

LIFE & ARTS



FAZAL SHEIKH (2)

ART REVIEW

Global Humanity

Fazal Sheikh documents the world's trouble spots, making dignified portraits of the people who live in them

BY RICHARD B. WOODWARD

FOR MORE THAN 25 years, Fazal Sheikh has photographed people caught by accident of birth or geography in the steel jaws of modern history.

His first book, "A Sense of Common Ground" (1996), was a slender volume of portraits taken in refugee camps in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda. He has since expanded his work to other poor or embattled countries, in Southern Asia and the Middle East. He visits not to file news reports about the world's trouble spots, much less in hopes of preventing wars or revolutions, but simply to make dignified portraits of uprooted civilians fleeing violence or campaigning against injustice and hoping to thrive against terrible odds.

"Homelands and Histories: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh," at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is a fine representation of his unadorned yet affecting approach. A sample from many of his 20 projects between the late 1980s and the early 2010s, the 75 prints are mostly black-and-white, with a smattering of color. Portraits predominate, although landscapes are interspersed throughout.

The solemnity of Mr. Sheikh's sitters—many looking directly into the camera, others down or away—reflects the time (hours, days, weeks) he has devoted to learning some

part of their story. Whatever ugly or horrible scenes witnessed by these women, men and children, most of whom are named, are safely outside the frame when he clicks the shutter. The photographs exude an unnatural calm.

Not that we are allowed to forget what happened before Mr. Sheikh appeared. The caption for a 1997 photograph of Mohammed Daud's



'Rohullah, Afghan Refugee Village, Badabare, North West Frontier Province, Pakistan' (1997), top, from 'The Victor Weeps' series; and 'Dawn along the Yamuna, Vrindavan, India' (2005), above, from the 'Moksha' series

mangled left hand informs us he had picked up a butterfly mine in Afghanistan, thinking it was a toy. In another close-up of a hand, Abdul Aziz holds a tiny photograph of his missing brother, Mula Abdul Hakim, presumed dead years ago after his capture by the Soviets during their 1980s incursion into Afghanistan.

Mr. Sheikh's photographs from India have a keener political edge and focus on injustice toward women. His 2003-05 series "Mok-

sha" (a Hindu concept indicating an elevated stage on the path to reincarnation) portrays some of the hundreds of widows who survive on handouts or from begging in the holy city of Vrindavan.

Born in New York in 1965 to a Kenyan father and American mother, Mr. Sheikh graduated from Princeton University, where he studied with the photographer Emmet Gowin, and has earned MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships. He lives in Zurich.

The later work in the show also displays his considerable skills and sympathies beyond the formal portrait. Most intriguing here are the seven color photographs from his lengthy series "Ether" (2008-12).

Made with a small camera on nighttime walks around the city of Benares (Varanasi), India, the sacred Hindu cremation site along the Ganges, they are random observations that veer between the macabre (a dead dog wrapped in ceremonial sheets) and the blissful (people peacefully asleep on the ground). The trance-like atmosphere in these pictures, of life slowed down and distilled into an attar of narcotic sensations, can be compared to "Forest of Bliss," Robert Gardner's mesmerizing 1986 documentary on this unique place.

Another outlier in Mr. Sheikh's oeuvre is "Desert Bloom" (2011). A series of sepia-toned aerial views of Israel's Negev Desert, each photograph marked by map coordinates, it's a project about history, growth, landscape and memory. What we see from on high are areas delicately carved out by mining or for the planting of forests; what's missing is any trace of the Bedouins, the Negev's long-time inhabitants, who have slowly been displaced, sometimes forcibly.

As the show is a sampler—it's a gift from a donor, Jane P. Watkins, who allowed the MFAH's curator of photographs, Malcolm Daniel, and Mr. Sheikh to select prints from many bodies of work—walking around the walls can seem like listening to the radio in scan mode.

This feeling is most acute with "Independence/Nakba," Mr. Sheikh's 2013 series of 65 diptychs, in which he paired photographs of one Israeli and one Palestinian born in each of the years since 1948. As his concerns are as much about community as physiognomy, it was fitting he used this anniversary date, marked by one group as a joyful beginning and by the other group as the beginning of a catastrophe, to generate parallel portraits. The single example here, simple and powerful, made me eager to see the other 64.

Not many exhibitions these days deserve to be bigger. This is a beautiful exception.

Homelands and Histories: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through Oct. 1

Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.



Visual distractions in an open office can disrupt employees' concentration. Boston Consulting Group installed oversize, curved computer monitors, below, at its New York City headquarters.

OFFICE

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down, too.) Employees' workspaces are farther apart. Ms. Spivak sits in a corner between an empty workstation and an eighth-floor window with a skyline view, and she's much more productive, she says. Some of Segment's engineers work in separate team rooms.

Being surrounded by teammates with similar work patterns can be comforting to employees. Unpredictable movements around the edges of a person's field of vision compete for cognitive resources, however, says Sabine Kastner, a professor of neuroscience and psychology at Princeton University who has studied how the brain pays attention for 20 years. People differ in their ability to filter out visual stimuli. For some, a teeming or cluttered office can make it impossible to concentrate, she says.

"If we see a bunch of people gathering in our peripheral vision, we wonder, 'What are they talking about? Did somebody get laid off? Are they coming to lay me off?'" says Sally Augustin, an environmental psychologist and principal at Design With Science, a La Grange Park, Ill., consulting firm.

Being visible to bosses and colleagues can make workers in some jobs feel pressured to conform to others' expectations, says Leigh Stringer, a senior workplace expert at EYP Architecture and Engineering in Albany, N.Y. If employees default to keeping typing to look busy, rather than taking time to reflect or brainstorming with others, innovation or analytical work may suffer, she says.

In an experiment with Chinese factory workers published in 2012, Ethan Bernstein, an assistant professor of leadership and organizational behavior at Harvard Business School, found teams were 10% to 15% more productive when they worked behind a curtain that shielded them from supervisors' view. The employees felt freer to experiment with new ways to solve problems and improve efficiency when protected from their bosses' critical gaze, Dr. Bernstein says.

A loss of visual privacy is the

No. 2 complaint from employees in offices with low or no partitions between desks, after noise, according to a 2013 study published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology of 42,764 workers in 303 U.S. office buildings.

Some employers are dealing with such distractions by giving employees a lot of choices, allowing them to leave their desks and relocate to other kinds of workspaces over the course of a day, says David Lehrer, director of communications for the Center for the Built Environment at the University of California, Berkeley.

AT&T has installed about 20 Steelcase Brody workstations at its San Ramon, Calif., offices. They have privacy screens on three sides to block distractions, says Colleen Randazzo, a tactical planner who worked with AT&T on converting part of its space from cubicles and private offices to open seating. The company also has 66 "focus rooms," small rooms with a single desk.



Boston Consulting Group installed 500 oversize, curved computer monitors at employees' desks when it moved last November to new open-plan offices in New York City, says Ross Love, the firm's managing partner in New York. Employees asked for the 34-inch screens, partly to help avoid distractions.

Yieldmo, a New York marketing technology firm, installed 18-by-24-inch frosted-glass panels as a buffer between salespeople's work areas when it moved recently to new space, says architect Ajay Chopra, founder of Echo Design + Architecture, New York.

While many Yieldmo employees work at brightly lit white tables amid white walls and carpeting, high-traffic corridors are more dimly lit and painted in dark gray, with distressed-wood walls and dark concrete floors, says Rick Eaton, chief financial officer. The dark colors are less distracting to the eye, decreasing the temptation for employees to look up.

FROM TOP: ISTOCK/CALUM OCHS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL