

EARLY WORK

Sheikh attended Princeton University, where he studied photography with renowned photographer Emmet Gowin. After graduating in 1987, he hitchhiked and drove from England to South Africa, settling in Johannesburg. During this period he regularly visited the homelands, regions where black South Africans were forcibly resettled under apartheid, the government-enforced system of oppression that lasted from 1948 through 1991.

While spending time with residents of the homelands, Sheikh learned about the effects of displacement due to racism and forced segregation. Taking few photos during his visits, he came to understand the complex social and political issues that sustained the apartheid system.

In 1992, Sheikh relocated to Kenya, where he had spent many childhood summers with his father's family. That same year, more than 500,000 Somalis, fleeing tribal and clan-based violence, sought refuge along Kenya's border with Somalia. As he did in the South Africa homelands, Sheikh gradually came to know and photograph some of the refugees living in the sprawling camps.

—Julia Dolan

A SENSE OF COMMON GROUND

During the early 1990s, civil wars and famine displaced millions of people living in a number of African countries. Citizens of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia flooded into the borderlands of Kenya in 1991 and 1992, where large camps were established to harbor them. Farther south, people escaping war in Mozambique fled to Malawi, and genocide of the Tutsi ethnic group pushed more than 250,000 Rwandans into Tanzania on a single day in 1994.

Between 1992 and 1994, Sheikh worked within these diverse refugee communities. He discovered that most photojournalists spent fewer than twenty-four hours in the camps, quickly taking their pictures before leaving. Uncomfortable with this impersonal and often exploitive approach, Sheikh spent extended periods in each camp, becoming acquainted with the elders and asking permission to photograph their community members. He collaborated with his sitters, who were invited to pose in the ways they wished to be portrayed. He also recorded their names, an unusual but critically important activity, since most news outlets rendered refugees nameless.

This respectful and sensitive method of portrait-making, first established in South Africa, was further developed during this period and is now a cornerstone of Sheikh's photographic practice. Elements including landscapes, still lifes, and personal narratives provide additional context, but the portrait remains at the core of his work.

—Julia Dolan

THE VICTOR WEEPS

In 1996, after an extended period of photographing displaced peoples in Eastern Africa, Sheikh traveled to Pakistan (formerly northern India), the birthplace of his grandfather. There he learned that hundreds of thousands of people who fled Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) still lived in refugee camps in the country's North West Frontier Province. Over the course of two years, Sheikh visited the camps to photograph residents and record their stories.

Some of Sheikh's subjects recounted their past experiences as Mujahedin, or freedom fighters, who fought in the jihad (holy war) against the Soviets. They also spoke of their continuing desire to return to their homes in Afghanistan, of those they lost during the long conflict, and how the dead often communicated with the living through dreams, bringing comfort to those left behind.

Many people shared photographs of their loved ones with Sheikh, demonstrating the power of photography and its importance to people suffering from great loss. After the Soviet-Afghan War ended and Taliban rule was installed in 1996, photography of living creatures was banned in Afghanistan, and was punishable by beatings and imprisonment.

—Julia Dolan

A CAMEL FOR THE SON

Sheikh first photographed in displacement camps in eastern Kenya between 1992 and 1994, spending time with refugees who fled Somalia after genocide and civil war took hold there. He made a series of portraits of babies with their mothers or older siblings at a feeding center where malnourished children were returned to health over time. The majority of the refugees in these camps were women and children, and famine was not their only obstacle: Frequently, they faced gender-based violence when they fled Somalia as well as in the Kenyan camps that were meant to offer safe harbor.

Sheikh returned to Kenya in 2000, visiting the consolidated camp at Dadaab, which today remains one of the largest refugee centers in the world hosting more than 230,000 refugees. There he found some of the same Somali women and children he encountered in the early 1990s. The children were approaching their teenage years, and a number of the women had formed groups to combat the rape and violence that continued to threaten them. They worked with organizations including the United Nations to bring their male oppressors to justice, and spoke with Sheikh at length about the many challenges they faced as women—both at home in Somalia a decade earlier as well as in the displacement camps.

—Julia Dolan

RAMADAN MOON

Fazal Sheikh photographed Seynab Azir Wardeere during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting in the Islamic calendar. Each night she spoke of her experiences in Somalia and current life at the Asylum Seekers' Center in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Seynab was a forty-year-old wife and mother of three when four men broke into her home while her husband was away. They killed her father, then raped her in front of her children. Her mother died of grief a week later. When her husband returned, they moved to a neighbor's house for safety.

Seynab and her husband hoped to trade their house for passage to Denmark, but they didn't have enough money for the whole family to leave. Seynab and their son left for Denmark, but were stopped in Amsterdam and sent to the Asylum Seekers' Center. Her husband and daughters went to live with his family in a smaller town in Somalia.

On clear nights Seynab looks up at the sky and imagines she is seeing the moon and stars from her old home in Mogadishu. She wonders if her husband and daughters are also looking up, and seeing the same stars. In sympathy with her hopes, Sheikh wandered and made photographs of night skies over the Netherlands.

—Eric Paddock, Curator of Photography,
Denver Art Museum

ETHER

Sheikh created *Ether*, his first color series, between 2008 and 2012. While walking the streets of Varanasi (also known as Benares) late at night, he considered the profound experience of death and its significance for the living. Located along the banks of the Ganges River in northern India, Varanasi is considered the spiritual capital of the country. It is a pilgrimage site for many Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains who seek salvation after death. At night, sleeping pilgrims who will rise with the sun to ritually bathe in the Ganges are nearly indistinguishable from the dead, whose bodies await cremation and final release from the earthly cycle of death and rebirth.

During these nighttime walks in Varanasi, Sheikh thought of the ways that the mind and body disconnect while sleeping and dreaming, recalling the time he spent with his dying father and the profound connection they shared as the elder man's physical state declined. He also thought of his paternal ancestors, who had left northern India a century earlier to resettle in Africa, and of the many physical and spiritual journeys one makes during the course of a lifetime.

—Julia Dolan

MOKSHA

For five hundred years the holy city of Vrindavan in northern India has been a haven for India's dispossessed widows. Cast out by their families and condemned by strict marital laws which deny them legal, economic, and in extreme cases, human rights, they have made their way to the city to worship at its temples and live in its ashrams (monastic communities), surviving on charitable handouts or begging on the streets. In Vrindavan they worship the young Hindu god Krishna, who invades their dreams, helping them to cast off memories from their past life and prepare for a new and better life to come. Their dream is to reach the state that Hindus call *moksha*, where they will be free from the cycle of death and rebirth and live surrounded by their gods forever.

Hindus believe that when a person dies, he or she is reborn. The position given in the new life depends on the person's karma. The laws of karma rule that all one's actions are the result of past actions and will dictate one's actions in the future. A person can affect his own karma by his conduct. This cycle of reincarnation based on past actions is called *samsara*. The ultimate dream is of a release from *samsara* into a higher state, where one is freed from the world of change and illusion which is the cause of disappointment and suffering. This state is called *moksha*. It involves the loss of one's individual identity and absorption into the universal spirit or the absolute.

In Vrindavan the devout chant and dwell upon Krishna in preparation for receiving his ultimate reward—*moksha*.

—Fazal Sheikh

LADLI

In 2003, I visited the holy city of Vrindavan, India, for the first time and saw some of the thousands of Hindu widows who live in its ashrams and on its streets. It educated me about the vulnerability of many women in traditional Indian society.

In 2005 I returned to India to start from the beginning: to discover from childbirth what women, the mother and her daughter, have to suffer. With the help of charitable and activist organizations, many of them staffed and run by women, I met girls and young women who told me about their experiences. In many parts of India, a girl child is considered a burden; she will not be able to carry on the family name, and she will cost the family a great deal in the future, when a dowry will have to be offered to secure her a husband. The long-held cultural preference in India for boy children has led to hundreds of thousands of girls being neglected, abandoned or killed at birth, or, with the advent of ultrasound scanning, aborted. Abortion is legal in India, but sex-selective abortion is not. Despite this, the rate of terminated pregnancies has risen over the past thirty years, and in some regions of India the ratio of females to males is 7:10.

As I read in the media how India is heralded for its miraculous entry onto the world's economic stage, I wonder what the prospects of women might be in a country surging forward into this glorious future. During the several months I worked in India, I was often told that key legislative and judicial reforms had vastly improved prospects for women. What I saw and heard daily showed, instead, that the mistreatment of women continues to reflect a cultural prejudice as ingrained as any racial or religious divide.

—Fazal Sheikh