



ARTIST

Fazal Sheikh

TITLE

Ndimwabahari ('a person who has milk and cattle'), Rwandan refugee camp, Lumasi, Tanzania

DATE

1994

DIMENSIONS

20 in H x 16 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

IMAGE NOTES

Toned Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1993.047

CURRENT LOCATION

2024-14B

FAZAL SHEIKH

BORN

1965

BIRTHPLACE

New York, NY

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1993
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1993
Fine Print Program, 1995
Book Collectors Program, 1996
Light Work Gallery, 2001

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 82
Contact Sheet 97
Contact Sheet 114
Menschel Gallery Catalogue 34
Contact Sheet 173

BIOGRAPHY

Fazal Sheikh is an artist who uses photographs to document people living in displaced and marginalized communities around the world. His principle medium is the portrait, although his work also encompasses personal narratives, found photographs, archival material, sound, and his own written texts.

He works from the conviction that a portrait is, as far as possible, an act of mutual engagement, and only through a long-term commitment to a place and to a community can a meaningful series of photographs be made. His overall aim is to contribute to a wider understanding of these groups, to respect them as individuals and to counter the ignorance and prejudice that often attaches to them.

Each of his projects is collected and published and is exhibited internationally in galleries and museums. He also works closely with human rights organizations and believes in disseminating his work in forms that can be distributed as widely as possible and can be of use to the communities themselves.

Fazal Ilahi Sheikh was born in 1965 in New York City. He graduated from Princeton University with a B.A. in 1987 and since then has worked as a photographer documenting the lives of individuals in displaced communities across East Africa, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Brazil, Cuba, India and Israel/Palestine. He has received many awards for his work, including a Fulbright Fellowship (1992), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1994), the Infinity Award (1995), the Leica Medal of Excellence (1995), Le Prix Dialogue de l'Humanité, Rencontres d'Arles (2003), the Henri Cartier-Bresson International Grand Prize (2005), the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize (finalist, 2008), the Lucie Humanitarian Award (2009), the Deutscher Fotobuchpreis (2009 and 2016), and the Kraszna-Krausz Book Award (2016).

In 2005 he was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow and in 2012 a Guggenheim Fellow.

Fazal Sheikh's work has been exhibited in galleries and museums around the world, including Tate Modern, London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the International Center of Photography and the United Nations, New York City, the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, Paris, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow. His work is held by many public collections, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, New York City; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; and the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 2001, as one facet of his practice, Sheikh established a series of projects and books about international human rights issues that would be published and distributed free of charge and made available online. These are published under the imprint of the International Human Rights Series (IHRS). This website is, therefore, a record of his work to date and constitutes an online exhibition, a publishing resource, and an archive.

ESSAYS

The title of Ellen Gilchrist's fourth book of short stories announces that 'Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle.' Light is the source of photographic descriptions. The nature of light to function both as a minuscule quantum of energy and as a force that illuminates our world informs us that point of view is a critical component of photography. From the earliest issues of National Geographic Magazine through its most recent release, to the celebrated portraits of Irving Penn, and onto the pages of today's newspapers, the point of view in photographs of Africans is as narrow as the pages they are printed on. The pervasive image of Africa as a 'Dark Continent' filled only with wild animals, exotic people and starving children is a tragic yet true testament to the power of photography. Fazal Sheikh understands the power of photographic representation. In his portraits from Kenya's Northern Frontier he finds that power in the faces and gestures of people from Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. His portraits are empowering in many ways. The simple detail that each portrait includes the names of the people is an acknowledgement of respect that opposes the usual tag line of 'Somali mother with malnourished child' or other anonymous identifications that usually accompany photographs of Africans who aren't Nelson Mandela. Sheikh shares a part of his own lineage with the people he photographs. His father is Kenyan and Sheikh speaks the same language as many of the people in his photographs. These points of common ground enable Sheikh to spend time uncovering small bits of personal information about his subjects that he translates into moments of trust and recognition across the picture plane of his photographs. We sense that the terms of agreement for the photograph have been arrived at together, a collaboration of conferral and acceptance. Within that collaboration Sheikh creates the opportunity for his subjects to express their dignity and then responds by giving that dignity the time and the place to form into the descriptions of his photographs. Fazal Sheikh's photographs are not as

important to Ajoh Achot, William Gai or Nyapa Deng as they are to us - the outsiders - freighted with our assumptions, pity and prejudice. Sheikh's photographs clearly acknowledge that the Ethiopian, Sudanese and Somali refugees in Kenya's Northern Frontier know who they are. They reach out to one another, they wear their customs and culture with pride, they persevere, they feel pain, they share affections, they are relentlessly human - like someone we know. Jeffrey Hoone (c) 1993 In 2001 Fazal Sheikh conceived of a series of projects that would engage an international audience and further their understanding of complex human rights issues around the world. These projects would take a variety of forms—books, films, catalogues, exhibitions—and would be disseminated as widely as possible. The first to projects, 'A Camel for the Son' and 'Ramadan Moon' (2001), concerned the situation of women refugees from Somalia living in long-term camps in northern Kenya and as asylum seekers in The Netherlands. The third project was a DVD based on Fazal Sheikh's book 'The Victor Weeps' (Scalo, 1998), a study of Afghan refugee communities exiled to camps on the North Pakistan border. In 2005 and 2007, Moksha and Ladli, two books which examine the prejudice against women in traditional Indian society, were added, each with texts translated into Bengali and Hindi. Publications from the series are being distributed through a network of institutions concerned with human rights and the humanities, political and cultural groups, and non-governmental organizations. They are distributed free of charge and brought to the attention of the media and relevant political representatives. This group of thirty posters, based on Fazal Sheikh's research in India for his books Moksha and Ladli, is one of one thousand sets to be distributed to charities and non-governmental organizations across India working for the rights of women. It is supported by a Distribution Fellowship from the Open Society Institute in New York City, and made in collaboration with ActionAid India, based in Delhi, and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, Paris. During the past several years northern Kenya has become home to nearly half a million people seeking refuge from their native countries. To the west come Sudanese refugees who are fleeing the ongoing civil war between the Islamic north and the Christian/Animist south. Kenya's shared border and Ethiopia is home to refugees fleeing tribal clashes. Kenya shares its northeastern border with Somalia and is experiencing a massive influx of Somalis in search of food and relief from the clan warfare gripping their homeland. My first trip to the Sudanese refugee camp on Kenya's northwestern border with the Sudan was with a United Nations High Commission of Refugees flight from Nairobi. Although the trip was nearly two years ago, it remains vivid in my mind because it was the first time I witnessed journalist and photojournalists at work. There were perhaps ten of us on the plane: aid workers, two journalists, and one cameraman. Before embarking on the journey, we were briefed on what we were about to see. From the cool comfort of Nairobi, it was difficult to imagine the harsh and remote terrain of the northern desert. The United Nations representative spoke in hushed tones about the 25,000 refugees in the camp. Catch words like "manipulation," "orphan," "Unaccompanied Minors," "training and suffering" played in my mind as we boarded the plane for the north. After we landed on a sandy spit at Lokichoggio, the journalist immediately began their work. 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 throughout the morning and early afternoon, I noticed that they were drawn to the areas that the spokesman had suggested would provide the best footage. Showing an attitude similar to these journalists was a European diplomat who, sometime later, visited the area 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. As I sat in the camp several days after my arrival, I thought back to the first day and to my initial impressions about the camp, the people, and my role there as a photographer. I felt an uneasiness, an inability to follow along and make the expected photographs. I had been to this part of Kenya in the days prior to the refugees' arrival, and now during this visit, I moved about the village and the camp trying to make sense of the whirlwind in which I was engulfed. As time passed I began to realize that the preconceptions which had been hoisted upon me at the initial briefing in Nairobi and shock of the first encounter began to fade away and I was left with a broader expanded sense of the people and their situation. I realized on this trip that my project was to become an attempt to depict a fuller sense of the communities in this region, free of what I have come to believe is the sensational, predatory nature of photojournalism. My pictures are collaborations in which individuals are free to express their humanity: their longings, their strengths, their solidarity. Where I had at one time avoided the areas of concentrated media coverage, I now approached these same locations with the determination that I would make photographs of people in the exact same place but render them in a way that would belie the notion that they lacked humanity or were stripped of their pride. I am the son of a Kenyan father and an American mother. This dual heritage has afforded me the advantage of seeing with the eyes of an insider and with the added knowledge of someone who has witnessed how the situation is interpreted and represented in other countries. The history of such depictions of Africans and their cultures within Western media and art is replete with images that perpetuate the mystique of Africa as the "Dark Continent." The two bodies of work that I have most recently seen which deal with Africa are the images in the mainstream media from Somalia and portraits of Africans made by artists. In the artist's work, the subject of the photograph is often chosen for his or her physical attributes. A fanciful dress or garment, a particular fierce gaze, a boy with a sloped forehead suggestive of inbreeding, are all used as measuring devices for photographic relevance. Once chosen, the subject is photographed in a makeshift studio. In the studio and away from their surroundings, the subject becomes a decontextualized model of exoticism consistent with the western perception of Africa as the place where wild, striking and exotic types abound. In studying the recent representations of Somalis in the media, I realize that the subjects of these photographs, as is true for those in artists' renderings, are chosen primarily for their physical qualities. A malnourished child, a haggard frame, and a vicious struggle for food are the subjects of choice. These kinds of representations allow us to have pity for people while remaining detached and superior; they are, after all, the "other." You and I could never be in the same situation. In these pictures, people are like animals, victims of a fierce and primitive world. It is my intention to create a body of work that will document the cultural and political transitions in Kenya. In contrast to typical portraits made by artists and the widespread media imagery of Somalis I work to offset or provide a balance to the imagery that foregrounds visions of a mythic Dark Continent. I make more direct, un-manipulated rendering of the people and their home. By using this method, I may not be able to get a story in the course of a single day, but I believe I gain and impart a fuller understanding of the complexities of the situation. I spend weeks in any one given area, initially without the camera, and have the luxury of returning to the same people and the same region repeatedly. My photographs show the people of northern Kenya as not wholly unlike you and me. It is my sense that by expanding our visual representations of Africa we can arrive at a level of understanding, empathy, and commonality that will bring about changes in stereotypical perceptions. Then, when we see and hear the five-line blip of news on the television we are more aware that this only scrapes at the surface of a situation that has many more layers. It is my hope that this type of documentation can ultimately serve to prompt social change by making the hardships of the "other" more like our own. Fazal Sheikh November 1993