

# THE INQUISITION

Text: EDMUND LEE

## SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

The 70-year-old Brazilian is one of the world's leading lights in social documentary photography

**48 HOURS:** Your exhibition at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, which runs through December 31, presents a selection of photographs taken from the past three decades. Does it feel strange to see your life's work contained in a little space?

**SEBASTIÃO SALGADO:** In a sense, yes, because every one of these pictures is part of a larger story. Here, the pictures are isolated. When I look at them, I say, "Wow, I was in incredible situations." When I was there, I was part of the moment. And this, for me, is the most interesting part of doing this kind of photography: the photography of life, history, historical moments.

**What do you mean by that?**

When I was coming here just now, I saw in the street [Hollywood Road] one gallery selling portraits of Mao Zedong. Mao was one politician among thousands at that time. If you had lived in that moment with Mao as a sign of China, the portraits would be just normal. When you isolate them, they become an icon. [Points to his photograph of a gigantic boat] When I was on the beach of Bangladesh to photograph this, it was a big boat, but it is only now that I realise it was really big when I see the size of the tiny human figures next to it. I believe that is the power of this kind of photo; they are cross-sections of reality.

**Do you usually notice that power?**

About four weeks ago, I was looking around a show [at Grand Palais] called "Paris Photo". Hundreds of galleries came from all over the world to show their work there.

Ninety-five per cent of the work was made to be there; they are pictures where guys are being very smart [about their approach].

They said, "Well, I do this, compose like that, use this light", and it became an object [the photographic print] at the exhibition. And we had maybe five per cent of pictures there that were like these [in my exhibition], which are pictures of people in our history.

**"I sometimes spend years to realise one of my works"**

**You're often called a photojournalist. Do you think that's a right description?**

Not really. Because as a photojournalist, you have an assignment and you work for a magazine or newspaper; it's not your story. All the photography that I do, it's part of a story that I choose to do. I make the option to work there. I sometimes spend years to realise one of my works. I believe this is much more documentary photography than just being a photojournalist. I work with a lot of magazines and newspapers; there are all

these pictures that have been printed in them, but they were not conceived just for that – my photographs are conceived for the long-term.

**Your recently completed project of wildlife photos is titled "Genesis". Are you religious?**

No, I'm not a believer. I don't believe in any god. But the religious use of this word "Genesis" – as I use the word – speaks about one moment in our history. We have a big part of the planet that has remained as it was 50,000 years ago. It's there, and it's this part of the planet that I went to see.

**When you took all these amazing pictures of nature, were there moments that almost convinced you of the existence of a god?**

No, I was never convinced that one god exists. If there is one general order that exists, it's Darwin's theory of evolution. In billions of years of evolution, we've had one kind of general intelligence that has made things part of this same big movement. This coherence is absolute, and there's a rationality in every one of these life elements, even the minerals. We've just arrived on the planet and we're at the foot of this evolution.

**The "Genesis" project was originally conceived as your last major project. I suppose it's no longer the case?**

Well, that's because I thought I couldn't survive it – it would be the last because I'm dead. But I'm alive. [Laughs] So I can do another. You see, in reality, photographers never stop. They never stop.

