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'Out of Africa'

Edith Newhall

On his first trip to the Sudanese refugee camp on Kenya's northwest border, with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, photographer Fazal Sheikh had been briefed on the suffering he would see. He was not, however, prepared for the sensationalism. "After we landed on a sandy spit at Lokichoggio, the journalists immediately began their work," he says. "Their stories had to be compiled quickly as they were leaving in the afternoon on the return flight to Nairobi. As I watched them work, I noticed they were drawn to the areas that the spokesman had suggested would provide the best footage," which, Sheikh noticed, inevitably provided the most pitiful images. On a later visit to that camp, Sheikh came across a European diplomat who was there on a "fact-finding" mission. "He was unsatisfied with the children at the feeding center, as there were none of a sufficiently emaciated and ghostly build to provide him the proper accompaniment for a publicity photograph."

The son of a Kenyan father and an American mother and raised in Manhattan, Sheikh spent his summers with his father's family in Kenya. In his own portraits of refugee Africans, on view at the Pace/Macgill Gallery, he looked for balance and a sense of humanity and found both. Says Sheikh: "My photographs show the people of Northern Kenya as not wholly unlike you and me."