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'Stories Reveal Violence Behind Formal Pictures'
Sarah Boxer

Abdia and her son Khalid, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1992

A picture is not worth a thousand words. In fact, a picture is not worth even one. Pictures tell a certain story, words tell another. Case in point: You would never know just from looking at Fazal Sheikh's gorgeous portraits what hideous things they conceal. The pictures are calm. The stories behind them are full of violence.

Mr. Sheikh, an American photographer educated at Princeton, has a mission. He wants to see "how people reconcile themselves to loss through their belief system." So he has traveled the world recording people's faces and beliefs. From Afghanistan and Pakistan (where his grandfather was born) to Kenya (where his father grew up) and Brazil (where Mr. Sheikh got to know farmers

displaced from their land), Mr. Sheikh has recorded faces with a camera and beliefs with a pen, thinking that through "their voices, their faces and their hands" people can "teach us about the landscape and how they survive."

Is his mission accomplished? Can you actually see people being reconciled to losses through their beliefs? Can you see just by looking at their faces and hands how they survive? Consider Mr. Sheikh's works now on view in SoHo.

At the gallery P.P.O.W., the walls are lined with Mr. Sheikh's sensual mother-and-child and sister-and-infant portraits, taken at feeding camps for Somalian refugees in Kenya. Every one is perfectly composed, the mother and child forming a single shape, limbs casually entwined. In one picture, Abdia, a woman in a black veil, holds her son Khalid on her lap, her hands making a gentle ring around him. He looks doubtfully at the camera, one hand pulling at his ear. In another picture, Shamsa Moka Abdi holds her sister Shahil. The older sister looks at the younger girl in her arms, who in turn looks sullenly at the camera, her hand splayed casually on her leg.

These photographs have more in common with August Sander's formal, direct black-and-white portraits than with James Nachtwey's pictures of the horrors of war.

But what stories are behind them? All of the people in the feeding centers in Kenya are refugees from the war in Somalia in the 1990's. Many have seen their fathers and husbands shot. Many have been raped. All have endured a long walk across the desert. One mother killed a child along the way to spare her a long, painful death. One family took their young boy to the feeding center but left the boy's older sister, who was severely malnourished, behind. Why? A doctor said the father feared "their son's treatment would be reduced if they brought a second child, the daughter, to the center."

The photographs do not show the deep-rooted degradation of women and girls, but the words do. The title of this exhibition, "A Camel for the Son," comes from a statement made by Abshiro Aden Mohammed, a women's leader in one of the refugee camps: "When a mother gives birth to a boy, there will be the gift of a camel for the son in the expectation that when he is a man, that one camel will have sired a whole herd, and his birthright will start him out in the world." But if the baby is a girl, "there is nothing for her." At age 7, she is circumcised and "her opening is stitched shut," proof of her virginity. She can be married at a young age and cast away at any time. If she happens to be raped, which seems to occur frighteningly often, no one will marry her.

One of the women whom Mr. Sheikh photographed, Farhida, told him that when she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was raped by a gang at her home, with her parents and husband watching. "The morning after, when the men had left, my husband divorced me," she said. "He said that he did not know why I had to accept being raped; that I could have chosen to die instead."

Still, many Somali women are believers. In a separate exhibition of Mr. Sheikh's photographs, "Ramadan Moon," shown in a dimly lighted, curtained-off area at P. P. O.W., are portraits of a pensive-looking woman named Seynab Azir Wardeere from Mogadishu. She watched as her father was shot. Her children watched as a group of men attacked her. She ended up in a political asylum center with her son in the Netherlands. Mr. Sheikh's portraits of her hang beside moody, impressionist photographs of leaves, trees, the moon and the paths of stars across the night sky. And there is a recording of prayers sung at Ramadan. Islam is her solace.

But the question that arises over and over in Mr. Sheikh's work is this: Are beliefs really consolation for loss, as he suggests, or can they be the cause of it?

The Scalo gallery is showing "The Victor Weeps — Afghanistan," photographs that Mr. Sheikh took during the rise of the Taliban. He took many close-up portraits of children orphaned by the war and many pictures of makeshift graves. But the most telling part of the show is a series of pictures within pictures. Some are framed and lying in the dirt. Others are gently held by relatives. Each is of a man who has died during the war. And each one comes with a similar story, a story in which the survivor dreams of the dead man returning to him as a martyr.

A small picture of Mula Abdul Hakim held in the palm of his brother's hand is accompanied by his brother's testimony: "In my dreams he sits beside a pool in a garden silently washing."

A picture of Abdul Abdi, killed in 1988, comes with words from his brother Said Ali: "He had been dead for four years when I dreamed of him. He was sitting beside a lamp. He told me that I should be patient, that the kindness of Allah will solve all our problems." The main belief that consoles these men is that their brothers, fathers and sons died not in vain but as martyrs in jihad.

But there are doubters. Not surprisingly, they are women.

One woman, living in exile in Pakistan, wrote this: "When our great Islamic revolution succeeded, we thought our day of deliverance had come. . . . Afghanistan was released. But once again women were treated as the goat in the game. . . . These men who think of themselves as the defenders of our faith, as our fathers and brothers sent to protect us, are the same ones who call us `Honey.' They say: `Don't come out of your bottle, the flies might touch you.' . . . Over the loudspeakers they announce that 14 years of holy war has simply been to cover Afghan women in Muslim dress. That, dear brother, dear father and son, I am sure was not the purpose of the holy war. . . . It is time to improve our lot in life and throw off the shackles that have allowed the caravan of civilization and democracy to travel far beyond us."

It is a good thing that Mr. Sheikh took a pen along with his camera. A portrait photograph can say many things that words cannot, but it can never convey such detailed and articulate anger as this.

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