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'Beautiful Misfortune'

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*Manita, Ahmedabad, India, 2007*

How beautifully should misery be rendered? This is a fundamental question confronting photographers who document the world's abundant miseries. Against the charge that aestheticizing misfortune deprives it of its full significance — that it prettifies suffering to make it palatable — the great artists reply that only a beautifully rendered presentation commands the viewer's attention long enough and deeply enough to make true witness possible. The 36 black-and-white prints in "Fazal Sheikh: Portraits" at the Pace/MacGill Gallery are testimony in support of this position.

Mr. Sheikh was born in New York in 1965, the son of a Kenyan father who was himself the son of a Pakistani father; his mother was American. He graduated from Princeton University in 1987 after studying photography with the esteemed Emmet Gowin, and has spent much of his time since traveling to desolate places on the globe where people displaced from their homelands by war, terror, famine, drought, and other natural and social disasters eke out marginal existences.

The pictures Mr. Sheikh has taken in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, and, most recently, India, have won him many of photography's highest awards, as well as international respect for his broad humanitarianism. His pictures of some of the world's most wretched people are sumptuously beautiful.

There are portraits of three children on the wall at the entrance to Pace/MacGill, all taken in India in 2007: "Labhuben, Gujarat," "Manita, Ahmedabad" and "Simran, New Delhi." These are art photographs, not ordinary photojournalism. Mr. Sheikh shoots usually in a 2 1/4-inch-by-2 1/4-inch format, which captures considerable detail, then scans the negatives and prints them digitally, which allows for great control. The images are carbon pigment prints on handmade Hahnemühle photo rag paper mounted to Plexiglas paper. This process produces extraordinarily delicate tones, with considerable depth and modeling, almost tactile. And the rich, off-white Hahnemühle paper has a feeling of permanence about it; these images are not ephemeral, but are meant to endure. The pictures are framed without glass, so there are no reflections or glare to detract from the immediacy of the work.

In spite of the high production values of the prints, or maybe because of them, these are disconcerting images. It is the almost identical set of the mouths on each of the three children — Labhuben, Manita, and Simran — that sets the mood for the exhibition: stoically determined, not grim exactly, and certainly not in pain, but endowed with hardship. Labhuben at first glance looks pretty. She wears a nice embroidered dress, a pendant on a necklace, and a nose ring. The shape of her face and her features are attractive. But she is not standing erect, and her torso is out of kilter, her hair unkempt, and her mouth bleakly set. One of her eyes is cast down and the other seems closed as if there is something wrong with it. This is not a child who is just momentarily unhappy, but one habituated with sorrow.

Mr. Sheikh's caretaking technique lets us see individual strands of Labhuben's hair, the details of the embroidery around the neck of her dress, the creases in her joyless lips, and the sensitive shading on the skin of her face and chest that establishes the reality of her flesh. We are confronted with a child in whose expression there is no self-pity, but an insistence — Mr. Sheikh's most characteristic effect — that we recognize her humanity.

The strength of character evident in "Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader, Somali refugee camp, Dagahaley, Kenya" (2000) makes her position in the community plausible. The composition strikingly frames her face in a tight-fitting black hood, and Mr. Sheikh's technique makes the face's planes and textures clear. As in many of his pictures, the subject looks at him confidently, even confidingly, indicating Mr. Sheikh has established some sort of bond with her. The fact that we see the photographer's image reflected in each of her pupils seems a warrant for her trust.

In "Haji Nadir, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, north Pakistan" (1998), a middle-aged man is framed in darkness, his face lit by an intense light coming obliquely from the left. His nose and forehead are thrown into high relief, and the film catches the light and dark strands in his full beard. Although he is presenting himself to the camera, his attention seems elsewhere, inward, as if puzzling out how a capable and vigorous man has come to be swathed in the darkness of a refugee camp.

There are nine portraits at Pace/MacGill from one of Mr. Sheikh's most recent projects, shot in Vrindavan, India, a holy city where Hindu widows go after their husbands have died and where they wait for death. "Asha Rajak ('Hope')" (2005) has drawn her white mantle across the bottom of her face, so we only see from her nose to her forehead. A vertical white marking is painted from her hairline down her nose. The hand and arm that hold the material up to her face are creased and wrinkled, as are the parts of the face that are visible — old woman's skin. Her

eyes are shut, in modesty or resignation. But even in its comparative anonymity, Mr. Sheikh has imbued the figure with monumental dignity.

Another photographer, Sebastião Salgado, has famously shot similar material in black-and-white, and in many of the same places. But Mr. Salgado began his career as a Marxist sociologist and is celebrated for dramatic pictures of large masses toiling in concert, whether Brazilian gold miners or Indian commuters or an endless plain of African refugees in Tanzania. In contrast to Mr. Salgado's social science, Mr. Sheikh offers us biography, insisting that history be understood as what happens to individuals. He makes those individuals known.

Go to the *New York Sun*