

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## ‘Homelands and Histories: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh’ Review: Capturing Global Humanity

Fazal Sheikh documents the world’s trouble spots, making dignified portraits of the people who live in them.

*By Richard B. Woodward*

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*Houston*



Fazal Sheikh’s ‘Bhajan Ashram at Dawn, Vrindavan, India’ (2005),  
from the series ‘Moksha.’ Photo: Fazal Sheikh

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**Homelands and Histories:  
Photographs by Fazal Sheikh**  
*Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*  
*Through Oct. 1*

**For more than 25 years**, Fazal Sheikh has photographed people caught by accident of birth or geography in the steel jaws of modern history.

His first book, “A Sense of Common Ground” (1996), was a slender volume of portraits taken in refugee camps in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique and Rwanda. He has since expanded his work to other poor or embattled countries, in Southern Asia and the Middle East. He visits not to file news reports about the world’s trouble spots, much less in hopes of preventing wars or revolutions, but simply to make dignified portraits of uprooted civilians fleeing violence or campaigning against injustice and hoping to thrive against terrible odds.

“Homelands and Histories: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh,” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is a fine representation of his unadorned yet affecting approach. A sample from many of his 20 projects between the late 1980s and the early 2010s, the 75 prints are mostly black-and-white, with a smattering of color. Portraits predominate, although landscapes are interspersed throughout.



Ajuh Achot and Achol Manyen, Sudanese Refugee Camp, Lokichoggio, Kenya; (1992), from the series ‘A Sense of Common Ground.’ Photo: Fazal Sheikh

The solemnity of Mr. Sheikh's sitters—many looking directly into the camera, others down or away—reflects the time (hours, days, weeks) he has devoted to learning some part of their story. Whatever ugly or horrible scenes witnessed by these women, men and children, most of whom are named, are safely outside the frame when he clicks the shutter. The photographs exude an unnatural calm.

Not that we are allowed to forget what happened before Mr. Sheikh appeared. The caption for a 1997 photograph of Mohammed Daud's mangled left hand informs us he had picked up a butterfly mine in Afghanistan, thinking it was a toy. In another close-up of a hand, Abdul Aziz holds a tiny photograph of his missing brother, Mula Abdul Hakim, presumed dead years ago after his capture by the Soviets during their 1980s incursion into Afghanistan.



Latitude: 31°1'5"N / Longitude: 34°57'5"E—Staining of Prior Animal Enclosures Marking Successive Years of Habitation, Unrecognized Bedouin Village of Rakhma, Live-Fire Training Zone, the Negev' (November 14, 2011) from the series 'Desert Bloom.' Photo: Fazal Sheikh

Mr. Sheikh's photographs from India have a keener political edge and focus on injustice toward women. His 2003-05 series "Moksha" (a Hindu concept indicating an elevated stage on the path to reincarnation) portrays some of the hundreds of widows who survive on handouts or from begging in the holy city of Vrindavan.

Born in New York in 1965 to a Kenyan father and American mother, Mr. Sheikh graduated from Princeton University, where he studied with the photographer Emmet Gowin, and has earned MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships. He lives in Zurich.

The later work in the show also displays his considerable skills and sympathies beyond the formal portrait. Most intriguing here are the seven color photographs from his lengthy series “Ether” (2008-12).



‘Night-Walking in Benares, India,’ from the series Ether (2008-12). Photo: Fazal Sheikh

Made with a small camera on nighttime walks around the city of Benares (Varanasi), India, the sacred Hindu cremation site along the Ganges, they are random observations that veer between the macabre (a dead dog wrapped in ceremonial sheets) and the blissful (people peacefully asleep on the ground). The trance-like atmosphere in these pictures, of life slowed down and distilled into an attar of narcotic sensations, can be compared to “Forest of Bliss,” Robert Gardner’s mesmerizing 1986 documentary on this unique place.

Another outlier in Mr. Sheikh’s oeuvre is “Desert Bloom” (2011). A series of sepia-toned aerial views of Israel’s Negev Desert, each photograph marked by map coordinates, it’s a project about history, growth, landscape and memory. What we see from on high are areas delicately carved out by mining or for the planting of forests; what’s missing is any trace of the Bedouins, the Negev’s long-time inhabitants, who have slowly been displaced, sometimes forcibly.



'Abdul Aziz, Holding a Photograph of His Brother, Mula Abdul Hakim, Afghan Refugee Village, Khairabad, North Pakistan' (1998) from the series 'The Victor Weeps.' Photo: Fazal Sheikh

As the show is a sampler—it's a gift from a donor, Jane P. Watkins, who allowed the MFAH's curator of photographs, Malcolm Daniel, and Mr. Sheikh to select prints from many bodies of work—walking around the walls can seem like listening to the radio in scan mode.

This feeling is most acute with "Independence/Nakba," Mr. Sheikh's 2013 series of 65 diptychs, in which he paired photographs of one Israeli and one Palestinian born in each of the years since 1948. As his concerns are as much about community as physiognomy, it was fitting he used this anniversary date, marked by one group as a joyful beginning and by the other group as the beginning of a catastrophe, to generate parallel portraits. The single example here, simple and powerful, made me eager to see the other 64. Not many exhibitions these days deserve to be bigger. This is a beautiful exception. —*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

<http://on.wsj.com/2q63Nk5>