom were strangers?**

RM: I spend a very long time with each girl. Sometimes the ice is instantly broken, but with others it is a slower process. I always spent as much time as needed so the young woman was fully comfortable with me, and eventually the photography session became a beautiful and intimate collaboration, which was always the goal. The girls understood the project and willingly collaborated with me. They understood that I wanted to get images that went past a depiction of the room, images that also truly represented them. Originally, I had started this work with my daughters and their friends and with daughters of my friends, but I eventually moved away from photographing girls that I knew well. I discovered to my own surprise that I could achieve a more intimate connection photographically with the girls I did not know. The key was that I was in no way associated with the mother. I was their photographer and age was not issue. I was one of them. As such, I enjoyed discovering new girls and building with them a photographer-model relationship with no expectations or holding back from either of us.

**SH: Did you find that you saw a reflection of your teenage self while you photographed the models?**

RM: Of course I did! I was a teenager in Lebanon and moved to the United States when I had just turned 20. It was revealing and moving to me to see that no matter where you grow up, what changes in the world—and a lot has changed since—at the core, we are just the same, dealing with similar issues of growing up, of leaping into adulthood and a new life, no matter what it is. It reminded me how much I loved my private time in my room, how I used to also shut the door from my parents, just like all those young women do. My room was also similar in the sense that it was my own space. I had my huge teddy bear, stickers everywhere, and my own posters of rock stars (my favorite was Johnny Halliday, a French rock singer). I had a very loved collection of vinyl records and cassettes and...a very unique collection of shrapnel and bullets (courtesy of the Lebanese civil war)!

**SH: Ultimately, what was the most poignant thing you learned in doing this project?**

RM: This project made me understand my own daughters so much better. For the most part, I photographed young women I did not know prior to the photo session. I quickly built a pretty intimate relationship with each one of them and I realized how trusting and open they were with me. It showed me that teens are often willing to talk and open up. Often we, the adults, just don't know how to give them the opportunity to do this. I truly felt how vulnerable and sweet those girls were. I couldn't help thinking that maybe they were difficult with their mothers but also came to the wonderful conclusion that being difficult with their mothers is after all their job as teenagers. I would say, working intimately with those young women was a privilege and it definitely made me more tolerant and understanding of all teens in general, especially of my own. I truly felt very fortunate to have been allowed into their private world and I tried to make images that reflected them truthfully and kindly.

**SH: How did your daughters feel about the project?**

RM: My daughters had fun with this project, but not while I was photographing them. In that instance I was their mother and not the photographer, and this was not as easy—for either of us actually. But they did it anyway—they realized they would not be happy if they were not in the book after all! However, they have been pretty involved helping me edit the work. They have their favorite images and by now they refer to most of the girls in the photos by their first name, even if they never met them before.

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Rania Matar is a photographer who was born and raised in Lebanon and moved to the U.S. in 1984. Matar's work focuses on girls and women. She documents her life through the lives of those around her, focusing on the personal and the mundane in an attempt to portray the universal within the personal. Her work has won several awards, has been featured in numerous publications, and exhibited widely in the U.S. and internationally. Her images are in the permanent collections of several museums worldwide. Her first book titled *Ordinary Lives* was released October 2009, published by the Quantuck Lane Press and distributed by W.W. Norton. Rania's latest monograph, *A Girl and Her Room*, published by Umbrage Editions was released in May 2012.

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*Photography by & Courtesy of Rania Matar/INSTITUTE*

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**Captions:**

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