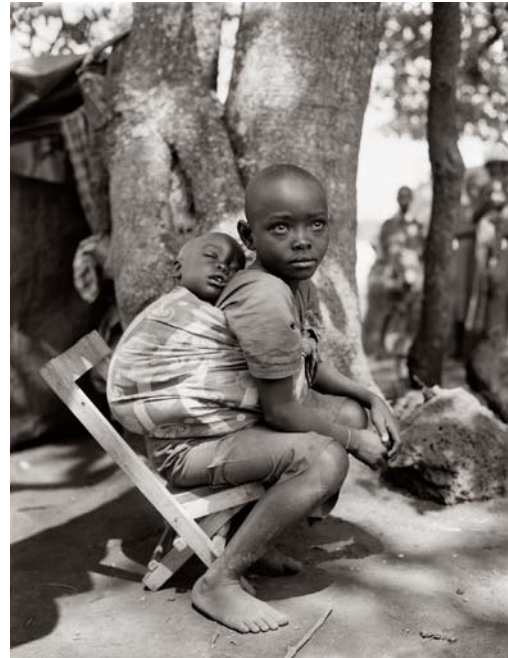From the catalogue of the exhibition, *A Sense of Common Ground: Excerpts*,
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Barbara Thompson (curator)

Left: Agai Miriam Adeng, ("Unaccompanied Minor"), Sudanese refugee camp, Kakuma, Kenya, 1992.
Right: Wezemana ("God is great") and her sleeping brother Mitonze, Rwandan refugee camp, Lumasi,
Tanzania, 1994

For Fazal Sheikh, portrait photography has become a tool for human rights activism. Through
the slow and deliberate process of his large-format work, Sheikh creates compelling images of
individually named refugees, at times allowing the images to speak for themselves, at times
providing unfiltered testimonials from his subjects. Sheikh aims to raise public awareness of the
less publicized stories of inequities, infractions, and consequences of persecution. The sublime
beauty and emotional complexity of his visual narratives can be just as much a testimony to
strength, humanity, and dignity as thy can an exclamation of terror, despondency, and anguish.
Particularly in the texts that often accompany his photographs, the harsh realities of the refugees'
experiences and the breakdown of international laws emerge with chilling honesty, reminiscent of
the horrors of bygone days.

The 1951 Geneva Convention
In the aftermath of World War II, the international community was shocked by the millions of
civilians roaming the European cities and countryside after fleeing their homes from persecution
and war. In hopes of curtailing further suffering, empathetic nations came together in 1950 to
form the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), an international
organization mandated to serve and protect the needs of these people. On 29 July 1951, member
nations of the UNHCR gathered in Geneva to create binding international standards for the

definition of refugee status, the treatment of refugees; and the obligations of member states to protect, aid, and provide asylum to European refugees.[1] The Geneva Convention also laid out the obligations of such refugees toward their host countries. In 1967, the convention extended its interests to include post-1951 events worldwide, and by 1993 forty-nine African, twenty-three American, eight Asian, six Pacific, and thirty-two European member states had joined its mission. Since 1951, the Geneva Convention and subsequent amendments to it have served as the main international instrument of refugee law.[2]

However, the convention has recently come under criticism and scrutiny. Over the past few decades, major refugee movements have resulted from civil, ethnic, religious, and gender-related violence brought on by shadowy organizations, rebel movements, non-state agents, or militia—the new "agents of persecution" (UNHCR 2000). Foreign aggression, natural catastrophes, and poverty also have increased dramatically the numbers of refuge seekers worldwide. Because of the 1951 Geneva Convention's ambiguous use of the term "persecution," its loose interpretability, and its failure to directly address the circumstances of civil conflict that characterize today's forms of persecution, it has failed to protect large numbers of people from ethnic, cultural, or religious "cleansing." Moreover, the convention's silence on issues of asylum, gender, and burden sharing has reduced its effectiveness in meeting contemporary refugee needs and concerns. While some member states and international organizations assert that persons fleeing such cleansing, whose states are unwilling or unable to protect them, should be considered refugees, others argue that they should not. Consequently, the UNHCR has advocated reforms to the convention, with top priorities being given over to a re-examination of its definitions and the granting of equal rights and access by refugee women to protection and assistance; the incorporation of children and adolescents into the mainstream of all UNHCR activities; and the promotion and engagement of older refugees in the planning and review of its programs, as resources in caretaking, opinion-setting, conflict management, and education.

The photographs in the exhibition *A Sense of Common Ground: Excerpts* portray women, children, and elderly refugees who have fled ethnic, religious, and cultural persecution in their homeland in the Great Lakes, East, and Horn of Africa between 1990 and 1995.[3] The images were taken during three years' documentation of African refugee camps in Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi, during which Sheikh captured the aftermath of conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. For many refugees, settlement into the camps meant a chance for survival, access to desperately needed food and medical attention, and protection against homelessness, violence, and death. For others, refugee life meant continued violence in the camps because the 1951 Geneva Convention failed to protect them. In some cases, warring civilian groups were placed in the same camps, leading to heightened tension, rape, and death. In other cases, bandits or antagonistic local security forces exacerbated the situation by attacking, kidnapping, or raping women refugees.[4] The untimely repatriation of refuges to their homelands also often carried fatal consequences. These and other conditions typically escape media attention and even the notice of host governments and have intensified criticism of the 1951 Geneva Convention.

To this day, the differences surrounding the interpretation of the convention remain unresolved. The safety, treatment, and status of refugees, particularly women, children, and the elderly, depend not just upon the real threat of persecution and violence but upon the tenuous political relations and international agreements. The UNHCR, humanitarians, refugees around the world, and human rights activists such as Sheikh are appealing for changes to the convention in hopes of resolving this growing problem.

Fazal Sheikh on Photojournalism versus Portraiture
A New Yorker now living in Switzerland, Sheikh attributes his interest in photographing and helping refugee, exiled, and migrant communities around the world to his deep concern with human rights and his multicultural American, Kenyan, and Pakistani background. Unlike other humanitarian photographers, Sheikh shuns the aggressive, predatory nature of photojournalism, which thrives on brutal images of victimization, war, poverty, and helplessness. While acknowledging the power images of starving children in overcrowded feeding centers and corpse-laden landscapes have in compelling global responses, Sheikh nevertheless believes that such images present the public with voyeuristic and disrespectful violations of human dignity. Consequently, Sheikh distances himself from a photojournalistic approach and focuses instead on the quiet contemplation of individuality through portrait photography.

Sheikh presents his subjects not as the clichéd recipients of international humanitarian aid or as helpless victims of war but as individuals guided by strength, perseverance, and a sense of common ground with others, Sheikh insists, "I hope that my work reaches a greater good. However, I am not willing to achieve that goal at the expense of the individual. I believe that it is the individual and is testimony that allow us to access broader themes – through the specific to gain entry to the universal."[5] Because world attention has rallied around men and their role the wars and conflicts in eastern Africa, Sheikh pays particular attention to the experiences of women, children, and the elderly. His simple compositions frame the person – alone, or in small groups, families, or entire communities. Whether portraying Rwandan orphans, Sudanese "Unaccompanied Minors," or traditional birth attendants with newborn babies, Sheikh's images reflect the ethnic, religious, and cultural differences that have led to armed conflict in eastern Africa.[6] Yet the empathy of his images reveals the sense of humanity and solidarity that binds these refugee communities together – at times in response to their differences, at times despite them.

"A Particular Way of Seeing": Issues of Authenticity in Representation/Self-Presentation
In the process of image-making, photojournalists seldom seek permission from refugees to photograph them, and rarely do refugees have the power to determine their own representation. Sheikh, however, seeks permission from his subjects and works closely with them to construct collaborative portraits. When arriving at the camps and feeding centers, he gains entrance into the networks of refugee communities through elders and group leaders. He stays among them for weeks to learn about their personal histories and struggle, survival, and hope, of mourning, memories, and restoration. Once familiar with his subjects and their surroundings, Sheikh creates a makeshift studio using the camp environment, the interior of camp tents, and the bleak eastern African landscape as his backdrop. Relying on his familiarity with his subjects, Sheikh attempts to reveal the subtle nuances of his sitters' personalities, the complexities of their emotions, and the daily experiences of refugee life inscribed in their gestures and expressions. He explains:

> The act of photographing becomes an event in the village. We construct the image together. Many of the people have never been photographed before, and the Polaroid provides a point of reference for the discussion that follow in which the residents of the community offer their opinions on how the documentation may unfold … The people in the photographs often look directly into the camera, and by extension, to the viewer. There are no visual gymnastics, and the image is pared down to what I believe to be its essential nature. The sitters present themselves. My role is not to confer upon, but rather to encourage, that which is already inherently part of the person to come forward. The strengths of a sitter's gaze and an entire life lived in their bodies speaks for itself. [7]

Taking advantage of the nature of Polaroid film, which creates both a negative and a positive, Sheikh keeps the negative to make his larger prints and gives away the positive image to the sitters. "Invariably," Sheikh explains, "the images became a topic of conversation. For the most part, people displayed them in their homes, bringing them to the attention of family and friends."[8]

The deliberate construction of Sheikh's imagery attests to the complex relationship of exchange and co-authorship between the photographer and his subject, and it demands that we consider the role of image-makers in the West's picture of history and current events in Africa. This important issue has been addressed recently in revisionist scholarship on photography in Africa.[9] Since the introduction of photography in 1839, the photographic image has shaped the way we have looked at and thought about Africa and Africans. As David Binkley, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the National Museum of African Art, notes,

> the photographic images … affected the way Europeans and American felt about themselves and their connectedness with events outside their own immediate communities and experience … [Photographs] are still widely used as evidence in legal, scientific and other forms of socio-historical documentation and, therefore, still maintain an aura of authenticity. Photographs with or without accompanying text were understood to present factual information by authoritative voices … believed to have first-hand experience in Africa. They also confirmed long-standing ideologies. [10]

Photographs continue to inform our impressions of world events. Consequently, the public acceptance of today's media images of African refugees and disasters can create problematic stereotypes similar to nineteenth-century colonial photography. Indeed, it is precisely the perceived aura of "truth" and "authenticity" of the photojournalistic image that undermines public awareness of the photographer's ability to manipulate content, composition, structure, framing, and presentation, all of which can convey particular meanings geared toward particular audiences: the Western media, humanitarian agencies, and donors, to name just a few. The "authorship" (authority) of the photojournalistic image and the control that the photographer exerts over the process of its production are rarely questioned by the viewing public. Moreover the meanings and preconceived notions that the viewer brings to the image – which can alter truth or reality in unexpected ways – can also shape the image's long-term impact in fostering preconceptions. Sheikh argues that: "The media seem preoccupied with encapsulating communities and paring them down to myopic tag lines. There is a horrific element to the refugee stories from Somalia and Rwanda, but the lives of those people are more complex than the way they have been represented. Being an African or a refugee is only one fact of who they are as human beings. I would like to balance out the equation, to broaden and challenge our preconceptions as structured by the media."[11]

The lasting effects of contemporary media images of African refugees can unintentionally reaffirm and thus perpetuate the colonial stereotype of a destitute and dependent Africa torn by ethnic rivalry and corruption. The underlying message of such images implies that the "plight: of African can only be resolved through Western intervention and aid – a notion very much akin to the colonial ideologies of the nineteenth-century propagandist photography, which served to invoke and justify the paternalistic policies of the colonial presence in Africa. While the circumstances of Africa today are clearly different from those of the nineteenth century, the long-term effects of photojournalistic image-making in erasing individuality, denying diversity, and creating (or, perpetuation) stereotypes often remain the same.

The formal, mostly frontal poses, the solemn gaze of his sitters, the toned prints, and the shallow depth of field of Sheikh's images may remind us of nineteenth-century photography of Africans. Unlike most colonial images, however, Sheikh's sitters determine their own poses, dress, manner, and moods in order to construct images of themselves that they feel comfortable presenting to the camera. Sheikh explains: "Often the community would instruct the process and encourage renderings of those people and situations that they felt were relevant." [12] Hence, some critics might argue that Sheikh's portraits are false construction of selfhood and identity, given over to the whims of the photographer and his/her sitter in presenting a "staged" self-identity rather than representing the lived "truth" that photojournalism seems to capture. Indeed, as Geary[13] and Stevenson and Graham-Stewart[14] have revealed, portrait photography of Africans since the nineteenth century was riddled with manipulation and staging by the colonial photographers.[15] These nineteenth-century portraits were voraciously consumed by the viewing public – predominately European and American – as facts, not as constructions, subsequently producing a multitude of lasting negative stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa and Africans.

Unlike our nineteenth-century predecessors, who regarded the "scientific" process of photography as capable only of presenting fact and truth, today's viewer, it has been argued, understands photography as "an artificial representational system in which the resulting images have a complicated relationship to the subjects they depict."[16] If such is the case, how can today's viewer embrace sensationalist media images as factual rather than imagined or contrived? Are Sheikh's collaborations any more or less truthful or real than the photojournalist's image? Or do the two approaches present us with different perspectives of the larger picture of refugee life? Certainly Sheikhs' collaborations force the viewer to be openly conscious of the complicated relationship between the photographer, the image, the subjects depicted, and the viewer or consumer. As Sheikh admits, "although it is inevitable that the photographs are also a product of who I am, I hope that my perceptions defer to or mingle with those of the people that I photograph, allowing the personal chord to resonate with the documentary."[17]

Like the fragments of refugee catastrophes presented in the media, Sheikh's collaborative portraits convey only part of the "real" story: the part that his subjects want to present of themselves to the broader world, the part that highlights healing and restoration without compromising the real consequences of their experiences. This constructed approach could be accused of romanticizing an Africa and Africans torn by conflicts of ethnic, cultural, and religious differences; of visually editing out the harsh realities of war, death, and pain suffered by the refugees; of consciously constructing "a particular way of seeing"[18] that denies one "truth" at the expense of another. One must consider, however, Sheikh's deliberate intention to challenge our views of African refugees and survivors of persecution. His aim to co-author alternative narratives forces the viewer to reconsider and question all forms of image-making and to consider also the power that the image, photographer, subject, and viewer has in creating and conveying multiple and multilayered truths and realities. Sheikh's portraits serve different but equally important goals as the disaster images in the media. Hence Sheikh's image-making can be celebrated as a necessary counteraction to the lasting effects of mass media imagery, which strips the refugee of his/her identity, individuality, and dignity. As a photographer who seeks the middle ground between art and journalism, Sheikh's portraits provide that balance, making us aware of the means by which images (re)present the world, and the consequences such means can have on the represented subject.

Endnotes

1 According to Article 1 of the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is a "person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution."

2 The 1969 Refugee Convention of the Organization of African Unity and the 1984 Cartegena Declaration of Central America formed regional adaptations to the original 1951 definitions.

3 This exhibition is derived from the traveling exhibition *A Sense of Common Ground*, which opened at the International Center of Photography in New York in 1996. The images were selected by the artist and curator to specifically complement the topic of a series of events held at Dartmouth College during the first half of 2003 that focuses on the consequences of armed conflict upon women, children, and the elderly.

4 Despite the local government's denials of such reports, an estimated eight thousand women refugees have been raped during the course of seven years in and around the refugee camps of Kenya's northeastern desert alone.

5 See: Light, Ken, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers*, Smithsonian Institution Press 2000, p159.

6 Sudanese "Unaccompanied Minors" are primarily boys between the ages of eight and eighteen who were forced to join or were abducted by members of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) for deployment in the war against the Islamic-dominated Sudanese government.

7 See Light, pp 156-157

8 From personal communications with Fazal Sheikh about his work conducted on 5 November 2002 and 3 January 2003.

9 See, for example, Bingham 1999, Geary 2002, Stevenson and Graham-Stewart 2001, and Landau and Kaspin 2002, among others.

10 See Geary, Christaud, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa*, 1885-1960, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution 2002, pp7–8

11 See Light, p156

12 See personal communication, January 2003.

13 Geary, Christaud, *In and Out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960*, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution 2002

14 See M

15 See their case studies in which Africans staged their own mises-en-scène for unsuspecting colonials.

16 Photography in Africa both reflected and fed into the rise of racial science in nineteenth-century Europe. Both ethnographic photography and the anthropometric photograph were used as tools to classify and "measure" races and, by extension, to establish their "degree of evolution."

17 See Light 2000, p157.

18 See Wells 2000, p19.

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