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'Fazal Sheikh: Portraits of African Exiles'

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Fatuma Abdi Hussein and her son Abdullahi, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1992

The realities of life in a refugee camp have been gruesomely brought home to us over the past few years. Heart-rending news photos and TV footage have shown Somalis and Rwandans in exile camps at their most tortured moments of violence, disease and death.

These are stories that have to be told. But they are not the only stories worth telling about these wretched Africans or about other refugees. In an exhibition at the International Center of Photography, the American photographer Fazal Sheikh offers another perspective on the life in the camps. Instead of squeezing their misery for every last ounce of sensational yet

distancing pain, “A Sense of Common Ground” focuses on the humanity and the dignity of individual refugees.

Mr. Sheikh’s images are a result of visits he made between 1992 and 1994 to many of the East African camps housing Sudanese fleeing a decade-old civil war, Mozambicans escaping a 15-year-civil war, and Ethiopians, Somalis and Rwandans fleeing tribal wars. (Although some of these camps have since been closed and their residents repatriated, there are still a staggering 11.8 million refugees in Africa).

The 30-year-old son of an American mother and a Kenyan father, Mr. Sheikh spent his childhood summers with family in Nairobi. Even so, he approached his first trip to a Sudanese refugee camp in Northern Kenya in 1992 with the preconceptions common to all outsiders. As a member of a delegation of journalists and aid workers from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, he was briefed beforehand on what to expect; he accompanied the reporters on their rounds of the recommended spots for the best footage and saw them off only a few hours after they had arrived. “When you have to move through a camp quickly, it’s easier to move through it as a voyeur, than it is to engage,” Mr. Sheikh observes. On that first trip, he stayed for several days, long enough for the preconceptions and first impressions to be tempered by exposure to the complexity of life. And it was then that he decided to ask the community elders and refugees “to collaborate with me in making the images.”

For these formal, posed, deliberate portraits, instead of darting around, stealing shots without notice or permission, Mr. Sheikh created a studio in the camps, setting up his large view camera on a tripod, talking (most times in Swahili) with his sitters and allowing them to pose themselves within the frame. And because he works with Polaroid film, he was able to give something back to his subjects right away, leaving them with the photo that they participated in, while he retained the negative.

On first sight of the exhibit wall with 33 mostly mother-and-daughter portraits, the beauty is mesmerizing. Proud, strong women lovingly and confidently hold their babies. The wall-mounted caption tells us that these photos were taken at a Somali-camp feeding center for children weighing less than 60% of their ideal body weight. In another photo, eight-year-old Hadija sits on a stool wearing a formal, long, white dress. We see only a portion of her father’s body to the side, as he reaches in to lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder – an instinctual response from him, and a resonating one for the photographer, who chose this moment for the portrait. The caption says, “She remains mute after being separated from her mother in the crossing from Somalia into Kenya,” yet in her face is a look of serene determination.

All the images include a caption that tells, at the least, the names and locations of the sitter, but many times there is more. In some cases the documentation becomes the point of the display, such as in an accordion-like book mounted with photos and lettered with the transcribed stories of several women who had been abused in the camps by local police. They express disbelief, both in their faces and words, that their once-happy lives have come to this. A majority of the images in the show are of women or children, and those of men do not speak as strongly. It is harder to read their solemn faces, and the captions do not shed much light on their individual stories (perhaps the photographer did not wish to spend as much time on those exiles – such as Rwanda’s Hutu military and militia members – who may have been responsible for violence in their homeland?).

There are also contextual photographs – panoramic views of the camps and group portraits such as a Rwandan leader with members of his compound, an Ethiopian tribal matriarch flanked by the women and children, and a group of Sudanese boys referred to as “unaccompanied minors.”

In each camp, Mr. Sheikh posed the sitters formally in front of their thatched huts, or in the surrounding countryside, or even with others from the community as a backdrop (this is, after all, very cramped living), but the shallow depth of field of his camera usually throws this background into a soft-focus haze. What is important is the sitter and what she wants to express.

The enlarged black-and-white prints are toned in a very warm brownish-yellow hue, further enhancing the softness and hinting at the aesthetic of 19th century studio portraits commissioned by their sitters. This allusion is quite deliberate. Mr. Sheikh studied photography at Princeton, has already won numerous awards, and was not a surprising choice for ICP and its curator, Miles Barth, to pick for a show so early in his career.

Some 100 of his works (most of the exhibit images are included in a flawlessly beautiful book of the same title published by Scalo at \$35) make a powerful argument that respectful pictures of beauty and dignity can speak as eloquently about these people as harsh ones of suffering and despair. Of course these photos don't tell the whole story of life in a refugee camp because they leave out the grim details of daily life. But images of these hardships are easy to find, while photos like these, which allow the refugees a chance to appear as themselves instead of as nameless faces in a crowd of miserable and uprooted strangers, are special indeed.