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First Comprehensive American Exhibition of Contemporary Photographer Fazal Sheikh's Works to Premiere at Denver Art Museum

Global human rights issues brought to light through more than 100 photographs

DENVER—Feb. 8, 2017—The Denver Art Museum (DAM) is proud to present *Common Ground: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh, 1989-2013*, the first comprehensive American exhibition of critically-acclaimed photographer Fazal Sheikh's work. The more than two-decade-long career of the Kenyan-rooted and American-born artist has focused on raising awareness of international human rights issues through his documentary-based photography practice. The exhibition, on view from Aug. 13 to Nov. 12, 2017, will feature more than 100 portraits and landscapes chronicling individuals living in displaced and marginalized communities around the world, many times as the result of war, exploitation and poverty. *Common Ground* is the first time this selection of works has been shown together in one place.

"Sheikh's photographs remind us that portraits are more than just a face," said Christoph Heinrich, Frederick and Jan Mayer Director of the DAM. "His ability to capture an individual's spirit, traditions, beliefs, culture and reality in one photo is awe-inspiring. The exhibition will invite visitors to explore mankind through the lens of a single artist, whose body of work is striking, and bound to spark conversations about present-day issues."

Common Ground will offer deeper insight into major world events, racial strife and the reality of mass global displacement in places such as East Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the Netherlands. Stories told through Sheikh's pictures focus on survivors, orphans and victims of violence and abuse, with subjects including mothers, children and the elderly. A selection of the artist's landscape photographs will be included in the exhibition to provide context. *Common Ground* will display Sheikh's meticulous technique and empathetic representation of harsh realities.

"Fazal Sheikh has photographed survivors of civil war, ethnic hatred and social marginalization for more than two decades," said Eric Paddock, curator of photography at the DAM. "His photographs put us eye-to-eye with individuals in ways that reveal our shared humanity, rather than reinforcing symbols or stereotypes. His empathy and the straightforward elegance of his pictures give his work unique power and grace."



Fazal Sheikh, *Abshiro Aden Mohammed, Women's Leader, Somali Refugee Camp, Dagahaley, Kenya, 2000*, from the series *A Camel for the Son*. © Fazal Sheikh.

The exhibition will survey Sheikh's work in eight thematic sections that span a period from 1989 to 2013, focusing on the artist's global travels that connected him to displaced refugees and those living in exile camps. The exhibition will open with portraits made on his early visits to refugee camps in East and South Africa. Following those portraits is a series that shows women and children left behind as a result of war in Somalia. Other sections consider women who were cast off by their families in India, young orphans and the memories of Afghanistan war refugees.

Common Ground also will feature a section focused on a single subject, the story of Seynab Azir Wardeere, a Somali war refugee who sought asylum in the Netherlands. Recorded interviews of Wardeere's difficult accounts of making a new home in a new and unfamiliar culture will be featured as well.



Fazal Sheikh, *Ether, Banaras, India*, 2012. © Fazal Sheikh

The exhibition will also examine Sheikh's first color series of photographs. Sheikh walked the streets and *ghats* of India's holy city of Benares, also known as Varanasi, where he encountered homeless people sleeping in the open, as well as human remains wrapped in colored shrouds awaiting cremation. Sheikh combined these portraits with photographs of doorways, clouds and the night sky to create a tender visual poem where sleep, death, dreaming and passage are closely interwoven.

Sheikh's series of photographs have earned him countless awards and fellowships, including a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Henri

Cartier-Bresson International Grand Prize and the Luce Humanitarian Award, among many others. The spirit of his work will be extended to the Denver metro area in 2017, as the museum plans to work with refugee community leaders to bring a local exhibition-focused community project to light.

The exhibition is included in general admission and will be on view in the Gallagher Gallery of the Hamilton Building at the DAM. A book of Sheikh's work will be available in The Shops at the Denver Art Museum.

Exhibition Sponsors

Common Ground: Photographs by Fazal Sheikh, 1989-2013, is organized by the DAM. It is presented with the generous support of donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign and the citizens who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD). Promotional support is provided by *5280 Magazine*, CBS4, Comcast Spotlight and *The Denver Post*.

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The Denver Art Museum

The Denver Art Museum is an educational, nonprofit resource that sparks creative thinking and expression through transformative experiences with art. Its holdings reflect the city and region—and provide invaluable ways for the community to learn about cultures from around the world. Metro citizens support the [Scientific and Cultural Facilities District](http://www.scfd.org) (SCFD), a unique funding source serving hundreds of metro Denver arts, culture and scientific organizations. For museum information, call 720-865-5000 or visit www.denverartmuseum.org.

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