

*Village Voice*

February 8, 1994

'The Light Continent'

Vince Aletti



*Akuot Nyibol (pregnant at center) with Riak Warabek, and Akuot's daughter, Athok Duom, who is recovering from malaria, Sudanese refugee camp, Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992*

Fazal Sheikh, a young American photographer who has spent the past few years making pictures in the refugee camps that dot Kenya's northern border, tends to skirt the feeding centers where the sickest of the camps' population can be found. That was always where the photojournalists swarmed, drawn like flies to the worst cases, to the distended bellies and skeletal limbs, sucking up desperation and death in the few hours before their plane returned to Nairobi. But Sheikh went to one feeding center, in Mandera, because he'd heard from a Kenyan doctor that Somali mothers in the camp had smothered their malnourished children, killing them out of pure callousness. And every day for nearly two weeks, Sheikh photographed mothers and aunts and older siblings – nearly 100 of them – sitting with the skinny, big-eyed children they carried three times a day to the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) tent. He's collected these pictures – small, black-and-white contact prints trimmed into irregular vignettes bordered in black – and lacquered them side-by-side on the inside of a big photo portfolio box that he holds open in his arms and displays like a pair of engraved tablets or a book of revelations. One picture would be enough to

refute the doctor's charge of callousness, but here are 50, each a detailed variation on Madonna and child: delicate, understated, achingly intense dramas of love and concern.

Sheikh doesn't doubt that some parents might have suffocated their sick children, but out of compassion and mercy, not cold-heartedness. "In their experience, across the border, they knew that their child was beyond help." And many of them were clearly shocked to discover that conditions they thought fatal could often be reversed at the feeding center. "That doctor could have been right, but I thought I should go and see for myself," Sheikh says simply. "And that 's really what all the work has been about – going to see with no real preconceptions, and letting them [the refugees] instruct me." "The work," some of which is on display now in Sheikh's New York debut at the OPSIS Gallery, trashes a lot of preconceptions, not the least of which is the horror show image of African starvation photojournalists have been feeding us for years.

Sheikh can get pretty worked up about photojournalists and what he calls the "sensational, predatory nature of their work," especially in Africa. The New York-born son of a Kenyan father and a mother he describes as "a WASP from New Jersey," Sheikh, 28, grew up privileged in Manhattan, graduating from Dalton, then Princeton, but spent his childhood summers in Kenya with his father's large, extended Muslim family. Though he studied both ceramics and photography at Princeton, producing a thesis project that combined both media in a cave-like installation of outsize, sometimes nude, self-portraits and pit-fired ceramic monoliths, it was the camera that finally won him over. He took one with him when he drove and hitchhiked from England to the southern tip of Africa over the course of a year after graduation. Alone in Johannesburg, he rented a room in the house of a politically active woman who also provided shelter to teenage boys just out of detention. He calls the time "a bit of a turning point" because, although he'd already photographed in the Swahili communities on the Kenyan coast where he spent his summers, he was ready to move into more unfamiliar territory.

"I was interested in working in a place that I had read about in the newspapers," Sheikh says, "but I wasn't ready to go there and accept what I had already read and heard. " He spent four months in South Africa before he took any pictures, and the longer he stayed, "the more gray the situation became. You go with this very clear idea of what the situation is, with a sort of righteousness about it all, but as I let that wash away, I realized it wasn't that simple." When he began making pictures, it was in the homelands with people he'd come to know, and he displayed his portraits against a background of collage news photos so that the gap between media hyperbole and the more complicated, more mundane, and more vividly specific reality of black south African life was if not bridged, then at least made plain.

With the Fulbright grant he nailed in 1990, Sheikh returned to Kenya reeling from a massive refugee influx, the result of civil wars and famines in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia – all bordering its remote northern region. The first time he was airlifted from Nairobi to the Sudanese border with a posse of journalists and news photographers, Sheikh writes, "I felt an uneasiness, an inability to follow along and make the expected photographs." Maybe it was because he'd already spent time in this same desert on his earlier trek through Africa, before MSF and the United Nations had set up their encampments. Maybe it was because the Dark Continent was, in part, his home and his heritage. Maybe it was because he could never see the refugees merely as subjects, as material, as pitiable, pathetic others.

In any case, the photographs Sheikh makes in the camps bear little resemblance to the sort of shocking images that show up on the cover of the New York Times Magazine or in full-page ads for relief organizations. Where even the best photojournalists are spirited in and out of a camp in a matter of hours, Sheikh typically stays two weeks in each location, sheltered by the UN High Commission for Refugees or by MSF but spending his with the exiles and hoping to

“give them some kind of a voice.” Working with the elders in different camps, he would photograph first what they thought was important and gradually cultivate a network of connections that he was able to return to again and again. Because he never just hits and runs, Sheikh’s pictures reflect the complex social life of the camps: a somber-looking Sudanese couple on the second day of a long-interrupted, two-day wedding; a small Somali girl in a flowing white dress seated next to her father, who’s standing slightly out of the frame but reaching in a strong, steadying hand to rest on her shoulder; a three-part panorama of Ethiopian women and children arrayed behind a seated matriarch with the face of an Egyptian icon. And, unlike nearly all the other photos we see from sites of Third World misery, each of the people in Sheikh’s portraits is carefully identified, given the simple dignity of a name.

“For me the most interesting thing is to make a picture of a loaded subject but in a way that belies our preconceptions,” he says. His example is a photograph of three Sudanese women, the youngest a teenage girl recovering from malaria who stands before her robed and pregnant mother, both facing the camera gravely. Next to them is the girl’s aunt who has turned away from the camera to look at her niece with an expression as serious as it is loving; she holds the girl’s left arm in both her hands, anchoring her in tenderness. The picture was taken at the end of a day when Sheikh was tired and ready to knock off, so he had little hope of making something good. But the women had not ever been photographed before and, because, Sheikh works with a Polaroid, they know they would be able to see and possess a copy right away. (Sheikh gives all his subjects the Polaroid original and makes his larger prints from the negatives, retaining their distinctive irregular borders as ready-made frames; smaller contact prints from these same negatives are often incorporated into black-lacquered hand-made books with texts in gold.) The striking triangular pose was their own, and Sheikh regards it and the resulting photographs as collaborations and as a “gift.” “I don’t feel I can take credit for it. When I say, ‘Isn’t this great?’ it isn’t because I made it but because, wow, look what I got to see.”

Some of what Sheikh sees in the camps he considers personally out of bounds – over what he calls “the edge.” He tells the story of a magazine photojournalist snapping pictures of a Somali man who was dying in his hut. When the photographer discovered that light was bouncing off his subject’s skin and ruining the photos, he stopped, applied makeup to the shiny spots, took some more pictures, left, and the man died. “There are times when I just wouldn’t think to photograph,” Sheikh says. “Having grown up partially in Kenya, I feel very protective, but just anybody should feel protective of someone in dire circumstances, and I feel like there are certain pictures that it would be a real trespass to make.” When it comes to pictures of the dead and dying he says, I just am not so interested in photographing people to make them this other group.” He prefers to focus on life, solidarity, and community – the ties that bind. In virtually all his pictures, people are shown in pairs or in groups, often with other people visible in the background or straying casually into the frame: “They’re not just that one guy lying on the ground. That one guy has people around him.”

Sheikh, who has been living on his own since age 15 but is currently rootless (“The important thing is to have a darkroom and a space to work in,” he says from the temporary shelter of a friend’s apartment), still divides his time between Nairobi and New Jersey and plans to continue work in the refugee camps for at least another two years. As a subject, “Africa is so loaded” and he’s only just begun. Besides, he has a mission: “There must be some middle ground between journalism and art,” he says, “Where you can be honest and still be supportive. I think that what art can do is create an atmosphere where we’re thinking that solutions are important. “The way I’m working is not about saving the world, I’m just sort of interested in balancing out the scales and thinking that must count for something.”