

The Myth of Europa

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'Hidden Faces – Democracy Equality Culture beyond the Nation State'

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Afghan children born in exile, North Pakistan, 1998

Taking up agency on behalf of personae non-grata – the often nameless, unrecognized and forgotten ones – Fazal Sheikh's images put focus onto their plight. In contrast to the repetitive sensationalist mass-media depictions of humanitarian crisis that shape our perceptions of others, his personalized encounters counteract this hyper-visibility increasingly responsible for the dehumanization of the figure of refugee and immigrant in the media. The black and white naturally lit images generate forms of recognition that work against identification of the refugees as the other. Repositioning its subject as the one/ones who matter, Sheikh frames his own visibility to put forward their recognition as individuals. The photographs are accompanied by personal histories narrated by the subjects, which encourage us to embrace the refigured image of the refugee as a victim, as human, as one of us. By appropriating the figure of a refugee in a way that

functions to omit the differences between the ways of being displaced Sheikh sets out to contest their exclusion by revealing how it is constitutive of inclusion.

However, universalizing the condition of displacement as something we all experience fetishises the figure of the refugee. This draws attention to the difference between being a refugee and the figure of the refugee. Sheikh's portraits address this critical issue by transforming the refugee, the abject underside of the already politically existent and what Imogen Tyler calls a figurative mirror for the subject's own disavowed exclusion/displacement to the figure of the refugee that offers us resources with which we might re-imagine ourselves.

Sheikh ends 'The Victor Weeps', his book on Afghan refugees in the camps in Northern Pakistan, with images of Afghan children born in exile. Differing from the other portraits in the book they are not accompanied by texts and they have no names. Their faces betray nothing; their empty gazes offer no insight. These children are the bare life. They have no stories, no memory of home. For them home and exile is interchangeable.

Disturbingly apathetic to identities, happiness, love, life and civility, the camps they were born into are zones of indifference. The children are found within it routinely passing from order into disorder. Remaining without destination, they inhabit a limbo suffering from a penalty for which they could not make amends.....