

Life on the frontier.
Biography of Fazal Sheikh
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Fazal Ilahi Sheikh was born in 1965 in the city of New York. His father was from Kenya, his mother American. Previous generations of his family were no strangers to the phenomenon of emigration: his paternal grandfather, Sheikh Fazal Ilahi, was born in what was then Northern India, later to become Pakistan, and left with his family for Kenya, which at the time was a British colony. It was an itinerary that would be decisive in the development of Sheikh's work.

Fazal Sheikh spent his childhood and youth in the USA, and long school holidays with his family in Kenya. It was these journeys that would leave the indelible imprint of his non-Western roots on this son of an emigrant.

In 1987, he completed a double degree in Fine Arts and History of Art at the prestigious Princeton University, to which he would return to exhibit his work years later. In the first few years of his academic training, his early photography, mainly self-portraits, was introspective, in a determined quest for self-knowledge. Then, a few years later, the premature death of his mother marked the start of a long period of mourning, which Sheikh would tackle in his subsequent work. At this point, he was to discover the connections between his own pain and that of the relatives of those who disappeared in the wars in Afghanistan. After this episode of self-analysis, healing and training, Sheikh felt ready to turn his lens on the outside world and the community. After graduation, he embarked on a different, non-academic kind of education, discovering the world. He travelled to many parts of Africa, and Kenya in particular, where he was to spend several months. Then he went to South Africa, where he took a special interest in the areas which *apartheid* reserved for the black population.

In 1992, he won a Fulbright fellowship to document the Bajun communities on the Kenyan coast. In February the same year, whilst still on familiar territory in Nairobi, he decided to add a new dimension to his project and headed

for the newly-created Somali, Sudanese and Ethiopian refugee camps on the country's northern border. During his trips to the camps, while a UN spokesperson gave the appropriate instructions to groups of visitors, Sheikh discovered a desire to go beyond the official speeches and the stereotyped treatment the refugees get from the press. Once there, he felt a need to use his time living with them and obtained a special permit to stay at the camp. This was the first step in what was to become a long relationship with East African expatriates, a problem that grew in line with his enthusiasm to understand and document it. In the next three years, he would continue travelling to camps in Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania, camps that were the direct result of the human tragedies arising in Mozambique and Rwanda respectively. His collaboration with the leading human rights activist Fauzia Musse gave him access to Somali rape victims who had sought refuge in Kenya.

In 1994, after his first exhibitions in the US, and at the age of just twenty-nine, Sheikh appeared on the list of the thirty young artists "most likely to change the culture in the next thirty years" published by *The New York Times*. The same year, he received the Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography in New York in the "Young Photographer" category. His *alma mater*, Princeton University, invited him to exhibit in 1995. His work also went on show at the Opsis Foundation in New York and at the FOTOFO Central European House of Photography in Bratislava.

His years of work with expatriates have brought him many opportunities, including at the New York's Pace/MacGill with which he exhibited for the first time at their gallery on East 57th Street. Pace/MacGill represents Sheikh commercially, but his work also features in non-profit-making contexts: the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) organised an exhibition at its Geneva head office,

which was the first of many projects in which Sheikh has worked with the UN.

After exhibiting a number of his series to the general public, in 1996, Sheikh published his first book under the title *A Sense of Common Ground*. This marked the start of a range of publications in which photography enters into a dialogue with testimonial text. The text has since become a key element in Sheikh's approach and stems from his desire to know, live and dialogue with the human beings he photographs.

In 1996, Sheikh travelled to Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, once again forging links between his work and his own life-story. His journey was a quest to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather. Although he had never met him, he knew him to have been a devout Muslim, born in what was then Northern India, and to have been buried in Medina after his death on a trip to Syria in 1955. On his journey, Sheikh discovered a camp of displaced Afghan refugees who had arrived in Northern Pakistan after decades fleeing from the diverse conflicts in their country, from the Soviet occupation in 1979 until the rise to power of the Taliban regime. Sheikh went on to develop his interest to the full, becoming directly acquainted with the people and compiling intimate eyewitness accounts from the relatives of those who had suffered as a result of war and persecution.

After two years working in the refugee camps in Pakistan and in the Afghan cities of Kabul and Jalalabad, Sheikh published his second book, *The Victor Weeps*, in 1998. He exhibited for a second time at Pace/Macgill and at the Fotomuseum Winterthur (Switzerland), which acquired a group of photos from *The Victor Weeps* series for its collection.

In the year 2000, he returned to the camps of Kenya, where he met up again with some of the people he had portrayed in earlier years. His experience once again showed the status of

the refugee as an expatriate *sine die*. Sheikh once again listened to eyewitness accounts of the systematic violation of human rights, particularly in Somali camps, and interviewed a large number of victims. On his return to Zurich, one of his places of residence, he worked with the material obtained in Africa to produce a new book entitled *A Camel for the Son*. This edition was immediately followed by *Ramadan Moon* which focused on Seynab Assir Wardeere, a Somali refugee woman in the Netherlands, and was the first series devoted to displaced peoples in Europe.

Together, the two books kicked off the International Human Rights Series, a project which encompassed a series of works in conjunction with other NGOs, institutions and galleries, and with which he set up alternative forms of distribution for his work, in particular on-line editions and documentaries. The profits from the sale of the printed editions were allocated to a special fund created to protect human rights.

By this time, the global recognition Sheikh had earned himself for his work enabled him to travel to parts of the world that had previously been unknown to him, allowing him to expand his field of action. He began to take an interest in social and religious affairs in Latin America. In Mexico, he worked on *Patroness of the Americas*, a series about crossing the US border, which he explored in relationship with the Pan-American cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In Brazil, he documented economic migrants in the area of Grande Sertão, and delved into magical-religious syncretism of Afro-Christian origin, in the series *Simpatia*.

The indignation he felt about the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the war they unleashed was expressed in the pamphlet *When two bulls fight, the leg of the calf is broken*, which momentarily took Sheikh back to the Afghan theme. Twenty thousand copies were distributed at the Frankfurt Book Fair during the first week of the Afghanistan war.

In 2003, at the prestigious Rencontres d'Arles, Sheikh was awarded the Dialogue de l'Humanité prize, and the Tate Modern in London included his work in the exhibition *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph*. The same year, Sheikh visited the Indian city of Vrindavan, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, for the first time. He made contact with the world of the widows compelled to live in Krishna-worshipping communities; a world which, when he returned to the city in 2004, he would document using his chosen method of testimonials and photographs. The result was *Moksha*, published as part of the International Human Rights Series. For the first time, this new book of portraits sets up a dialogue with images from the city.

The same year, Sheikh put on his first exhibition at the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris and the UN selected *A Camel for the Son* and *The Victor Weeps* for an exhibition in the lobby of its New York head office to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development.

He returned to India in 2005. On this occasion, he visited the states of Punjab and Gujarat, and the slums of Delhi, in search of a deeper understanding of the condition of women in the subcontinent. He received support from activists working at the grassroots with women suffering from exclusion, rape, labour exploitation and forced prostitution. Today, this material features in *Ladli* (2007), a publication which expands on the more local framework of *Moksha*.

Moksha and *Ladli* reappeared together under the new title *Beloved Daughters*, for which Sheikh was awarded the Henri Cartier-Bresson International Grand Prize in 2005. The jury acknowledged his endeavours in these two series on India, declaring them to reveal "a very serious commitment, both political and poetic, in Sheikh's way of expressing very painful issues. With a classical formal approach, almost

distant, he allows the viewer to reach his own opinion.” It also acknowledges Sheikh’s work as that of an activist before that of photojournalist. The same year, Sheikh was named a MacArthur Fellow, receiving the *Genius Grant* from the prestigious MacArthur Foundation, an organisation which supports people and institutions “committed to building a more just, verdant and peaceful world,” which enabled him to expand the scope of his projects over the next few years. Subsequently, his work began to appear more regularly in collective exhibitions in art galleries, universities and foundations. In 2007, he returned to Princeton to exhibit *Beloved Daughters* at the Princeton University Museum of Art and, simultaneously, Pace/MacGill presented the retrospective *Fazal Sheikh: Portraits*. It was also at this stage that Sheikh received a new fellowship, on this occasion from the Soros Foundation.

In 2008, the International Center of Photography in New York included his work in the renowned exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. In 2009, Fundación Mapfre presented a complete retrospective of his work in Madrid. This was the first time his work had been on show in Spain.

Fazal Sheikh is currently based in Zurich, New York and Kenya. Fifteen years after *The New York Times* included him on the list of artists changing the face of culture, Sheikh continues to work as a photographer and activist, with a discourse constantly updated by today’s events as they create new frontiers, causing the mass displacement of an ever-growing flood of human beings. His work features in more than thirty international collections and is equally sought after by both organisations involved in cooperation and human rights protection projects, and by those in the art world.