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'Beyond Clichéd Interpretations of Exile, Suffering and Death'

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*Gholam Nabi, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997*

Photography introduced a number of new subjects to the pictorial canon and then revised some old ones radically. Refugees, for instance: throughout history, wars and politically repressive regimes have left refugees in their wake, but the search for safe haven and the condition of refugees have seldom been painted. The holy family on the flight to Egypt is the exception, a kind of ur-representation that usurped all others and did not call for pity alone.

Photography in the 20th century changed the picture. Every war and many of the uprisings since World War I have called forth pictures of civilians thronging the crowded and hazardous paths to safety. Compassion is expected of the viewer. In recent times the press and television have been glutted with images of starving, emaciated, ragged people in wretched camps standing in interminable lines for a bit of sustenance, awaiting death with distended stomachs.

Horrible as these pictures are, they are almost clichés by now. Fazal Sheikh photographs refugees without them. The International Center of Photography showed his photographs of African refugee camps in 1996; what was striking was the dignity of the people, who faced Mr. Sheikh's camera not only with utter seriousness but also with a sense of self, even perhaps of self-worth, that outshone their desperation and seemed to have outlasted self-pity.

Since then, Mr. Sheikh has photographed Afghans in exile in Pakistan. Pace Wildenstein MacGill Gallery has 53 of these pictures on view in "Fazal Sheikh: The Victor Weeps." (Scalo has published a book of the same title.) Again, these are strong, sober, contemplative and respectful portraits rather than scenes of misery, although a few views of the ruins of the Afghan capital, Kabul, which Mr. Sheikh also managed to visit just before the Taliban moved in, make it painfully clear that misery must have been in abundant supply. More than six million people, almost half the nation, fled Afghanistan during the war, and by 1997 some 2.7 million were still in exile.

Many of Mr. Sheikh's new portraits are tight close-ups of heads dramatically lighted in ambient darkness. Others are full-length pictures of people outdoors. The men's faces are eloquent, mournful, intense, marked by years of sorrow and, presumably, dedication. Even young children, though posing outdoors and less starkly lighted, are seen close up with expressions so serious they amount to sadness. Everyone, it seems, has enormous and striking dark eyes.

The show includes some portraits made by an Afghan studio photographer before the Taliban prohibited pictures of living creatures. Startlingly, the expressions of men, then mostly in Western dress, are just as intense and conscious of invincible sorrow as those of the exiles. Had Mr. Sheikh seen such pictures before he went to Afghanistan and consciously imitated them? Has that country been so surfeited with trouble that no other expression is possible? Is this a conventional demeanor or a conventional photographic demeanor in a land whose conventions most of us do not know?

Exile did not concern painters much in bygone centuries, unless you count the saints and eastern monks who trudged into the desert to live on air. By Napoleon's time the subject sparked some interest because Napoleon's exile did, but photography (and history) gave it a more universal importance. Victor Hugo, exiled for his republican sympathies, effected what was probably the first significant attempt to portray a life in exile and arouse widespread sympathy, and he did it largely by means of photographs. Later, ordinary mortals in exile became common photographic fare.

Mr. Sheikh, restricting himself to portraits, fills in the lives and pasts, the losses and longings, in his book with quotations from the people themselves and accounts of what he heard and saw.

He made photographs of other people's photographs as well: a hand holding a picture of a relative or a photograph on the ground among pebbles, sad pieces of paper that are all the living have left of the dead. This record of the pictorial remains of those who have been killed acknowledges that photography has introduced not only new subjects but even new kinds of emotional responses to pictures.

People in photographs look unreasonably alive, their images suffused with a premonitory sorrow as we read their future deaths in these fragments of their lives. The photograph as a prefiguration of death is essentially a new subject for the general run of pictorial imagery and also a new way of looking at portraits.

In "Camera Lucida" (Hill and Wang), the French sociologist Roland Barthes wrote about looking at a photograph of his late mother: "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child,

I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."

Photography inexplicably and illogically stops time, which everyone knows cannot be stopped. The future of the person portrayed flows on past the stilled image, tangling subject and viewer alike in the human condition. Painting and sculpture had for centuries represented specific prefigurations of Christ's death, but the idea that every secular portrait harbors a premonition arises only with photography.

The most chilling examples of Barthes's catastrophes include the continuing exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington of casual photographs of the inhabitants of Eiszyszki, a Lithuanian town, before they were erased en masse by the Nazis. Also devastating are photographs of Cambodian prisoners, all destined for death and many aware of it, which were shown at the Museum of Modern Art last spring -- pre-mortem photographs, as it were.

In a show called "Buena Memoria" at the SABA Gallery (and a bilingual book by the same name, published by Asunto Impreso), Marcelo Brodsky, an Argentine photographer, enters similar territory in recalling the "dirty war" in Argentina from 1976 to 1984. He begins with a photograph of his eighth grade class, 32 children, two of whom would later be killed by the military regime. One was Mr. Brodsky's best friend; there are pictures of him as a boy. Mr. Brodsky took color photographs of all the remaining members he could locate, placing them near the class photograph, an exercise in time, memory and changing appearances.

An estimated 30,000 people "disappeared" under the military dictatorship. Most were never heard of again, nor were their bodies found. The assumption is that they are dead, but grief has been prolonged and complicated by all the unanswered questions. Mr. Brodsky's younger brother, Fernando, disappeared at 22. The show includes old black and white photographs of him, mostly indistinct.

Fernando, still a boy, sits on a bed in one of the first photographs Marcelo Brodsky ever took. The boy must have moved; his face is blurred past recognition, as if he were already losing his identity. Also displayed are still frames from a video of the two Brodsky boys, about 12 years old, playing at shooting one another with bows and arrows. Both end up "dead."

All these pictures were displayed during a memorial for the 98 students that Mr. Brodsky's school estimates were disappeared. Probably there were more; only this many could be confirmed. A video at the gallery presents a reading of their names, like an endless dirge, to a large group of people, some of whom hold up photographs of their missing relatives.

The old photographs on the gallery wall are obviously not accomplished portraits. The new portraits are adequate but not in the least exceptional. It does not matter. What is moving is the sense of youth torn up and thrown away, sometimes for a political cause, sometimes arbitrarily. What matters are images of people "to the life," as fancy writing used to have it, images that events have turned into a whisper of catastrophe to come. It must have seemed so innocent then, to snap a boy sitting on a bed, boys playing on the lawn. Life is seldom innocent for long; perhaps photography never is.

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