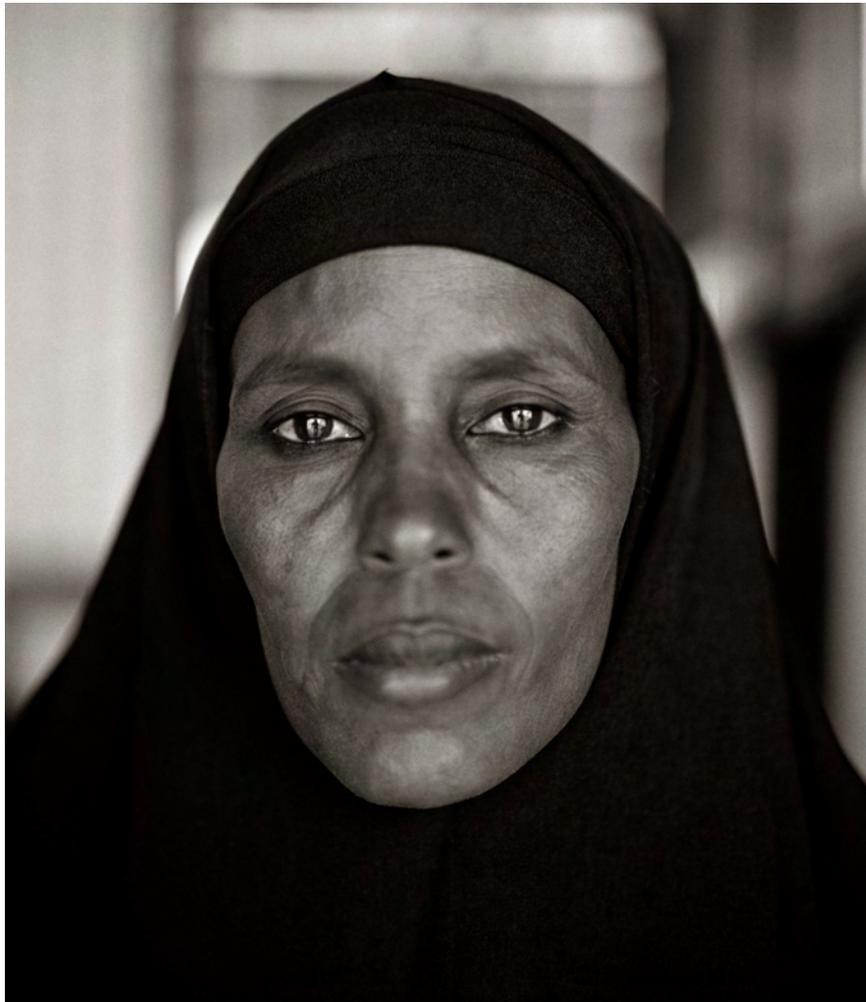


*Artforum International*

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'Fazal Sheikh – Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris'

Miriam Rosen



Most photographs take us back in time. Much rarer are those that follow us into the present with a seeming life of their own. The photos in Fazal Sheikh's series *A Camel for the Son*, 1992-2000, and *The Victor Weeps*, 1996-1998, are among the latter. The first grew out of Sheikh's encounters with Somali families who had sought refuge in northeast Kenya after the outbreak of civil war in the early '90s; the second out of his discovery of the three million Afghans who had similarly fled to northern Pakistan to escape the Soviet occupation, the warring mujahidin factions, or the Taliban. But Sheikh is not a documentary photographer, much less a war reporter. He has chosen to "render" (his word) the often dramatic situations at hand through eloquent portraits of the people caught up in them – portraits often made in the most rudimentary conditions imaginable: a makeshift "studio" in a feeding center where Somali mothers brought their malnourished children or an empty house where Afghan village elders received visitors around a gaslight. And

they were made with equally rudimentary equipment, mainly an old Polaroid positive-negative camera, which allowed Sheikh to give the positives to his subjects while keeping the negatives for himself.

A sharp focus on the sitters and the shallow depth of field make the surrounding details of time and place (or non-place) fade away. But in the course of repeated visits, Sheikh has taken the time to talk, to listen, to record what cannot directly appear in a photograph: the often horrifying accounts of what his sitters have experienced, from the rapes suffered by the Somali women to the treachery Great Powers and petty warlords alike have inflicted on the Afghans. The human bond that Sheikh has developed with those he photographs undoubtedly contributes to the particular intensity of the images; expressions are never posed or emptily focused on the lens but most often riveted on his presence behind the camera – notably in several close-cropped portraits of Somali women taken on a return visit to Kenya in 2000, where the photographer is reflected in the women's eyes.

In less visible ways these lives he has “rendered” are also the reflection of his own: the three-generation history of colonial and postcolonial displacement going from the north of India (now Pakistan), where his paternal grandfather was born, to Nairobi, where his father was born, to New York, where Sheikh himself was born, to Zurich, where he now lives much of the time. Sheikh's inner journey in search of his own history is more fully developed in the book and DVD versions of *The Victor Weeps* (1998, 2002).

Here, where each series occupied one of the two exhibition rooms, the point of view was subtly reversed. The meticulously grouped photos were punctuated by texts stenciled on the walls – the first-person narratives and more formal statements from the refugees plus a few of Sheikh's commentaries, but also dreams, bits of poems and sayings. This spatial presentation, with its point-counterpoint of images and texts, physically placed visitors “in the picture.” They alternately exchanged glances in the present with these people who were just a few inches away, reading what they had experienced in a past that could only be imagined – and in the process, hopefully, as Sheikh says, “beginning to accept that *we*, and *they*, are one and the same.”

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