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# Sebastião Salgado's Search for the Pristine

**HOLLY MYERS AND TOM CHRISTIE** | JUNE 13, 2007 | 6:00AM

A documentary photographer with a Ph.D. in economics, Sebastião Salgado has spent much of the last 30 years in the underbelly of globalization, bearing witness to some of the bleakest chapters of recent history. He's photographed the victims of

famine in Ethiopia, genocide in Rwanda, land mines in Angola, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and war in Afghanistan. His last two major projects, “Workers” (1986–1992) and “Migrations” (1993–1999), are epic studies of postindustrial economic development, as reflected in the faces of those whom it least serves, from Brazilian gold miners to Vietnamese fishermen, displaced Ecuadorian farmers to Sudanese refugees.

### Iceberg Between Paulet Island & the Shetlands, Antarctica (2005)

His recent work, however, has taken a more optimistic turn, and he’s seeking out a different sort of company: not farmers and coal miners but penguins, whales, tortoises and gorillas. Four years into an eight-year project he calls “Genesis,” he’s circling the globe to document everything development hasn’t soured: wilderness areas that remain as they were, more or less, “on the day of Genesis.” He’s been to Antarctica, the Galápagos, the Kamchatka peninsula of eastern Russia, and the Namib Desert of Southern Africa, among other places, and will soon be on his way to Botswana. A selection from the ongoing series, as well as highlights from previous bodies of work, is up at Peter Fetterman Gallery through the summer.

Salgado was in town recently to raise money for another of his projects: Instituto Terra, a nonprofit organization he founded with his wife, Lélia Deluiz Wanick Salgado, to promote reforestation and environmental education in Brazil’s Atlantic Rainforest. (It is located on 1,600 acres that Salgado’s own family once farmed.) In person, Salgado is thoughtful and impressively unassuming, with a kind face and engaging blue eyes. His voice, cloaked in a Brazilian accent, is gentle but emphatic, and it is easy to see how he wins the trust of his subjects, whatever their species.

*{mosimage}L.A. WEEKLY: With the Genesis project, you’re shifting from a sociological perspective to an ecological one. You’ve spoken before about coming away from Migrations with a sense of despair about humanity. Does that have something to do with your turn to nature?*

**SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:** I had a show of Migrations in Berkeley, and afterward I spoke with the students there about exactly this: the loss of hope in the possibility of survival for our species. Because I was coming from such a hard moment, seeing so much degradation. I lived for about seven years in real desperation – something

very difficult, very difficult. And from all that I had seen, I was sure it would be very difficult to go on in another direction. But many things changed after that. For me now, it looks much more hopeful, much more interesting than 10 years before.

It's not that things *themselves* are better today. A lot of disasters are happening – like Iraq. Iraq is a grand disaster. Not a disaster only for these young American people who go there to be killed, but also for the number of Iraqi people killed every day, no? Thousands every month, tens of thousands every year. A country that was a structured country – I worked a lot in Iraq before – with social security, with retirement for old people. It was a structured country. We put the country into total chaos, no? Big disaster.

*But.* There is something happening now. We went so deep in these last 30 years, as far as human relations are concerned, as far as concentration of wealth on this planet, as far as environmental destruction, that finally reactions have started to appear, no? We have a big concern today about many things that we didn't have 10 years before. I see some hope. We know that we are in danger, but we've started to react, and many people have started to get together – really get together. There is a wake-up, and this is very important. Now, I am not so sure that we will be destroyed.

*What is the difference between the impulse to take your photographs and the impulse to plant your trees?*

Oh, there is no difference, there is no difference. This is a way of life. Why did I do this photography, showing the degradation of this group of people? Because for me it is necessary to have social justice. I believe that everyone deserves to have school for their kids, have a nice house to live in, have social security, have protection, have a retirement, live in dignity. And to have the camera in my hand, to have this frame, this space, my eyesight – to organize this space – is a pleasure. This is the place where I come from, it's my work.

And to do what we are doing in Brazil, planting trees – it is where I was *born* that we are planting trees. I knew this land covered in forest. We started with an area that was killed for what is so-called economic development, and we are rehabilitating. It is possible to rehabilitate this land. In seven years, we plant more

than 1 million trees. We have an incredible number of birds that come back, insects, ants. We have fish that come back that had no water. And we are not just planting trees, we are working in education, working to bring another kind of production into the area, working in handicrafts. We create a cinema, we create a theater, we are bringing a little bit of culture together. It's a completely sustainable project that we are working in this region. It is possible to do – we can do.

I believe that these very political issues are all tied together. When I go to make these Genesis pictures – it's not that I wanted to become photographer of exotic animals, not that I wanted to do landscape. I worked a lot when I was considering this project with Conservation International, and from them I get [the figure] that 46 percent of the planet is there like the day of Genesis. It is for this that I'm looking. It's fabulous, to show to the people that live in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, anywhere, who imagine that all the planet is destroyed. There is good news, very hopeful news: 46 percent is there yet, not including the oceans. Of course, that is not the majority, the majority we exploit. But most lands that are over 10,000 feet high – and there are a lot – we haven't exploited yet, because it is difficult to do. A lot of forest in Siberia, in Alaska, in Canada, Argentina, Chile – we aren't there yet, it's too cold. A lot of deserts, because it's so hot. I'm taking a kind of sample around the world, about 30 places that together give an idea of the planet, and I am trying to put it in order to see if we can include also the nature in the discussion. After this, I will probably go back to the photography that I did always. With Genesis I am completing the circle.

Group Portrait of All the Kamayura Shamans; High Xingu, Mato Grosso State, Brazil (2005)

*Where does your interest in social justice intersect with your photographic interests and instincts? You've made very beautiful photographs of human degradation.*

We have incredible imagination to think that beauty is only in Yosemite Park. You know? It's very beautiful, it's fabulous. But the gold mines were very beautiful. The refugee camps in Ethiopia – the light. There's incredible light in Ethiopia. The people, the face of this lady [*he gestures to a photograph hanging nearby of an Ethiopian refugee holding a baby to her wizened breast*], she's so beautiful. Women, the relation between father, mother, people, families – very beautiful relations. And this

must come out. I don't pose anyone, they were there. This light that they have – I don't bring this light with me, the light was there, no?

A person who creates something, he has a way to do it, he has not two ways to do it. As a writer when he writes – he has his style, he write in a way, he don't write in two ways: one ugly for the ugly people and beautiful for the beautiful people. Photography is the same, no? It's not that I went to the poor places of the planet and tried to make them beautiful. I have a way to photograph. You work with space, you have a camera, you have a frame, and then a fraction of a second. It's very instinctive. What you do is a fraction of a second, it's there and it's not there. But in this fraction of a second [*he snaps his fingers*] comes your past, comes your future, comes your relation with people, comes your ideology, comes your hate, comes your love – all together in this fraction of a second, it materializes there. I speak like this, I don't speak in another way. No? You can put the question *why* I went there, but if I am there and I make the picture, I can make only this kind of picture, I cannot do two different kind of pictures.

*In traveling around the world for the four years you've been working on this project, have there been any surprises? Anything that you didn't expect?*

It's very difficult to say if I have a surprise, because these take a long time, these things. With the gold mine, I had a surprise, yes, the first moment that I came to the edge of this hole, when I saw 50,000 men working together with not one mechanical instrument, only hand instruments, working, digging the land. It's something *very* impressive. But after this moment, after I went inside, there was no more surprise. Then it became a movement. It took me close to one month there, living with people, speaking with people, the morning to the evening – that became also my life. My instrument was a camera, and I was looking for things that were happening around me, trying to capture what was for me the most striking thing, the most compelling thing, the best composition. Some moments I had anger, some moments I had happiness, some moments were very dramatic because I saw some people die. And all this was together. It becomes a movement, you are inside of it.

*So much of your previous work has been connected to people. Do you feel isolated now, going to these very isolated places?*

No, no, not at all. I work now, in Genesis, with an assistant, because I go sometimes to difficult places and I must have one person who knows how to deal with this. Like walking on glaciers – you have a lot of breaks covered by snow, you can be killed there. With all these other pictures, I was alone, I came alone, but in reality we are *never* alone. No. It is one fabulous thing with our species. Yesterday night if you came alone to this gallery, you have a big chance to go out with someone. Because you come in, we discuss, you relate, you smile and – it's the same if you go to a gold mine, to go to a refugee camp, to go to a factory, it's exactly the same. You go there, you relate, you eat with people, at night you sleep in the same place, at the end of the day there are some that you like more and some that you like less. You are related. In reality we are very gregarious animals. Very few of us can really live alone. If we live alone, we don't live too much.

No, I never feel isolated. It's the same with nature. You are so in common with these things. It feels so good, when you are there. The other animals, if you pay attention to their movement, you discover that they are paying attention to you. And if you find a way to relate with them, they relate with you, absolutely. They are very curious to you like you are curious to them. And in that way, you are never alone.

**SEBASTIÃO SALGADO** | Peter Fetterman Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., A-7, Santa Monica | (310) 453-6463 | Through September 8

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