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Die Tageszeitung

25. AUGUST 2015

‘Zerfurcht, zerfahren’

Der US-amerikanische Fotograf Fazal Sheikh erkundet die Wüste Negev und ihre Bewohner, die Beduinen. Der israelische Architekt Eyal Weizman sekundiert ihm in einem Studienband
Von Lennart Laberenz

Ein erster Band, „Desert Bloom“, ganz in Beige-, Rot- und Braun- tönen: Wüstenboden, fotografiert aus größerer Höhe, zer- furcht, zerfahren, mit rätsel- haften Mustern durchsetzt. Pisten winden sich durch den Sand, schweres Gerät hat den Boden gewalzt und zusammen- gekehrt: Militär und Landwirt- schaft strukturieren die Wüste, dazwischen staubige Wasser- läufe, Ruinen. Selten erfassen die Aufnahmen winzige An- siedlungen, das Metaldach ei- nes kargen Gehöfts, die anarchi- sche Ordnung eines Friedhofs.

Die Wüste wird von großen Gesten geordnet, gewaltige Fel- der industrieller Landwirtschaft sind in den Staub geschnitten, werden künstlich bewässert. Rippenförmige Terrassierungen legen sich über weite Flächen – ein Wald soll hier wachsen. Im- mer wieder Bunker, simulierte Befestigungen von feindlichen Mächten, Militärposten.

Gelegentlich durchschneidet das saubere Asphaltband einer neuen Überlandstraße das Bild. Der US-amerikanische Fotograf Fazal Sheikh hat die Aufnahmen im Oktober und November ge- macht, vor der Regenzeit, am frühen Morgen: Der Boden ist ausgedörrt, liegt bar jeder Vege- tation im klaren Sonnenlicht. Ein erster, schwacher Regen hat die Luft vom Staub gereinigt.

Die Bilder haben nichts von der Coffetable-Langeweile eines Yann Arthus-Bertrand: „Desert Bloom“ ist eine politische Bil- derserie, eine Spurensuche. Die Negev-Wüste ist ein Ort der ko- lonialen Auseinandersetzung. Hier geht es um ein Doppel- spiel der „territorialen Expansio-“, wie der Architekt und Au- tor Eyal Weizman feststellt.

Verdrängung der Beduinen

Neben physischer und kultu- reller Verdrängung spielt auch das von Menschen veränderte Klima eine Rolle. Weizman in- terpretiert und kommentiert die Arbeit von Fazal Sheikh in einem Zusatzband, „The Con- flict Shoreline“, wobei er die Ver- drängung der Beduinen aus der Negev durch Klimalabore, Mili- tärstrategie, Kartografenstu- ben und bis in die Gerichtspro- tokolle hinein verfolgt.

Weizman kam schon in seiner Monografie „Sperrzonen. Isra- els Architektur der Besatzung“ (Nautilus, 2008) zu einem kla- ren Urteil: „Trotz der komplexen rechtlichen, territorialen und gebauten Realität der Besatzung und ihrer Aufrechterhaltung ist der Konflikt um Palästina doch ein recht geradliniger Prozess der Kolonialisierung, der Ent- eignung, des Widerstandes da- gegen und der Unterdrückung.“

Mit Fazal Sheikhs neuer Ar- beit, dem Blick auf die Ne- gev-Wüste, die israelisches Staatsgebiet ist, wendet sich die Perspektive nun nach Innen und geht über die Organisation von Architektur und den gebauten Diskurs der Landnahme hinaus: Für die Vertreibung der Bedui- nen braucht es eine Mischung aus formaler Entrechtung, mi- litärischer Macht und Climate- Engineering. Dabei sind die Beduinen auch in der palästi- nensischen Gesellschaft das schwächste Glied, werden aus- gegrenzt und vertrieben, über- gangen und belächelt.

Gleichwohl sind die Beduinen für Fazal Sheikh nur eine Stro- phe im Lied, er schaut sich den Prozess der Kolonialisierung in drei Bänden an: Aus der Luft fo- tographiert er Regionen, in denen Militär, Landwirtschaft und der für Aufforstung zuständige Je- wish National Fund

Beduinen- siedlungen beseitigen und ver- schwinden ließen. In einem zweiten Band, „Memory Trace“, sucht er (nun vom Boden aus) Überbleibsel von palästinensi- schen Siedlungen, die nach der Gründung des Staates Israel 1948 zerstört, deren Bewohner vertrieben wurden.

Sheikh geht von 450 Sied- lungen und 700.000 Vertriebe- nen aus. Viele Siedlungen wur- den geschliffen. Die Ortsnamen tauchen auf keiner Karte mehr auf. Sheikhs Aufnahmen su- chen nach Resten der Siedlun- gen, in der Form eines lexikali- schen Eintrags notiert er Namen und Geschichte der Orte. In den Flüchtlingslagern des Westjord- anlandes hört er die Erinnerun- gen der Vertriebenen. Ein letz- ter Band geht ins Symbolische über, „Independence | Nakba“ sammelt Porträts von Palästi- nensern und Israelis, die seit der Nakba („Katastrophe“, oder auch „Schande“) geboren sind – für jedes Jahr ein Pärchen, ihre Unterschiede sind oft marginal.

Man kann die Arbeit von Fa- zal Sheikh als eine Anstrengung verstehen, Quellen und Spuren der Opfer all des Unterpflügens, Verdrängens und Überschrei- bens zu sichern, Erinnerung zu bewahren. Die Bände erschei- nen unter dem Titel „The Erasure Trilogy – Trilogie der Aus- lösung“. Aus der Mühe ent- steht ein Doppelbild: Reste und Ruinen palästinensischer Sied- lungen und Beduinenkultur, Er- zählungen und Anklagen ragen wie Splitter aus der Geschichte einer gewaltsamen Praxis des Staates heraus, dem zuletzt die Soziologin Eva Illouz erhebliche Schwierigkeiten nachwies, Ver- haltensweisen einer säkularen Instanz zu akzeptieren.

Tatsächlich hat sich in diesem Sommer wieder gezeigt, dass die Strategie der Ausgrenzung und Trennung auch nach Innen, in die israelische Gesellschaft, zu- rückwirkt. Nach dem Brandan- schlag auf das Haus einer pa- lästinensischen Familie durch radikale Siedler und den Mes- serangriff eines orthodoxen Fa- natikers auf die Gay Parade no- tierte der Schriftsteller David Grossmann entsetzt in der *FAZ*, dass, wer nach Schuld fragt, da- für bei der herrschenden Poli- tik und der gegenwärtigen Re- gierung nachschauen müsse: „In unbeirrter Verneinung der Wirklichkeit verschließen der Ministerpräsident und seine Anhänger die Augen vor der ir- rigen Auffassung, die sich im Be- wusstsein der Besetzer im Ver- lauf von fast fünfzig Jahren un- aufhaltsam eingenistet hat: dass es zwei Arten von Menschen gibt. Die eine Art ist der ande- ren unterworfen und scheint deswegen von Natur aus weni- ger wert zu sein.“

Zum TAZ

Photo-Eye, Santa Fe

January 20, 2014

'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.

Go to Photoeye

ARTFORUM, New York City

January 2013

'Fazal Sheikh – Ether, Pace/MacGill Gallery'

David Frankel

The photographer Fazal Sheikh's concern with international issues of human rights has led him not only to many pictures of people living under conditions of displacement and duress but to a meditation on how this kind of image may most ethically be conceived. Through much of the 1990s, for example, Sheikh worked in African refugee camps, the products of conflicts in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and other countries. Whereas another photographer might have documented the difficulties of the camps' conditions or hunted for visible traces of traumas accumulated on the way there, Sheikh most often chose to make portraits, showing people as subjects in the philosophical sense as much as the photographic one: men, women, and children who are the centers of their own worlds and who present themselves with dignified gravity. They usually face us directly, looking straight into the camera, and though we may fear for their vulnerability, we must also respect their integrity.

Sheikh's recent show, of work made between 2008 and 2011, finds him broadening his approach both visually and conceptually, though without abandoning core principles. For one thing, this is his first work in color, and the prints are small, being mostly horizontals a little over five inches tall. (Sheikh has never printed at very large scale; his portraits might be twenty or so inches high – which, however, is four times the height of the new works.) The photographs were taken in Varanasi, India, a pilgrimage site for Jains, Buddhists, and most of all Hindus, who bathe in the Ganges River there for purification and believe that to die in the city is to be released from the grinding cycle of reincarnation. Many therefore go to Varanasi when they understand they are dying, and the city is known for the riverside ghats where bodies are cremated. It is also, like other Indian cities, a place where many live and sleep in the street.

Sheikh has focused on these sleepers and on the dead. The intense life of the city, which contains both its own population and countless religious visitors, is invisible in these works. Instead, we find only those left in the streets late at night: corpses awaiting cremation, sleepers waiting to wake. These groups are not always visually separable, since the sleepers may wrap themselves up to and over the head in blankets and other, sometimes quite beautiful fabrics. One guesses that bodies curled up on their sides, though shrouded like the dead, are more likely to be living than those stretched out on biers, but the ambiguity is deliberate and irresolvable and extends beyond the question of mortality: The bodies become sculptural volumes, enigmatic shapes. Other images show the sleepers' faces, always, of course, with their eyes closed, as if they were thinking about something incommunicable.



Since the pictures were all shot at night, their color is never brilliant. Instead, it fuses richness and obscurity, recalling Milton's contradictory "darkness visible," and combines with the prints' small size to pull the viewer in. The series also includes a scattering of other subjects: dogs, asleep outdoors like everyone else; cremation pyres and their ashes, here and there showing fragments of bone; modest cairns dotted with flowers; the night sky studded with stars. Four pictures in black-and-white, and vertical, slightly larger format than that of the colored prints, portray, separately, two infants and two corpses—in other words, of two people entering life and two leaving it. The sum is a union between Sheikh's longtime concern with impoverished, even brutal social conditions and a more distanced rumination on life and death. Even while the poetry of these photographs is foreshadowed in his earlier work, it is also a departure that asks us to go back to that work with fresh eyes.

WALL STREET JOURNAL, New York City

October 5 2012

'Epic Journeys And the Sleep of Twilight: Fazal Sheikh: *Ether*'

William Meyers



Brown is not a color one ordinarily associates with fine-art photography, but it is the dominant color in Fazal Sheikh's exquisite photographs from Varanasi, the Indian city on the Ganges where Hindus go to die and be cremated.

In the black-and-white pictures in Michael Ackerman's 1999 "End Time City," Varanasi is a place of spiritual ecstasy and physical gruesomeness. For Mr. Sheikh (b. 1965), who took all of his pictures at night, it is a place of supernal calm. He roamed the city to photograph men sleeping in the street, dogs curled at rest after their day of scavenging, wrapped bodies awaiting cremation and humble memorial cairns strewn with flowers. He also shot the starry heavens where ancient men believed that ether—the fifth element after earth, air, fire and water—filled the inaccessible void.

The earth the men sleep on is brown; their faces, framed by blankets and head coverings, are brown; the water, when we see it, is brown. Mr. Sheikh's pigment prints are small, 5¼ inches by almost 8 inches, so you have to get close to them and really look: The details are crisp. The browns shade into yellows and into reds, and there are accents of orange. The men have their eyes shut and are unaware of the photographer, but we sense some nighttime cognitive process at work, some dreaming of cosmogonies that bring balance to a hard world. The weary dogs dream, too. The stillness is palpable.

Go to the Wall Street Journal

The New Yorker

September 24, 2012

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN: ART, FAZAL SHEIKH

Vince Aletti



From his earliest work, portraits taken in a Kenyan refugee camp, Sheikh has epitomized the “concerned photographer”—the phrase coined by Cornell Capa to describe photojournalists whose impulses are as humanitarian as they are documentary. Sheikh continues to work among the dispossessed, most recently in India; the pictures here were made in Varanasi, the city on the Ganges where Hindus believe it is auspicious to die. As usual, his photographs are modestly scaled but for the first time most of them are in color—a rich range of dusty beiges, deep browns, and tarnished golds. Sheikh’s subjects are both the living and the dead, including a number of sleepers and blanket-shrouded bodies that suggest an interim state of existence. The work is unsentimental but deeply felt and quietly affecting.

TIME: LightBox

September 18, 2012

'Into the Ether' by Fazal Sheikh

Ishaan Tharoor



The northern Indian city of Varanasi, perched on the banks of the Ganges river, is perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, a site that has drawn pilgrims literally for millennia. It's famed for its burning *ghats*—the sloped-approaches to the waterfront where for centuries devotees have brought their deceased loved ones for cremation, then floating the ashes into the mighty, holy Ganges. Some Hindus still believe it's auspicious to pass away on these steps. In Varanasi's morning fogs and along its shrine-lined streets, visitors can feel an ancient, intangible power, a sense of place that is defined more by ritual and time than geography.

Varanasi's burning grounds drew critically-acclaimed photographer Fazal Sheikh, whose latest project, *Ether*, on exhibit at Pace/MacGill gallery in New York City till Oct. 20, is the product of his own nocturnal wanderings in the old town. New York-born Sheikh's two earlier India-based projects—*Moksha* (2005), of a community of widows, and *Ladli* (2007), portraits of young women in orphanages, hospitals, brothels—had a decidedly engaged, political edge. *Ether* is less so. "Other documentary pieces of mine are much clearer in the pointed nature of what I wanted to say," says Sheikh, who first came to prominence with his work from refugee camps in Kenya. "This project is a bit more open and broad. It's an exploration of a mood."

Sheikh's vigil would begin at nightfall and end at dawn. "Ether" itself is that mysterious, unfathomable fifth element of the universe—the others being water, air, fire and earth—and is a property Sheikh attempts to articulate in his work. He makes elemental gestures throughout: The embers of a fire glow with an almost cosmic intensity. The stars wink and gleam in a night sky. Four dun-colored city strays curl into the trammled earth.

Sheikh describes working in Varanasi as “a sort of nurturing experience. The whole place was calming; there was a kind of quiet.” In *Ether*, there is a dreamy, contemplative quality to the pictures, but it rarely feels overly sentimental. Departing from Sheikh’s earlier portraiture, many of *Ether*’s images are of bodies—both those of sleepers and the dead—who don’t directly engage the camera. The inability of a photograph to fully penetrate its subject fascinates Sheikh: “There are some things that a person holds for themselves, some things that will remain inaccessible.” But if there are visions of a world beyond our world, its traces are in the ether.

Go to TIME: Lightbox

Die Tageszeitung (TAZ.DE)

25. 5. 2011

‘Der Krieg ist niemals virtuell’

In der sehenswerten Ausstellung "Serious Games. Krieg - Medien - Kunst" in Darmstadt wird das Verhältnis von Kriegsrealität und Medienrealität überzeugend reflektiert.



Video-Installation von Harun Farocki mit dem Titel "Ernstes Spiel II: Drei tot".

DARMSTADT taz | Die aktuelle Ausstellung auf der Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt widmet sich dem Thema "Serious Games. Krieg - Medien - Kunst". Die Kuratoren Antje Ehmann und Harun Farocki beschäftigen sich schon seit Jahren mit dem Thema. Die Ausstellung schielt nicht auf die aktuellen Kriege im Nahen Osten und in Afrika, denn sie war lange davor geplant. Ausgewählt wurden Fotos, Videos, Gemälde und Installationen von zwei Dutzend Künstlern aus der ganzen Welt.

Unter den gezeigten Werken befinden sich ungewöhnliche Bilder vom Krieg - zum Beispiel "Kriegsteppiche". Das sind von unbekanntem Künstlern oder Kunsthandwerkern von Hand geknüpfte Teppiche aus Afghanistan, die stark stilisierte Panzer, Kampfhubschrauber und Kalaschnikows abbilden. Mit landläufigen Vorstellungen von orientalischer Teppichkunst haben sie nichts gemein. Gleich am Eingang steht eine überzeugende Installation von Ingo Günther, der die Globalität von Konflikten und Konfliktursachen sinnlich erfahrbar macht. Die Installation "Worldprocessor" besteht aus 25 Globen von 30 Zentimeter Durchmesser. Jeder Globus enthält objektive Daten - etwa zum Klima, zu Rohstoffvorkommen, Kriegen, Militärbasen, Energieverbrauch oder Lebenserwartung und demonstriert so visuell das enorme Ungleichgewicht von Chancen und Risiken in der globalisierten Welt und damit einen wichtigen Grund für kriegerische Konflikte.

Das Zentrum der Ausstellung bilden vier Videos des Kurators Harun Farocki, der das Verhältnis von Kriegsrealität und Medienrealität künstlerisch überzeugend reflektiert und darstellt. Wenige Probleme wurden durch die modische französische Philosophie so verballhornt wie das Verhältnis von Krieg und Medien. Paul Virilios und Jean Baudrillards Schlagwörter vom "virtuellen Krieg" oder "medialen Krieg" beruhen auf plumpen Denkfehlern. Die Ausstellung denunziert diese gleich doppelt - mit den ausgestellten Werken und durch den guten Katalog.

Unsichtbare Opfer

Nicht erst mit dem Vietnamkrieg, aber verstärkt durch diesen wurde der Krieg auch in dem Sinne ein Medienkrieg, dass sich die Kriegsparteien der Bilder vom Krieg bemächtigten, um mit diesen das heimische Fernsehpublikum für ihre Sache zu gewinnen. An der Kriegsrealität hat die

Instrumentalisierung der Bilder aber nichts geändert. Der Krieg wurde keineswegs zum "Bilderkrieg", wie die philosophierenden Fernsehzuschauer meinen, sondern blieb ein realer Krieg, dessen Opfer und Folgen alles andere als virtuell waren und sind. Neu war dabei allerdings, dass sich das Verhältnis von Kriegsrealität und Medienrealität änderte: Während kämpfende Soldaten wie zivile Opfer unsichtbarer wurden, drängten sich die Kriegsherren immer mehr auf die mediale Bühne. Man denke an den Auftritt von George W. Bush am 1. Mai 2003 in der Uniform eines Piloten auf dem Flugzeugträger "USS Abraham Lincoln", etwas voreilig "Mission Accomplished" verkündend für einen Krieg, der bis heute andauert. Auch die Fotos mit dem ehemaligen deutschen Verteidigungsminister Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg als Warlord trivialisierten das Bild vom Krieg zum kitschigen Genrebild.

Harun Farockis Videos unterlaufen die telegene Verharmlosung des Krieges. Sie zeigen, dass ganz andere Bilder als die von Kriegsherren wichtig sind für die Kriegsrealität. Farockis vier Arbeiten tragen den Titel "Ernste Spiele" ("Serious Games") und dementieren zugleich alles Spielerische. Seine Videos zeigen, wie Computersimulationen zur militärischen Ausbildung gehören, wie also mit den im Studio erzeugten Bildern das Töten fachmännisch eingeübt wird: eine "verharmlosende Virtualisierung des Krieges", wie Ralf Beil im Katalog meint, und keineswegs ein "Spiel" mit Kriegsbildern. Freilich führen Bilder keinen Krieg, aber die Kriegsausbildung kommt ohne simulierte Bilder nicht aus.

Es spricht für die Sensibilität des Künstlers, der seine Arbeit mit authentischem dokumentarischem Material bestreitet, das sich selbst entlarvt, darauf hinzuweisen, dass die Videos, in denen "Krieg" zu Lehrzwecken simuliert und damit "gespielt" wird, mit großem ästhetischem und wissenschaftlichem Aufwand gemacht werden. Andererseits sind die Videos, die zu therapeutischen Zwecken für traumatisierte Soldaten eingesetzt werden, sehr viel primitiver gestaltet und wirken wie schlechte Computerspiele. Die Vorbereitung der Soldaten für den Krieg war wichtiger als die nachträgliche Heilung der traumatisierten Soldaten.

Was das Verhältnis und die Entwicklung von Kriegs- und Medienrealität betrifft, so steuert die amerikanische Künstlerin Martha Rosler einen starken Beitrag bei. Schon zu Zeiten des Vietnamkriegs schuf sie Fotocollagen mit authentischen Kriegsbildern. Um den Hurratriotismus im Afghanistan- und im Irakkrieg zu denunzieren, collagierte sie die heute fast idyllisch wirkenden Kriegsfotos aus den 60er Jahren mit aktuellen Fernsehbildern aus der Scheinwelt der Werbung und der Unterhaltung.

Die Schwarzweißfotos des Ägypters Fazal Sheikh beeindrucken durch ihre Schlichtheit ("The Victor Weeps" - "Der Sieger weint"). Sie zeigen Handflächen, in denen kleine Passfotos von Getöteten oder Vermissten liegen. Die ruhigen Gesten der Trauer und der Erinnerung wirken anrührend, aber nicht sentimental.

Zum TAZ

Financial Times, London

August 25, 2010

'Contemporary photography, Metropolitan Museum, New York'

Ariella Budick

The Metropolitan Museum is an odd place to learn about the messiness of life. The orderly progression of galleries, the ever-vigilant security guard and the controlled lighting encase even the most uproarious displays in a civilizing shell, and exhibitions are supposed to fit into a consistent intellectual frame. That requirement bedevils *Between Here and There: Passages in Contemporary Photography*, which the curator Douglas Eklund has tried to organize around the theme of disorganization.

"Beginning in the mid-1960s the work of art started to break free from wall and pedestal," Eklund writes in the introductory text – a problem for an institution whose principal tools of display are walls and pedestals. Eklund tackles the paradox by lashing together two different ideas with ropes of twisted prose. The first is that artists have responded to what he calls the "spooky, comical vacuity of the modern world" by replacing traditional image-making with thought experiments. The second is that photographers mirrored the disorienting nature of contemporary life with portraits of uprooted people and scenes of dislocation.

The show's opening act covers the 1960s to the early 1980s, and its central work is Dennis Oppenheim's magnified shot of a mosquito sinking its stinger into a fleshy hand. A text elucidates: "The blood now conforms to the interior configuration of an insect, thereby placing part of you in a state of aerial displacement." Though it's large and dramatic, the image is really secondary to the idea Oppenheim injects into your consciousness with the precision of a mosquito's blade: that insectness and humanity mingle at the site of the bite.

This section explores objects that defy definition. On Kawara's "I Got Up", for instance, is a collection of store-bought postcards that he sent every day all through the 1970s, each one bearing a stamp with the date and time he rose from bed. Art doesn't just imitate life; it keeps a tally of life's minutiae.

Alternatively, art can record the experience of looking at art. In a 1969 performance, Vito Acconci sneaked on to a blackened stage and snapped photos of the waiting audience. The spectators, startled by the flash, became the subjects, and their expressions of surprise, distaste or indifference are mirrored on the faces of viewers at the Met, trying to decipher the piece's point. The Kawara and Acconci works aren't much to look at. Both men were less interested in photography than in pushing limits, and today the performance and the postcards generate more archival than aesthetic interest.

In Part 2 of "Passages", Eklund turns to a different argument entirely. Tired of toying with the rules of their calling, photographers once again took pictures to be framed and hung, only this time they hunted down real-life disruptions, some traumatic, some ordinary, but all of them somehow emblematic of the global Now.

Fazal Sheikh, who tracks displaced people around the world, uses his camera to tell uneasy truths. "Hadija and Her Father", a poignant evocation of parental tenderness, came about as a retort. In Kenya recording the Somalian refugee crisis, Sheikh had overheard a local doctor blame the Somalis' "essentially callous and aggressive nature" for their practice of smothering malnourished infants. Sheikh's rebuttal came in the form of this haunting picture of a father's touch on the shoulder of a young girl. It's not his face we see, but his hand, bolstering his daughter and trying to infuse her frail body with his strength.

Many photographs in this section have to do with rewriting the past. A young Bosnian asylum-seeker named Almerisa matures before the lens of Rineke Dijkstra. Over 14 years, the girl evolves from open-faced child to pinched adolescent, finally hardening into a leathery grown-up. Dijkstra observes how Almerisa moulds herself into a Dutch model of adulthood, gradually erasing all hints of her origins. A similar process takes place on the collective scale in China, where cities have cut down old buildings and sprouted new towers to accommodate migrating millions. Weng Fen relishes the brash shape of the new urban skyline as he mourns the vanishing present. His alter ego is a schoolgirl perched on a wall with her back to the camera, one leg still dangling above the weedy past, eyes fixed on the glass horizon.

If the exhibition's two halves — one focused on the radicals of the 1970s, the second on their earnestly globetrotting successors — add up to an interesting hodgepodge rather than a coherent argument, it is because Eklund's premise is excruciatingly vague. The curator's difficulties stem from the malaise afflicting many photography shows now that viewers are visually sophisticated yet totally overwhelmed. You can now find astounding photos everywhere from Flickr to Facebook. A couple of iPhone apps give the gizmo's users access to techniques once guarded by darkroom specialists. The verb "to Photoshop" appears in any up-to-date dictionary. New clichés spread before they get noticed.

This radically democratized context makes it difficult to distinguish professional art photography from the work of industrious amateurs. Curators are left trying to make the increasingly untenable argument that the most interesting photography is to be found on the very gallery walls that artists forsook a generation ago.

Eklund has a powerful ally in this debate: Thomas Struth, who is as fascinated by audiences as Acconci was but who sees them with a master's eye. The Met show hinges on his photo of "Liberty Leading the People", Delacroix's icon of Frenchness, uprooted from its home at the Louvre and exhibited at the Tokyo National Museum. The Gallic goddess, bare-breasted and indomitable, leads her compatriots' charge toward destiny; the Japanese museum-goers stand at a devotional remove. In a show about guerrilla art and rootless nomads, Struth offers the museum as a node where national identity, sanctity and theatre can contend, where art can cross the world and still find itself at home.

Go to the *Financial Times*

Los Angeles Times

October 30, 2009

'Fazal Sheikh's photos focus attention on forgotten girls and women of India'

Leah Ollman

Photographer Fazal Sheikh's two most recent projects tell of indignity but show only beauty. It's an unusual combination for a photographer drawn to populations under duress. Throughout the history of the medium, socially concerned photographers have tended instead to advocate for justice by showing its absence, by illustrating injustice. Think of Jacob Riis' turn-of-the-20th-century pictures of New York's dank and dirty tenements, Lewis Hine's images of child laborers, or Dorothea Lange's Depression-era chronicle of need, hunger, want.

Sheikh's work delivers no less bitter truths. "Beloved Daughters," his deeply affecting exhibition at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, addresses the devastating effect of traditional social mores on women in India. Sheikh documents a life cycle of inequities: from abandonment in infancy and limited or nonexistent educational opportunity, to spousal and familial abuse, and back again to abandonment in widowhood.

For all the pain inflicted upon his subjects by virtue of their being born female, however, Sheikh never depicts them as victims but always as dignified, whole human beings, compromised by circumstance, not by nature. Explanatory wall texts and individual testimonies tell us in words of extraordinary depersonalization; the images re-personalize, restoring the basic humanity that social conditions have stripped away.

"*Moksha*," the earlier of the two projects, was prompted by a 1998 New York Times article about the community of Vrindavan, a holy city in northern India that has harbored widows (an estimated 20,000 at present) for 500 years. A portion of them settle there by choice, attracted to the tranquility of a life devoted to Krishna, but the majority seek refuge in the town after having suffered the "social death" of widowhood, which leaves them alone and impoverished. In Vrindavan, the women beg or receive a small pension in exchange for their chanting. Permanently stigmatized by the death of their husbands -- a blot on their own karmic balance sheet -- they pray to reach *moksha* (heaven), where they can stay for eternity, released from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Sheikh's study of the city and its residents oscillates between document and sense impression. In contrast-rich black and white, he shows a family of monkeys huddled in a corner; a wall of well-used water bottles hanging above a clutter of humble pots and pans; an ashram astir with praying widows in traditional white shrouds; a gridded perch full of pigeons; a dark empty alley; a tangle of light hovering in the blackness.

His portraits are sculptural in their attention to textures of skin and fabric, light and shadow. Some are accompanied by excerpts from the sitters' accounts of their lives and their journeys to Vrindavan. Dreams of Krishna and their lost husbands often enter into the stories, and Sheikh's pictures (some taken from the front, some from behind, eyes open or occasionally closed) poetically invoke lives in which the remembered and wished-for are as vividly real as the women's present surroundings.

In one tender grouping of seated portraits, Sheikh isolates and frames each sitter's hands. One woman cradles a copy of the sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita. Another holds two pet white rats in her lap. In one simple but breathtaking image, Sheikh focuses tightly on a woman's hands resting on her knees, the skin like carved, burnished wood, worn smooth by endurance.

Sheikh published a tremendous book on the "*Moksha*" project in 2005. That year, the New York-born photographer received a MacArthur Foundation fellowship as well as the Henri Cartier-Bresson International Award for his work addressing the displacement and exile of populations around the world. He returned to India to explore more fully the situation of women in traditional society. The project, "*Ladli*" (beloved daughter, in Hindi), embraces a wide span of female experience, from infancy to old age, almost entirely through head-and-shoulder portraits, some shot from behind.

Across this continuum of beautifully earnest faces, Sheikh concentrates his attention and sharpest focus on the eyes. They are each picture's soulful and exacting epicenter. The focus starts to soften almost immediately beyond the eyes, and is slightly blurred already at a sitter's cheek. The intensity of these gazes, these encounters, is matched by the blunt facts laid out in the accompanying texts, starting with the tragedy that the birth of a girl represents, both for the baby, dismissed as a burden, and for the mother, rejected as a disappointment. Sheikh describes lives consumed by basic survival and tenuous dependencies on others. The complexity of their fate, as rendered in words, is complemented poignantly by the simple, visual evidence of their humanity.

The 70 photographs in the show, organized by curator Joel Smith of the Princeton University Art Museum, are divided fairly evenly between the two projects. "*Ladli*" was published in book form in 2007.

Sheikh is not only sensitive as a photographer but savvy as a social reformer, recognizing that images alone cannot contain all the ingredients necessary for change -- an understanding of causes and conditions as well as a path toward solutions. He identifies several agencies addressing the challenges faced by the female population in India, and he distributes his work broadly and free of charge through human rights organizations.

Stunningly beautiful and also viscerally disturbing, Sheikh's work attests to the notion that art exists -- to paraphrase the director Andrei Tarkovsky -- because the world is not perfect.

Go to the *Los Angeles Times*

The Myth of Europa

May 2009

'Hidden Faces – Democracy Equality Culture beyond the Nation State'

Nadja Stamselberg



Afghan children born in exile, North Pakistan, 1998

Taking up agency on behalf of personae non-grata – the often nameless, unrecognized and forgotten ones – Fazal Sheikh's images put focus onto their plight. In contrast to the repetitive sensationalist mass-media depictions of humanitarian crisis that shape our perceptions of others, his personalized encounters counteract this hyper-visibility increasingly responsible for the dehumanization of the figure of refugee and immigrant in the media. The black and white naturally lit images generate forms of recognition that work against identification of the refugees as the other. Repositioning its subject as the one/ones who matter, Sheikh frames his own visibility to put forward their recognition as individuals. The photographs are accompanied by personal histories narrated by the subjects, which encourage us to embrace the refigured image of the refugee as a victim, as human, as one of us. By appropriating the figure of a refugee in a way that

functions to omit the differences between the ways of being displaced Sheikh sets out to contest their exclusion by revealing how it is constitutive of inclusion.

However, universalizing the condition of displacement as something we all experience fetishises the figure of the refugee. This draws attention to the difference between being a refugee and the figure of the refugee. Sheikh's portraits address this critical issue by transforming the refugee, the abject underside of the already politically existent and what Imogen Tyler calls a figurative mirror for the subject's own disavowed exclusion/displacement to the figure of the refugee that offers us resources with which we might re-imagine ourselves.

Sheikh ends 'The Victor Weeps', his book on Afghan refugees in the camps in Northern Pakistan, with images of Afghan children born in exile. Differing from the other portraits in the book they are not accompanied by texts and they have no names. Their faces betray nothing; their empty gazes offer no insight. These children are the bare life. They have no stories, no memory of home. For them home and exile is interchangeable.

Disturbingly apathetic to identities, happiness, love, life and civility, the camps they were born into are zones of indifference. The children are found within it routinely passing from order into disorder. Remaining without destination, they inhabit a limbo suffering from a penalty for which they could not make amends.....

Iberarte, Madrid

April 3, 2009

'Fazal Sheikh, la belleza del compromiso'

La Fundación MAPFRE presenta, por primera vez en España, el trabajo del fotógrafo norteamericano Fazal Sheikh (Nueva York, 1965). La exposición es la retrospectiva más grande e importante realizada hasta la fecha sobre su obra.

Fazal Sheikh es un fotógrafo documentalista de madre norteamericana y padre keniano, Sheikh emprendió su carrera como fotógrafo buscando sus propias raíces que buscan reflejar la realidad que viven y sufren las comunidades más desfavorecidas del Tercer Mundo. En un principio centró su atención en refugiados de distintas partes del globo, personas que se han visto obligadas a abandonar sus tierras para huir de guerras y matanzas.

Con el tiempo abrió su campo de interés y, en los últimos años, se ha preocupado por discriminación que sufren las mujeres indias desposeídas de todo derecho y condenadas a sobrellevar una vida difícil. Sheikh personaliza los conflictos y los narra a través del rostro de sus protagonistas. Él busca representar a sus retratados con plena dignidad y serenidad, como personas y no como símbolo de aquello de lo que han sido víctimas.

Sheikh pasa tiempo con ellos, los escucha, pide su colaboración, se gana su confianza y, en ese momento, aborda sus retratos. Sus protagonistas posan relajadamente ante a la cámara, de manera frontal, sobre sencillos fondos que hacen que toda la atención de espectador se detenga en ellos. Así, la mirada del retratado se encuentra serenamente con la del artista y éste la traslada al espectador.

Sheikh cuida enormemente la composición, en la que los contrastes de blancos y negros propician unos resultados espectaculares, de extrema belleza. Sus retratos tienen mucho de la perfección formal del emblemático fotógrafo alemán August Sander (1876-1964) quien, tras un trabajo exhaustivo, logró documentar el paisaje humano de la República de Weimar.



Manita, Ahmedabad, India, 2007

En la exposición se puede comprobar cómo el arte de Fazal Sheikh ha evolucionado. Con los años, sus retratos se han ubicado en un primer plano extremo, en los que el rostro ocupa prácticamente la totalidad de la superficie. Sheikh se implica personalmente con las realidades que conoce, con sus gentes y se vale de la fotografía para atraer la atención del público hacia estos temas.

En 1998 añadió un componente más y empezó a recoger las historias que sus protagonistas le iban contando, para asociarlas de manera directa con sus rostros. Es precisamente de esta asociación entre imagen y palabra de donde surge el mayor contraste. El espectador se estremece al situarse en frente de unas bellísimas fotografías que reflejan dignidad y entereza, pero que esconden unas historias trágicas y violentas que el propio artista con sus textos pone de manifiesto.

Durante los últimos años, las fotografías de Fazal Sheikh han captado la atención de la crítica y han estado presentes en los principales museos norteamericanos y europeos. En 2005 recibió dos de los más importantes galardones que puede ser reconocido el trabajo de un fotógrafo: el MacArthur Fellowship y el Henri Cartier-Bresson International Grand Prix.

Su obra se ha expuesto, entre otras, en instituciones del prestigio de la Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation (París), el Museum of Contemporary Art (Moscú), el Fotomuseum (Winterthur), el Nederlands Fotomuseum (Rotterdam), la Tate Modern (Londres), The Art Institute of Chicago, el International Center of Photography (Nueva York) y el Metropolitan Museum of Art (Nueva York).

Go to *Iberarte*

Madridiario

April 2, 2009

‘La Fundación Mapfre acoge una exposición de Fazal Sheikh’



La Fundación Mapfre presenta, por primera vez en España, el trabajo del fotógrafo norteamericano Fazal Sheikh. La exposición es la retrospectiva más grande realizada hasta la fecha sobre su obra. Fazal Sheikh es un fotógrafo documentalista que busca reflejar la realidad que viven y sufren las comunidades más desfavorecidas del Tercer Mundo.

Al acto de presentación asistieron el comisario de la muestra, Carlos Gollonet, el artista Fazal Sheikh y Pablo Jiménez Burillo, director general del Instituto de Cultura de Fundación Mapfre. En el acto se explicó cómo Fazal Sheikh en un principio centró su atención en refugiados de distintas partes del globo pero con el tiempo abrió su campo de interés y, en los últimos años, se ha preocupado por la discriminación que sufren las mujeres indias desposeídas de todo derecho y condenadas a sobrellevar una vida difícil. Sheikh personaliza los conflictos y los narra a través del rostro de sus protagonistas. □

Busca representar a sus retratados con plena dignidad y serenidad, como personas y no como símbolo de aquello de lo que han sido víctimas. La mirada del retratado se encuentra serenamente con la del artista y éste la traslada al espectador. □ □ Sheikh cuida enormemente la composición, en la que los contrastes de blancos y negros propician unos resultados espectaculares, de extremada belleza. Sus retratos tienen mucho de la perfección formal del emblemático fotógrafo alemán August Sander (1876-1964) quien, tras un trabajo exhaustivo, logró documentar el paisaje humano de la República de Weimar. □

En la exposición se puede comprobar cómo el arte de Fazal Sheikh ha evolucionado. Con los años sus retratos se han ubicado en un primer plano extremo en los que el rostro ocupa prácticamente la totalidad de la superficie. □ □ El artista se implica personalmente con las realidades que conoce, con sus gentes y se vale de la fotografía para atraer la atención del público hacia estos temas, bien sea a través de sus cuidadas publicaciones, de sus exposiciones o de su página web, www.fazalsheikh.org. Pero no trata de buscar culpables, únicamente aporta un testimonio. □

La importancia de los textos □ La fotografía documental siempre ha necesitado de la palabra para poder □ transmitir globalmente la realidad que busca comunicar: la claridad del mensaje es fundamental. En el caso de Fazal Sheikh, los textos tienen una gran importancia. En ellos, describe el contexto que rodea a las fotografías, indica el lugar, el acontecimiento, los datos

históricos, los datos de la persona que retrata. En 1998 añadió un componente más y empezó a recoger las historias que sus protagonistas le iban contando, para asociarlas de manera directa con sus rostros. Es precisamente de esta asociación entre imagen y palabra de donde surge el mayor contraste.



Go to *Madridiario*

El Cultural, Madrid

April 2, 2009

'Desastres de las guerras, por Fazal Sheikh'

Mapfre celebra la retrospectiva más importante dedicada al fotógrafo documentalista nacido en Nueva York

Los expresivos ojos de los protagonistas de los retratos de Fazal Sheikh miran de frente al espectador en unas imágenes cargadas de dramatismo, pero también de belleza, con las que el fotógrafo norteamericano quiere romper con ideas preconcebidas de lugares como Somalia, Afganistán o la India.

Más de ciento cincuenta de estas imágenes han sido reunidas por la Fundación Mapfre en la primera exposición que se le dedica en España a este autor y la retrospectiva más amplia e importante a nivel internacional que se organiza sobre un trabajo que Fazal Sheikh (Nueva York, 1965) inició en 1989 en Kenia.

Fotógrafo documentalista, Sheikh busca reflejar la realidad en la que viven los habitantes de países asolados por las guerras y el hambre y sometidos a tradiciones injustas, y hacerlo de una manera muy distinta "rompiendo las ideas preconcebidas que se tienen a través de los medios de comunicación", comentó el fotógrafo durante la presentación de la muestra.

"Espero que la exposición sirva para que el espectador se distancie de esas ideas y así, cuando oigan noticias sobre esos países, lo visto aquí les haga reconsiderarlas", declaró Sheikh.

Algunas de sus series le llevan hasta ocho años, ya que realiza una importante labor de documentación y se traslada a vivir con la gente sobre la que quiere hacer el trabajo. Esta relación le permite hacer unos retratos sencillos y directos de sus protagonistas, a los que da voz a través de textos en los que cuentan en primera persona la realidad que viven.

Dotados de arte y belleza, sus retratos no excluyen el dramatismo de la situación y son el resultado "de una colaboración, una búsqueda, una apertura a la vida de sus protagonistas".

Plantear preguntas

Esa colaboración que logra con los retratados es la que le interesa que establezca el espectador con su obra. "Quiero plantear preguntas y no postular respuestas", señaló el artista, a quien no le interesa tanto el acto de retratar como el estar inmerso en una comunidad.

"La foto en si me lleva muy poco tiempo. El trabajo es el de establecer la relación y decidir con ellos qué es lo quieren transmitir para que desaparezcan las ideas preconcebidas".

Su intención es plantear preguntas que van más allá de los aspectos políticos o financieros, "me interesan las personas, las situaciones y las diferentes formas en que se puede fotografiar una sociedad", y para que su trabajo llegue al mayor número de personas abre la posibilidad de acceder a sus libros en la web.

En opinión de Pablo Jiménez Burillo, director del Instituto de Cultura de la Fundación Mapfre, Sheikh es "uno de los grandes fotógrafos del mundo. Un autor realmente especial que plantea una visión de la realidad con una carga artística enorme. La exposición es muy densa de contenido y al mismo tiempo tremendamente bella".

El recorrido planteado por el comisario Carlos Gollonet muestra cómo Sheikh centró inicialmente su atención en refugiados de distintas partes del mundo y después se interesó, en los últimos años, en la discriminación que sufren las mujeres indias desposeídas de todo derecho.

Las dos primeras series, Kenia (1989-1991) y Sudáfrica (1989) muestran los trabajos iniciales, con algunas imágenes no expuestas hasta ahora.

"A Sense of Common Ground, África del Este (1992-1994)", es el resultado de tres años de viaje por campamentos de refugiados de Kenia, Malawi y Tanzania, mientras que en "The

Victor Weeps" (1996-1998), retrata refugiados afganos que llevaban viviendo en la frontera casi veinte años.

En 2000 Sheikh se trasladó al noreste de Kenia para visitar tres campamentos ubicados en los alrededores de Dabaab y retomar en "A Camel for the Sun, Somalia", el trabajo inconcluso que inició con "A Sense of Common Ground".

La serie Ramadan Moon-Holanda (2000) la realizó por encargo y narra la situación que vive una mujer somalí en ámsterdam, mientras que los protagonistas de "Simpatia", Brasil (2001), son los inmigrantes del Gran Sertão brasileño.

El recorrido finaliza con dos series realizadas en la India. "Moksha"(2003-2005), con imágenes de algunas de las miles de viudas que llegan a Vrindavan para esperar su muerte, y "Ladli" (2005-2008), continuación de Moksha que completa el retrato sobre la discriminación que sufren las mujeres en ese país.

Photo-eye

December 10, 2008

'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.

Go to Photoeye

New York Times

January 18, 2008

'Well, It Looks Like Truth'

Holland Cotter



Haji Qiamuddin holding a photograph of his brother, Asamuddin, in Fazal Sheikh's series "The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan," at the International Center of Photography.

After an autumn of large, expert, risk-free museum retrospectives, the time is right for a brain-pincher of a theme show, which is what “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art” at the International Center of Photography is.

Organized by Okwui Enwezor, an adjunct curator at the center, it’s an exhibition in a style that’s out of fashion in our pro-luxe, anti-academic time, but that can still produce gems. The tough, somber little show “Manet and the Execution of Maximilian” at the Museum of Modern Art last year mixed grand paintings with throwaway prints and demanded a commitment of time and attention from its audience. The payoff was an exhibition that read like breaking news and had the pull of a good documentary. It was the museum’s proudest offering of the season.

Mr. Enwezor’s “Archive Fever” is up there with it. It has something like the same suspenseful pace, without the focused story line. The archive of the title is less a thing than a concept, an immersive environment: the sum total of documentary images circulating in the culture, on the street, in the media, and finally in what is called the collective memory, the “Where were you when you heard about the World Trade Center?” factor.

Photography, with its extensions in film, video and the digital realm, is the main vehicle for these images. The time was, we thought of photographs as recorders of reality. Now we

know they largely invent reality. At one stage or another, whether in shooting, developing, editing or placement, the pictures are manipulated, which means that we are manipulated. We are so used to this that we don't see it; it's just a fact of life.

Art, which is in the business of questioning facts, takes manipulation as a subject of investigation. And certain contemporary photographers do so by diving deep into the archive to explore its mechanics and to carve their own clarifying archives from it.

"Archive Fever" puts us deep inside right from the start. The gallery walls have been covered with sheets of plain industrial plywood. The exhibition space looks like the interior of a storage shed or a shipping container packed with images both strange and familiar.

Familiar comes first: Andy Warhol's early 1960s "Race Riot," a silk-screened image of a black civil rights marcher attacked by police dogs. Warhol, our pop Proust, was a child of the archive; he lived in it and never left it. He culled his images straight from the public record — in this case Life magazine — and then made them public in a new way, as a new kind of art, the tabloid masterpiece, the cheesy sublime.

In the process he messed up our habit of sweetening truth with beauty, of twisting the base and the awful into the transcendent. He nailed art's moral ambivalence, pegged it as a guilty party and kept hammering away at this. People who hate the 1960s for the illusions they shattered usually hate Warhol too. He was a slippery spoiler.

The second, far less well-known work that opens the show is a 1987 silk-screen piece by Robert Morris that does what the Warhol does but in a deadlier way. It too is based on an archival image, a 1945 photograph of the corpse of a woman taken in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Although such pictures initially circulated in the popular press, they were soon set aside in an ethically fraught image bank of 20th-century horrors. As if acknowledging prohibitions, Mr. Morris has half-observed the woman's figure with old-masterish strokes of paint and encased it, like a relic, in a thick black frame swelling with body parts and weapons in relief.

The series of war-related paintings this piece came from took a lot of critical heat in the 1980s. Mr. Morris was accused of, at best, pandering to a market for neo-Expressionism; at worst, of exploiting the Holocaust. Now that his reputation as an influential artist of probing diversity is becoming more clear, so is the impulse behind this work. When you are looking at great art in museums, it seems to say, you are, whether you know it or not, looking at realities like the one you see here. Art is not merely a universal ornament of civilization. It is a cautionary tale in need of constant translation.

There are many tales in "Archive Fever." In most, fact and fiction are confused. A group of pictures called "The Fae Richards Photo Archive" (1993-1996), produced by Zoe Leonard in collaboration with the filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, purports to document the life of an African-American actress from her childhood early in the 20th century through her post-civil rights era old age. The substance of the narrative, including a film career sabotaged by racism, rings true; but Fae Richards never existed. Her life was staged for the contemporary camera.

So, in a different way, was the saga suggested in "The Sher-Gil Archive" (1995-97) by Vivan Sundaram, an artist in New Delhi. In this case the people are real, members of Mr. Sundaram's family as photographed by his great grandfather in colonial India. But Mr. Sundaram has altered the pictures, mixing eras and generations, meticulously splicing an imaginary whole from real archival parts.

Other artists present randomness as the archive's logic. The casual snapshots that make up Tacita Dean's salon-style "Floh" may look like a natural grouping. In fact they are all found pictures that the artist, acting as a curator, has sorted into a semblance of unity.

The thousands of images in a looping 36-hour slide projection by Jef Geys would seem to be linked by a firmer thread. They are a visual archive of Mr. Geys's photographic output of 40 years. Whether they provide evidence of aesthetic development, though, or insight into the artist's maturing mind and soul, will be known only to the most devoted of viewers.

In any case, the romantic notion that an artist's work and soul are inevitably of a piece has long been poked at and played with by artists themselves. Sherrie Levine's photographs of Walker Evans photographs debunk the heroic ideals of personal vision in art. At the same time, because the copies are genuine Sherrie Levine's, the ideal is reaffirmed; and another name enters the market, the museums, the history books.

Just as Ms. Levine questions authenticity as a component of art making, some of her contemporaries question its role in writing history. In a video called "The Specialist: Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1999), the Israeli artist Eyal Sivan reordered scenes in videos of the 1961 trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann to create new sequences and, some have said, a less damning portrait of him. In elaborate conceptual projects the artist Walid Raad revisits the Lebanese civil war of the 1980s in minute, graphic detail, through the voices of people who never existed using details he has invented.

For some artists details, or rather the accumulation of them, are the only truth. On large sheets of paper, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996) printed photographic portraits of almost 500 people killed by gunfire in American cities in a single week in 1989. Ilán Lieberman's "Lost Child" series consists of a stream of hand-drawn thumbnail portraits, based on photographs in Mexican newspapers, of missing children.

And in the show's most startling example of archival accumulation, the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann has filled a room with the framed front pages of 100 international newspapers — from Paris, Dubai, Sydney, Seoul, New York and elsewhere — printed on Sept. 12, 2001. Questions flood in: Why were certain pictures of the devastated Twin Towers used in certain places? Why does Osama bin Laden's face appear on some pages and not on others? And how is the story reported in languages we cannot read; Arabic, say, or Persian? And what could readers who didn't read English know of our reports? To enter this archive is to relive recent history. I was reluctant to go in, but then I couldn't leave.

Mr. Feldmann's work, made for this exhibition, is monumental. Fazal Sheikh's "Victor Weeps: Afghanistan" series (1997) is, in almost every way, not. Each of the four pictures in the show is of a hand holding a passport-size photographic male portrait. Statements by the family members who hold the photos tell us that they are portraits of Afghan mujahedeen fighters who had died or disappeared during battles with occupying Russian forces in the 1980s.

Although the portraits are in each case held loosely, even tenderly, the words they evoke are passionate. These little pictures — routine, unexceptional, of a kind turned out in countless numbers — may be the only visual link between the dead and their survivors. Here the archival is profoundly personal.

But do Mr. Sheikh's beautiful pictures, or the photographs within them, represent some special, easily approached corner of the great archive that surrounds, shapes and even overwhelms us? Do they convey, for once, some comprehensible truth? No, just the ordinary one: When it comes to full disclosure, art never, ever speaks for itself, as Mr. Enwezor's eloquent exhibition tells us in many ways.

Go to the *New York Times*

New Yorker
March 19, 2008
'Seeing is Believing'
Andrea K. Scott



In a piece by Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris in this week's issue, Specialist Sabrina Harman explains why she took hundreds of pictures at Abu Ghraib: "to expose what was being allowed." The impulse to stockpile photographs in the hopes of revealing political truths is one subject of the current exhibition "Archive Fever: The Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art," at the International Center of Photography. Not everything in the show is politically explicit: Thomas Ruff's manipulated images of industrial machinery, printed from vintage glass negatives, are about the mechanics of reproduction, for instance. But most of the works are closer in spirit to "Haji Qiamuddin Holding a Photograph of His Brother, Asamuddin, 1998," by the artist-activist Fazal Sheikh. The picture is excerpted from the series "The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan," for which the New York native returned to his family's roots on the border of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan (which was northern India when his grandfather was born there). Sheikh found himself drawn to the region's recent history, to Afghan refugees' stories of death and martyrdom, of flight from Soviet troops and the jihad that drove out the Russians, in 1989, and of the country's devastating civil war. His project, which pairs photographs and interviews, can be viewed online in its entirety [here](#).

Go to the *New Yorker*

Daily Telegraph, London

January 14, 2008

'Deutsche Börse Photography Prize: India's forgotten daughters'

Drusilla Beyfus □



Malikh is a child of the Dehli slums

In the first of a four-week series on the artists shortlisted for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008, Drusilla Beyfus looks at the nominated work of the American artist Fazal Sheikh

London as a centre of creative photography takes a step forward with the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008, presented by the Photographers' Gallery. Now in its third successive year, the venture acts like a magnet, drawing worldwide talent to the capital. Other related developments are also encouraging: the gallery is due to relocate to a new £15.5 million architect-designed, purpose-built address in Soho in 2010 and the Deutsche Börse Prize is scheduled to continue next year in a program of off-site exhibitions.

Supported by The Daily Telegraph since Deutsche Börse became the sponsors, the award is characterised by a refreshingly unparochial, wide-ranging approach. This year's nominees are strong on concerned social observation. As Brett Rogers, the director of the gallery, puts it, 'Each of the photographers addresses subjects of critical importance and highlights the crucial

role that photography plays in our understanding of the 21st century.' The pages of the Telegraph Magazine further enlarge our awareness by making available insights that might otherwise be limited to relatively few gallery-goers.

The prime mover in the story is Deutsche Börse, which is the world's largest exchange organisation, and is an example of money putting its faith in the medium of contemporary photography. It is well known for its collection by leading international photo-graphers at its headquarters in Frankfurt. Reto Francioni, CEO of the Deutsche Börse Group, explains why the company clicks with photo-graphy: 'Artists shown in our buildings still manage to surprise us with their extraordinary perspectives on today's world. They make us perceive our surroundings in a different way... this helps us to remain open to new perspectives and in our business as well, to "think out of the box" and remain innovative.'

The core facts of the prize are as follows: a shortlist of four photographers is drawn up. The winner receives £30,000 (currently the largest bounty for photography in the UK) and the three runners-up are awarded £3,000 each in a presentation at the Photographers' Gallery. The condition for entry is that each of the photographers has had a show or a publication during the previous year. An important aspect for interested outsiders is that the shortlist is decided by a jury that considers only the work for which the artist has been selected.

The jury of five is international in composition and this year includes Jem Southam, a distinguished British photographer, and Thomas Weski, the chief curator of the influential Haus der Kunst in Munich. Last year, the show was visited by 140,000 people before it travelled to Frankfurt and Berlin. The 2007 winner, the conceptualist Walid Raad, also exhibited his nominated work in New York and Lisbon in a year that he won another accolade, the Alpert Award in the Arts, with a prize of \$75,000.

The international character of the players involved is reflected in this year's shortlist: Jacob Holdt (born 1947, Denmark), Esko Männikkö (born 1959, Finland), John Davies (born 1949, UK), and Fazal Sheikh (born 1965, USA). It is a factor that gratifies Alexandra Hachmeister, who is in charge of Corporate Responsibility for Deutsche Börse, and stresses that the prize is about being 'international and contemporary'.

Sheikh is the first of the nominated photographers to be reproduced in our coverage. Described as an artist-activist, he is known for creating sustained studies of communities around the world. Realistic black-and-white portraits are Sheikh's fire power and his primary evidence. The frame is filled with close-ups that capture the emotion of the sitter - those dark eyes speak volumes. In some shots, a head is shown turned away from the camera's lens, for reasons that become apparent in the accompanying testimony.

Sheikh's nominated work is *Ladli* (which in Hindi means beloved daughter). The book (published by Steidl) may be known in vague outline to many, but it is his synthesis of photography and written testimonies, exposing the injustice encountered by girls and women among the poor and dispossessed in India, that concentrates the mind acutely. 'In India a girl child is a burden,' the photographer observes. 'The cultural preference for boy children has led to hundreds of girls being abandoned or killed at birth, or with the advent of ultrasound scanning, aborted.' A study in 2006, conducted by Canadian and Indian researchers, found that 500,000 girls are aborted every year in India.

Among the girls pictured on these pages is Labhuben, who will probably be a victim of a situation that has come about through the long-term effects of this selective abortion. Namely, a shortage of brides of marriageable age and the institution of a barter system: 'I'll marry your sister if you'll marry mine.' Sheikh implies that girls like Labhuben risk ending up in the town of Mewat, 30 miles outside of Delhi, where 'what amounts to a modern slave trade operates a bride

bazaar'. There, Sheikh writes, 'Women are offered for sale at a variety of prices. The price is determined by factors such as age, virginity, skin colour (the lighter the better) and the number of times a woman has been sold before.'

Incidents in the lives of Sheikh's subjects are thus spelt out. Thirteen-year-old Rekha is from Madhya Pradesh, where her family work in the fields. Her father sent her, along with 100 rupees for the journey, to live with her uncle. According to the written account, she was waylaid by a man who took her to his house for the night and then put her on a train. She was eventually handed over to the police who in turn handed her over to a refuge. Her unkempt hair and sewn-together sweater suggest a state of deprivation. 'I have been in this shelter for a month,' she tells Sheikh.

All we see of Sonali are her work-worn hands, gracefully folded on her lap. She is a 14-year-old from Bihar in eastern India. Sheikh's account describes how she was found wandering in a village near Karnal, her clothes soaked in blood after she had been raped. The experience affected her mentally. When her parents were tracked down they denied all knowledge that they had such a daughter. When Fazal photographed Sonali, she had been living in a shelter for three months.

Sanjeeta, a baby abandoned at Palna orphanage, which is run by the Delhi Council for Child Welfare, demonstrates an alarming demographic. Sheikh quotes the orphanage's director Aruna Kumar as saying that a more accurate description would be a home for abandoned children, as many of the children in care have parents. 'As I read in the media how India is heralded for its miraculous entry on to the world's economic stage, I wonder what the prospects of women might be,' he comments. Alongside a picture of Malikh, a child of the Delhi slums that are a by-product of the city's new prosperity, Sheikh writes, 'The responsibility for looking after the home falls to a daughter, who is left alone during the day as soon as she is old enough to cope. There is little chance for these girls to go to school. Eventually they will be sent out, like their mother before them, to work as a domestic servant.'

In attempting to demonstrate that females are the victims of entrenched cultural and religious codes, Sheikh doesn't ignore the fact that many well-intentioned individuals and agencies are trying to bring about reforms and equally comments on the frustrations that often await them. He explains that according to the Indian constitution, the state must provide free and compulsory education for every child between the ages of six and 14. Agencies such as Bal Vikas Dhara, a grassroots organisation set up to defend the rights of the slum dwellers, is pushing for the government to enforce that right for the children in the slums, but, as Sheikh argues, 'It is extremely difficult to convince parents already below the poverty line to keep girls at school after the age of nine.'

Credit is also given in the text to other organisations, such as Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA), that are trying to improve the lot of such children. Set up in Delhi by the inter-national anti-poverty agency ActionAid, AAA is supported by the Indian government. One of its successes has been the right to allow 42 children to enrol in school, as they can give the shelter as a verifiable address. His beat is one in which small reforms are victories.

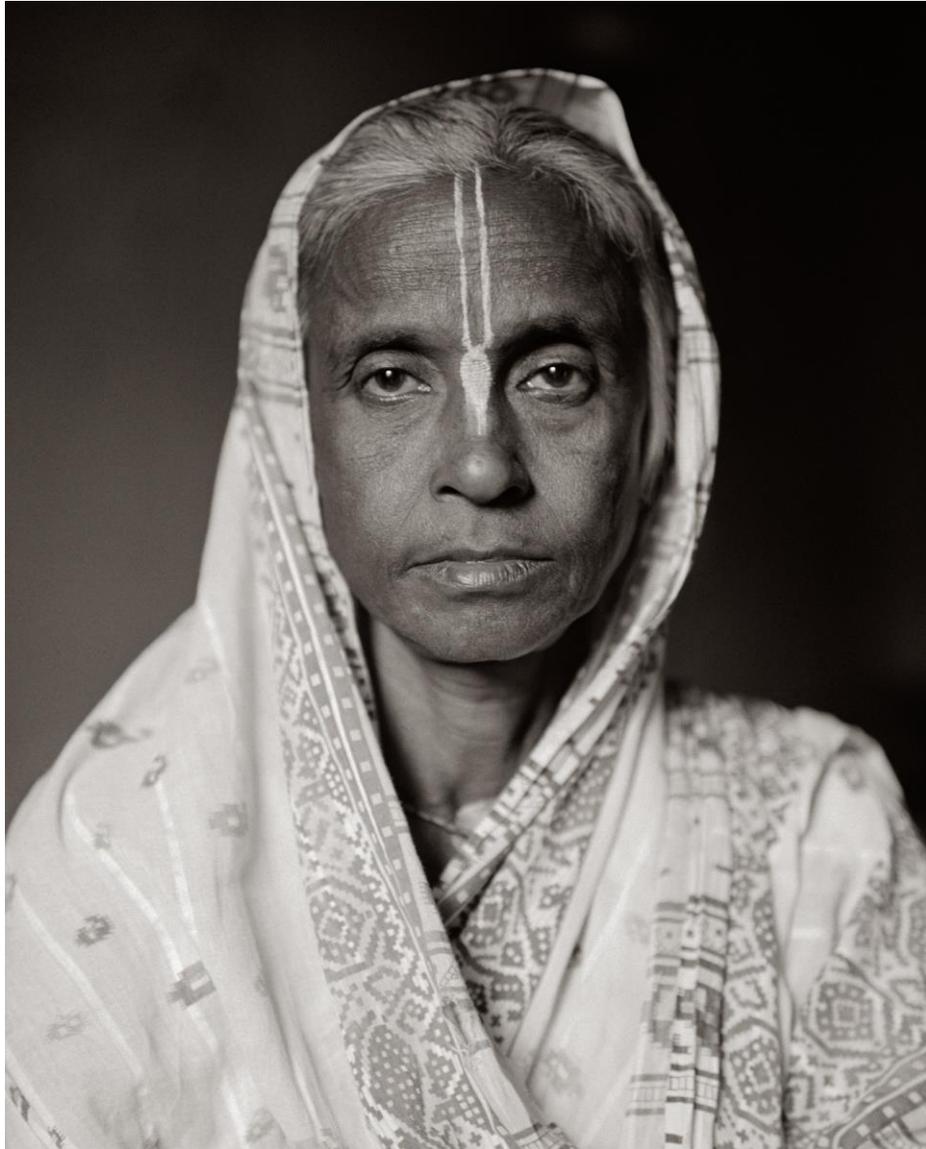
Sheikh has previously won the International Henri Cartier-Bresson Grand Prize 2005, has exhibited at Tate Britain and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Moscow. His pictures are in MoMA's permanent collection and he has received a fellowship from the Fulbright Foundation.

Aperture

Winter 2007

'Fazal Sheikh: Beloved Daughters'

Miriam Rosen



Renuka, Bhajan Ashram, Vrindavan, India, 2005

“A rose can come from a thorn, a thorn can come from a rose,” reads the Afghan proverb accompanying the portrait of a baby (also Afghan, and seated next to a rose) on the back cover of Fazal Sheikh’s booklet *When Two Bulls Fight, the Leg of the Calf is Broken*. This twenty-page work was put together immediately after 9/11 as an impassioned call for restraint in the prevailing climate of revenge. But the proverb, in all the complexity of its apparently simple message, could be applied as well to the entire corpus Sheikh has assembled, project by project, book by book, over the past fifteen years. *Moksha* (2005) and *Ladli* (2007) – the two companion pieces for which

he received the 2005 Henri Cartier-Bresson award, and which were featured last summer at the Fondation HCB in Paris – are no exception.

Weaving together photographs and texts, investigation and creation, these two works offer us a multifaceted look at the situation of women in India today. The point of departure was a brief news item Sheikh read many years ago about the holy city of Vrindavan, known for its four thousand Hindu temples and shrines, but also for some twenty thousand dispossessed widows who have taken refuge there in the hope that their devotion to Krishna will gain them entry to *moksha*, the state of eternal bliss. The widows came to mind, Sheikh explains, in the wake of his earlier companion pieces on Somali women refugees (*A Camel for the Son* and *Ramadan Moon*, both 2001), because of the concrete women's issues involved, but also the more intangible question of religiosity, which he had explored in terms of Islam with *Ramadan Moon*.

The force of *Moksha* lies precisely in the integration of these two apparently disparate dimensions into a rhythmic flow of images and texts alternating Sheikh's hypnotic photographs of Vrindavan, his stately portraits of the widows he met there, and their own accounts of earthly sufferings and hopes for a better life in *moksha*.

Far from orienting us to a neatly packaged reportage, Sheikh's "subjective camera" – panning shadowy voids and foggy landscapes, timeworn facades and deserted alleyways, sleeping dogs and birds in flight, not to mention the phantomlike white-shrouded widows chanting in the temples— thrusts us into the disorienting, paradoxical experience at hand. The widows' stories are painful, not simply because of their traditional exclusion from a society that considers them "inauspicious" but because of their material situations: cast out by their families, denied their inheritances and decent pensions, and, depending on their age, prey to sexual exploitation. But if Sheikh makes it clear in his epilogue that the keys to resolving this earthly plight are education and economic independence, he also recognizes that what was for him for him the "secret, impenetrable world" of Vrindavan offers the widows a haven and that their communion with Krishna gives meaning to their lives.

In *Ladli* ("beloved daughter" in Hindi), by contrast, he opts to delve more deeply into the here and now, to "discover from childbirth what women, the mother and her daughter, have to suffer." The result is at once a haunting portrait album of the girls and women he met in orphanages, shelters, and slums throughout India and a painful catalog of abuses ranging from feticide and infanticide to human trafficking and dowry deaths. Here, too, by highlighting the day-to-day efforts of local activists, he reminds us that "a rose can come from a thorn, a thorn can come from a rose." And true to his own "artist-activist" credo, Sheikh is adapting a series of some thirty or forty posters from *Moksha* and *Ladli* for display in a thousand venues throughout India.

American Photo

December 16, 2007

'Heroes of Photography: Fazal Sheikh – Uncovering the Faces of the World's Forgotten'

Dave Anderson



For more than a decade, Fazal Sheikh has been meticulously documenting marginalized communities: refugees in Africa, immigrants crossing the Mexican border, women resigned to second-class status in India. Sheikh, 41, the New York-born child of a Kenyan father and white American mother, considers himself an "artist-activist"; he uses portraiture to personalize large social issues. Among Sheikh's admirers is Dave Anderson, whose first monograph, *Rough Beauty* (Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2006), explores the down-and-out town of Vidor, Texas. As Anderson points out here, Sheikh has consciously removed himself from the strictures of "straight" photojournalism to create images of obvious sympathy and respect. Rather than focusing on his subjects' victimhood, he makes photographs that are, in essence, collaborations.

To this day, only one photograph has ever literally taken my breath away. I first saw "Jamaa Abdullai and her brother Adan" at *Cruel and Tender*, the Tate Modern's first major photography exhibition, in 2003. It was an unforgettable moment.

The image was from a series called *A Camel for the Son*, about Somali refugees living in Kenyan border camps, and it came from an American photographer with whom I was not familiar: Fazal Sheikh. Alongside works by legendary artists like Walker Evans, William Eggleston, and August Sander, Sheikh's transcendent photographs more than held their own. His minimalist black-and-white portraits and landscapes, so devoid of pretense but bursting with

humanity, seemed to leap off the wall and into my psyche. In an art world that seems to favor icy distance, irony, and garish print sizes, Sheikh's work is not only heart-stoppingly beautiful but also a resonant antidote to the prevailing winds.

One senses in Sheikh an almost religious tone, a kind of reverence for his subjects. For an artist who does not follow a particular faith, this spiritual quality is striking. "I was never drawn to one faith," Sheikh says, yet when he describes his work, there is a quasi-religious tone. "I'm most drawn to images that evoke a degree of quiet, calm, or solace," he says. It seems no accident that Sheikh is a former student of the revered Emmet Gowin, who was his teacher at Princeton University. Gowin, long a practicing Quaker (also my own faith), calls his former student "a spiritual ally." There is an intriguing similarity of personal manner and worldview between the two: Both project a modest inwardness and virtue that seems almost monk-like. Gowin speaks of "thinking compassionately and living compassionately," which "sensitizes you to deal with other people." It is clear he believes Sheikh walks this path.

Sheikh focuses on specific injustices that are rarely in the public eye. The radiated warmth in his photographs, the sense of import communicated about the lives of his subjects, and his dedication to bringing attention to those who are deeply marginalized has been an inspiration to me. While his subjects could easily be called victims, Sheikh chooses to photograph them in a manner that accentuates the dignity of their lives, leading the viewer to see that these are people, as he puts it, "not unlike you and me." He carefully avoids the easy visual vocabulary of victimization: no protruding bellies, no flies on tear-streaked cheeks, no bloody garments or casually placed weapons of war. Instead, he plainly illustrates one honest moment after another with subjects whose lack of pretense and openness demands the respect of the viewer.

Much of Sheikh's early work was concerned with refugees in East Africa and Northern Pakistan (regions from which his grandfather hailed), while his last several projects have focused on the plight of Indian women: ostracized widows and orphaned girls. I admire the fact that Sheikh begins with a modest goal of simply promoting awareness. "You don't expect to change the world," he says. "You try to change views subtly." His numerous books, from *A Sense of Common Ground* (1996) through *Moksha* (2005) and the upcoming *Ladli* (2007), all frame the issues not only with radiant imagery but also by gently weaving in oral histories and his own elegiac narratives. Many of these projects can be viewed in their entirety at fazalsheikh.org, and his International Human Rights Series project subsidizes and distributes his work to human-rights organizations.

It comes as little surprise, then, that a MacArthur Genius Grant was recently added to Sheikh's long list of accolades. But a hero? He recoils from the idea. "To think there's something heroic in spending a month or two someplace where people have to live their entire lives is absurd," he insists. Typical modesty. But there is something heroic in Sheikh, not only in the quality of his art but in the quality of a life ambitiously dedicated to the betterment of his fellow man. The word "moksha" is defined as "the loss of one's individual identity and absorption into the universal spirit or the absolute." Apt words indeed.

Go to *American Photo*

New Yorker
November 19, 2007
'Art and Soul'
Vince Aletti



*Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader,
Somali refugee camp, Dagabaley, Kenya, 2000*

The photographs in Fazal Sheikh's first exhibition, in 1995, were portraits of refugees who'd fled civil unrest in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia and found shelter in Kenya. His most recent works, currently on view at the Princeton University Art Museum, depict Indian widows and girls who have found themselves to be outcasts in a culture where female infanticide still regularly occurs. In between, Sheikh has worked in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Brazil, and the Netherlands, documenting the displaced and the persecuted—people whose basic human rights are at stake. A compact, engrossing survey of this work at Pace/MacGill couldn't look less like photojournalism. Sheikh's subjects are not anonymous victims; all but a few are identified by name. At once descriptive and loving, and warm rather than cool, the photographs are extraordinarily moving portraits in the classic mode (think Julia Margaret Cameron and Irving Penn), whose aesthetic weight is multiplied by the power of their maker's concern.

Go to the *New Yorker*

New York Sun
October 25, 2007
'Beautiful Misfortune'
William Meyers



Manita, Ahmedabad, India, 2007

How beautifully should misery be rendered? This is a fundamental question confronting photographers who document the world's abundant miseries. Against the charge that aestheticizing misfortune deprives it of its full significance — that it prettifies suffering to make it palatable — the great artists reply that only a beautifully rendered presentation commands the viewer's attention long enough and deeply enough to make true witness possible. The 36 black-and-white prints in "Fazal Sheikh: Portraits" at the Pace/MacGill Gallery are testimony in support of this position.

Mr. Sheikh was born in New York in 1965, the son of a Kenyan father who was himself the son of a Pakistani father; his mother was American. He graduated from Princeton University in 1987 after studying photography with the esteemed Emmet Gowin, and has spent much of his time since traveling to desolate places on the globe where people displaced from their homelands by war, terror, famine, drought, and other natural and social disasters eke out marginal existences.

The pictures Mr. Sheikh has taken in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Afghanistan, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, and, most recently, India, have won him many of photography's highest awards, as well as international respect for his broad humanitarianism. His pictures of some of the world's most wretched people are sumptuously beautiful.

There are portraits of three children on the wall at the entrance to Pace/MacGill, all taken in India in 2007: "Labhuben, Gujarat," "Manita, Ahmedabad" and "Simran, New Delhi." These are art photographs, not ordinary photojournalism. Mr. Sheikh shoots usually in a 2 1/4-inch-by-2 1/4-inch format, which captures considerable detail, then scans the negatives and prints them digitally, which allows for great control. The images are carbon pigment prints on handmade Hahnemühle photo rag paper mounted to Plexiglas paper. This process produces extraordinarily delicate tones, with considerable depth and modeling, almost tactile. And the rich, off-white Hahnemühle paper has a feeling of permanence about it; these images are not ephemeral, but are meant to endure. The pictures are framed without glass, so there are no reflections or glare to detract from the immediacy of the work.

In spite of the high production values of the prints, or maybe because of them, these are disconcerting images. It is the almost identical set of the mouths on each of the three children — Labhuben, Manita, and Simran — that sets the mood for the exhibition: stoically determined, not grim exactly, and certainly not in pain, but endowed with hardship. Labhuben at first glance looks pretty. She wears a nice embroidered dress, a pendant on a necklace, and a nose ring. The shape of her face and her features are attractive. But she is not standing erect, and her torso is out of kilter, her hair unkempt, and her mouth bleakly set. One of her eyes is cast down and the other seems closed as if there is something wrong with it. This is not a child who is just momentarily unhappy, but one habituated with sorrow.

Mr. Sheikh's caretaking technique lets us see individual strands of Labhuben's hair, the details of the embroidery around the neck of her dress, the creases in her joyless lips, and the sensitive shading on the skin of her face and chest that establishes the reality of her flesh. We are confronted with a child in whose expression there is no self-pity, but an insistence — Mr. Sheikh's most characteristic effect — that we recognize her humanity.

The strength of character evident in "Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader, Somali refugee camp, Dagahaley, Kenya" (2000) makes her position in the community plausible. The composition strikingly frames her face in a tight-fitting black hood, and Mr. Sheikh's technique makes the face's planes and textures clear. As in many of his pictures, the subject looks at him confidently, even confidingly, indicating Mr. Sheikh has established some sort of bond with her. The fact that we see the photographer's image reflected in each of her pupils seems a warrant for her trust.

In "Haji Nadir, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, north Pakistan" (1998), a middle-aged man is framed in darkness, his face lit by an intense light coming obliquely from the left. His nose and forehead are thrown into high relief, and the film catches the light and dark strands in his full beard. Although he is presenting himself to the camera, his attention seems elsewhere, inward, as if puzzling out how a capable and vigorous man has come to be swathed in the darkness of a refugee camp.

There are nine portraits at Pace/MacGill from one of Mr. Sheikh's most recent projects, shot in Vrindavan, India, a holy city where Hindu widows go after their husbands have died and where they wait for death. "Asha Rajak ('Hope')" (2005) has drawn her white mantle across the bottom of her face, so we only see from her nose to her forehead. A vertical white marking is painted from her hairline down her nose. The hand and arm that hold the material up to her face are creased and wrinkled, as are the parts of the face that are visible — old woman's skin. Her

eyes are shut, in modesty or resignation. But even in its comparative anonymity, Mr. Sheikh has imbued the figure with monumental dignity.

Another photographer, Sebastião Salgado, has famously shot similar material in black-and-white, and in many of the same places. But Mr. Salgado began his career as a Marxist sociologist and is celebrated for dramatic pictures of large masses toiling in concert, whether Brazilian gold miners or Indian commuters or an endless plain of African refugees in Tanzania. In contrast to Mr. Salgado's social science, Mr. Sheikh offers us biography, insisting that history be understood as what happens to individuals. He makes those individuals known.

Go to the *New York Sun*

Télérama n° 2992

May 16, 2007

'Un oeil à l'écoute'

Luc Desbenoit

LE FIL ARTS ET SCÈNES - Pour photographier les réprouvées de l'Inde, Fazal Sheikh a séjourné auprès d'elles et recueilli leurs témoignages. Avec un respect rare.

Fazal Sheikh donne l'impression de s'être trompé de siècle. A l'époque du numérique, où la photographie contemporaine explore de nouvelles formes, souvent en couleur et en grands formats, il n'utilise que les pellicules argentiques et le noir et blanc. Son mode opératoire ? La photo posée. Fazal Sheikh montre une prédilection toute particulière pour les portraits immobiles. Des images qui évoquent, par l'étrange fixité des modèles, les débuts de la photographie, lorsque le sujet devait poser longuement sans bouger. Dans ses récentes enquêtes sur la condition des femmes en Inde, qu'il expose actuellement à Paris, aucun indice ne permet de se situer dans le temps. Ni baskets Nike, ni baladeur mp3 apparent. Pas la moindre trace de modernité dans cette Inde qui suscite, on le sait, l'étonnement des médias internationaux par sa formidable capacité à émerger au sein de l'économie mondiale. Dans son premier volet sur les femmes, Moksha, Fazal Sheikh raconte le rejet des veuves indiennes par une société traditionnelle qui les considère responsables de la mort de leurs maris, à cause des péchés qu'elles ont commis dans une vie antérieure ou de leur manque de dévotion. Parfois très jeunes, ces veuves, qui trouvent refuge par dizaines de milliers dans la ville sainte de Vrindavan, marchent pieds nus. Elles s'étourdissent du matin au soir en psalmodiant, dans les ashrams, des chants à la gloire de Krishna. Elles portent toutes le sari blanc, marque ancestrale de leur veuvage, et le tilak, ce troisième œil tracé avec de la cendre au milieu du front. Ces photos nous plongent dans un temps ancestral, tout comme dans Ladli, cet autre travail de Fazal Sheikh autour d'un orphelinat du Pendjab. Cet établissement recueille les petites filles ayant eu la « chance » d'être abandonnées, alors que la découverte de leur sexe en condamne des milliers d'autres à mort dès la naissance. Personne, évidemment, n'est insensible à de telles brutalités. Reste à comprendre pourquoi Fazal Sheikh, avec un sujet sur les violences faites aux femmes – hélas ! banales en Inde comme ailleurs –, s'est imposé comme l'un des artistes à la pointe de la photographie contemporaine. Avant d'être remarqué par la Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, le New-Yorkais avait déjà en effet été sélectionné pour l'exposition événement « Cruel et tender », de 2003, à la Tate Modern de Londres, et reconnu à cette occasion comme l'un des vingt-cinq artistes ayant le plus marqué l'histoire de la photographie documentaire. Il y figurait aux côtés d'August Sander, de Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Andreas Gursky, Philip-Lorca diCorcia ! Tout comme eux, Fazal Sheikh propose une nouvelle façon de représenter le monde. Chez lui, il s'agit de rendre aux exclus une place au sein de l'humanité, une dignité à laquelle ils ne semblaient plus avoir droit. Et à travers eux, de montrer le monde autrement que le font les reportages télévisés. Né à New York, en 1965, d'une mère blanche (issue de la bourgeoisie américaine), Fazal Sheikh est aussi le fils d'un Kényan, dont le père, riche commerçant musulman, avait émigré du nord de l'Inde en 1912, bien avant que cette région ne devienne le Pakistan (1947). Diplômé de l'université de Princeton, Fazal Sheikh passe ses vacances dans son autre famille, musulmane, au Kenya. Cette ouverture aussi sensible à l'Orient qu'à l'Occident lui permet de dépasser les incompréhensions, en s'interrogeant sur sa propre identité... Côté photographie, tout commence en février 1992. Fazal Sheikh a 27 ans. Cette année-là, la famine et la guerre civile en Somalie provoquent l'exode massif de populations qui traversent la frontière du Kenya pour s'entasser

par dizaines de milliers dans des camps de fortune. Fazal Sheikh y débarque à bord d'un avion humanitaire plein de journalistes internationaux. Pendant un jour ou deux, ceux-ci mitraillent la misère collective, avant de repartir, leurs besaces pleines de détresse à craquer. Fazal Sheikh, lui, ne peut appuyer sur son déclencheur, et encore moins décamper. Il a honte de voir ces Africains traités comme de la chair à photo, acteurs impuissants et anonymes d'un scénario qui leur échappe. Il décide alors de s'installer à leurs côtés, de vivre des semaines durant dans les mêmes conditions, et de se lier à eux. Plus tard, il passera des mois et des mois aux côtés des Indiennes, à Vrindavan. Avant de photographier, Fazal Sheikh écoute. Ce n'est qu'une fois qu'il connaît la personne, son histoire personnelle, qu'il sort son Rolleiflex pour des portraits posés. La règle du jeu est simple. Il n'impose rien. C'est le sujet qui décide de la posture à adopter face à l'objectif ; le photographe fixe l'image que le modèle veut bien lui donner. Les images de Fazal Sheikh ne sont pas prises ; elles lui sont offertes. Et cela donne à ses portraits de Somaliennes, de réfugiés afghans ou encore de ces Indiennes une très grande beauté formelle... Voilà des femmes qui nous regardent droit dans les yeux. On s'interroge. Qui sont-elles ? Que leur est-il arrivé ? La réponse n'est plus dans l'image elle-même, comme avec la spectaculaire photographie humanitaire, lorsqu'elle montre des individus à terre, impuissants, attendant une main secourable. Une photographie de Fazal Sheikh ne raconte rien à elle seule. Elle se révèle à travers le témoignage qui l'accompagne à chaque fois, tel que Fazal Sheikh le recueille de la bouche même de son sujet. Ces histoires personnelles, singulières, comme celle de Seva Dasi (lire page précédente), sont toujours stupéfiantes, terribles, et souvent d'une grande complexité. Fazal Sheikh ne livre pas en pâture des photos chocs, larmoyantes et sentimentales, sans lesquelles un événement n'existe plus pour les médias. Grâce à ses images de femmes ayant retrouvé leur dignité, il redonne leur poids aux mots, seuls à même aujourd'hui de saisir et de raconter le monde avec lucidité. Sans naïveté, ni stérile apitoiement .

Go to *Télérama*

Photo-Eye Booklist

Spring 2006

'Moksha - Photographs by Fazal Sheikh, Steidl, Gottingen, 2005'

Larissa Leclair

Not many photographers can handle both politically and culturally sensitive topics with such understanding and respect as Fazal Sheikh. He considers himself an artist-activist and since 1992, with a Fulbright to Kenya, Sheikh has dedicated his photographic life to highlighting the plight of displaced peoples in order to spread awareness on a global level. He has lived in refugee camps in East Africa collaborating with displaced communities from the Horn of Africa to Mozambique, resulting in the books *A Sense of Common Ground* and *A Camel for the Son*. He has followed his grandfather's roots to northern Pakistan and given a voice to Afghan refugees in his 1998 book *The Victor Weeps*. In creating *Moksha*, he lived among dispossessed widows in northern India. In this latest book, Sheikh combines portraits, testimonials, cultural details and history to present a holistic view of the women of Vrindavan. The mood and spirituality of this holy city permeate the pages with his soft-focus and fog-saturated black-and-white images. The ritual of turning each page, looking at each portrait, reading each personal history, is meditative. The reason these women live in Vrindavan, though, is societal marginalization. Once widowed, and cast out by their own families, they seek refuge in Vrindavan only to survive by chanting at the temples for a charitable donation or begging on the streets. These women are resolute, devoting themselves to Krishna in hopes of being released from their misery and the cycle of reincarnation, to reach a higher state in the afterlife called "moksha." Sheikh has been lauded with many awards, and rightly so. Just last year he was named a MacArthur Fellow. Education is power and that is part of Sheikh's vision with his International Human Rights series. In addition to reaching those who can make a difference, he also seeks to enlighten the citizens within the countries of displaced peoples. He does this by making material available online and by including text in the languages of the respective communities. In *Moksha* there is a separate insert with translations in Hindi and Bengali. Time and again, with each project, Sheikh produces beautiful and moving images that make a lasting impression and leave one both pensive and solemn.

Frankfurter Allgemeine

14 Dezember, 2006

'Die Witwen von Vrindavan'

Freddy Langer

Es mangelt nicht an Versuchen in der zeitgenössischen Fotografie, eine Stadt anhand ihrer Einwohner, häufiger noch: Einwohnerinnen, zu porträtieren - auch in Deutschland nicht. Das Angebot an Bildbänden reicht von New York und Paris bis Berlin, Aschaffenburg und Freiburg. Oft sind die Bände geprägt von ungezügelter Leidenschaft - allzuoft aber leider auch von ermüdender Belieblichkeit. Wie anders dagegen ist Fazal Sheikhs Fotobuch "Moksha" über die indische Stadt Vrindavan; gleich einem Monolithen ragt es aus dem Einerlei der Bildbandproduktionen heraus. Diese stillen Schwarzweißaufnahmen vergißt man nie wieder. Vrindavan ist eine gespenstische Stadt. Seit fünfhundert Jahren finden dort mittellose und nach Hindu-Tradition zudem rechtlose Witwen ein Zuhause; in der Verehrung Krishnas suchen sie ihren Lebenssinn, verbunden mit der Hoffnung, dem Kreislauf der Reinkarnationen zu entkommen und direkt einzugehen in das erlösende Nichts des Paradieses: "Moksha". Tatsächlich aber führt für viele der oft noch sehr jungen Frauen das Leben in Vrindavan direkt in die Prostitution. Fazal Sheikh hat viel Zeit zwischen den wenigen staatlich geförderten Armenhäusern und den mehr als viertausend Tempeln und Altären der Stadt verbracht. Seine Bilder sind keine en passant entstandenen Schnappschüsse, sondern eindringliche Personenstudien - selbst dort, wo man nichts sieht als kunstvoll gefaltete Schleier -, und stets sind sie ergänzt um beklemmende Lebensgeschichten. Es zeichnet Fazal Sheikh aus, daß er in seinen Texten lakonisch zurückhaltend bleibt, die Bilder aber von gewaltiger künstlerischer Kraft zeugen. Damit hebt er die Gattung der Sozialreportage auf das höchste Niveau.

Go to *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

June 2006

'Fazal Sheikh and the Power of the Portrait'

Edgar Allen Beem

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 *Moksha* is less judgmental than his previous books. *Moksha* 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 *Moksha* 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."

Princeton Alumni Weekly

January 25, 2006

'Portraits of people, not just of their pain'

Katharine Greider



Sarla Goraye

My husband died of a fever six months after we were married. He was 12 years old. I was only 5. His family said I was an unlucky person and I was to blame for his death. I was never taken into their household because they did not want me to bring them the same fate. So even though the marriage had never been consummated there was no chance I could ever be married again and I have carried this stigma for the rest of my life.

After my parents died I lived with my brothers for many years, but eventually they, too, died and 30 years ago, at the age of 50, I moved to Vrindavan, where I have lived in this home with the other widows ever since.



*Seynab Azir Wardeere, Asylum Seeker's Center, Osdorp,
The Netherlands, 2000 From Ramadan Moon*



*Anef Ibrahim Addan with her son Abdullahi and daughter Ayen, feeding center,
Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1992. From A Camel for the Son*

Fazal Sheikh '87 had every reason to be confident when, in 1992, he headed to a refugee camp in Kenya to make photographs of the scene. The well-traveled son of an American mother and Kenyan-born father, Sheikh's Manhattan upbringing had been privileged, his undergraduate years at Princeton distinguished, his career auspiciously launched with the Fulbright fellowship that brought him to Kenya. But when the plane landed and Sheikh's photojournalist colleagues set to work forthwith, the young man's self-assurance drained away. The scene was overwhelming. How could he render it?

Rather than tamp down this uncertainty and get cracking, Sheikh allowed himself to "fumble around" — a fumbling that yielded the very signature of his art: a respectful, patient, collaborative technique for portraying human beings in extreme circumstances. He got to know these Somali people shoved from their homes by violent conflict, who had lost dear ones and in exile continued to endure privation and threat; he asked for their "complicity," as he puts it, in the work he was doing.

The newness of Sheikh's approach was borne out in the arresting pictures he brought home, first from refugee camps in Africa and later from among Afghans displaced by Soviet occupation and the rise of the Taliban, impoverished Mexicans struggling to enter the United States, and, most recently, shunned widows living out their days in the ashrams of Vrindavan, India.

Many of these works are formal, yet intimate, portraits that bring the subject front and center while surroundings fall away in the near-abstraction of a spare tree in dappled light or the white-white of tent fabric. In portraits of Afghan children and elderly mujahedeen, one sees faces, close up; the intensity of attention to these faces — to the vein that delicately traces the temple of the elder, to the child's hank of dark hair and ample, down-turned mouth — seems to say that there is no other person like this one anywhere. In their particularity the subjects become almost universal. In an image from the Somali work, Anep Ibrahim Addan nurses her son Abdullahi. She looks unsmiling into the camera, the tilt of her head complex, maybe a little playful; the nursing child has the far-off gaze of contentment, his hand curled around his ear. A daughter, Ayen, perhaps 7, looks down at the boy, her small hand resting in the maternal lap. We may not recognize the names Sheikh is careful to attach to these portraits, or the patterned drapery his subjects wear. But we know these gestures; when the photographer tells us son, daughter, sister, we know what he means.

These are not lurid dispatches from the disaster zone, but neither are they typical family portraits. They are too frank — that reflexive happy-face the camera elicits from Westerners nowhere to be found — and too accomplished, each "a very highly sensed aesthetic piece," according to Peter Bunnell, recently retired as curator of photography at the Princeton University Art Museum. Nor does Sheikh neglect the political and cultural turmoil that drove these families into exile, or pretty up their suffering. On the contrary, text that accompanies images in exhibitions and in Sheikh's five published monographs often unspools a tale of unspeakable cruelty and loss.

His book *Ramadan Moon* (2001) begins with images of leaves, sky, and moon that have a trembling, ecstatic quality, accompanied by quotations from the Koran and other Muslim texts. Then comes a series of facial portraits of Seynab Azir Wardeere (above) and, in her own voice, sweet memories of Ramadan in Mogadishu with her family. When finally we arrive at this subject's time of woe, we nearly choke on its bitterness: father murdered before her eyes, raped and beaten in front of her children, separated from husband and daughter, betrayed by Dutch authorities who might have offered safe haven. Sheikh's great insight about human nature is that you first have to see the person before you can fathom her suffering. Azir Wardeere's

victimization, he says, “changes the way you see her, but she’s not reduced to that one moment of trauma in her life.”

Sheikh’s audaciously humanitarian goal is to allow the viewer to see himself as “on an equal footing” with Azir Wardeere and other displaced people in poor, war-ravaged countries. His humanizing photographs surprise partly because they call to mind certain familiar images, but contradict their implications: for example, the “candid” journalistic renderings of famine-stricken refugees that fill the newspapers today — images meant to document events as much as people, and that too often provoke our pity, but not our identification, Sheikh says.

The recipient of numerous grants, most recently a 2005 unrestricted, \$500,000 MacArthur “genius” award, Sheikh steers wide of the media as a means of disseminating his work. His pieces are owned by prestigious museums and well-to-do collectors, but he also has distributed thousands of books for free and published them on the Internet (www.fazalsheikh.org). Sheikh lives in Zurich. He feels increasingly alienated from an America he sees as intolerant of dissent in the aftermath of 9/11 and disappointingly resistant to placing that awful day in the context of a world convulsing with similar agonies.

How Sheikh came to his own empathy for the people he photographs is a complex affair. As a boy, he spent summers in his father’s native Kenya, and it was partly a fascination with paternal roots — his grandfather was born in what is now northern Pakistan — that motivated his first photographic explorations. Sheikh’s mother, a New Jersey native, took her own life when he was a young man; here is a measure of the “extreme heartache” that, Sheikh says, might permit any of us to empathize with others’ suffering. Asked about artistic influences, Sheikh names Lewis Hine, the documentarian of early-20th century New York, for his influence on such social issues as child labor and his aesthetic “knockouts.” But he dwells on Princeton photography professor Emmet Gowin, “basically like my family now,” because of the way he lives and works, and the way each is a lucid reflection of the other. “Emmet, day and night, handles his life in the same way that he handles his images,” says Sheikh. “You can’t erase yourself when you’re making the image.”

As he prepares for a new project exploring infanticide and the lives of girls left at orphanages because their parents didn’t want to raise daughters, Sheikh’s own life and collaborative work seem to argue for a different metaphor of photography, perhaps one that de-emphasizes the clicking shutter — the “taking” and “shooting” and “getting” of images — in favor of the aperture, an eye, that opens, exposing not only the subject, but the film, and the photographer.

Artforum International

November 2004

'Fazal Sheikh – Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris'

Miriam Rosen



Most photographs take us back in time. Much rarer are those that follow us into the present with a seeming life of their own. The photos in Fazal Sheikh's series *A Camel for the Son*, 1992-2000, and *The Victor Weeps*, 1996-1998, are among the latter. The first grew out of Sheikh's encounters with Somali families who had sought refuge in northeast Kenya after the outbreak of civil war in the early '90s; the second out of his discovery of the three million Afghans who had similarly fled to northern Pakistan to escape the Soviet occupation, the warring mujahidin factions, or the Taliban. But Sheikh is not a documentary photographer, much less a war reporter. He has chosen to "render" (his word) the often dramatic situations at hand through eloquent portraits of the people caught up in them – portraits often made in the most rudimentary conditions imaginable: a makeshift "studio" in a feeding center where Somali mothers brought their malnourished children or an empty house where Afghan village elders received visitors around a gaslight. And

they were made with equally rudimentary equipment, mainly an old Polaroid positive-negative camera, which allowed Sheikh to give the positives to his subjects while keeping the negatives for himself.

A sharp focus on the sitters and the shallow depth of field make the surrounding details of time and place (or non-place) fade away. But in the course of repeated visits, Sheikh has taken the time to talk, to listen, to record what cannot directly appear in a photograph: the often horrifying accounts of what his sitters have experienced, from the rapes suffered by the Somali women to the treachery Great Powers and petty warlords alike have inflicted on the Afghans. The human bond that Sheikh has developed with those he photographs undoubtedly contributes to the particular intensity of the images; expressions are never posed or emptily focused on the lens but most often riveted on his presence behind the camera – notably in several close-cropped portraits of Somali women taken on a return visit to Kenya in 2000, where the photographer is reflected in the women's eyes.

In less visible ways these lives he has “rendered” are also the reflection of his own: the three-generation history of colonial and postcolonial displacement going from the north of India (now Pakistan), where his paternal grandfather was born, to Nairobi, where his father was born, to New York, where Sheikh himself was born, to Zurich, where he now lives much of the time. Sheikh's inner journey in search of his own history is more fully developed in the book and DVD versions of *The Victor Weeps* (1998, 2002).

Here, where each series occupied one of the two exhibition rooms, the point of view was subtly reversed. The meticulously grouped photos were punctuated by texts stenciled on the walls – the first-person narratives and more formal statements from the refugees plus a few of Sheikh's commentaries, but also dreams, bits of poems and sayings. This spatial presentation, with its point-counterpoint of images and texts, physically placed visitors “in the picture.” They alternately exchanged glances in the present with these people who were just a few inches away, reading what they had experienced in a past that could only be imagined – and in the process, hopefully, as Sheikh says, “beginning to accept that *we*, and *they*, are one and the same.”

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Artwurl

February 2003

'Interview with Fazal Sheikh'

Eric Gottesman

Eric Gottesman: In a 1994 *Village Voice* review of your book *A Sense of Common Ground* by Vince Aletti, you said, "There must be some middle ground between journalism and art, where you can be honest and still be supportive. I think what art can do is create an atmosphere where we are thinking that solutions are important. The way I am working is not about saving the world; it's just sort of interested in balancing out the scales and thinking that must count for something."

I'm interested in that idea of a middle ground between journalism and art. Do you think that "documentary" accurately describes that space?

Fazal Sheikh: It's complicated. Often people try to set barriers between various means of working. It seems to me that whether someone would be strictly described as a photographer or painter serves no real purpose. The point of the matter is: is the work effective?

I think that there should be this sort of fluent quality across boundaries. Documentary, in the best sense, is able to tap into various levels of aesthetics within the realm of art and perhaps as well into political and social issues. I hope my photographs could just as easily and happily be displayed in a political or social context as in a museum. I see no reason that we should limit the way in which the work can function.

I'm not so enamored, clearly, in the way in which the media functions. I generally don't have my work reproduced in magazines or newspapers. I don't make it for that kind of consumption. I'm definitely not willing to sacrifice the individual for a grand purpose, which I have the impression often many journalists are willing to do. Maybe it has to do with what I believe images can do. I guess it's just a personal ease. How do you feel comfortable functioning in another community? I never felt comfortable that way [as a journalist]. But that can also mean that you are a failure sometimes. If you are working in that mode, you might retreat at a moment when you might better make a photograph. I don't know. When I first started, I was much more judgmental in my posture. Now I realize there is strength and weakness in different ways of working.

EG: You talk about not limiting where the work is acceptable to be seen. Do you feel there are places where it is best seen?

FS: Most of the pieces that I make will either be online or distributed in a very democratic fashion. My books are in essence intended to encourage people. They are sent to institutions in the arts as well as social and political institutions, the media and so forth. *Ramadan Moon*, my Somali book about the Netherlands, was actually intended to be quite strong politically in that it was sent to most of the judges, parliamentarians, and mayors within the country to underscore what was happening to asylum seekers in the current climate. So this book arrives, sort of unsolicited by them and hopefully they have this experience of it that makes them rethink their policy toward asylum seekers in their country.



*Seynab Azir Wardeere, Asylum Seekers' Center, Osdorp, The Netherlands,
December 2000 (From Ramadan Moon)*

I don't know where the work is best seen. People who deal in this kind of documentary work, the plans were always that you were going to change the world and that by bringing these images to the world, you would really raise consciousness in such a way that would affect this grand change. I think you can't really tell how your images will affect people. Part of what I was saying to Vince was: I don't really know if I will be able to change very much. Of course my belief in the process is such that in some unspoken way, I do expect to change things. But if you think too hard about exactly what you are affecting and when, I think that's very limiting.

One of the most gratifying things is for the work to be received and accepted at the source, where you make it. The difficult part is how to take it on from there. The fact of the matter is that, for instance, the Somalis that I was working with don't really understand what it means when you say, "Is it okay for this work to be exhibited in a museum or published in a magazine or a book form?" In really remote areas, you say that to somebody and they agree fully. In my case, I was working with women who were assaulted and they said, "Please, we expect and want you to bring this to the world." But you have to sort of interpret; do they really grasp the significance of that acceptance? Their trust rests with you in such a way that you have to see how it is going to be received in our world or in the First World, let's say.

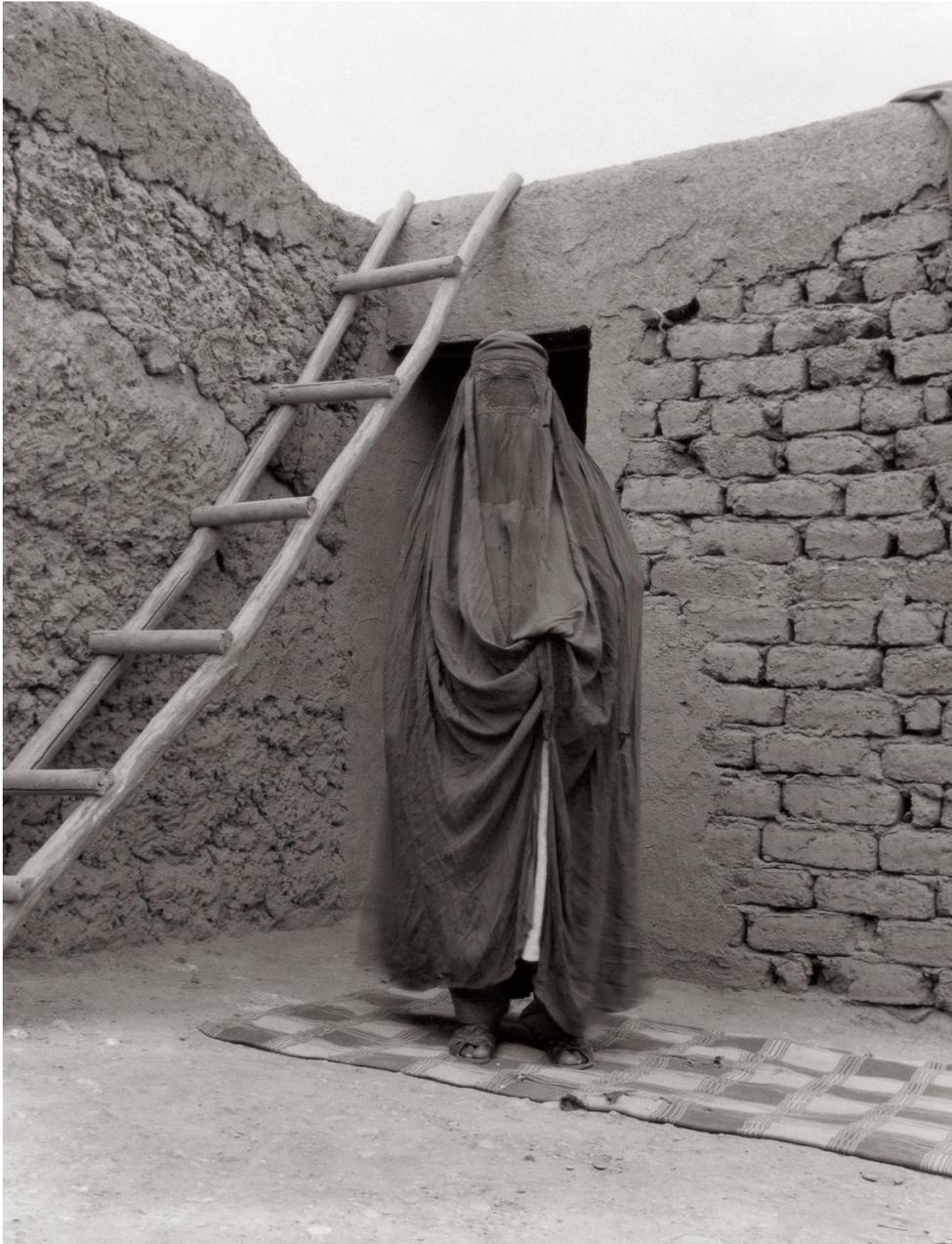


Halima and her son Ibrahim (From A Camel for the Son)

EG: So are there ways that the work can be misinterpreted? Especially working in Africa, where photographic images have had such a profound impact on international understanding of what Africa is — issues of representation seem especially relevant to someone making images there.

FS: *A Sense of Common Ground* was really in response to the way in which Somalis were being rendered in the West. I was very timid about this. My personality is such that I don't really want to trespass upon people.

We often discuss the nature of trespass, the nature of propriety. Who has the right to go where to make what kind of image? In the current artistic, or let us say documentary, climate, you'll notice a lot of books being produced by people who are from the place. So the fact that I had Kenyan links made it acceptable and appropriate for this book and exhibition to come out. But to say, "Well, he's Kenyan; he is allowed," sanctions a kind of voyeurism. It separates us from them. The fact that I had a Kenyan link doesn't mean that I am the only one allowed to have that kind of access. That's kind of racist and divisive.



*Abdul Shakour's eldest wife, Najiba, Afghan refugee village, Northwestern Frontier Province, Pakistan
(From When Two Bulls Fight, The Leg Of the Calf is Broken)*

EG: The notion of beauty amidst horror comes up a lot when people talk about photographs that are political. I'm thinking specifically of what Ingrid Sischy wrote about Sebastiao Salgado's work in the early 1990s: "Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action."

FS: I think Salgado has made some extraordinary images. One thing I would like to say on his behalf is that clearly he genuinely believes and is hoping through his work to affect serious and profound change. I think that is basically unassailable. I have a lot of respect for what he does.

Having said that, I don't particularly feel the desire to make images in that way. I'm much more interested in the specificity of someone's image, name, story, gaze. I want to attend to individuals. Salgado, I presume, approaches it in such a way that I think he truly believes the people are heroic. You might say that there is some anonymity attendant with that notion. That's very different from what I want to do. I don't want to put subjects into a heroic context. I am interested in people's individual presentations and the way in which that might also challenge our preconceptions and our assumptions of them in that place.

Some of the best photojournalism garners support for aid efforts. Other work, and I suppose mine would be numbered among this group, may be complex in a way because it doesn't simplify. I hope that my work is not reductive. I hope that it alludes to the complexity of the situation and by virtue of doing that, creates a more profound understanding across these communities.

I guess that is the thing I have been talking around. The international community knows, for instance, that famine will come in a cycle every eight years in the Horn of Africa. But they still require the images in order to garner support for the aid effort. And so, we have created a system where we really need to see the suffering people before we will give any money. Therefore, much of photojournalism is predicated on the notion that money is the final arbiter of successful work. I have never believed that. Perhaps once early on when I was living in NY and working in Africa, both places my homes, I felt a degree of unease or maybe even guilt about the privilege I had in life. But after a while, you stop apologizing for that. You say, "Okay, I live in a place, Zurich now. I ask to be a visitor. But I accept that." I accept that I am a visitor, that it is a privilege, but also that my interest is genuine. I don't think I really need to apologize for that.

EG: Do you have an idea of what the final arbiter of successful work would be?

FS: In America, we would like to posit the notion that it is money. But money is a palliative; the means by which, in the case of Ethiopia for example, you assuage your guilt: by giving money. But it is much more complicated than that.

I think the final arbiter would be true empathetic understanding. If America understood more in an empathetic way about these other countries, perhaps we'd be less willing to accept the warring notions that are spread through our society. That's one of the greatest reasons we had a problem with Afghanistan in the first place. Our arrogance made us believe that at any time, we could go into any country we saw fit to invade or to use to our advantage and, when our means had been gained, to just abandon them. This created great animosity in Afghanistan, a country in which people don't understand when that happens. I think if we really understood the nature of that country and perhaps the belief system, we might be less willing to thump a country that was already living in the Stone Age even further back.

EG: Can images create "empathetic understanding?" Are there ways you could create empathy beyond image making? Have you considered means other than photography?



Afghan child born in exile, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, north Pakistan, 1998

FS: I have thought of different means. It's very typical of the documentary mode that we think that the photograph does everything. I think the photographs do some things very well but I do not think they do everything. In my recent books and exhibitions, text plays a rather prominent role. In the two Somali books, it is essential that the voices be there. The voices allude to a complexity and depth, which is held in the resonating gaze, but which I think needs to be pinned down and made very clear. That's both a strength and a weakness of the photographic medium. I want the strength of the portraits to make you perhaps sympathetic and interested in then reading the testimonial. And the testimonial resonates with the image in a way that transcends the separate elements.

I guess what is maybe good and also bad about my own work is that it is at times rather quiet. It asks that you really contemplate what is going on there, or that you read the attendant dream with the picture, and that you really think about that. Not everybody has that time. But from my perspective, that is the only way you can come to a higher understanding of those other places and political situations.

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New York Times

July 15, 2003

'Critic's Notebook: For London, a Summer of Photographic Memory; Around the City, Images From Around the World'

Michael Kimmelman

This city is immersed in photography exhibitions, a coincidence of scheduling, perhaps, that the museums here decided made a catchy marketing scheme. Posters and flyers advertise the "Summer of Photography."

Why not? I stopped here on the way home from the Venice Biennale, after which any exhibition that did not involve watching hours of videos in plywood sweatboxes seemed like a joy. The London shows leave you with no specific definition of what photography is now, except that it is, fruitfully, many things at once, which is a functionally vague description of the medium. You can nevertheless get a fairly clear idea of the differences between a good photograph and a bad one.

In the first category are two unlike Americans: Philip-Lorca diCorcia, with a show at Whitechapel, and Cindy Sherman, at Serpentine. Into the second category falls Wolfgang Tillmans, the chic German-born, London-based photographer, who has an exhibition at Tate Britain that cheerfully disregards the idea that there might even be a difference between Categories 1 and 2.

There is also the posthumous retrospective, long overdue, of Guy Bourdin, the high-concept soft-core-pornography fashion photographer for French *Vogue* and Charles Jourdan shoes in the 1970's and 80's, at the Victoria and Albert.

And as the unofficial anchor for it all Tate Modern, which until now had apparently never organized a major photography show, has tried in one fell swoop to make up for lost time with "Cruel and Tender: The Real in the 20th Century Photograph." The title is from Lincoln Kirstein's apt description of Walker Evans's work as "tender cruelty." Like Tate Modern in general, "Cruel and Tender" is vast, not particularly logical and blithely skewed.

It consists of two dozen or so solo shows strung together in what the museum hopefully calls "sympathetic clusters," beginning and ending with contemporary work, lest anyone leave Tate thinking that the art of the past might ever be as memorable as the art of the moment. The exhibition, helter-skelter, runs the chronological gamut from Evans and August Sander through Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra and other present art luminaries – with big gaps. We get Albert Renger-Patzsch, Fazal Sheikh, Paul Graham, Michael Schmidt and Boris Mikhailov. We do not get Atget, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, Paul Strand, Sebastião Salgado, Avedon, Berenice Abbott, James Nachtwey or Robert Capa.

The given explanation for who's in and who's out has to do with tender cruelty: a philosophy of balancing "engagement and estrangement," as the show's catalog puts it. The philosophy is ostensibly shared among the photographers in the show. We're told they eschew sentimentality for "cold-eyed" observation.

If you know the huge, extravagantly grotesque and exploitative color photographs that Mr. Mikhailov takes of starving, homeless, drunken Ukrainians, whom he pays to take off their clothes and reveal their sagging flesh and scars – an antic parody on Soviet Socialist Realism that ends up making a mockery of the people in the pictures – you will know how slender is the thread of "cold-eyed" observation that binds these sort of pictures to the work of someone like Sander.

Did I mention that I enjoyed the show anyway? This is notwithstanding Mr. Mikhailov or some of the works of Mr. Schmidt, whose brutally stark pictures, hung erratically up and down walls as narratives enigmatically exploring German identity, establish him as an intellectual photographer. That said, his selfless insistence on exposing himself naked to the camera, while admirably frank, didn't happen to be what I was in the mood for after lunch.

So I reacquainted myself with the works of Evans, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus (whose photographs look humane next to Mr. Mikhailov's), Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth, Robert Adams, Garry Winogrand, Stephen Shore, William Eggleston and on and on. As for Lee Friedlander's photographs of office workers staring at their computer screens, a documentary project from the mid-1980's, I was put in mind of Mr. diCorcia's photographs of passers-by on the street, on view both at Whitechapel and also in "Cruel and Tender." Each photographer, although in very different ways, makes actors of people doing mundane things, the subjects' expressions given a baroque weight simply by virtue of being caught when the shutter clicked. They look struck by some shocking revelation that is unavailable to us.

We are each our own little universe of portent and mystery, these photographs remind us, which is also, from another perspective, a message in Fazal Sheikh's black-and-white portraits of refugees: beautifully plainspoken pictures that bear witness to people the world disgracefully tries hard to forget.

Who knows exactly what Mr. Sheikh is doing in "Cruel and Tender." His work is the opposite of cold-eyed, but I was glad to have found it there. It's an example of what concerned documentary photography, the tradition of Cartier-Bresson and Capa, who are not here, can still provide to humanity, of which the people in these pictures have seen precious little.

I won't linger over Ms. Sherman's photographs at Serpentine or over Mr. Tillmans's at Tate Britain. His cool, Warholian style, derived partly from his background in avant-garde fashion magazines, entails photographing anything: clouds; a man with a mohawk holding his penis; Kate Moss in a red dress; fruit; the Concord overhead; someone's armpit; an aerial cityscape; semiabstractions; two women kissing.

Call it weary sophistication. Mixing insouciance and abject indifference clearly impresses many people, including the jurors who gave him the Turner Prize a few years ago, but I left Tate Britain feeling a little weary myself.

On the other hand Ms. Sherman's show at Serpentine is engaging: a tendentious retrospective recognizing heroic talent that now stands maturely outside fashion. It includes a new series of works, digitally enhanced with psychedelic backdrops, in which she poses as a clown. Somehow, just barely, she manages to reanimate even this cliché.

Over the years Ms. Sherman has circulated an encyclopedia of female types. They're here. The works are not abstract social statements. They come from the gut. That has become clearer over time. Notwithstanding their artifice, they are intimate and honest dramas about the psychological burdens of life, borne by the women she plays in her pictures, who are weighed down by their absurd makeup and adopted roles, trying to put on the best face and usually failing.

They seem much more authentic and human than the people in Mr. Tillmans's photographs. Authenticity is an artistic matter, after all, not the automatic outcome of snapping whatever's in the viewfinder. In another way, Bourdin's photographs look authentic, too, despite being staged, like Ms. Sherman's work.

Bourdin was by various accounts a strange little man with a whiny voice and demanding temperament, who, I read in an article about him by Tim Blanks in the *New York Times Magazine*, forced his models to balance on rocks in the ocean during electrical storms, glued pearls to their

bodies until their skin couldn't breathe and they blacked out, and handcuffed them to beds. Everyone seemed to love to work with him.

He was, at least as much as Helmut Newton, responsible for bringing a feverish new brand of sex and violence to fashion magazines and advertising in the 1970's, capturing the marketably seedy spirit of that era in lurid colors, influencing multifaceted visual culture since. He became a cult figure.

All this evidently gave little satisfaction to Bourdin, who was abandoned by his mother as a boy and aspired unsuccessfully to be a painter after Balthus or Bacon. Unlike Mr. Newton, he couldn't have cared less about money or fame; he turned down prizes and refused to show his work in galleries or publish books of his pictures. So when he died of cancer in 1991, at 62, he had more or less orchestrated his own neglect. He seems to have had a contempt for his work that gives it its black-humored heat and true perversity.

The retrospective at Victoria and Albert, like a peep show, is laid out in two darkened rooms, with a short Bourdin film at the entrance showing a woman in lingerie spinning on a stool. The first to arrive one morning, I slunk past the earnest young woman reading a book and taking tickets. I didn't want to seem too eager. In the front room a few photographs were visible only through peepholes. The second room included Bourdin's early work: lean, geometrically abstracted landscapes and still lifes harking back to the work of photographers like Weston. The connections with the later commercial pictures entail both formal rigor and a pervasive loneliness.

Bourdin uncovered beauty in unlikely places and ugliness in the world of beauty. The taboos he flirted with were actually broken before he came on the scene. They are not what sticks in the mind about his work. Fashion is about masks and make-believe. Bourdin injected into it a degree of self-honesty, or self-loathing, the effect of which creeps up on you.

Talk about tender cruelty.

Go to the *New York Times*

Bookforum

Spring 2002□

'*A Camel for the Son* and *Ramadan Moon*, By Fazal Sheikh'

Andy Grundberg

Sheikh, who has devoted his career to photographing refugees, focuses on the plight of Somali women in these companion volumes, which he has written, designed, and produced. *A Camel for the Son* – at birth in Somalia, males get camels, females zilch – opens with an incredible panorama of a huge Somali refugee camp in Kenya and proceeds to tell the stories of a number of Somali women, many of whom were victims of rape and torture. These sad sagas are accompanied by Sheikh's straightforward, emotionally compelling portraits, most which were taken in a tent that functions as a makeshift studio a la Penn. *Ramadan Moon* is more concise and in many ways more powerful. Close-up portraits of a Somali asylum seeker living temporarily in the Netherlands alternate with her first-person narration of how her family's once-pleasant life in Mogadishu turned into a living hell. As prelude and coda to her story, near-abstract pictures of leaves and the moonlit night sky are combined with poetic excerpts from the Koran. It could be corny, but instead it's dead-on heartrending.□

New York Times

February 3, 2002

'Images of Afghanistan, When the Taliban Ruled'

William Zimmer



Kabul, one month before Taliban conquest of the city, Afghanistan, 1996

Since last fall the American public has had something of a crash course on Afghanistan. By now most of us know at least the main outlines of its recent history, and is aware that events in that country over several decades make up a human tragedy that has cut both widely and deeply.

Many intrepid photographers and photojournalists are responsible for providing what we now know about Afghanistan. But one whose pictures are on view at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at the State University of New Jersey, at Rutgers, began his work before the recent wave of interest in that country.

The show, "The Victor Weeps: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh of Afghan Refugees, 1996-98," displays the pictures of Mr. Sheikh, the son of a Kenyan father and an American mother, who was born in 1965, grew up in New York and graduated from Princeton University.

In 1996, Mr. Sheikh went to Afghanistan just after the Taliban had taken power. The results of his photographic investigations were seen in "The Victor Weeps," a book published by Scalo in 1998, the year he completed the last of several trips to Afghanistan.

Although the show includes several panoramic pictures of Kabul mostly in ruins, as it looked when the Taliban took over, most of the show is composed of rich black-and-white photographs of people. Many are close-ups. Some subjects -- men and women, young and old --

have sharp recollections of particular, horrifying, even sadistic events of war that are printed in text below their pictures.

The main foe, still fresh in the memory of Mr. Sheikh's subjects, is the Communists, who fought with invading troops from the Soviet Union in the 1970's. The title "The Victor Weeps" alludes to the fact that although the Communists were defeated and the Soviets expelled, the human toll was so great that there was mourning rather than celebration.

Mr. Sheikh has balanced the pictures and stories of bleakness and tragedy with more optimistic images. A grid-like arrangement of 21 photographs with the descriptive title "Afghan Children Born in Exile" is a reminder that life and the life cycle go on, and that people who so often make up nameless statistics are particular personalities. In these pictures of children, Mr. Sheikh has captured across the board a clear-eyed hopefulness. Only one child is crying, and it is a baby.

One aspect of human rights in Afghanistan that has piqued wide interest in the United States is the treatment of women. At first glance, "Abdul Shakour's Eldest Wife, Najiba" would not seem to be someone who could speak about enlightened attitudes. Wearing an enveloping *burka*, she is mainly identified as someone's wife. But her printed statement reads; "Our prized possessions are pens and books."

Mr. Sheikh presents two other photographs that tacitly address the way women are regarded in Afghanistan. In "Sisters, Sima and Shahima," these young girls are photographed in what seems like opulence even though it is mainly the floral prints on their dresses and on the wall covering that provides the sensation of luxury.

The other picture features a toddler identified as "Shahria." She is outdoors on a striped blanket, playing with a couple of flowers; the photograph includes part of the leafy tree that shades her. This is as close to idealism as the exhibition comes.

The largest photographs contain hints of tales apart from the usual war stories. "Dr. Jan's Son and Friend" shows two young men standing and facing each other against the background of a mud wall. One man holds the other's hand tightly by a couple of fingers.

The humanistic promise of this picture is not fully evident until the viewer comes upon "Osman and Farid, Blind 'Qari' Brothers." The wall text explains that *qari* means "one who knows the Koran by heart." These boys, while standing close, face away from each other.

One of Mr. Sheikh's most frequent devices is the photograph within a photograph. People whom he interviews and photographs present a picture of someone they have lost, and these images become seamlessly collaged in Mr. Sheikh's compositions. This is an effective narrative technique because it corresponds to the subjects' dreams that they relate at the same time that they describe atrocities. The loved ones appear radiant in dreams and offer at least a moment's consolation.

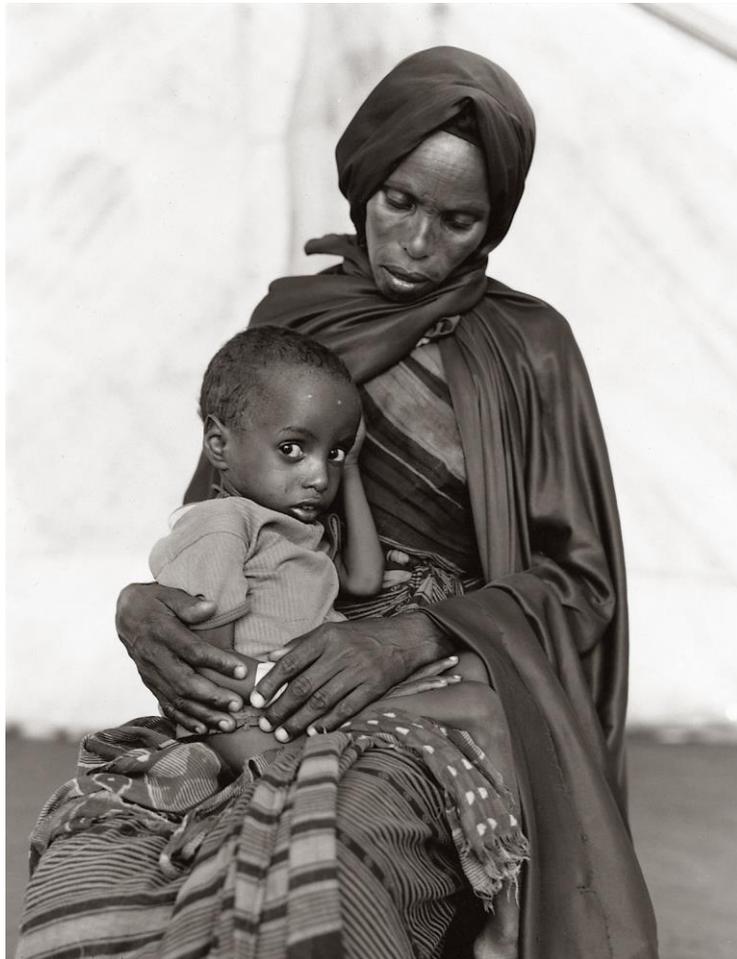
Go to the *New York Times*

New York Times □

October 4, 2002

'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.□□

Go to the *New York Times*

Village Voice □

September 18 - 24, 2002 □

'Fazal Sheikh's Worldview - □ Gravity and Grace □'

Vince Aletti □ □

Fazal Sheikh is a concerned photographer in the traditional mold: an artist who sees his role not merely as a witness but as a compassionate, involved humanitarian. Unlike so many of the images that come out of third-world trouble spots, his pictures of Somali and Afghan refugees are never polemical or exploitative. Instead, he makes intensely sympathetic, emotionally complex portraits of people who are too often seen as little more than ciphers or symbols, and he underlines their individuality by naming each of his subjects in the title. As a result, Sheikh's photos have the gravity of August Sander and the grace of Julia Margaret Cameron – a combination of formality and frankness that feels at once classic and utterly contemporary.

Although a traveling survey of Sheikh's work has been divided among three galleries, blunting its cumulative effect, the impact of each show is moving and memorable. The most successful segment is at P.P.O.W (476 Broome Street, through October 12), where Sheikh's soulful portraits of Somali mothers and children at a refugee camp in Kenya look like Madonnas for our time. A dimly lit room here houses Sheikh's "Ramadan Moon," a text and photo installation that revolves around a Somali woman's story of rape and exile, told in her own remarkably measured words and a series of close-up portraits. At Scalò (560 Broadway, through November 2), they've hung portraits from Sheikh's 1998 book on Afghan refugees, *The Victor Weeps*, that allow us to look deep into the faces of people whose lives have unexpectedly intersected with our own. The pictures at Pace/MacGill (32 East 57th Street, through October 19) are of farmers in a Brazilian national park that's one of the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places; though the photos are not as historically charged, Sheikh invests them with genuine sensitivity and seriousness.

"My main concern as a photographer is community," Sheikh has written, but that community is clearly the whole wide world.

□ □ Go to the *Village Voice*

Texas Observer

January 17, 2002

'Picturing Afghanistan'

Jake Miller



Image from 'The Victor Weeps – Afghanistan' by Fazal Sheikh

On September 11, like many of you, I spent most of the day and most of the night staring at what looked like the end of the world on my television. At one point in the evening, the anchors broke away from replays of the World Trade Center crash and coverage of the rescue efforts in Manhattan to show what seemed to be a missile attack on Kabul, Afghanistan. The correspondent was standing on a hotel rooftop overlooking the city, reporting on what some thought might be the first U.S. attack in the war. It soon became clear that it was just another sortie in Afghanistan's lingering civil war. While the reporter was speculating that the Northern Alliance had blown up a Taliban munitions dump, something struck me as odd. The cityscape behind the reporter, flickering as it was through his videophone connection, seemed altogether too modern, too whole. Rows of streetlights illuminated the city's avenues, and it looked more or less like any other hilly city in the world.

On my bookshelf, I had a copy of Fazal Sheikh's *The Victor Weeps* (Scalo, 1998). I flipped through the pages of the book quickly and found images of Kabul that confirmed my suspicion. In the daylight, Kabul doesn't look anything like a city. It's a bombed-out, dusty moonscape. The shattered buildings look more like an archaeological dig than a habitable city.

I turned to *The Victor Weeps* and the other books of photojournalism that I mention in this essay the same way some people turned to scripture or to the American flag. I was looking for answers, for insight, for some sense that the world is intelligible, for reassurance that we can look at life and make some sense of it. I wouldn't say I found any answers there, but answers are hard to come by lately. In the days after the attack in September, a friend kept asking me what my solution would be for the problem, taking it on faith that there is some solution. In the books that I looked at, it seemed clear to me that the photographers were searching just as hard for answers, or even for a way to ask the right questions, as the rest of us are.

Fazal Sheikh's grandfather was a Muslim cleric who emigrated to Kenya from what was then India. Sheikh's family eventually settled in New York. In 1996 Sheikh traveled to his grandfather's old village in what is now Pakistan. When he arrived he found that the region was home to hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees. Many had been mujahedeen who first helped to dispel the Soviets and then were driven from their homes by the Taliban. Sheikh began to photograph these refugees and to record their stories. Eventually he traveled to Afghanistan to

photograph there, too. *The Victor Weeps* is the result. In gratitude for their help with the book, Sheikh is donating some of the proceeds from the book to aid the refugees.

It would be impossible to tell the story of Afghanistan with just one kind of picture. Sheikh uses a variety of techniques. There are the glowing, cratered cityscapes. (They really do have the same extra-bright glow that pictures taken on the Moon by the Apollo astronauts have.) There are sumptuous, chiaroscuro portraits of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Some of the men seem lit by a campfire, with dark-clouded faces and a sharp glint in their eyes. There are close-up shots of people's hands, holding the photo IDs of their dead brothers, husbands, fathers and sons. There is a section of prints that Sheikh made from the scratched and battered negatives of a Jalalabad portrait photographer who was put out of business by the Taliban prohibition on photography. Not all of the pictures are photographs. The book begins with a selection of children's drawing in the familiar naïve style of grade school kids. Here, instead of a house with a tree and a rainbow, the kids draw portraits of men getting their legs blown off, blood and body parts spurting every which way.

Many of Sheikh's portraits are accompanied by quotes from the subject or an anecdote that someone else told about them. They tell about things like fleeing from their villages after all of the religious elders were buried alive in the desert by the communists. Sheikh also includes notes about things he saw and people he met, like the children of Kabul who would rather risk getting blown up by gathering firewood in a minefield than be assured of dying from the cold.

There's a photograph of a sturdy, fierce, "Afghan fighting dog," taken from what seems like a prudent distance down the street. Sheikh did not keep his distance from the pain and suffering of his human subjects. In the early days of our war with the Taliban, I would look at the hard, determined men in these pictures, and wonder how we could ever hope to defeat them in battle. As I write this in early December, it looks like our military campaign has gone more smoothly than many of us feared, with swift victories and few American or civilian casualties. But something tells me that this story is far from over.

That was the same reaction that photojournalist Edward Grazda had when he traveled to Kabul in 1992 to cover the mujahedeen victory over the Soviets. Grazda has been covering Afghanistan for decades. His book *Afghanistan: 1980-1989* covered the years of the Soviet invasion and the beginning of the civil war. He returned to Kabul in 1992 to cover what he thought would be the conclusion of a long struggle, and then watched as the factions that had fought together to oust the Russians turned against themselves.

Over the next eight years, Grazda returned several times to photograph. The pictures that he made on those trips appear in his latest book on the cycle of crises in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Diary: 1992-2000* (PowerHouse, 2000). The war against the invaders devolved into a civil war, and Kabul was transformed from capital city to battleground. Grazda writes that each attempt to reach a peace accord only led to more rockets, more rubble, and more death. From this chaos, the Taliban rose up and drove the Northern Alliance from Kabul. Soon, clean-shaven men, unveiled women and photography were outlawed.

Like Sheikh, Grazda is visibly struggling with the limitations of the form, trying to stretch photography to the impossible task of showing us a country, a civilization, a culture, as it disintegrates. Grazda even goes so far as to include a disclaimer on the title page, writing that the *Diary* "is one photographer's view of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and as such is not intended to be a complete picture of the Afghan situation."

Grazda's view includes many attempts to capture elusive moments of Afghan history. Grazda shoots before-and-after diptychs showing the effects of the civil war and the Taliban occupation: Buildings crumble, women disappear from offices and from the streets, and all of the

faces stop smiling. He shoots multiple views of monuments and stitches them together to form composite images. The pages of the book are crowded with multiple images, frame lines nearly overlapping, images bleeding to the edge of the paper. Where Sheikh's photos are formal and elegant and vibrating with constrained misery, Grazda's pictures are kinetically charged, with lots of hip-shot snaps and off-kilter images taken through the window of a car or in the tumult of a crowded street.

Grazda photographed in Kabul and Mazar-I-Sharif. (Could he have imagined that the names of those cities would be heard nightly on American network television?) He photographed in the Afghan communities in Pakistan and in Queens, New York. He introduces each section of photos with a brief essay. (One complaint: The captions for the photographs are in the back of the book, with photos identified by page number. Frustratingly, many of the pages are unnumbered, which can make it hard to figure out what you're looking at.)

Grazda also includes transcriptions of several Taliban decrees. Some of them seem almost funny—an insufficiently bearded man "shall be arrested and imprisoned until his beard gets bushy"—if we didn't know that the rules were enforced with impromptu rubber hose beatings (which Grazda photographed) and with torture and summary executions. (The line where the Taliban promised to "continue their efforts until evil is finished" was also disturbing, because it sounds like some of the weirder rhetoric that our own leaders have been using since September.)

Those who would stamp out evil have much to do. There have been huge changes in the way people around the world live in the last half-century. Some of us are doing better than ever, but millions aren't. Sebastião Salgado's *Migrations* (Aperture, 2000) is an attempt to document the details of some of those miserable new lives and offers still another glimpse at the Afghan situation. Salgado made pictures of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, of an orthopedic hospital that makes (or is it made?) prosthetic legs for landmine victims, and of the ruined skyline of Kabul. In the mountains, shepherds herd their flocks past tanks and armored personnel carriers. One of the most startling pictures was of a group of Tajik refugees who had fled their Tajikistan to, of all places, Afghanistan.

So what can these photos show us? Are these displaced peoples with their worlds turned upside down the pieces of a puzzle, with a solution that we can find? Or are they the shards of a shattered glass, broken beyond repair? Last summer, before September 11, I saw a re-run of an old Bill Moyers interview with Joseph Campbell. Campbell was saying that the greatest challenge that we face is to find some unifying mythology that allows us all to recognize each other as human, as part of the same tribe. Looking at these pictures, and at the events of the last several months, one thing is clear. The world is a mess. Only some of it is our fault (as Americans, as consumers, as good men and women who sit by and let evil roll unchecked through the world), but all of it is our problem. The questions that these pictures raise are just the beginning. Let's hope we can see some answers

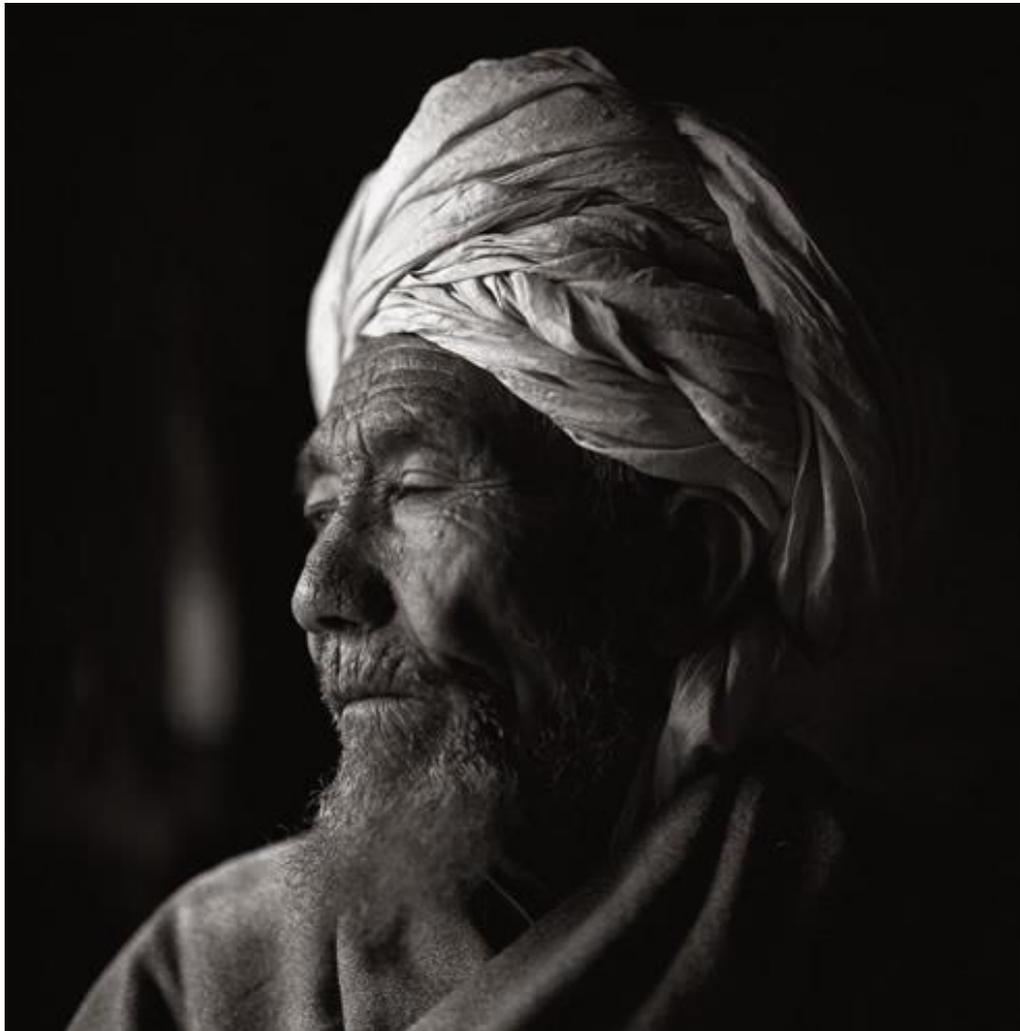
Go to the *Texas Observer*

Chicago Tribune

January 12, 2001

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

Abigail Foerstner



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.”

Die Tageszeitung

September 29, 2001

'Keiner heiratet die Witwe'

Brigitte Werneburg



Kabul im August 1996, kurz vor der Eroberung durch die Taliban: Der Fotograf und Journalist Fazal Sheikh reiste durch das kaputte Land seiner Vorväter. Die Stammesstruktur ist die Feindin der Politik

1994 schickten sich die Taliban an, die Herrschaft in Afghanistan zu übernehmen. Das machte damals in der Weltpresse noch Schlagzeilen. Doch in den darauffolgenden Jahren geriet das Land mehr und mehr aus dem Blick der Weltöffentlichkeit. Hilflosigkeit und Schuld - die Gotteskrieger erhielten Militärhilfe durch die Vereinigten Staaten - angesichts des moralischen

Skandals der Taliban-Herrschaft, nicht zuletzt aber die scheinbar restlose Bedeutungslosigkeit von Afghanistan in Hinblick auf die zentralen Herausforderungen der globalisierten Welt brachten das große Schweigen über das Land am Hindukusch.

Unter diesen Umständen muss es als eine Tat des Schweizer Verlegers Walter Keller gelten, 1998 einen großen, aufwändig gestalteten Bildband über die Lage in Afghanistan veröffentlicht zu haben. Doch Fazal Sheikhs "The Victor Weeps" erschien gleichzeitig mit Gilles Perres' bestürzender Fotodokumentation über die Massengräber von Srebrenica. In der hauseigenen Konkurrenz zu Perres fand Sheikh damals eher bescheidenes Interesse. Heute freilich ist es aufschlussreich, auf den Band zurückzugreifen.

Statt der Bilder des afghanischen Fotografen und Journalisten wartet das Buch zunächst mit Zeichnungen afghanischer Kinder auf. Sie zeigen, wie ein Mann vor den Augen seiner Frau von einer Mine zerfetzt wird, oder wie ein Flüchtlingstreck dem Kriegsgeschehen zu entkommen sucht. Erst dann finden sich die großen Panoramaaufnahmen von Kabul im August 1996, kurz vor der Eroberung der Stadt durch die Taliban. Kabul scheint tatsächlich ein einziger Schutthaufen zu sein. Erst den folgenden Aufnahmen von den Restbeständen der städtischen Häuser gelingt es, die Leser davon überzeugen, dass hier Menschen leben können.

Fazal Sheikh, der 1965 in New York geboren wurde, fotografiert nicht nur, er schreibt auch über die Reise in das Land seiner Vorfahren und er lässt sich von den Menschen, die er aufnimmt, ihre Erlebnisse aus der sowjetischen Besatzungszeit und dem nachfolgenden Bürgerkrieg erzählen. Diese kurzen Texte neben den eindrucksvollen, oft bei künstlichem Licht aufgenommenen Porträts, die naive Erwartungen an orientalische Gesichter unter dem traditionellen Turban durchaus befriedigen, sind voll religiöser Inbrunst. Was dann auch zu erklären scheint, dass zunächst der einzige mörderische Feind der frommen und gottesfürchtigen Menschen die Kommunisten und sowjetischen Besatzer sind. Doch als neben die vielen Männer auch Frauen und Kinder vor die Kamera treten, berichten die Erzählungen jetzt auch davon, wie die Menschen zwischen die Frontlinien der Mudschaheddin gerieten und wie auch dort ethnische Säuberungen, Folter und Vergewaltigung an der Tagesordnung waren. Das Pathos liegt nun im Erstaunen und im Schock darüber, wie fromme Muslime sich so gotteslästerlich gebärden können.

Am aufschlussreichsten aber sind zwei Briefe, die der Band dokumentiert. Der eine stammt von den Ältesten des Distrikts Agra in der Provinz Logar und der andere stammt von einer Flüchtlingsfrau in Pakistan. Die Ältesten schrieben 1996 davon wie sie in reiner Clanformation gegen die Sowjets kämpften, für eine islamische Regierung nach dem Gesetz der Scharia. Die Taliban, so sagen sie, repräsentieren die letzte Hoffnung der Leute auf einen solchen Staat. "Wir haben unsere Stammestraktionen und unsere nationalen, islamischen Traditionen, mit denen wir unsere inneren Probleme lösen", glauben sie. Doch es ist die Stammesstruktur, die die Feindin jeder Politik ist. 1998 beklagt die Flüchtlingsfrau in ihrem Brief, wie junge Mädchen auf den Märkten wie Vieh oder Sklaven verkauft werden; wie sie verschleppt und vergewaltigt werden; wie die Taliban in Kabul junge Frauen zur Heirat zwingen: "Aber keiner wollte eine Witwe heiraten, um ihr tragisches Schicksal zu ändern." "Lieber Bruder, lieber Vater und Sohn", schreibt sie, "was ihr gebracht habt, ist Korruption, Blasphemie und Zerstörung."

Go to *die Tageszeitung*

Artforum/Bookforum

Fall 1999

'The Victor Weeps – Afghanistan'

Andy Grundberg

Sheikh, whose well-received 1996 book *A Sense of Common Ground* focused on African refugees, spent the next two years documenting Afghan refugee living in Pakistan. The result is more complex and self-reflexive than conventional documentary photography. Sheikh's family roots are in the part of Pakistan now largely occupied by Afghan encampments, and although he was raised in New York, Sheikh clearly identifies with the families of the mujahedin who disdain Afghanistan's fundamentalist regime. The book consists mostly of Sheikh's black-and-white portraits, done in his signature style, but the most emotionally affecting images are of hands holding small, tattered studio portraits of men killed during the Soviet occupation or in civil wars since. There also are views of Kabul in ruins, and of countless graves marked by stones. Interspersed with the pictures are the photographer's accounts of his adventures among the refugees and his travels within Afghanistan itself. As an experiment in a more personal form of documentary practice, *The Victor Weeps* proves that metaphorically, at least, you *can* go home again.

Rain Taxi

Spring 1999

'The Victor Weeps – Afghanistan'

Josie Rawson

During a 1996 excursion through the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands, photographer Fazal Sheikh, along with his interpreter, stopped for the night in Jalalabad. His camera had already captured the arid light and rubble of the region's war-torn terrain in panoramic detail, especially in several refugee camps where, still, more than a million Afghans who fled their country after the Soviet invasion in 1979 live in makeshift tents. Now the two men strolled through the streets patrolled by Islamic fundamentalist guards of the Taliban, which controls most of the country under brutal rule. Down a lit thoroughway, Sheikh noticed a sign advertising a photo studio, but the shop was dark and the door shut.



Upon entering, he noticed the faint outlines of absent images on the walls, and, by candlelight, the proprietor seated behind a desk. Ridzwanul Haq told the visitors that the Taliban had banned photography on the grounds that creating images of people amounted to idolatry under Koranic law. Even so, Haq had saved a scattering of his forbidden negatives, which he presented to Sheikh to do with as he wished. As Sheikh recalled in an interview earlier this year,

when he told the shopkeeper he hoped to bring the faces and voices of the territory's residents to the attention of the world, Haq laughed and said, "Should you bring such a book back to Afghanistan, it would be burned, and you would be beaten."

Set at the intersection of India, the Central Asian steppes, and the Iranian upland, Afghanistan has endured centuries of conquest and calamity – invaded by Alexander the Great, the Mongols under Genghis Khan, and, during a spell of rebellion against Marxist reforms in the late 1970s, Soviet troops. A decade after the last communist regime was overthrown by the Mujahedin freedom fighters in 1992, civil war broke out and, in 1994, with the Afghan body count some two million and rising, the extremist Taliban took control and instituted the severe measures, chiefly against women, that last year earned Afghanistan top ranking as "the worst oppressor state" by the U. S. ambassador to the United Nations.

It is against this backdrop that 33-year-old, New York-born Fazal Sheikh packed his camera and set off to explore his grandfather's homeland – once part of Pakistan, now an Afghan refugee camp. In more than 100 photographs, he documents the scarred terrain of exile and the weathered faces of those destined to survive in the wake of disaster. These are mainly close-in shots, dignified and haunting – of ex-Mujahedin elders illuminated by gaslamps; of women wholly draped in veils; of families lodged in the wreckage of Kabul; and of the young men captured on film by Ridzwanul Haq before their future crumbled. All of the image are depicted in black and white, and call to mind the work of 19th-century photographers and, perhaps, Walker Evans, with their formal poses and plain stagings – a chair, a decorative rug, a ground of stone. Most are graced with simply a name as caption, rather than with the manipulative taglines so often found in the likes of *National Geographic* ("starving girl with amputated hand") or the spate of recent books by shooters more intent on horrifying the gaze with exotic victims than translating the dignity of survivors to readers a world away from the ground-zero hell.

As with Sheikh's earlier collection, *A Sense of Common Ground*, shot mostly in East Africa from 1992-1994, many of the large-format portraits here are accompanied by oral histories – accounts of husbands, sisters, and babies being kidnapped, murdered, martyred, and disappeared during the tumultuous fighting that has yet to reach any peace. These stories work not as the thousand words a picture alone could tell, but as a vital element in the collaboration between those depicted, the photographer, and the instant *click* of recognition that echoes in the barren ruins around them.

New York Times

January 1, 1999

'Beyond Clichéd Interpretations of Exile, Suffering and Death'

Vicki Goldberg



Gholam Nabi, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1997

Photography introduced a number of new subjects to the pictorial canon and then revised some old ones radically. Refugees, for instance: throughout history, wars and politically repressive regimes have left refugees in their wake, but the search for safe haven and the condition of refugees have seldom been painted. The holy family on the flight to Egypt is the exception, a kind of ur-representation that usurped all others and did not call for pity alone.

Photography in the 20th century changed the picture. Every war and many of the uprisings since World War I have called forth pictures of civilians thronging the crowded and hazardous paths to safety. Compassion is expected of the viewer. In recent times the press and television have been glutted with images of starving, emaciated, ragged people in wretched camps standing in interminable lines for a bit of sustenance, awaiting death with distended stomachs.

Horrible as these pictures are, they are almost clichés by now. Fazal Sheikh photographs refugees without them. The International Center of Photography showed his photographs of African refugee camps in 1996; what was striking was the dignity of the people, who faced Mr. Sheikh's camera not only with utter seriousness but also with a sense of self, even perhaps of self-worth, that outshone their desperation and seemed to have outlasted self-pity.

Since then, Mr. Sheikh has photographed Afghans in exile in Pakistan. Pace Wildenstein MacGill Gallery has 53 of these pictures on view in "Fazal Sheikh: The Victor Weeps." (Scalo has published a book of the same title.) Again, these are strong, sober, contemplative and respectful portraits rather than scenes of misery, although a few views of the ruins of the Afghan capital, Kabul, which Mr. Sheikh also managed to visit just before the Taliban moved in, make it painfully clear that misery must have been in abundant supply. More than six million people, almost half the nation, fled Afghanistan during the war, and by 1997 some 2.7 million were still in exile.

Many of Mr. Sheikh's new portraits are tight close-ups of heads dramatically lighted in ambient darkness. Others are full-length pictures of people outdoors. The men's faces are eloquent, mournful, intense, marked by years of sorrow and, presumably, dedication. Even young children, though posing outdoors and less starkly lighted, are seen close up with expressions so serious they amount to sadness. Everyone, it seems, has enormous and striking dark eyes.

The show includes some portraits made by an Afghan studio photographer before the Taliban prohibited pictures of living creatures. Startlingly, the expressions of men, then mostly in Western dress, are just as intense and conscious of invincible sorrow as those of the exiles. Had Mr. Sheikh seen such pictures before he went to Afghanistan and consciously imitated them? Has that country been so surfeited with trouble that no other expression is possible? Is this a conventional demeanor or a conventional photographic demeanor in a land whose conventions most of us do not know?

Exile did not concern painters much in bygone centuries, unless you count the saints and eastern monks who trudged into the desert to live on air. By Napoleon's time the subject sparked some interest because Napoleon's exile did, but photography (and history) gave it a more universal importance. Victor Hugo, exiled for his republican sympathies, effected what was probably the first significant attempt to portray a life in exile and arouse widespread sympathy, and he did it largely by means of photographs. Later, ordinary mortals in exile became common photographic fare.

Mr. Sheikh, restricting himself to portraits, fills in the lives and pasts, the losses and longings, in his book with quotations from the people themselves and accounts of what he heard and saw.

He made photographs of other people's photographs as well: a hand holding a picture of a relative or a photograph on the ground among pebbles, sad pieces of paper that are all the living have left of the dead. This record of the pictorial remains of those who have been killed acknowledges that photography has introduced not only new subjects but even new kinds of emotional responses to pictures.

People in photographs look unreasonably alive, their images suffused with a premonitory sorrow as we read their future deaths in these fragments of their lives. The photograph as a prefiguration of death is essentially a new subject for the general run of pictorial imagery and also a new way of looking at portraits.

In "Camera Lucida" (Hill and Wang), the French sociologist Roland Barthes wrote about looking at a photograph of his late mother: "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child,

I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."

Photography inexplicably and illogically stops time, which everyone knows cannot be stopped. The future of the person portrayed flows on past the stilled image, tangling subject and viewer alike in the human condition. Painting and sculpture had for centuries represented specific prefigurations of Christ's death, but the idea that every secular portrait harbors a premonition arises only with photography.

The most chilling examples of Barthes's catastrophes include the continuing exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington of casual photographs of the inhabitants of Eiszyszki, a Lithuanian town, before they were erased en masse by the Nazis. Also devastating are photographs of Cambodian prisoners, all destined for death and many aware of it, which were shown at the Museum of Modern Art last spring -- pre-mortem photographs, as it were.

In a show called "Buena Memoria" at the SABA Gallery (and a bilingual book by the same name, published by Asunto Impreso), Marcelo Brodsky, an Argentine photographer, enters similar territory in recalling the "dirty war" in Argentina from 1976 to 1984. He begins with a photograph of his eighth grade class, 32 children, two of whom would later be killed by the military regime. One was Mr. Brodsky's best friend; there are pictures of him as a boy. Mr. Brodsky took color photographs of all the remaining members he could locate, placing them near the class photograph, an exercise in time, memory and changing appearances.

An estimated 30,000 people "disappeared" under the military dictatorship. Most were never heard of again, nor were their bodies found. The assumption is that they are dead, but grief has been prolonged and complicated by all the unanswered questions. Mr. Brodsky's younger brother, Fernando, disappeared at 22. The show includes old black and white photographs of him, mostly indistinct.

Fernando, still a boy, sits on a bed in one of the first photographs Marcelo Brodsky ever took. The boy must have moved; his face is blurred past recognition, as if he were already losing his identity. Also displayed are still frames from a video of the two Brodsky boys, about 12 years old, playing at shooting one another with bows and arrows. Both end up "dead."

All these pictures were displayed during a memorial for the 98 students that Mr. Brodsky's school estimates were disappeared. Probably there were more; only this many could be confirmed. A video at the gallery presents a reading of their names, like an endless dirge, to a large group of people, some of whom hold up photographs of their missing relatives.

The old photographs on the gallery wall are obviously not accomplished portraits. The new portraits are adequate but not in the least exceptional. It does not matter. What is moving is the sense of youth torn up and thrown away, sometimes for a political cause, sometimes arbitrarily. What matters are images of people "to the life," as fancy writing used to have it, images that events have turned into a whisper of catastrophe to come. It must have seemed so innocent then, to snap a boy sitting on a bed, boys playing on the lawn. Life is seldom innocent for long; perhaps photography never is.

Go to the *New York Times*

Village Voice □

December 23 - 29, 1998

‘Out of the Past □ - Among the Exiles With Fazal Sheikh □’

□ Vince Aletti



Afghan boy, born in exile, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1998

In his extraordinary new book, *The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan*, photographer Fazal Sheikh writes about his first night at the refugee settlement of Bizen Khel in northern Pakistan. His companions are the village's Afghan Muslim elders, all former Mujahedin freedom fighters forced into exile during the 10-year jihad against the Soviets and kept there by the subsequent civil war and the relentless rise of the Taliban. Most of these men have lived just across the border from their homeland for nearly 20 years, but they continue to gather in the evenings to reaffirm their commitment to Afghan traditions and hierarchies. Sheikh sits with them around a glowing gas lamp and listens to their stories of martyrdom and pained endurance, many of which he prints verbatim in between the photographs in his book.

Those photos make clear that Sheikh was touched by these weathered men, but when they've retired, he meets someone whose story strikes a more personal chord— a 19-year-old who was born days after his parents fled to Pakistan and has lived his whole life in exile. "As he spoke about his country," Sheikh writes, "I recognized the cadence of longing in his voice, not for politics or society but for something more intimate and less grand. It was a child's need for the touch and sensation of an animated history, the desire to inhabit a place that only exists in stories brought to him in the flickering evening light."

Sheikh's emotional identification with this young man born in exile will come as no surprise to those familiar with his earlier work. The photographs that jump-started Sheikh's career were his portraits of Sudanese, Somali, and Ethiopian refugees in camps across those countries' borders in Kenya. Shown in a small, now defunct New York gallery early in 1994, they were like no other pictures coming out of the camps, which had already been picked over by photojournalists airlifted in to grab shots of bloated children and skeletal mothers before the horror got too old. Sheikh's photos, later collected in a book called *A Sense of Common Ground*, were modest, respectful, and not just sympathetic but loving, as if he were recording not strangers in distress but an extended family pulling together for comfort and support. He underscored this feeling of community by identifying the people in his portraits, rescuing them from the black hole of Third World anonymity by giving each of them the simple dignity of a name— in many cases, the only thing they had left except one another.

"There must be some middle ground between journalism and art where you can be honest and still be supportive," Sheikh said at the time, and, though he had certainly located it in *A Sense of Common Ground*, he's continued to pursue that particular ideal. If the success of his first project sent him off on the international art whirl, he still found himself drawn to displacement and loss, to stubborn survival and community against all odds. What led him to Afghanistan and Pakistan was family in a more literal sense and a desire to share and understand trauma on a personal, intimate scale.

Though Sheikh bristles at the journalistic formula that summarizes him too neatly as the only son of a Kenyan father and an American mother, that background remains crucial. Now 33, he was born and grew up in Manhattan, graduating from Dalton and Princeton, but he spent summers in Nairobi with his father's extended family, sons and daughters of Indian-born merchants whose estates had once occupied large parts of the city. Sheikh says he was "always enamored of " his father's family history, especially the stories about his grandfather, the self-educated, philanthropic man after whom he was named. Sheikh Fazal Ilahi died 10 years before Fazal Sheikh was born, but, the photographer writes, "though I can never know him, I continue to search for part of him to call my own."

That search led him to his grandfather's birthplace in northern India, now Pakistan:□
"By visiting the land of my fathers, moving through the space linking the present to the past, I hoped to gain insight into who they were and by extension who I am." What Sheikh found there, over the course of two years spent among a population in extended exile, may not have been the roots he was seeking, but he was never at a loss for insight.

One morning, in the refugee village at Miram Shah, he had what he calls a waking dream prompted by the memory of his mother's "sudden death." She committed suicide when Sheikh was 21— an event that he prefers not to dwell on but one that marks his life and his work. In this dream, he sees and enters his own body, only to realize that it's also inhabited by another body— his mother's— that he embraces and is embraced by in "a moment of empathy and mercy."

The dream prompts him to ask the Afghan refugees about their dreams of the dead, and these, too, he records in his book (see Mazari's story below) alongside portraits of the dreamers. But his dream also allows Sheikh to suggest to the reader why he's considerably more than your average engaged observer. Asked if he's drawn to the uprooted, he counters with a question he was asked about *A Sense of Common Ground*: "What do you have in common with these people?" He deflected it at the time, and only answers it now with some hesitation and none of his usual verbal flair: "If you have experienced some degree of trauma or of deep emotional taxing, you may be drawn to people who have a similar level of experience. That's not to equate my experience with, say, their experience as refugees, but I am drawn to people who interact with one another on a more emotional or connected plane. Part of what I'm curious about is the nature of the sublime. When something's sublime, it's not just simply visually beautiful, but to be poignant sometimes it also may be tinged with sadness."

Even if *sublime* isn't a word you're comfortable with, there's something remarkable about Sheikh's photographs in *The Victor Weeps*, more than 50 of which are on display through January 16 at PaceWildensteinMacGill (32 East 57th Street). Though the book and the show include a number of full-length portraits that recall his African work, the most striking pictures are in a more intimate square format that brings us closer to the sitter. The result feels like an exceptionally thoughtful family album, full of yearning and concern. Sheikh gathers the elders around the gas lamp and bathes their sorrow and determination in the soft, lovely light. Women, even the most clear-eyed of his dreamers, appear wrapped in similar reveries of remembrance. Scattered among the portraits are images of hands offering other portraits— tiny pictures of dead brothers, sons, and husbands whose presence is as vital to the community as any living soul. □ At the end of the book, Sheikh introduces the children of the exiles and offers what he calls "a ray of hope." But don't look for sunny optimism here: these are mature, knowing faces, at once open and closed, apprehensive, grave, and terribly moving. □ "A lot of the better pictures were not so much what I did but what they brought to that space," Sheikh insists, and these kids brought more history than we can imagine.

"The only way I've been able to work in places and find a ray of hope was in the very specific," Sheikh says with his usual modesty. "Not to go with a notion of these grand political gestures, but to really just listen to the people and listen to my own sense of the place. Who knows what effect it has on the world? But to me it seems honest: that's what I have to offer." In this case, that's more than enough.



Mazari, Afghan refugee village, Miram Shah, North Pakistan, 1998

MAZARI

My husband died a long time before the coming of the communist troops. Our two sons were only children, and as they grew, I was the only one responsible for them. Without a father, it was my place to guide them in the world. They were teenagers when our country was invaded by the communists. For a short period we stayed in Afghanistan, then we fled with other villagers from our area to the refugee camp here at Miram Shah.

My oldest son, Abdul Malik, asked my permission to join the jihad. I knew that he was following the way of Allah and I allowed him to go. He traveled back into Afghanistan with the Mujahedin and I did not see him for months at a time, nor did we hear anything about him. It was only when he returned to Miram Shah with his group that we knew he was safe.

Then in 1987 there was an attack on the military post in our home village in Afghanistan. During that fighting, my son, Abdul Malik, was martyred with a bullet. His body was taken back to the village by the Mujahedin and he was buried in the lands surrounding our home. Two months later, the news of my son's death reached us here in Pakistan. When the family was told, Khail Mohammed, Abdul Malik's younger brother, vowed not to let his martyred brother's rifle rest.

One night, I dreamt of Abdul Malik. He came to me and told me to bring him some water. I brought the water and he began to wash. Then he took off his shirt and showed me where he had been wounded in the back. On seeing the wound, I awoke. Two years later, my second son Khail Mohammed was also martyred by a shot from an anti-aircraft gun. We learned of his death three months after he had been killed. I dreamt of Khail Mohammed walking in a garden. He was surrounded by trees heavy with fruit. When I tried to enter the garden and go to him, I awoke.

--- from Fazal Sheikh's *The Victor Weeps: Afghanistan* (Scalo)

□ Go to the *Village Voice*

Wall Street Journal □

March 27, 1996

'Fazal Sheikh: Portraits of African Exiles' □

Taylor Holliday



Fatuma Abdi Hussein and her son Abdullahi, Somali refugee camp, Mandera, Kenya, 1992

The realities of life in a refugee camp have been gruesomely brought home to us over the past few years. Heart-rending news photos and TV footage have shown Somalis and Rwandans in exile camps at their most tortured moments of violence, disease and death.

These are stories that have to be told. But they are not the only stories worth telling about these wretched Africans or about other refugees. In an exhibition at the International Center of Photography, the American photographer Fazal Sheikh offers another perspective on the life in the camps. Instead of squeezing their misery for every last ounce of sensational yet

distancing pain, “A Sense of Common Ground” focuses on the humanity and the dignity of individual refugees.

Mr. Sheikh’s images are a result of visits he made between 1992 and 1994 to many of the East African camps housing Sudanese fleeing a decade-old civil war, Mozambicans escaping a 15-year-civil war, and Ethiopians, Somalis and Rwandans fleeing tribal wars. (Although some of these camps have since been closed and their residents repatriated, there are still a staggering 11.8 million refugees in Africa).

The 30-year-old son of an American mother and a Kenyan father, Mr. Sheikh spent his childhood summers with family in Nairobi. Even so, he approached his first trip to a Sudanese refugee camp in Northern Kenya in 1992 with the preconceptions common to all outsiders. As a member of a delegation of journalists and aid workers from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, he was briefed beforehand on what to expect; he accompanied the reporters on their rounds of the recommended spots for the best footage and saw them off only a few hours after they had arrived. “When you have to move through a camp quickly, it’s easier to move through it as a voyeur, than it is to engage,” Mr. Sheikh observes. On that first trip, he stayed for several days, long enough for the preconceptions and first impressions to be tempered by exposure to the complexity of life. And it was then that he decided to ask the community elders and refugees “to collaborate with me in making the images.”

For these formal, posed, deliberate portraits, instead of darting around, stealing shots without notice or permission, Mr. Sheikh created a studio in the camps, setting up his large view camera on a tripod, talking (most times in Swahili) with his sitters and allowing them to pose themselves within the frame. And because he works with Polaroid film, he was able to give something back to his subjects right away, leaving them with the photo that they participated in, while he retained the negative.

On first sight of the exhibit wall with 33 mostly mother-and-daughter portraits, the beauty is mesmerizing. Proud, strong women lovingly and confidently hold their babies. The wall-mounted caption tells us that these photos were taken at a Somali-camp feeding center for children weighing less than 60% of their ideal body weight. In another photo, eight-year-old Hadija sits on a stool wearing a formal, long, white dress. We see only a portion of her father’s body to the side, as he reaches in to lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder – an instinctual response from him, and a resonating one for the photographer, who chose this moment for the portrait. The caption says, “She remains mute after being separated from her mother in the crossing from Somalia into Kenya,” yet in her face is a look of serene determination.

All the images include a caption that tells, at the least, the names and locations of the sitter, but many times there is more. In some cases the documentation becomes the point of the display, such as in an accordion-like book mounted with photos and lettered with the transcribed stories of several women who had been abused in the camps by local police. They express disbelief, both in their faces and words, that their once-happy lives have come to this. A majority of the images in the show are of women or children, and those of men do not speak as strongly. It is harder to read their solemn faces, and the captions do not shed much light on their individual stories (perhaps the photographer did not wish to spend as much time on those exiles – such as Rwanda’s Hutu military and militia members – who may have been responsible for violence in their homeland?).

There are also contextual photographs – panoramic views of the camps and group portraits such as a Rwandan leader with members of his compound, an Ethiopian tribal matriarch flanked by the women and children, and a group of Sudanese boys referred to as “unaccompanied minors.”

In each camp, Mr. Sheikh posed the sitters formally in front of their thatched huts, or in the surrounding countryside, or even with others from the community as a backdrop (this is, after all, very cramped living), but the shallow depth of field of his camera usually throws this background into a soft-focus haze. What is important is the sitter and what she wants to express.

The enlarged black-and-white prints are toned in a very warm brownish-yellow hue, further enhancing the softness and hinting at the aesthetic of 19th century studio portraits commissioned by their sitters. This allusion is quite deliberate. Mr. Sheikh studied photography at Princeton, has already won numerous awards, and was not a surprising choice for ICP and its curator, Miles Barth, to pick for a show so early in his career.

Some 100 of his works (most of the exhibit images are included in a flawlessly beautiful book of the same title published by Scalo at \$35) make a powerful argument that respectful pictures of beauty and dignity can speak as eloquently about these people as harsh ones of suffering and despair. Of course these photos don't tell the whole story of life in a refugee camp because they leave out the grim details of daily life. But images of these hardships are easy to find, while photos like these, which allow the refugees a chance to appear as themselves instead of as nameless faces in a crowd of miserable and uprooted strangers, are special indeed.

New York Times

January 19, 1996

'Reading the Sorrow of Africa in Individual Faces'

Charles Hagen



Fatuma Abdi Hussein with her son Abdullahi, Somali refugee camp, Manderu, Kenya, 1992

One of the most remarkable photographic projects in recent years is the series of images made by Fazal Sheikh, an American photographer, in refugee camps in the troubled countries of Central and East Africa. These pictures, most of them portraits, have received wide acclaim since Mr. Sheikh began making them in the early 1990's. Now a show at the International Center of Photography presents an extensive selection of these photographs under the puzzling title "A Sense of Common Ground."

If anything, these uncommon images testify to the lack of community between the refugees and the rulers of the countries from which they fled. What gives Mr. Sheikh's photographs their emotional power is their implicit assertion that the refugees share humanity with their oppressors, even if they no longer occupy the same land.

Mr. Sheikh achieves this effect simply by treating his subjects not as representative types, bit players in a social and political drama larger than themselves, but as individuals. In depicting

them, he adopts the attitude and style of a portraitist rather than a photojournalist; this shift of reference brings with it enormous esthetic and emotional consequences.

For the most part the refugees are photographed alone or in pairs, outdoors or in tents. Mr. Sheikh works with a large-format camera on a tripod, a clunky apparatus that imposes a slower, more deliberate approach on both the photographer and his subjects. He also makes good use of the exceptional detail and shallow focus provided by the larger film and camera. In this way he concentrates attention on his sitters rather than their bleak surroundings.

But it's not just the choice of camera that gives these pictures their commanding air. Mr. Sheikh has a sharp eye for nuances of gesture and stance, and most of his sitters bring a towering dignity to the ceremonial exchange involved in making a portrait.

In a photograph made in a camp in Kenya, for example, the ritual scars that flare across a Sudanese woman's forehead are echoed by the splayed fingers she presses to her plain dress. In another shot from the same camp, a woman poses with her baby daughter; from outside the frame a man's hand reaches to clutch the girl's head.

Hardly anyone smiles in these pictures, but in part that may reflect the solemnity with which the sitters approach the photographic act. Many poses have an iconic formality; in one image, for example, two Sudanese sisters in rough dresses and rubber clogs confront the camera with impassive stares, each with a hand on the other's shoulder.

Details in other photographs speak eloquently of the complexities of the refugees' lives. A picture from a camp in Kenya, for example, shows two teen-age boys, one with ritual scars like worry lines across his forehead, the other with a gleaming cross dangling from his neck.

Wall labels dutifully provide details about the shifting political tides that forced these people to flee their countries. The numbers involved are astounding: hundreds of thousands who left the Sudan in the late 1980's to escape a harrowing civil war; some 500,000 Somalis who by 1992 had settled in camps in Kenya to avoid tribal and clan-based violence; 1.7 million Mozambicans who sought refuge in six neighboring countries in the course of a 15-year civil war.

Statistics like these make the eyes swim. But Mr. Sheikh's quiet photographs demonstrate the impact such upheavals have on the individuals involved, and suggest the depths of tragedy hidden by the numbers.

In some cases Mr. Sheikh concentrates on particular groups within the camps. Many pictures from a camp of Ethiopian refugees, for example, are of young war widows, alone or in pairs; photographs of Sudanese refugees focus on children and youths without families.

One of the most telling aspects of Mr. Sheikh's approach is his implicit respect not only for his subjects but also for his audience. He seldom tries to inject particular meanings into his pictures by using dramatic lighting or poses; instead, he allows his sitters to reveal themselves to the lens, and his viewers to make of the images what they will.

At times, though, he seems to lose faith in the process. A shot of a doleful young man carrying a large print of Jesus' face is emotional overkill; a picture of an outdoor barber tending his customers verges on the picturesque.

Panoramic shots, made by joining several frames, record groups of refugees and the desolate landscapes of the camps themselves and set the scene for the portraits. But several accordion-fold books of photographs mounted on wood or paper and accompanied by handwritten texts seem self-consciously arty, and undercut the direct power of the other images.

The plight of refugees has become a staple of Western news coverage of Africa. But Mr. Sheikh's images, unconventional precisely because they allow events to speak for themselves, provide faces to go with the bare and chilling stories of people driven into exile.

See: A Journal of Visual Culture

June 1995

'A Prayer for the Living'

Carla Williams



Traditional birthing attendant, Nyirababire Esteri, holding newborns Nsabimana ("I beg something from God") and Mukanzabonimpa ("God will grant me, but I don't know when"), flanked by mothers Kanyange, Mukabatazi, and Mukabatazi's mother, Rwandan refugee camp, Lumasi, Tanzania, 1994

Outsider, insider—does it matter who makes the image? It matters what the motives are.

In Fazal Sheikh's photographs of Sudanese, Ethiopian, Somali, Mozambican and Rwandan people living in refugee camps in eastern Africa, the motive is to dispense information in a fair light, to offer an alternative to the invasive and sensationalistic depictions that western journalists routinely offer us of such situations. While first-person anecdotes enliven and flesh

out, and statistics sober and inform, neither provides complete representation. Two things are apparent when I look at these photographs and think of the places from which they come: there is more living going on here than we think, and every one of the images is its own rich, multifarious narrative.

300,00; 500,00; two million; ten million—I cannot conceive of these numbers in any real terms that apply to me. All I know is that whatever they represent in human terms, it is gravely serious. What does it mean for a country when one-third the population either is killed or literally gets up and walks out? What does it mean for the people in the place they must adopt as their new home? And who is facilitating in all of this?

By definition, these refugee camps are not the end of the journey but rather the entrenchment between battles—the deep, drawn breath before exhalation. This life is war—as epic, destructive and apocalyptic as any that has been, fought hand-to-hand against one’s neighbor, his blood draining off into the dirt at your feet.

Sheikh’s photographs possess a patina and formality generally associated with a nineteenth-century tradition of portraiture, demanding the utmost care in the rendering of the subject and relying upon his or her complicity in making it successful. Sheikh never poses his subjects, nor does he assume that a document cannot first be a portrait, richly rendered to heighten its authority and command a presence in the world. The tonality of the prints—sometimes muted, sometimes, graphic—recalls the very color of the earth and the light of the place. Yet these people exist right here, right now, separated not temporally but by distance, geography. There can be nothing nostalgic about the never-before-seen, about subjects as they present themselves, often for the first time, to the camera: conscious but not self-conscious, fully possessed of the solemnity of the record-making event. You do not have to be photographed every day – or ever, for that matter – to understand your physical being and its presence, to comport yourself accordingly. Like the disenfranchised in Walker Evans’ and Doris Ullman’s work, no one here seems to smile, and the viewer is disarmed. For it is a smile that we crave, a hint, an ever-so-slightly turned up corner of a lip that in our minds reassures us that it isn’t so bad, that *everything’s going to be okay*, that they really are like us.

12,000 boys, now assembled, now scattered, like 8-to-18-year-olds often are. They are believed to be faceless, like all homeless persons—as if stability and rootedness are required to make you visible, viable. And yet they are here and standing to be recorded just as plainly as anyone. The format of the panoramic triptych mimics the reality of the so-called “unaccompanied minors” perpetually moving across the continent. Their continual journey through the land, and their existence on it and in it, transforms them into whichever place currently claims them. They are displaced from their homeland, many perhaps believing that it will all be over one day, and they *will* be moving on, going home, getting well.

These photographs encompass, in the mutual reverence and honesty between subject and photographer, the truths about the place, the experience of making the pictures, and the individual identities of the subjects. They allow individuals whose lives and stores are represented to declare their very existence and demand their recognition. Can we come away knowing these people, because we have stared at them and learned their name? Of course not. We come away knowing of them, what they have presented of themselves to the photographer, and, by extension, to us.

New York Magazine

January 2, 1995

'Out of Africa'

Edith Newhall

On his first trip to the Sudanese refugee camp on Kenya's northwest border, with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, photographer Fazal Sheikh had been briefed on the suffering he would see. He was not, however, prepared for the sensationalism. "After we landed on a sandy spit at Lokichoggio, the journalists immediately began their work," he says. "Their stories had to be compiled quickly as they were leaving in the afternoon on the return flight to Nairobi. As I watched them work, I noticed they were drawn to the areas that the spokesman had suggested would provide the best footage," which, Sheikh noticed, inevitably provided the most pitiful images. On a later visit to that camp, Sheikh came across a European diplomat who was there on a "fact-finding" mission. "He was unsatisfied with the children at the feeding center, as there were none of a sufficiently emaciated and ghostly build to provide him the proper accompaniment for a publicity photograph."

The son of a Kenyan father and an American mother and raised in Manhattan, Sheikh spent his summers with his father's family in Kenya. In his own portraits of refugee Africans, on view at the Pace/Macgill Gallery, he looked for balance and a sense of humanity and found both. Says Sheikh: "My photographs show the people of Northern Kenya as not wholly unlike you and me."

New York Times
February 18, 1994
'Art in Review'
Charles Hagen

For several years, Fazal Sheikh has photographed refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia who have been forced by ethnic strife to flee to camps in Kenya. But his photographs have none of the sensationalism usually found in images from this troubled region.

Mr. Sheikh photographs with an old-fashioned formality, depicting his sitters head on and using shallow focus and a large-format camera. He enlarges black-and-white Polaroid negatives to make prints that are then toned a golden brown. This process gives the pictures the impassive distance of 19th-century studio portraits. The ceremonial quality of the pictures is strengthened by the seriousness with which the sitters confront the camera.

Most of the images are ones that were taken outdoors, often in the shade of a tree. In one picture, made in a tent, a thin girl gazes into the lens with a quiet intensity, while a man's hand reaches into the frame to steady her.

Mr. Sheikh achieves a remarkable degree of trust from his sitters. His pictures do little to explain the continuing violence in the area, but they do present the refugees as people, rather than exotic ciphers.

Accompanying Mr. Sheikh's portraits are black-and-white photographs of Egypt by Richard Barnes. Mr. Barnes has a sharp eye for incongruities; one of his pictures is of a watchman's television inside an ancient tomb; another shows a sleek tourist bus in front of the Pyramids. Next to Mr. Sheikh's more emotional pictures, though, his smart and ironic images suffer.

Go to the *New York Times*

Village Voice

February 8, 1994

'The Light Continent'

Vince Aletti



Akuot Nyibol (pregnant at center) with Riak Warabek, and Akuot's daughter, Athok Duom, who is recovering from malaria, Sudanese refugee camp, Lokichoggio, Kenya, 1992

Fazal Sheikh, a young American photographer who has spent the past few years making pictures in the refugee camps that dot Kenya's northern border, tends to skirt the feeding centers where the sickest of the camps' population can be found. That was always where the photojournalists swarmed, drawn like flies to the worst cases, to the distended bellies and skeletal limbs, sucking up desperation and death in the few hours before their plane returned to Nairobi. But Sheikh went to one feeding center, in Mandera, because he'd heard from a Kenyan doctor that Somali mothers in the camp had smothered their malnourished children, killing them out of pure callousness. And every day for nearly two weeks, Sheikh photographed mothers and aunts and older siblings – nearly 100 of them – sitting with the skinny, big-eyed children they carried three times a day to the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) tent. He's collected these pictures – small, black-and-white contact prints trimmed into irregular vignettes bordered in black – and lacquered them side-by-side on the inside of a big photo portfolio box that he holds open in his arms and displays like a pair of engraved tablets or a book of revelations. One picture would be enough to

refute the doctor's charge of callousness, but here are 50, each a detailed variation on Madonna and child: delicate, understated, achingly intense dramas of love and concern.

Sheikh doesn't doubt that some parents might have suffocated their sick children, but out of compassion and mercy, not cold-heartedness. "In their experience, across the border, they knew that their child was beyond help." And many of them were clearly shocked to discover that conditions they thought fatal could often be reversed at the feeding center. "That doctor could have been right, but I thought I should go and see for myself," Sheikh says simply. "And that 's really what all the work has been about – going to see with no real preconceptions, and letting them [the refugees] instruct me." "The work," some of which is on display now in Sheikh's New York debut at the OPSIS Gallery, trashes a lot of preconceptions, not the least of which is the horror show image of African starvation photojournalists have been feeding us for years.

Sheikh can get pretty worked up about photojournalists and what he calls the "sensational, predatory nature of their work," especially in Africa. The New York-born son of a Kenyan father and a mother he describes as "a WASP from New Jersey," Sheikh, 28, grew up privileged in Manhattan, graduating from Dalton, then Princeton, but spent his childhood summers in Kenya with his father's large, extended Muslim family. Though he studied both ceramics and photography at Princeton, producing a thesis project that combined both media in a cave-like installation of outsize, sometimes nude, self-portraits and pit-fired ceramic monoliths, it was the camera that finally won him over. He took one with him when he drove and hitchhiked from England to the southern tip of Africa over the course of a year after graduation. Alone in Johannesburg, he rented a room in the house of a politically active woman who also provided shelter to teenage boys just out of detention. He calls the time "a bit of a turning point" because, although he'd already photographed in the Swahili communities on the Kenyan coast where he spent his summers, he was ready to move into more unfamiliar territory.

"I was interested in working in a place that I had read about in the newspapers," Sheikh says, "but I wasn't ready to go there and accept what I had already read and heard. " He spent four months in South Africa before he took any pictures, and the longer he stayed, "the more gray the situation became. You go with this very clear idea of what the situation is, with a sort of righteousness about it all, but as I let that wash away, I realized it wasn't that simple." When he began making pictures, it was in the homelands with people he'd come to know, and he displayed his portraits against a background of collage news photos so that the gap between media hyperbole and the more complicated, more mundane, and more vividly specific reality of black south African life was if not bridged, then at least made plain.

With the Fulbright grant he nailed in 1990, Sheikh returned to Kenya reeling from a massive refugee influx, the result of civil wars and famines in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia – all bordering its remote northern region. The first time he was airlifted from Nairobi to the Sudanese border with a posse of journalists and news photographers, Sheikh writes, "I felt an uneasiness, an inability to follow along and make the expected photographs." Maybe it was because he'd already spent time in this same desert on his earlier trek through Africa, before MSF and the United Nations had set up their encampments. Maybe it was because the Dark Continent was, in part, his home and his heritage. Maybe it was because he could never see the refugees merely as subjects, as material, as pitiable, pathetic others.

In any case, the photographs Sheikh makes in the camps bear little resemblance to the sort of shocking images that show up on the cover of the New York Times Magazine or in full-page ads for relief organizations. Where even the best photojournalists are spirited in and out of a camp in a matter of hours, Sheikh typically stays two weeks in each location, sheltered by the UN High Commission for Refugees or by MSF but spending his with the exiles and hoping to

“give them some kind of a voice.” Working with the elders in different camps, he would photograph first what they thought was important and gradually cultivate a network of connections that he was able to return to again and again. Because he never just hits and runs, Sheikh’s pictures reflect the complex social life of the camps: a somber-looking Sudanese couple on the second day of a long-interrupted, two-day wedding; a small Somali girl in a flowing white dress seated next to her father, who’s standing slightly out of the frame but reaching in a strong, steadying hand to rest on her shoulder; a three-part panorama of Ethiopian women and children arrayed behind a seated matriarch with the face of an Egyptian icon. And, unlike nearly all the other photos we see from sites of Third World misery, each of the people in Sheikh’s portraits is carefully identified, given the simple dignity of a name.

“For me the most interesting thing is to make a picture of a loaded subject but in a way that belies our preconceptions,” he says. His example is a photograph of three Sudanese women, the youngest a teenage girl recovering from malaria who stands before her robed and pregnant mother, both facing the camera gravely. Next to them is the girl’s aunt who has turned away from the camera to look at her niece with an expression as serious as it is loving; she holds the girl’s left arm in both her hands, anchoring her in tenderness. The picture was taken at the end of a day when Sheikh was tired and ready to knock off, so he had little hope of making something good. But the women had not ever been photographed before and, because, Sheikh works with a Polaroid, they know they would be able to see and possess a copy right away. (Sheikh gives all his subjects the Polaroid original and makes his larger prints from the negatives, retaining their distinctive irregular borders as ready-made frames; smaller contact prints from these same negatives are often incorporated into black-lacquered hand-made books with texts in gold.) The striking triangular pose was their own, and Sheikh regards it and the resulting photographs as collaborations and as a “gift.” “I don’t feel I can take credit for it. When I say, ‘Isn’t this great?’ it isn’t because I made it but because, wow, look what I got to see.”

Some of what Sheikh sees in the camps he considers personally out of bounds – over what he calls “the edge.” He tells the story of a magazine photojournalist snapping pictures of a Somali man who was dying in his hut. When the photographer discovered that light was bouncing off his subject’s skin and ruining the photos, he stopped, applied makeup to the shiny spots, took some more pictures, left, and the man died. “There are times when I just wouldn’t think to photograph,” Sheikh says. “Having grown up partially in Kenya, I feel very protective, but just anybody should feel protective of someone in dire circumstances, and I feel like there are certain pictures that it would be a real trespass to make.” When it comes to pictures of the dead and dying he says, I just am not so interested in photographing people to make them this other group.” He prefers to focus on life, solidarity, and community – the ties that bind. In virtually all his pictures, people are shown in pairs or in groups, often with other people visible in the background or straying casually into the frame: “They’re not just that one guy lying on the ground. That one guy has people around him.”

Sheikh, who has been living on his own since age 15 but is currently rootless (“The important thing is to have a darkroom and a space to work in,” he says from the temporary shelter of a friend’s apartment), still divides his time between Nairobi and New Jersey and plans to continue work in the refugee camps for at least another two years. As a subject, “Africa is so loaded” and he’s only just begun. Besides, he has a mission: “There must be some middle ground between journalism and art,” he says, “Where you can be honest and still be supportive. I think that what art can do is create an atmosphere where we’re thinking that solutions are important. “The way I’m working is not about saving the world, I’m just sort of interested in balancing out the scales and thinking that must count for something.”