

*Chicago Tribune*

January 12, 2001

'Photo exhibit's portraits of Afghans personalize the suffering'

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Abdul Basir, Afghan refugee camp, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997

American photographer Fazal Sheikh set up a mammoth view camera in the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1996 amid the funereal ruins of a city caught in civil war. People teemed past him despite the cataclysmic backdrop he captions in a mural-sized panorama, part of his exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Just weeks later, the fundamentalist Islamic faction the Taliban conquered the city and a new wave of exiles fled. Sheikh's picture-taking became dangerous because the Taliban forbade photograph, along with the appearance of women in public unless they are accompanied by a male relative.

The Afghans emerged the victors of the 1980s jihad against the Communists, but holy war quickly turned into civil war and eventually led to the Taliban rule. Sheikh's exhibit, drawn from images in his 1998 book "The Victor Weeps," tells the story of the refugees in portraits of

Afghan men, women and children living in exile. Oral histories of heroism, faith and family tragedy often accompany the pictures.

“The tight framing eliminates all background or sense of context in Sheikh’s portraits, for these people who now live in bombed-out cities and villages or in refugee camps in Pakistan have lost the context for their lives, notes exhibit curator Colin Westerbeck of the Art Institute.

Sheikh works in the classic tradition of black and white portraiture. The creased faces of turbaned men and wizened eyes of small children stare out from the pictures, giving universal expression to human suffering. In one series of images, Sheikh fills the photograph with just the hands of people holding tiny identity-card portraits of loved ones they have lost. The pictures within a picture recover the fundamental meaning of a photograph as a precious visualization of a memory.

Sheikh was born in New York City, studied at Princeton University and now lives in Zurich. He has previously photographed African people in refugee camps, always personalizing the struggle of single human being in portraits rather than taking photojournalistic shots of brutal events. Sheikh and his subjects collaborate in making lyrical and introspective photographs that resonate with a profound sense of dignity.

In his book Sheikh writes, “As the worlds spins impossibly out of control around them, Afghans look further inward, narrowing their scope of vision to their own friends and families to find the spirit that will sustain them.”