

**National Museum of Women in the Arts**  
**She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from**  
**Iran and the Arab World**  
**Guide by Cell Audio Guide Transcripts**



**202-747-3417**

Welcome to the National Museum of Women in the Arts' cell phone audio guide for She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World, on view through July 31, 2016. Selected artists featured in this exhibition and its curators contributed to this audio guide. To hear their thoughts, look for the blue cell phone icon on the labels in the exhibition and press the item number followed by the pound key. Interrupt any audio recording simply by pressing another number and the pound key. Press the star key for instructions. We hope that you will enjoy the exhibition and this audio guide.

## **Introduction by Kathryn Wat, Chief Curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts**

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This is Kathryn Wat, Chief Curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. I know from my colleagues who work with artists in the Middle East region that women there are at the forefront of photo-based contemporary art. Women artists are driving new trends and that's the fact we want to share here at NMWA through the exhibition She Who Tells a Story. You know, much of what I think I know about the experiences and viewpoints of women in Iran and parts of the Arab world I learned from the media. I see short video clips and hear sound bites on television and the web. So the ability to see firsthand these photographs by women artists and learn about their own ideas and perceptions is truly gratifying. We want She Who Tells a Story to provide visitors with fresh perspective and encourage thoughtful discussion about how powerfully women artists reflect our world today.

**Introduction by Kristen Gresh, Estrellita and Yousuf  
Karsh Curator of Photographs, MFA, Boston**

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She Who Tells a Story offers a prism through which we can better understand the complex cultural, political, and religious mosaic that makes up the multiple identities of the Middle East. It is an invitation for visitors to discover new work, new photography, and it's an invitation to put art and culture before politics and before the images, sounds, and stories that we're constantly hearing in the media about Iran and the Arab world.

These 12 photographers are telling compelling stories about the region, they are showing us the range of identities, and the work in the show is divided into three parts. "Deconstructing Orientalism" shows artists from the mid-'90s up until today questioning traditional modes of representing the East. "Constructing Identities" shows

contemporary portraiture related to questions of female identity and of political identity and of religious identity while the “New Documentary” section shows a blend of artistic imagination and real experiences that artists have lived through and are documenting today.

This exhibition came about from a decade of my following the contemporary arts scene in the Arab world and in Europe. I lived in Egypt ten years ago, and I discovered a very prolific photography scene there and also followed artists that were being shown in Europe and showing these artists to new audiences here in the United States is incredibly exciting, and I hope that you enjoy the discovery of their work, which helps us all to challenge our preconceived notions and perceptions about their region and an invitation to discover new photography. Enjoy the show!

## **Rania Matar, “A Girl and Her Room” series, 2010**

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Hi, my name is Rania Matar, and I would like to tell you a little bit about the work on display here. It is part of the largest series, titled “A Girl in Her Room.” I was born and raised in Lebanon. I moved to the U.S. to go to architecture school in 1984. I have lived in the United States since, but I travel back and forth to the Middle East regularly. My family still lives there. I am very much part of both cultures and both places have shaped my identity. While I was still working as an architect and raising my young children, I became interested in photographs and photography after September 11, when all the news coming from the Middle East was very negative. I wanted to tell a different story with my images, so I started making work in the Middle East, focusing on girls and women. My work aimed then, and still aims today, to focus on universality and our sameness.

After my first book, Ordinary Lives, about women and girls in refugee camps and in the aftermath of war in Lebanon, was published, I started the project about teenage girls. This work was actually started in the United States, inspired by my older daughter, then 15. I was watching her passage from girlhood into adulthood, fascinated with the transformation taking place, the adult personality taking shape, and a gradual self-consciousness replacing the carefree world she had known and lived in so far. I started photographing her with her girlfriends, and quickly realized how aware they were of each other's presence, and how much the group affected the identity they were portraying to the world.

From this recognition, the idea of photographing each girl alone by herself in her personal space emerged. The room was a metaphor, an extension of the girl, but also the girl seems to be part of the room, to fit in, just like everything else in that material and emotional space. There was an

organic relationship between the girl and her space and how she personalized it.

I initially started this work focusing on teenage girls in the United States and eventually expanded the project to include girls from the two worlds I was most familiar with. The two worlds I had experienced myself as a young woman, the United States and the Middle East. This is how this project became personal to me. I was one of those young women myself 25 years earlier in a different country, different culture, and at a different time. I became fascinated with the realization of the universality of growing up and with the similar issues that girls that age face regardless of culture, religion, and background.

The images here are part of that series in the Middle East—Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. They include six young women from all backgrounds and religions, and it is

honestly not obvious at all to guess which one is Muslim, Druze, or Christian. The focus is on being a girl, on growing up, and on identity—the young women's I am photographing but also mine and my daughter's. Being with those young women in the privacy of their world gave me a unique peek into their private lives and their inner selves. They sensed that I was not judging them and they became an active part of the project. The work was collaborative and was very much about the girl and not about my vision of what the girl should be. Their frankness; their generosity in sharing access was a privilege that they have extended to me, but also to all the viewers of this work.

Again, in this period of polarization, it's important for me to focus on our common humanity and our sameness, and I do that here through the private lives of those young women.



**Boushra Almutawakel, Untitled, from the series “The Hijab,” 2001**

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I photographed the young woman veiled, or wearing the hijab, of the U.S. flag, after September 11. I was very upset, like many people, this traumatic and deadly event. And also was torn in many ways and the fact that I felt, you know, that being a Muslim and being an American, although I am not an American, but I was thinking in my mind that there would be maybe some kind of contradiction: Can you be a Muslim? A loyal Muslim? And can you be a loyal American? Or, do you have to be one or the other? And that could be answered by whoever is perceiving the work.

And one of the things I found over time was that there were many Americans who were offended that I had covered her with the American flag just as there were

many Muslims who were offended that she was veiled with an American flag. So, it seemed that no one seemed to be happy with it, which is maybe a good thing. So, it's interesting to see the different views on it from different sides, from say, a purely American side and from a Muslim perspective.

**Boushra Almutawakel, Mother, Daughter, Doll, 2010**

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In Mother, Daughter, Doll I was looking at the fact that Yemen, an already very conservative country, was becoming more and more conservative. And one of the ways you could see that was in the way that women dressed or in their outer wear. And I progressively saw an increased amount of layers and layers of covering from head to toe and wearing the gloves and wearing like a thin sheet over the niqab and, I found to be a little bit excessive and, honestly, I didn't feel it had anything to do with Islam. And it's something that has started to spread in the past several years from Saudi Arabia, from this brand of Islam called Wahhabism and what it did is annihilated differences, it made everything and everyone black and the same.

When I was a child, with school, we went camping in the coastal plains and there I remember the women wearing very colorful, beautiful clothing, and 25 years later, I went to the same city, the same area, and was shocked to find everyone dressed in black. And it seemed to annihilate this distinctiveness and to make everyone one and the same, and I felt like it was sort of a control of some kind. Furthermore, it seemed like the idea of covering up women was in order for the men not to look at them, for them to be conservative and not draw attention to them, and it seemed this excessive covering in effect was not doing that and the men still continued to look at the women, they still continued to gawk at them and make comments and harass them. So the issue and the problem was not the women and their covering or uncovering, it was the men and the way in which they perceived the women and the fact that they needed to be educated or re-educated in how they perceived women and to learn about treating them respectfully or in a respectful manner. Another thing that alarmed me was also seeing young little girls, as young as eight or nine, who were also dressed in

black completely and even wearing the niqab. I mean that I felt it had really nothing to do with Islam whatsoever and really saddened me. I think that's how I would summarize Mother, Daughter, Doll.

## **Rula Halawani, “Negative Incursions” series, 2005**

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Hi, my name is Rula Halawani. I am from Jerusalem, Palestine. I am going to talk about my project “Negative Incursions.” “Negative Incursions” was my first project after I quit photojournalism. It happened a few months after my return from London where I was doing my Masters in Photography. Very soon after, the major Israeli army invasion of the West Bank happened. The Israelis called it the “Operation Defensive Shield.” It happened on March 28, 2002. When it started, I was in Ramallah. The Israeli army invaded Ramallah. I was shocked. The city that I knew very much suddenly had been transformed into a dark and scary place. Every street and square I visited was dark and empty. No one was in the streets that day except the Israeli army and its tanks. I felt depressed and cold and scared. The only Palestinian I met on the road that day was an old man, used to sell coffee like in the streets of Ramallah. Later, he was shot dead. I never

knew his name, but I had seen him walking around these same streets before. That night I could not take away his face from my memory and many questions without answers rushed inside my head.

I would like to talk more about “Negative Incursions,” how it was done and why the pictures look like this. On the surface, the pictures I took of the invasion could be considered regular photojournalism. I could have published them just as they were, as documents of the invasion. Instead, I printed them in negatives. Why I printed them in negatives? In negatives, the pictures were able to express my own feelings merged with the feelings of my people, to explain what had happened to us and to our Palestine. As negatives, they express the negation of our reality that the invasion represented. Their darkness allows the spectator to feel the darkness of the days I had witnessed during this incursion.

The photographs represent some of the stories I had witnessed in Ramallah. Others tell stories I had heard and learned in Jenin from the people that I met there. But only by manipulating them do I think it was possible to tell the larger story of one period of the Palestinian experience of the Israeli repression and destruction of our lived reality.

In general my projects are political; yes, they are, but they also try to express aspects of our experience and feelings as Palestinians, as a people. I hope very much that they allow others to look and enter into the pictures and reflect their own understanding of these experiences and feelings. Instead of simply telling a story, a very terrible story, about the people and what has happened to them, I want to go further and create pictures that no matter where viewers are from or where they are living can find themselves in a part of our story.



**Tanya Habjouqa, “Women of Gaza” series, 2009,  
introduction**

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Hello, my name is Tanya Habjouqa. I am a Jordanian and Texan photographer and I am presenting my series “Women of Gaza.” In the occupied Palestinian territories, the political is always hovering. It is an invasive bedfellow. You can’t escape it. So even focusing on the seemingly mundane, the occupation affects basic movement or unification with family. In Gaza, with three devastating Israeli military campaigns since 2008 alone, those restrictions are more overt. The more overt, obvious visuals are most often captured with endless local and ex-pat journalists. In some ways, those images have lost their meaning. They are so ubiquitous. There is never enough political context and the gruesome and overt signs of violence can be easy.

What is harder is telling the human story here, which is why I often choose to find the everyday in conflict. Because this conflict is there every day. How they continue to strive and live in normalcy and even laugh. And they do laugh at the absurdity. Palestinian black humor is untouchable and a marker of release.

It is often the women who have to pick up the pieces and keep the family together. By focusing on women, I gained access to all sectors of society, men and children too, and it was quite often the women who were struggling to maintain a sense of normalcy in their destroyed lives and households.

In the following years, Hamas has heightened its social restrictions not only on women, but across all sectors of society. Between Israeli siege and emboldened Hamas and a closed border with Egypt, that feeling of being trapped is heightened. Now the trend is for women to find

Palestinian men to marry who have the potential to study or work outside. They want out. Imagine, a women I met excited her fiancé was going to bring her to Libya.

Because being stuck is untenable, you can't imagine. After just a few weeks there as a visitor you too feel claustrophobic.

**Tanya Habjouqa, “Women of Gaza” series, 2009, gym  
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Highlighting another element of life for women in Gaza, in the picture here of the gym, these women agreed to be photographed with the caveat that I explained why they are wearing jilbaab, or the long coats, as they work out. They didn't want to be mocked by the West for wearing such things as they work out. They wanted me to explain that they had very little spaces to work out or even just to be in public. The decimation of large parts of their neighborhood further limits that. Here they are working out in a public high school gym.

**Tanya Habjouqa, “Women of Gaza” series, 2009,  
bench**

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If your entry point is humor, it can often soften your perspective on how you view something. For example, for me and many across the Levant, we do not understand the rise of the niqab, the all-black facial and body covering. We see it as hailing from the Gulf countries. In my image of the university student sitting alone in this exhibit, at first glance, I felt she was aloof. There was a group of girls near her, some uncovered and some wearing a standard hijab, or head scarf, seeming to ignore her. But then I saw the teddy bear hanging from her bag. Somehow that gave me a glimpse into her humor and in fact, she did not say a word about my photographing her. She seemed to welcome it. We all have our assumptions and judgments to unpack.

**Tanya Habjouqa, “Women of Gaza” series, 2009, boat  
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Almost every Gazan I meet says, “Thank God for the sea and internet. One gives us visual sanity and the other is our access to the world.” This is illustrated well through the image of the laughing girls on the boat. It was their high school graduation day and the big treat was a five-minute boat ride out. Gazans are not allowed, whether for fishing or recreation, to access more than six nautical miles beyond shore enforced by the Israeli siege. So this was a short boat ride. But the joy on their faces was magnificent. The sea keeps people sane. Unlike Palestinians in the West Bank who cannot access it, it is the one thing the Gazans have, and they use every inch they are allowed. No matter what economic class, impromptu picnics abound.

**Tanya Habjouqa, “Women of Gaza” series, 2009, girl with cell phone**

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When I began this work in 2009, I was curious to unpack why there was a predominant media trend at that time, focusing exclusively on the loss of women’s rights under Hamas as opposed to the entire population affected by the siege and trauma of the 2008 Israeli Cast Lead Military Campaign.

The effects of the siege are multifaceted, so I choose to explore how women’s lives were more broadly affected by their environment. How were women able to continue with their dreams, day-to-day activities, work and care for their families in this very tense environment where their husbands could not find work, where people were still left with post-traumatic stress, where the idea of leaving was impossible? How were they living? What I found was inspiring. It took a few visits before people would open up,

but when they did, I found the proudest, warmest, and hospitable characters would often cry. For example, a woman who had been pregnant during Cast Lead hid her fear to calm her children; made the bombing sounds into a game. There were many miscarriages in this time and there really is no space or release to heal.

There was also a hunger for communication among the youth. Young university girls would open up rather quickly about their feelings. Culturally, across the Middle East there was often a tendency to be warm and friendly, but not share the personal with strangers. But here, there was a feeling they were trapped, there was no way out—to travel, to see, to breathe. One girl, exhibited here with the pink cell phone, within two minutes, she was rapidly pouring out her heart. She was studying English literature, loved Jane Austen novels, dreamt of seeing Europe and the U.S., and perhaps continuing education abroad. She was excited to show off her impressive English skills, but there was always this melancholy just hanging.