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Back to Nature, in Pictures and Action



Sebastião Salgado at the Peter Fetterman Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif.
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EBASTIÃO SALGADO sounds as if he's slightly allergic to Los Angeles. It's not just that this celebrated Brazilian photojournalist has been sniffing since he arrived in the city, explaining: "I was born in a tropical ecosystem. I'm not used to these plants." It's also that he peppers his description of the city with words like strange and crazy, noting that he was mesmerized by the sight of the endless stream of automobile traffic as his plane made its descent.

The urban sprawl of Los Angeles is, in any case, a far cry from the remote, sparsely populated jungle and desert locations where he has been traveling for his epic, ecological work in progress "Genesis." Famous for putting a human face on economic and political oppression in developing

countries, Mr. Salgado is photographing the most pristine vestiges of nature he can find: pockets of the planet unspoiled by modern development. He has visited the seminomadic Zo'e tribe in the heart of the Brazilian rain forest and weathered desolate stretches of the Sahara. Next up: two months in the Brooks mountain range of Alaska on the trail of caribou and Dall sheep.

But this brand of environmentalism is costly enough to send him back to major cities for support. That's what brought him here for a three-day whirlwind of talks, meetings and parties. One night he gave a slide show featuring new work from "Genesis" to a sold-out crowd at the Hammer Museum. The next evening he was a guest of honor at a fund-raiser at the Peter Fetterman gallery in Santa Monica, where some of his new work appears in his show "Africa," through Sept. 30. After that it was off to San Francisco for a benefit dinner given by Marsha Williams before returning to Paris, which he considers home along with Vitória, Brazil.

It might sound like a punishing schedule, but the 65-year-old photographer says he doesn't mind and doesn't lose focus on work even when flocked by art collectors and celebrity backers. Sitting down at the Peter Fetterman gallery, with his image of zebras in Namibia hanging overhead, Mr. Salgado compared his time away from nature to the potentially disruptive moment when he has to change the film in his camera, when he likes to close his eyes and sing so as not to lose concentration.

"I came here for special things, but my head is there, my body is there," he said with an intent expression and a gentle Portuguese accent. "I might be sleeping in a hotel room in Los Angeles, but in my mind I am always editing pictures."

For "Genesis," an eight-year project now more than half completed, he is piecing together a visual story about the effects of modern development on the environment. Yet rather than document the effects of, say, pollution or global warming directly, he is photographing natural subjects that he believes have somehow "escaped or recovered from" such changes: landscapes, seascapes, animals and indigenous tribes that represent an earlier, purer — "pristine" is a favorite word — state of nature.

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In this way “Genesis” is a grand, romantic back-to-nature project, combining elements of both the literary pastoral and the sublime. Mr. Salgado also describes it as a return to childhood, as he was raised on a farm in the Rio Doce Valley of southeastern Brazil — then about 60 percent rain forest — that suffered from terrible erosion and deforestation. Years later, in 1998, he and his wife, Lélia, founded the Instituto Terra on 1,500 acres of this land to undertake an ambitious reforestation project. His wife, who also designs his books and exhibitions, is the institute’s president; he is vice president and the institute’s most famous spokesman. Or, as Ian Parker wrote in *The New Yorker*, Mr. Salgado is more than a photojournalist, “much the way Bono is something more than a pop star.”

In short, while the Instituto Terra is the locally rooted arm of his environmental activism, “Genesis” is its globally minded, photo-driven counterpart. Since undertaking the series in 2004, he has visited some 20 different sites across 5 continents.

He began with a shoot in the Galápagos Islands that paid homage to Darwin’s studies there. (Mr. Salgado says his title, “Genesis,” is not meant to be religious.) “Darwin spent 37 to 40 days there,” he said. “I got to spend about three months there, which was fabulous.” He was thrilled to see for himself evidence of natural selection in species like the cormorant, a bird that lost its ability to fly after a history of foraging for food underwater, not by air.

Last fall he spent two months in Ethiopia, hiking some 500 miles (with 18 pack donkeys and their owners) from Lalibela into Simien National Park to shoot the mountains, indigenous tribes and rare species like a very hairy baboon known as the Gelada. “I was traveling in this area in the same way people did 3,000 to 5,000 years ago,” he said.

Well, almost the same way. He did carry a satellite phone, which made him the point person for receiving news of the United States election in November. “When we found out that Obama won, everyone driving these donkeys, everyone was jumping up and down,” he said. He called Mr. Obama’s election “a victory for the planet.”

He is cautiously optimistic about his own environmental work. “I’m 100 percent sure that alone my photographs would not do anything. But as part of a larger movement, I hope to make a difference,” he said. “It isn’t true that the planet is lost. We must work hard to preserve it.”

His earlier projects were also driven by a sense of urgency. Before becoming a photographer he did doctoral work in agricultural economics at the University of Paris and served as an economist for the International Coffee Organization in London. You can see this training in the scope and complexity of his photography.

“Workers,” a seven-year project completed in 1992, featured images of laborers from 26 countries, including his acclaimed pictures of the Serra Pelada miners in Brazil. “Migrations,” a six-year project spanning some 40 countries that was completed in 1999, focused on migrants, refugees and other displaced populations that are financially and often physically vulnerable. (Both series became coffee-table books.)

A Getty Museum curator, Brett Abbott, who is including “Migrations” in his 2010 exhibition survey of narrative photojournalism, called this “epic approach” one of the Mr. Salgado’s hallmarks: “Of all the photographers I’m looking at, he’s probably taken on the biggest conceptual frameworks. He’s always looking at global problems.”

In this way “Genesis” represents less of a departure than it might at first seem. Even though he recently switched to a digital camera for large-format printing, his pictures have a consistent sensibility. He still generates contact sheets. He still likes to backlight his subjects, emphasizing — or romanticizing, his critics say — their forms. He still works in black and white. And his work still culminates in photo essays that, through a network of smaller stories, reveal something about an entire species. His fundamental subject is social systems, and now ecosystems.

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His longtime gallerist, Peter Fetterman, also sees a strong through line in his career. While initially surprised by the turn to lush landscapes (“When I first saw the contact sheets, I thought maybe I was in the wrong studio, or the Ansel Adams archive”), he called Mr. Salgado’s empathy for subjects an overarching trait. “Other photojournalists go in and out for a day,” Mr. Fetterman said. “Sebastião goes and lives with his subjects for weeks before he even takes a picture.”

Mr. Salgado also emphasizes the continuities between his various projects. “There is no difference photographing a pelican or an albatross and photographing a human being,” he said. “You must pay attention to them, spend time with them, respect their territory.” Even landscapes, he said, have their own personality and reward a certain amount of patience.

His goal for “Genesis” is to produce a total of 32 visual essays, which he hopes to display in major public parks as well as at various museums starting in 2012. “It’s my dream to show the work in Central Park, not in some building but outside among the trees,” he said.

So far financial support from the project has come from gallery sales and reproduction deals with magazines like Paris Match in France and Visão in Portugal. Two Bay Area foundations — Susie Tompkins Buell’s and the Christensen Fund — have lent support. Eventually, to raise money for printing, he plans to issue a limited edition of 20 platinum photographs, a first for Mr. Salgado, who is known for rather democratically printing as many pictures as there are orders.

That’s just one of the elements that makes “Genesis” seem like a legacy project: a veteran photojournalist’s carefully planned and well-meaning contribution to his children, grandchildren and the world at large. But he said he did not think it would not be his last. While admitting that he might not attempt another 500-mile hike over the Simien Mountains, he said he had no plans to retire any time soon.

“I don’t know any photographer who stopped working because he turned 70,” he said, adding that as a breed they tend to live a long time. He mentioned Henri Cartier-Bresson, who died at the age of 95, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who lived until 100.

“I was in Mexico City for Álvarez Bravo’s 100th-birthday celebration,” Mr. Salgado said. “He was sick, with his feet inside a tub of hot water, but he still had his camera. So he was photographing his feet.”