

The Middlebury Campus

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ARTS & CULTURE

Rania Matar's "SHE" explores women's resilience in new Middlebury Museum of Art photography exhibit



Rania Matar (Lebanese, born 1964), *Nour #2*, Beirut, Lebanon, 2017, photograph, 28 3/4 x 36 inches. © Rania Matar.

Photo by [Raina Matar](#) | The Middlebury Campus

By [Maya Alexander](#)

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On Thursday Feb. 13, staff, students and faculty gathered in Mahaney Arts Center (MAC) to celebrate the opening of Rania Matar's photography exhibition, *SHE*. Her work will run until April 20, and tells the stories of young women through portraits taken across Lebanon, France, Palestine, Egypt and the U.S.

The exhibition [includes 51 large-scale color photographs](#) from *SHE*, which depict women in their 20s from a wide range of vantage points: through car windows, in abandoned buildings, snow-strewn fields, or floating in the Mediterranean Sea. By working with women in both the U.S and the Middle East, Matar — a Lebanese-born American herself — highlights a shared experience across borders and cultures. Through this, she has established ongoing relationships with many of her subjects, creating intimate portraits that evolve organically.

"I am interested in young women as they enter adulthood today, and in portraying not only their individuality, but also how they confront the environment they find themselves in," Matar wrote in the [artist statement](#) on her website.

The exhibition was curated by Josephine Rodgers, curator of collections and director of engagement at the [Middlebury College Museum of Art](#). She worked alongside Assistant Professor Sarah Rogers, student curators, as well as students in the “Orientalism and the Visual Arts and Middle East Photography” course in the fall, who drafted the labels for the exhibition.

While Matar photographs a diverse array of people and landscapes, two recurring themes emerge within five minutes of strolling through the exhibition: the young girls’ hair and its relationship to their respective surroundings, and how the women interact with water. For instance, Matar depicts Cierra, whose bright pink hair blends into the flowers around her — she becomes part of the environment. This photo was taken in a field in North Carolina, but we can also see an example captured in an entirely different context: Joelle, who is pictured in Beirut, Lebanon, is framed by what appears to be a demolished window. Her braids are entangled in the destruction.

Other subjects are depicted in bodies of water, providing the viewer with moments of tranquility. While there is a sense of calmness in these images, there appears to be a discomfort or pain in some of the subject’s faces, even those who are floating with their eyes shut: as one of the statements on the wall discussed, we must not forget the violence and hardships these women have faced. The photos hold “memories of destruction and experiences of displacement,” as one of the student statement’s read.

Depicting this violence and resilience, the exhibition also highlights the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, which is this coming April. Thanks to Matar’s work, the Middlebury community has a chance to learn about this history through incredible imagery.

“My goal is to create programming that inspires Middlebury students and promotes the museum as a space to make connections to their lived experiences,” Rodgers wrote.

Maya Alexander

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