

*See: A Journal of Visual Culture*

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'A Prayer for the Living'

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*Traditional birthing attendant, Nyirabahire Esteri, holding newborns Nsabimana ("I beg something from God") and Mukanzabonimpa ("God will grant me, but I don't know when"), flanked by mothers Kanyange, Mukabatazi, and Mukabatazi's mother, Rwandan refugee camp, Lumasi, Tanzania, 1994*

*Outsider, insider—does it matter who makes the image? It matters what the motives are.*

In Fazal Sheikh's photographs of Sudanese, Ethiopian, Somali, Mozambican and Rwandan people living in refugee camps in eastern Africa, the motive is to dispense information in a fair light, to offer an alternative to the invasive and sensationalistic depictions that western journalists routinely offer us of such situations. While first-person anecdotes enliven and flesh

out, and statistics sober and inform, neither provides complete representation. Two things are apparent when I look at these photographs and think of the places from which they come: there is more living going on here than we think, and every one of the images is its own rich, multifarious narrative.

300,00; 500,00; two million; ten million—I cannot conceive of these numbers in any real terms that apply to me. All I know is that whatever they represent in human terms, it is gravely serious. What does it mean for a country when one-third the population either is killed or literally gets up and walks out? What does it mean for the people in the place they must adopt as their new home? And who is facilitating in all of this?

By definition, these refugee camps are not the end of the journey but rather the entrenchment between battles—the deep, drawn breath before exhalation. This life is war—as epic, destructive and apocalyptic as any that has been, fought hand-to-hand against one’s neighbor, his blood draining off into the dirt at your feet.

Sheikh’s photographs possess a patina and formality generally associated with a nineteenth-century tradition of portraiture, demanding the utmost care in the rendering of the subject and relying upon his or her complicity in making it successful. Sheikh never poses his subjects, nor does he assume that a document cannot first be a portrait, richly rendered to heighten its authority and command a presence in the world. The tonality of the prints—sometimes muted, sometimes, graphic—recalls the very color of the earth and the light of the place. Yet these people exist right here, right now, separated not temporally but by distance, geography. There can be nothing nostalgic about the never-before-seen, about subjects as they present themselves, often for the first time, to the camera: conscious but not self-conscious, fully possessed of the solemnity of the record-making event. You do not have to be photographed every day – or ever, for that matter – to understand your physical being and its presence, to comport yourself accordingly. Like the disenfranchised in Walker Evans’ and Doris Ullman’s work, no one here seems to smile, and the viewer is disarmed. For it is a smile that we crave, a hint, an ever-so-slightly turned up corner of a lip that in our minds reassures us that it isn’t so bad, that *everything’s going to be okay*, that they really are like us.

12,000 boys, now assembled, now scattered, like 8-to-18-year-olds often are. They are believed to be faceless, like all homeless persons—as if stability and rootedness are required to make you visible, viable. And yet they are here and standing to be recorded just as plainly as anyone. The format of the panoramic triptych mimics the reality of the so-called “unaccompanied minors” perpetually moving across the continent. Their continual journey through the land, and their existence on it and in it, transforms them into whichever place currently claims them. They are displaced from their homeland, many perhaps believing that it will all be over one day, and they *will* be moving on, going home, getting well.

These photographs encompass, in the mutual reverence and honesty between subject and photographer, the truths about the place, the experience of making the pictures, and the individual identities of the subjects. They allow individuals whose lives and stores are represented to declare their very existence and demand their recognition. Can we come away knowing these people, because we have stared at them and learned their name? Of course not. We come away knowing of them, what they have presented of themselves to the photographer, and, by extension, to us.