

RANIA MATAR AND NATAN DVIR

An Interview by Susan Burnstine



Rania Matar



Natan Dvir

While attending Fotofest in March 2010, I spent time with two outstanding photographers who opened my eyes to a world of hope and possibility. Stylistically and thematically, Rania Matar and Natan Dvir have much in common. If I had not known better, I would have assumed they were siblings when viewing their remarkable imagery. But in actuality, Rania was born and raised in Lebanon and Natan in Israel. Conflict could have easily been the root of their relationship due to their cultural and gender differences, but instead, these two exceptional and courageous photographers share the importance of equality in their daily lives, and subsequently, that's expressed within all their images.

What's even more ironic about Rania and Natan is that their previous bodies of works also connect in style and theme. Rania's critically acclaimed body of work and monograph, *Ordinary Lives*, parallels Natan's previous body of work *Belief* in many ways. Thus, I was compelled to present Rania's series *A Girl And Her Room* and Natan's series *Eighteen* in concert with personal recollections from their first meeting.

SB: Can you describe how you experienced one another's work for the first time?

RANIA MATAR: When I viewed Natan's work initially, I looked at the every day life shots and thought it was kind of funny, he is doing in color what I had been doing in black and white in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Then he showed me his portraits and this is where my heart skipped a beat-- I told him to come look at my work right then! We had specifically one image that seems so similar of a Palestinian girl in her room. My image was in a refugee camp in Lebanon and his was in the West bank somewhere. There is something very eerie about that for so many different reasons: he is a man and I am woman, he is Israeli and I am Lebanese, my focus is photographing teenage girls in their rooms and not specifically Palestinian or Lebanese girls, and he is focusing on Palestinian teenagers. It was very interesting how we converged into something while coming from very different places.

NATAN DVIR: I was a fan of her work from Lebanon, yet had never seen before her series of teenage girls in their rooms photographed in various places around the world including Lebanon and Israel. I was fascinated by the intimacy her pictures transmitted coupled with visual richness of details unveiling her subjects' personalities or backgrounds. In a way I felt I found a photographic soul mate. We both chose the language of environmental portraiture of young people in their private spaces. I also find it interesting that both of us chose this approach though previously being used to a much more documentary practice. We didn't have to explain much and understood each other's work instantly. As our curiosity grew we found ourselves exploring each others' previous bodies of work, just to find additional references surprising in their resemblance. It felt both strange and intriguing.

SB: There is a strong link between your imagery despite cultural and gender differences, can you both describe what that is in your perspective?

RANIA MATAR: It makes you realize how similar our cultures are, how we might have grown up a few miles from each other but it might as well have been thousands of miles, but that at the core our backgrounds are so similar and connected. Also for me it showed how a Palestinian girl growing up in a refugee camp in Lebanon who has never been to Israel/Palestine could be so similar in outlook and culture to a girl living on the West Bank. The connection is strong even though the two could never have been in touch due to border restrictions in place since 1948. It somehow summarizes the magnitude of the abyss. I felt Natan was able to cross the boundaries and make people who are considered members of "the other side" welcome him while he also welcomed them. It shows how people connect on a personal level, if and when politics are put aside.

NATAN DVIR: I would not like to put words in Rania's mouth, and would therefore refer to my personal work and my personal understanding of Rania's pictures.

I think both Rania and myself have come from an area of conflict and reached a point in our careers that we wish to engage with it from a less intuitive (and hopefully more effective) point of view. The media and many artists referring to the situation in the Middle East have used imagery of conflict excessively. I am afraid this kind of imagery might be doing as much to distort our understanding of this area as it does to inform us about it. By photographing individuals, both Rania and myself decided to adopt a more personal approach, and discuss the reality through the people whose lives are affected by it. We try to allow the details build the bigger picture, within every image as within the whole project.

SB: With your series, what was it that you were both attempting to say about the world that surrounds you and otherwise?

RANIA MATAR: My previous work *Ordinary Lives* was about showing the humanity of people in Lebanon (in the aftermath of war, in the refugee camps and behind the veil), their daily lives and different aspects of women's issues in the Middle East. My current work focuses on teenagers and not necessarily teenagers from the Middle East. I originally intended it as work in the US, but I am too connected to the Middle East not to include it. I feel I went full circle. My projects connected and that connected me at this point with Natan's work. For me, my work was about showing teenage girls in the privacy of the little shell that is their bedroom. I found that girls are the same on some level everywhere at that age. Despite cultural and sometime religious differences, the same tension exists in the lives of those girls everywhere. They have to deal with the changes in their bodies, with the fact that they are trying to find themselves, that they are scared or anxious about the future and they rebel (some more than others). It was very interesting to see the duality in those girls almost always present: aspects of the little girls they had barely left behind and glimpses of the women they were turning into.

NATAN DVIR: I think our series discuss two different themes yet are very aware of how people might refer to these subjects and try to challenge these perceptions. In this fast evolving world characterized by huge amounts of information and imagery inflicted on us by the Internet and various media outlets, it is easy to generalize in order to be able to cope with this overwhelming reality. Unfortunately, this might cause us to disregard the complexity of some situations that can only be understood by looking closer and searching deeper. Our series are an invitation to see, explore and better understand. While sometimes visually striking, the core essence of the pictures lies not in their formal qualities, but rather in the relationship between the photographer, the subject(s), and the viewer(s).

RANIA MATAR:

NATAN DVIR:

Natan Dvir's series "Eighteen" was made possible by contributions from the "Other Israel Film Festival" www.otherisrael.org

To see more of Rania's and Natan's work:

www.raniamatar.com
www.natandvir.com

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