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'Fazal Sheikh – Ether, Pace/MacGill Gallery'

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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.