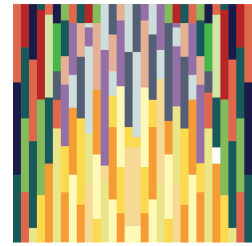


An Exhibition Review of “Rania Matar’s ‘Other Side of the Window:’ Portraits During COVID-19” A Virtual Exhibition at Rollins Museum of Art

Anneliese Hardman



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Abstract

Photographer, Rania Matar (b.1964), strives to create a sense of intimacy with those she photographs by collaboratively involving her subjects as they decide location, costume, and the ways they engage with the camera. These techniques are featured in the Rollins Museum of Art’s online exhibition, “Rania Matar’s ‘Other Side of the Window: Portraits During COVID-19.’” This virtual exhibition was made accessible in February 2021 and is still accessible through the Rollins Museum of Art website. Matar’s ‘Other Side of the Window’ series is focused on the personal and collective identities of all who were affected by the COVID-19 public health crisis of 2019.

This exhibition critique explores how the Rollins Museum of Art displays Matar’s photos in a way that highlights the typically hidden lives of those at home quarantining during the public health crisis of COVID-19. Photos like, “Minty, Kayla, Leyah, Layla, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2020” and “Susan, Raffy, and Baby Violette, Salem, Massachusetts, 2020,” depict their subjects physically leaning on each other and displaying love and tenderness. However, other photos like, “Lucy, Newton, Massachusetts, 2020” and Rania Matar, photographer, [Linda, Watertown, MA, 2020] portray darker consequences felt by victims of the pandemic, including loneliness.

The review also explores the concept of online exhibition and the increase of virtual platforms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This exhibition—along with other virtual exhibitions like it set a precedent for the ability to create virtual museum spaces. Through virtual platforms a ‘hétérotopies,’ or a notion of a world hidden within a world is highlighted. This is underscored as visitors interact with the photography’s subjects and perceive intimate moments of those quarantining during the COVID-19 pandemic. A hétérotopies’ is also created as an experience is fabricated in an online platform where visitors can engage virtually.

Keywords: COVID-19, photography, resilience, virtual exhibition

In a recent interview I had with Lebanese American photographer, Rania Matar (b.1964), the photographer expressed that her intention is to create a sense of intimacy with those she photographs. She strives to do this by collaboratively involving her subjects as they decide location, costume, and the ways they engage with the camera.¹ Through the use of a wide-angle lens, Matar is able to remain close to her subjects while creating a distancing effect. These techniques are featured in the Rollins Museum of Art's online exhibition, "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window: Portraits During COVID-19.'" This virtual exhibition was made accessible in February 2021 and is still accessible through the Rollins Museum of Art website. Matar's 'Other Side of the Window' series is focused on the personal and collective identities of all who were affected by the COVID-19 public health crisis of 2019.

Matar's photos capture the typically hidden lives of those at home quarantining during the public health crisis of COVID-19 (Rollins Museum of Art Staff 2021, para. 1). For example, Figure 1, "Minty, Kayla, Leyah, Layla, Cambridge Massachusetts , 2020" depicts its subjects physically leaning on each other as they look through their window (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art). The act of touching each other displays the crucial emotional, mental, and physical support the family members provided to each other during the trials of the pandemic. Similarly, through Figure 2, "Susan, Raffy, and Baby Violette, Salem, Massachusetts, 2020," the audience is invited into moments of tenderness and love between intergenerational mother and daughter relationships (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art).



Figure 1. Rania Matar, photographer, [Minty, Kayla, Leah, Layla, Cambridge, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM> (accessed on November 10, 2021).



Figure 2. Rania Matar, photographer, [Susan, Raffy, and Baby Violette, Salem, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM> (accessed on November 10, 2021).

In contrast, other photographs portray darker consequences felt by victims of the pandemic, including loneliness. For example, Matar's Figure 3 photograph, "Lucy, Newton, Massachusetts, 2020," displays Lucy, the subject as almost being swallowed by darkness (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art). Lucy, reaching towards the light coming in through her window could be perceived as a metaphorical desire for hope in a discouraging time. In the same way, Figure 4, "Linda, Watertown, Massachusetts, 2020," depicts her body half swathed in darkness (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art). This work causes viewers to consider the isolation that COVID forced upon many—especially those living without

the contact of others. Linda's door is open, allowing light to flood the right side of her face and cast shadows on the left side of her face.



Figure 3. Rania Matar, photographer, [Lucy, Newton, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." [https:// my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM](https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM) (accessed on November 10, 2021).



Figure 5. Rania Matar, photographer, [Linda, Watertown, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM> (accessed on November 10, 2021).

The exhibition statement describes how images were chosen to document the experience of families and individuals in quarantine. The photos are meant to remind viewers of people's enduring resilience by celebrating beauty in a variety of ways (Rollins Staff, 2020, Introductory panel, wall text, virtual gallery space of "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits of COVID-19"). The photos show "the face of [a] child, the wisdom of older couples who have overcome hardships together, in the gaze of a lonely figure who faced the pandemic in isolation, in the smiles of siblings embracing, and in the uniqueness of every person photographed" (Rollins Staff, 2020, Introductory panel, wall text, virtual gallery space of "Rania Matar's 'Other

Side of the Window:’ Portraits of COVID-19”). The photographs displayed in the exhibition convey human resilience. Although photographs, by their nature, capture static moments, Matar’s pictures also portray times of transition. These moments of change demonstrate the universal themes of human strength and resilience.

While Matar’s photographs are well supported by the curatorial intentions, the exhibition texts, labeling, and general object placement could better support Matar’s artistic content. There appears to be an absence of exhibition information except for the introductory statement. Each photograph is generically labeled with a basic title and year. I would have appreciated further information describing the connection between the images and the exhibition themes, and some background information on the curatorial process. I found object placement and groupings to be inconsistent, perhaps ordered according to complementary color schemes rather than thematically. For example, Figure 5, “Jayne, Boston, Massachusetts, 2020” an older woman facing away from the camera is displayed below Figure 6, which is a photograph titled, “Ellie and Megan, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2020.” This photograph depicts Ellie, a small child, who faces the camera, and her mother, Megan (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art). Jayne and Ellie contrast in positioning, age, and context of their home in MA (Matar 2020, Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art). The only linking attributes are the prevailing color schemes of black. Besides this commonality, the photos contrast in the age, numbering, and positioning of the subjects.



Rania Matar, photographer, [Jayne, Boston, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." [https:// my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM](https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM) (accessed on November 10, 2021).



Figure 6. Rania Matar, photographer, [Ellie and Megan, Cambridge, MA, 2020], photograph. Lake Wales, FL: Rollins Museum of Art, 2020. From "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19." <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=QqYztzst6cM> (accessed on November 10, 2021).

Despite this seeming lack of organization and direct connection between the exhibition themes and objects, the platform of a virtual exhibition does inherently remind online visitors of the theme of the pandemic. Virtual exhibitions became popular at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and are a product of the time. As a result, it is difficult to attend an online exhibition and not think of the necessary public health orders that precipitated it. This exhibition—along with other virtual exhibitions like it—set a precedent for the ability to create virtual museum spaces. In some ways, the virtual platform creates more accessible space to

Exhibition Review of "Rania Matar's 'Other Side of the Window:' Portraits During COVID-19" A Virtual Exhibition at Rollins Museum of Art_Anneliese Hardman

diverse audiences by avoiding traditional barriers of financial and physical limitations that in-person museum exhibitions can present. However, the virtual platform remains limited in its own ways, demanding high-bandwidth internet and causing screen fatigue.

In “Rania Matar’s ‘Other Side of the Window:’ Portraits During COVID-19,” I was able to maintain some agency in how I navigated the exhibition. I used keyboard arrow keys and a mouse to move throughout the gallery. However, I was unable to zoom in on the generic exhibition labels given and they were not listed anywhere else. I found myself frustrated because I could not move exactly where I wanted to go. I felt demoralized as a viewer, because of this lack of control. The exhibition did try to build viewers’ trust through familiar and common display attributes, including neutral wall coloring behind “hung” works and virtual furniture located throughout the gallery space as a typical museum would have. However, these efforts were not sufficient to encourage any more than a 20-minute virtual visit.

This exhibition can be looked to as an adequate model for a virtual exhibition. It can also be used as a beginning point to improve upon online museums. I argue that it is important to explore methods for creating interactive material or developing educational opportunities online. It will be important for virtual museums to encourage socio-cultural elements despite the lack of a physical space. It is in moments of interaction between visitors and museum staff that personal experience is fostered, and impactful moments made. While the exhibit is successful in many ways, it will be exciting to see how museum spaces continue to adapt to online settings and serve communities to the best of their abilities.

Endnotes

¹ Rania Matar, meeting with Rania Matar [Interview], FSU Visitor-Centered Exhibitions Course, Tallahassee, FL, March 31, 2021.

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About the Author

Hailing from Sarasota, Florida, Anneliese is passionate about sharing narratives from history in meaningful ways. Since 2015, she has held positions in art museums, historical societies, historic churches, historic towns, libraries, art galleries, and archives. She completed her Bachelor's in Music and History from Palm Beach Atlantic University. While in Palm Beach, she worked in collaboration with Harvard's Schlesinger Woman's Library, to document the life of the past Chief of Protocol, Ambassador Nancy Brinker. Following her undergraduate studies, Anneliese moved to Battambang, Cambodia to take a position as a museum assistant at the Cambodia Peace Gallery. While there, she developed an exhibit focused on the role of Cambodian music, art, and theatre in the country's reconciliation following the Khmer Rouge genocide. Upon returning from Cambodia, Anneliese has begun pursuing dual master's degrees in Peace and Conflict Studies from Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia and Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies from Florida State University. She has also pursued studies at the University of Oxford and the University of Edinburgh; the paper she is presenting today is based on research conducted while abroad in Scotland. Other disciplines she has presented on include art history, literature, musicology, political cartoons, and peace museum theory.
