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'The Circle'
George Slade

Several of Fazal Sheikh's monographs have appeared in a trim size, about 8 inches tall by 6 inches wide, and a modest thickness that makes them seem almost like pocketbooks — items one could easily tote on a long journey. The unassuming dimensions of these books, however, belie the profundity of the images they contain. The arc they collectively describe is one of displacement, of people who have been subject to abuse, exile, or other manifestations of inhumanity. In that context, the books are perfectly scaled to suggest the minimal possessions one might bear in a situation of extremity — smaller than a pair of shoes and lighter than a jug of water. Sheikh's synecdochic photographs intimate their epic tales with unnerving acuity. Their formal beauty relates the struggles encountered with surprising, compelling power.

The Circle is one such tale, told almost entirely by faces. Sheikh utilizes very close, highly detailed black-and-white portraits to record women's faces that tell the harsh stories of India's historical mistreatment of the females in its population. In turn, the sequence portrays the full circle of life, from the newly born to the very aged. Holding this compendium of lives in one's hand, one realizes that the book's faces represent thousands of other women, and that this entire accumulation represents one great injustice — the lot of these women is perpetually reincarnated in an eternal circle of life. Sheikh notes, however, that this circle is both damning and hopeful:

I realized that for many of them, life was not merely a single line, but rather something more resembling a circle, in which the hopes and aspirations that were not attained in this life might be bestowed on them or on others in the next.

The Circle is a prayer book. The faces, lovely and epic in their resignation, attain communion with viewers. The full passage of these beautifully reproduced faces is framed by two unpopulated but highly appropriate and symbolic images — at the book's beginning, a crib for abandoned babies in a Delhi orphanage, and at the close, an image of mist in a grove. Together, they signal an abandoned anonymity into which many Indian women are born and the formless limbo that reabsorbs them when they pass from this cycle of life.

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