

# THE BIGGER PICTURE

Renowned photographer Sebastião Salgado visited Hong Kong, where works were being showcased from his latest project *Genesis*, which was over eight years in the making.

STORY RYAN SWIFT

Few photographers in the world attract as much attention from other lensmen as Sebastião Salgado. The Brazilian-born photographer, now 72, famously gave up a career as an economist in 1973 to eventually become one of the most recognisable names in fine art photography.

Mention Salgado to a professional photographer and you're likely to get a giddy response. Two of his best-known photographic compilations, *Workers* (1993) and *Migrations* (2000), documented hardships faced by humanity. His work on *Migrations*, which was completed in the 1990s and revealed the brutality faced by mass movements of people, left him despairing for the future.

But it was also in the mid-'90s that Salgado, with his wife, confidante and business partner Lélia, took over a piece of ranchland from his father. They replanted the land – which had been damaged by deforestation

and soil erosion – with native trees and were happy to see natural forest come back, with erosion and run-off replaced by rivers and creeks. Numerous flora and fauna also returned.

Seeing the ability of the natural world to restore itself inspired Sebastião and Lélia (who worked on editing, concept and design) to undertake *Genesis*, a photographic project that aims to illustrate the places and peoples of the world that have not yet succumbed to the power of urbanisation.

Calling *Genesis* a “project” is a bit like referring to the Apollo moon landings as a “project”. *Genesis* was eight years in the making and involved two-month trips to over 30 remote destinations – from the Amazon to Antarctica, and the Sahara to Sumatra.

Some of Salgado's journeys involved hundreds of kilometres of trekking just to get to a location for a single shot – the more

inaccessible, the better.

“We did an 850-kilometre walk into the mountains; it was very high. We were over 4,000 metres three times,” says Salgado during his visit to Hong Kong, where Sundaram Tagore Gallery exhibited some of the photos from the series. “First, it was to prove that you *can* walk 850 kilometres and, second, [it was] to be in an area where no one goes, no tourists. And when you go, you meet populations that live like we did 3,000 years ago.” Salgado also made broad hints that *Genesis* will be his last great compilation of photographs.

## LIGHT AND DARK

You know when you're looking at a photo by Salgado. Everything is in black and white – and arresting. It's all in the detail. Salgado's images are artistic, but unscripted. He uses no artificial light, and says he doesn't pose his human subjects. They are, he says, fully aware of what he is doing when he



Sebastião Salgado

PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH GAY

points his camera at them. He's captured tribesmen swinging on vines between trees and women preparing adornments on their largely nude forms.

It's hard to reconcile the humanity that you see in Salgado's photos with its counterpart in Hong Kong. But to the photographer, there is no difference. Salgado sees the human species in its essential elements – love, fear, hope, jealousy – rather than ensconced in material things.

With his shots of animals, Salgado's photos at times make you wonder how he's still alive, given how close he gets to his subjects. In one photo, a pair of seals bend their heads back to get a look at Salgado. The photo seems to show every ripple of skin and every hair, with the animals' eyes and faces opened up in a welcoming expression. Another has a leopard eyeing the camera from a small watering hole opposite.

Salgado's main technique is to shoot against the light. Normally, photographers of all stripes will try to line themselves up so that the light source (usually the sun) is behind them and lighting the subject. Salgado shoots into the sunlight in order to bring out all the detail of his subjects.

"I come from Brazil," Salgado says exuberantly. "When I was a kid, my nose was always burned [from the sun] – I grew up looking against the light. Now, it's instinctive." That instinct bred into Salgado the need to see the details that only a high angle of lighting, slightly against the photographer, can achieve. "I see a lot of contours; it's more rich [shooting against sunlight] in the power it gives these things. If I

A view of a cattle camp in Southern Sudan, where Dinka tribespeople spend the dry months of the year moving with their cattle in search of fresh pastures, using cow urine to wash their faces and cow-dung ashes as an insect repellent. Here, Dinka tribesmen have selected a bull for mating. *February and March, 2006, Southern Sudan*



COURTESY SEBASTIÃO SALGADO



GENESIS WAS EIGHT YEARS IN THE MAKING AND INVOLVED TWO-MONTH TRIPS TO MORE THAN 30 REMOTE DESTINATIONS – FROM THE AMAZON TO ANTARCTICA, AND THE SAHARA TO SUMATRA

The Nenets people of the Siberian Arctic travel some 50 kilometres to cross the Ob River with their reindeer. Their annual journey of over 1,000 kilometres into the Arctic Circle in search of new grazing lands begins in March in freezing temperatures. Only around 42,000 Nenets remain. *March and April, 2011, Ob River, Siberia, Russia*

was photographing on the other side of the light, it would be flat.”

Midway through the *Genesis* project in 2008, Salgado switched from film to digital. “Digital is flat; I had to put the grain back,” he explains. The change required a unique method of developing his photos. That’s because from film, the photos had a certain grain that helped give tones and details. A special technique was developed with DuPont over the course of three years that allowed Salgado to shoot digitally but achieve the look and quality of film. The exact technique – discovered accidentally, according to Salgado – involves taking two exposures and merging them.

Salgado currently shoots with a specially made Canon EOS DX, which can auto-focus in the dark. “It’s the best in the world today,” he says. Canon has partnered for some time with Salgado. “The camera has less pixels, but different pixels, so you can get much more detail against the light,” he explains.

Salgado’s techniques render images of sand dunes and icebergs (which are particularly tricky) full of detail, nuance and tone. A shot of a whale’s tail reveals every ripple of water trickling down its flukes. A photograph of an iceberg shows every crack and corner of the ice, which dwarfs a line of penguins cautiously making their way back into the sea.



COURTESY SEBASTIAO SALGADO

A southern right whale seen near the Valdés Peninsula, Argentina. The whales often navigate with their tails upright in the water and are thought to use their tails as a sail, letting the wind do the work. *September and October, 2004, Valdés Peninsula, Argentina*



COURTESY SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

“I SEE A LOT OF CONTOURS; IT’S MORE RICH [SHOOTING AGAINST SUNLIGHT] IN THE POWER IT GIVES THESE THINGS. IF I WAS PHOTOGRAPHING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LIGHT, IT WOULD BE FLAT”

—Sebastião Salgado

He describes the animals he has photographed as though they are people. He refers to alligators and leopards as “nice guys”, but was very afraid of bears in Kamchatka, Russia. “There is a system with each animal; they will kill to defend themselves.”

Describing the process of getting close to the large gorillas that appear in *Genesis*, he says he had to present the back of his neck to the largest of the male gorillas to show submission — and a gorilla has the strength to kill a person with a single blow to the neck. Once accepted, Salgado was able to photograph some of the last of the world’s large gorillas up close. It’s a story that, in some way, applies to each time Salgado has gotten up close to his subjects, helping him produce the most powerful images.

Salgado declines to be thought of as an advocate for the natural world. “I don’t have the pretension that my photos will do anything. They are about the moment. It is the moment that is important,” he says. Yet, in the introduction to *Genesis*, Salgado describes it as his “love letter to the planet”. It’s a letter that’s fascinating, revealing and open to all. 🌍

Southern elephant seal calves. November and December, 2009, Saint Andrews Bay, South Georgia, United Kingdom