

Sebastião Salgado

SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY | CHELSEA
547 West 27th Street
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The annihilation of life—it is war’s brazen *raison d’être*. The splattering of blood and flesh, the smell of decaying bodies on burning land, a permanently ruined environment—the trauma of such horror marks survivors indelibly and gets passed on to subsequent generations. This is the natural outcome of any armed conflict.

Sebastião Salgado’s black-and-white photographs of Kuwait (all titled *Kuwait*, 1991), shot toward the end of the Gulf War, feel otherworldly. They capture the spectacular violence of smoldering desert landscapes where nearly seven hundred oil wells—set alight by Saddam Hussein’s murderous forces as they were scrambling out of the country—are engulfed in flames. The presence of a human element in most of them, however, grounds these images in a harsher and far less alien reality. Through billowing clouds of smoke, we see firefighters drenched in crude. Their desperate faces are contorted in anguish by the carbon-monoxide-filled air that they’re inhaling. In one picture, a man is lying on the ground, seemingly lifeless, gazing into a blackened sky.

The pieces on view are an unsettling time capsule—they vividly bring back memories of the Bush Senior era and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Governments give many reasons for why war is “necessary,” a “moral duty.” Yet these photographs shed light on what wars really are: legitimized massacres.

— Lara Atallah



Sebastião Salgado, *Kuwait*, 1991, gelatin silver print, 60 x 81".