

Images - Images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut and EastWing Gallery, Dubai.

Writer - Sandra Williams, assistant curator, LACMA.

Rania Matar: A Girl and Her Room

On growing up and growing old

Sandra Williams (SW): How did the series *A Girl and Her Room* develop?

Rania Matar (RM): My daughter was fifteen and I found it fascinating how she was transforming right before my eyes. I started photographing her with her friends and realised they seemed to be performing for each other, so I decided to photograph each girl by herself. Coincidentally, the first two were in their bedrooms and I thought, 'This is my project!' I started photographing young women in the Boston area where I live and I realised that twenty-five years earlier, I was exactly one of those girls, living in a different country, a different culture and a different time, but that I was just the same, trying to navigate those complicated years and finding my identity, so I decided to include young women from the Middle East as well in this project. The work became more personal to me but also more interesting because it was about teenage girls in both cultures, and about the universality of growing up, despite individual experiences. Being from both cultures myself, it was important for me to focus on our common humanity, especially in the current political climate that seems to emphasise our differences

SW: What do the bedrooms reveal about this moment of transition from girlhood to womanhood?

RM: The project is about space and the girl, and the organic relationship between them. At that age, the bedroom is the cocoon, the one space the young woman can control, and where she can explore her developing identity and surround herself with

anything she wishes to. Even a girl growing up in a refugee camp, who doesn't have her own bedroom, is going through the same transitions. It was touching for me that she would find small areas of her space to personalise and make hers, even if it is a closet. It makes you human, in a way, to want to create your own habitat, especially when the outside world can be a scary place.

SW: How did the sessions unfold?

RM: I knew that I wouldn't use the first images. They were like a warm-up for breaking the ice. I'd put the camera down, they'd slouch or start playing with their hair, and all of a sudden I'm seeing a different person from what they were consciously giving me. It was like pressing the 'reset' button. I would then say, 'Can you hold that?' and I would start photographing again. Slowly, the session became more collaborative and more intimate. I wanted the girls to feel well-represented. In one of them—Shannon—I thought I was done photographing her and she asked 'Do you mind if we do some with clothes that I made myself?' It was like a gift she gave me because the picture happened after I thought we were done. I love when they feel like they are truly part of the process.

SW: Several of your other series focus on young women and there seems to be a dialogue between all of them: in one series you see a girl alone; then in another you see her with her mother; and in another one you realise she is a refugee. It gives a fuller narrative to the portraits. And the work also seems to be about your identity.

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RM: Yes, and I think I didn't realise that until after the fact. When I'm photographing people I'm out of the way and it's one hundred percent about them. However, at some point, I owned up to the fact that my work is on many levels personal and autobiographical, and that it is following my life and my own identity as a woman, a mother but also my identity as a Lebanese/Palestinian/American. It became important for me to include women and girls in both cultures and focus on our universality and our common humanity. But maybe it's just natural and art has to be personal and reflect one's own experiences.