

*Village Voice*

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'Fazal Sheikh's Worldview - Gravity and Grace'

Vince Aletti

Fazal Sheikh is a concerned photographer in the traditional mold: an artist who sees his role not merely as a witness but as a compassionate, involved humanitarian. Unlike so many of the images that come out of third-world trouble spots, his pictures of Somali and Afghan refugees are never polemical or exploitative. Instead, he makes intensely sympathetic, emotionally complex portraits of people who are too often seen as little more than ciphers or symbols, and he underlines their individuality by naming each of his subjects in the title. As a result, Sheikh's photos have the gravity of August Sander and the grace of Julia Margaret Cameron – a combination of formality and frankness that feels at once classic and utterly contemporary.

Although a traveling survey of Sheikh's work has been divided among three galleries, blunting its cumulative effect, the impact of each show is moving and memorable. The most successful segment is at P.P.O.W (476 Broome Street, through October 12), where Sheikh's soulful portraits of Somali mothers and children at a refugee camp in Kenya look like Madonnas for our time. A dimly lit room here houses Sheikh's "Ramadan Moon," a text and photo installation that revolves around a Somali woman's story of rape and exile, told in her own remarkably measured words and a series of close-up portraits. At Scalò (560 Broadway, through November 2), they've hung portraits from Sheikh's 1998 book on Afghan refugees, *The Victor Weeps*, that allow us to look deep into the faces of people whose lives have unexpectedly intersected with our own. The pictures at Pace/MacGill (32 East 57th Street, through October 19) are of farmers in a Brazilian national park that's one of the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places; though the photos are not as historically charged, Sheikh invests them with genuine sensitivity and seriousness.

"My main concern as a photographer is community," Sheikh has written, but that community is clearly the whole wide world.

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