

*Photo-Eye*, Santa Fe

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'Ether'

Reviewed by Blake Andrews

The relationship between two of life's certainties, death and sleep, is closer than we might realize. That's the conceit of Fazal Sheikh's recent book *Ether*, a collection of photographs made while walking at night in Benares, India. Most depict sleeping humans. The rest relate to death in some way. And in many photos the line is blurred. Sleep and death sometimes appear indistinguishable, even from just a few feet away.

OK, this isn't rocket science. Prone bodies can appear dead, especially when shrouded under covers. We don't need Sheikh's photos to tell us that. But he has approached the subject gently and with great sensitivity. The photos are in no way heavy-handed or agenda-ridden. Instead they are quiet and subdued and get their message across almost by subterfuge.

This effect is fostered by the use of desaturated color palette throughout the book, with tones pulled strongly to the warm side. It's not clear if the desaturation is through Photoshop or poor lighting or some combination. But the effect is consistent. *Ether* is Sheikh's first color project, and he seems to have one foot still planted in the black and white world. His photos remind one that when a body burns it loses life and color.

Death is something of a cottage industry in Benares. This is where Hindus come to die and have their bodies cremated. The whole scene has been photographed, well, to death. At this point we've all seen images of corpses and funeral pyres floating in the polluted Ganges. But by shooting mostly at night and away from the river, Sheikh (mostly, *Ether* contains one) avoids these clichéd and familiar themes.

We see image after image of sleeping (and a few dead?) figures oblivious to Sheikh's presence. Most are men. Ordinarily there might be a creep-factor associated with spying on public sleepers without permission. But somehow these photos do not feel transgressive. This is more a meditation than an exposé, helped along by photographs of other subjects: starry skies, ashes, totems, flowers, and stone memorials.

*Ether* is the third in a trilogy of photo essays by Sheikh about India. The photos were shown last year at Pace/Macgill in New York, before resuming its afterlife in book form. Apparently the physical exhibit included a few birth photos, perhaps to reinforce the life cycle theme. Fortunately these photos have been left out of the book, allowing this version to stay on message.

Physically this is a beautiful book, tall, thin, and sturdy. The photos are small and uniform, maybe 6 inches wide, laid in horizontally as if they'd fallen asleep on the page. The dedication/introduction is a list of names with birth and death dates, presumably of Sheikh's relatives. With tan cover and warm-tone images the whole book has the feel of something dipped in amber, or perhaps in the muddy Ganges.

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