

Photo District News

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'Fazal Sheikh and the Power of the Portrait'

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Fazal Sheikh had a banner year in 2005. In awarding him one of its highly coveted \$500,000 fellowships, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation described Sheikh, a native New Yorker who now divides his time between Zurich and Kenya, as "a documentary photographer who uses the personalizing power of portraiture to bring the faces of the world's displaced people into focus."

One of the first things Sheikh did with the proceeds from his MacArthur award, commonly known as a "genius grant," was to put several of his books online at www.fazalsheikh.org so that more people could see them free of charge. Sheikh's oeuvre reads like a personal human rights campaign. *The Victor Weeps* (Scalo, 1998) documents Afghan refugees in Pakistan. *A Camel for the Son* (Steidl, 2001) focuses on the lives of Somali women and children refugees in Kenya. *Ramadan Moon* (Steidl, 2001) is a portrait of a Somali asylum seeker in the Netherlands. And *When Two Bulls Fight* (Northwestern University, 2002) portrays Afghanistan on the eve of the U.S. bombing.

The jurors who awarded Sheikh the 2005 Henri Cartier-Bresson Award of 30,000 Euros for his on-going project about the status of women in Indian society said much the same thing about the power of his portraits as the MacArthur Foundation had, noting, "Through his portraits, his interviews and his photographs of the subject's environment, Fazal Sheikh brings us to the tragedy of these women - very old and very young - in India."

The first of Sheikh's books on Indian women appeared in September. *Moksha* (Steidl, 2005) is a substantial 220-page hardcover that uses text, interviews and 170 of Sheikh's tri-tone black and white photographs to create a visual journey to Vrindavan, India's city of 20,000 exiled widows. Like most of Sheikh's work, *Moksha* is more art than exposé, presenting formal portraits of dispossessed peoples as a way of dignifying them and calling attention to their plights.

"I am engaged politically and socially," says Sheikh of his soft-sell approach to artistic activism, "but I want to use imagery to coax people into engaging with the issues."

Sheikh's own multicultural background informs his photography, and each of his examinations of displaced people takes on a subtle element of autobiographical research. Sheikh, (pronounced Fuzzle Shake) 41, was born in Manhattan in 1965. His family came originally from the region of Northern India that became Pakistan after partition in 1947. His grandfather (and namesake) moved to Kenya in 1912 and became a successful merchant there. His father moved to New York City where he became a publisher of Islamic books and a lecturer on Islam. Fazal himself enjoyed a privileged upbringing, summering with family in Kenya, attending New York's Dalton School and then studying art and playing squash at Princeton University (BA, 1987).

At Princeton, Sheikh was greatly influenced by the teachings and photography of the man he considers his mentor, the legendary photographer Emmet Gowin.

"When you study with Emmet," Sheikh says, "you learn to use photography as a way to explore yourself and your place in the world. In college, I did a lot of self-portraits."

Just as Emmet Gowin's work evolved from intimate family photographs to aerial images of man-damaged landscapes, Sheikh's work quickly grew from youthful introspection to an art of social reflection. This process began with a trip overland from England to South Africa during

which Sheikh says he was "photographing timidly." But his encounters with people on the continent lead him to his single-minded focus on those individuals who have been dispossessed.

"When he was a student, he was a real omnivore, voracious," Gowin says of Sheikh. "Then between his junior and senior year he spent the summer in Africa. When he came back from Africa, he was seeing things the way you wish all students would. He had made a connection to his central self. His vision involves finding his relationship to people who have the least, who have seen the worst, yet still have something deeply humane about them."

In 1992, Sheikh used a Fulbright Fellowship to begin work on a three-year exploration of refugee camps in Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi as a half million people fled famine and political violence in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda. That body of work became his first book, *A Sense of Common Ground* (Scalo, 1996).

"I feel like it's slightly divinely inspired this mission he's on," says Gowin of Sheikh's work with refugee communities. "I don't know whether he knows it or not."

Sheikh's long-term commitment to photographing the displaced begs comparison to Sebastião Salgado's epic 1993-99 Migrations project, but where Salgado captures the massive scale of human dislocation, Sheikh focuses on the individual experience.

"He has a way of making heroic images," says Sheikh of Salgado. "I approach it in another way. If I'm going to have a broad, sweeping understanding of a people, it has to be done in specific individual portraits and voices."

Sheikh's aim is not to make Westerners feel guilty so that they will donate to refugee relief efforts. The point of his refugee portraits is that, "We all could be in the same position as those people."

Sheikh began working on *Moksha* (a Hindu designation for Heaven) in 2003, taking five trips of a month or more to the city of Vrindavan over the next two years. The city is a haven for Indian widows who, having rejected the ancient Hindu practice of throwing themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, live lives of self-denial, spending eight hours a day chanting in exchange for a few rupees of government welfare. While human rights organizations have charged that the women of Indian widow ghettos are often sexually exploited, Sheikh, who enlisted the aid of social workers to gain access to the women, says that the more time he spent among the women of Vrindavan the more subtle and complex their situations seemed to him.

"Their lives in that place consist of more than the moments of trauma," he says, noting the irony of the widows' isolation and alienation from mainstream Indian society. "The very thing that is giving people solace is also, at the same time, the source of their pain. The system that put them there is the thing that gives them the ability to endure."

In *Moksha*, Sheikh presents beautiful, even reverential portraits of widows accompanied by their often harrowing and horrifying accounts of the circumstances that led them to Vrindavan. The book's layout gives it a narrative flow and funereal mood, the individual portraits broken up by impressionistic landscapes and still-lives that contribute to a gradually unraveling of the women's stories.

Sheikh used an old 1960s Rolleiflex square format camera for most of the portraits and a Plaubel 6 x 7 camera to capture the atmosphere of the Vrindavan environment. All of his work is in black and white.

"I've never worked in color," he explains. "I feel as though I see in black and white. I'm able to pare things down to the essence. Color conspires against you somehow."

Though like all concerned photographers, Sheikh bears witness to injury and injustice in hopes that calling attention to social problems will lead to discussions about what can be done to

solve them, he admits that *Moksba* is less judgmental than his previous books. *Moksba* is more of an invocation than an indictment. This is not the case with his next book.

Titled *Girl-Child*, the second of Sheikh's photographic studies of the treatment of women in India will focus on the cultural bias against girls in Indian society that leads to infanticide and the abandonment of female babies. As with *Moksba* and his other books, the proceeds from the sale of *Girl-Child* will go to the International Humanitarian Fund set up through the Volkart Foundation in Switzerland to benefit the communities Sheikh portrays.

"Indian culture is very set against women," he says. "I see the images as empowering these women."