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'Reading the Sorrow of Africa in Individual Faces'

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*Fatuma Abdi Hussein with her son Abdullahi, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1992*

One of the most remarkable photographic projects in recent years is the series of images made by Fazal Sheikh, an American photographer, in refugee camps in the troubled countries of Central and East Africa. These pictures, most of them portraits, have received wide acclaim since Mr. Sheikh began making them in the early 1990's. Now a show at the International Center of Photography presents an extensive selection of these photographs under the puzzling title "A Sense of Common Ground."

If anything, these uncommon images testify to the lack of community between the refugees and the rulers of the countries from which they fled. What gives Mr. Sheikh's photographs their emotional power is their implicit assertion that the refugees share humanity with their oppressors, even if they no longer occupy the same land.

Mr. Sheikh achieves this effect simply by treating his subjects not as representative types, bit players in a social and political drama larger than themselves, but as individuals. In depicting

them, he adopts the attitude and style of a portraitist rather than a photojournalist; this shift of reference brings with it enormous esthetic and emotional consequences.

For the most part the refugees are photographed alone or in pairs, outdoors or in tents. Mr. Sheikh works with a large-format camera on a tripod, a clunky apparatus that imposes a slower, more deliberate approach on both the photographer and his subjects. He also makes good use of the exceptional detail and shallow focus provided by the larger film and camera. In this way he concentrates attention on his sitters rather than their bleak surroundings.

But it's not just the choice of camera that gives these pictures their commanding air. Mr. Sheikh has a sharp eye for nuances of gesture and stance, and most of his sitters bring a towering dignity to the ceremonial exchange involved in making a portrait.

In a photograph made in a camp in Kenya, for example, the ritual scars that flare across a Sudanese woman's forehead are echoed by the splayed fingers she presses to her plain dress. In another shot from the same camp, a woman poses with her baby daughter; from outside the frame a man's hand reaches to clutch the girl's head.

Hardly anyone smiles in these pictures, but in part that may reflect the solemnity with which the sitters approach the photographic act. Many poses have an iconic formality; in one image, for example, two Sudanese sisters in rough dresses and rubber clogs confront the camera with impassive stares, each with a hand on the other's shoulder.

Details in other photographs speak eloquently of the complexities of the refugees' lives. A picture from a camp in Kenya, for example, shows two teen-age boys, one with ritual scars like worry lines across his forehead, the other with a gleaming cross dangling from his neck.

Wall labels dutifully provide details about the shifting political tides that forced these people to flee their countries. The numbers involved are astounding: hundreds of thousands who left the Sudan in the late 1980's to escape a harrowing civil war; some 500,000 Somalis who by 1992 had settled in camps in Kenya to avoid tribal and clan-based violence; 1.7 million Mozambicans who sought refuge in six neighboring countries in the course of a 15-year civil war.

Statistics like these make the eyes swim. But Mr. Sheikh's quiet photographs demonstrate the impact such upheavals have on the individuals involved, and suggest the depths of tragedy hidden by the numbers.

In some cases Mr. Sheikh concentrates on particular groups within the camps. Many pictures from a camp of Ethiopian refugees, for example, are of young war widows, alone or in pairs; photographs of Sudanese refugees focus on children and youths without families.

One of the most telling aspects of Mr. Sheikh's approach is his implicit respect not only for his subjects but also for his audience. He seldom tries to inject particular meanings into his pictures by using dramatic lighting or poses; instead, he allows his sitters to reveal themselves to the lens, and his viewers to make of the images what they will.

At times, though, he seems to lose faith in the process. A shot of a doleful young man carrying a large print of Jesus' face is emotional overkill; a picture of an outdoor barber tending his customers verges on the picturesque.

Panoramic shots, made by joining several frames, record groups of refugees and the desolate landscapes of the camps themselves and set the scene for the portraits. But several accordion-fold books of photographs mounted on wood or paper and accompanied by handwritten texts seem self-consciously arty, and undercut the direct power of the other images.

The plight of refugees has become a staple of Western news coverage of Africa. But Mr. Sheikh's images, unconventional precisely because they allow events to speak for themselves, provide faces to go with the bare and chilling stories of people driven into exile.