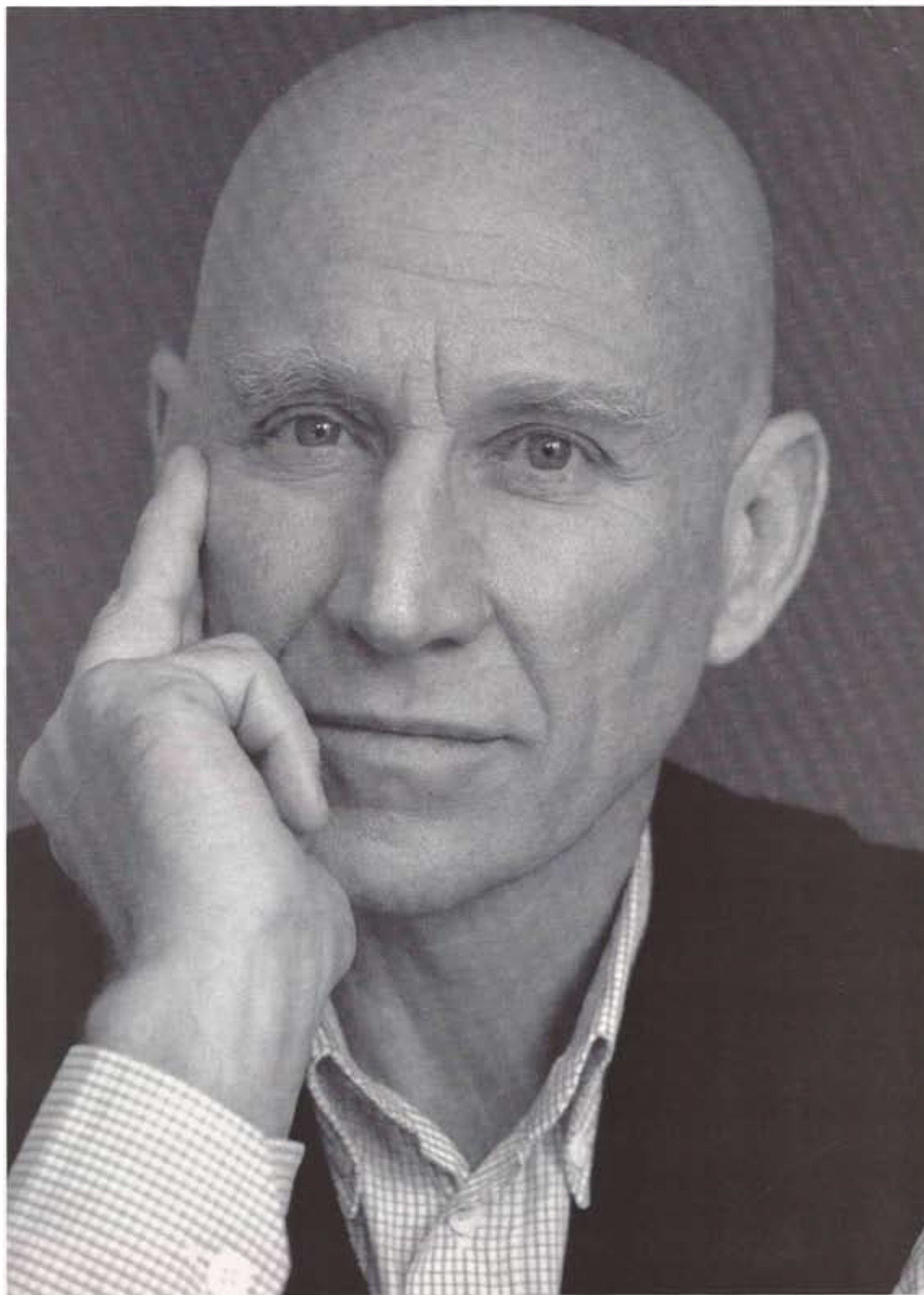


LOS ANGELES' ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

# venice



# SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

## Changing the World Frame By Frame

BY AYSEGUL SERT



by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. Dinka group at Pagarau cattle camp, Southern Sudan, 2006

**A**s we proceed with our interview in French, photographer Sebastião Salgado, who has lived in Paris since 1969, begins most of his answers with "Écoutez..." as to say "Listen..." in a heavy Brazilian accent he has maintained well from his native land.

How to introduce him? He has been telling the story of humanity in images for decades, be it through a snapshot of hundreds of Sudanese walking to receive a polio shot, a gold mine worker in Brazil, a wild landscape in the Galapagos, a child in a refugee camp in Tanzania. How can we describe him in concrete structured confining sentences?

The best way seems to let his words and iconic black and white images tell it all.

What is to be known of Salgado? Born on a farm in Brazil in 1944 before the country had its turn into modernizing and urbanization, he became an economist, took his first picture at the age of 26, and decided to abandon everything and become a photographer. Today he is highly regarded as a golden name in photojournalism.

His first book, *Other Americas*, about the poor in Latin America, was published in 1986, followed by *Sahel: Man in Distress*, the result of a collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières covering the drought in northern Africa. From 1986 to 1992 he documented manual labor worldwide, resulting in a book and exhibition called *Workers*. From 1993 to 1999, he turned his attention to the global phenomenon of mass displacement of people, resulting in the inter-

nationally acclaimed books *Migrations* and *The Children* published in 2000.

What else is to be known of Salgado? We let him reveal.

**Venice:** You have witnessed harsh conditions — war zones, refugee camps, poverty-stricken lands. How do you deal with keeping your sanity upon seeing some of these atrocities?

**Sebastião Salgado:** It is difficult. Especially what I did in Africa. It was very hard on me. A few times upon my return I wanted to stop — the post effect was very strong, on my psyche and health. I'm a photojournalist, a reporter, and for all these years I've worked for many magazines and newspapers; it is, after all, my way of life.



*by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. School Girls in Jamane, Somalia, 2001*



*by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. The population of the cattle camp of Kenya walk toward the polio vaccinators as soon as they arrive, Maper Payem area, Rumbek District, Southern Sudan, 2001*

**Is there such a thing as getting used to it, where with time it affects you less, where you somehow become immune to the pain?**

You are never made for this kind of thing, you are always deeply affected. You can never get used to this. It never gets easier. It's like peeling off a layer of your skin, it hurts madly. When you take off the second layer, it still pains you. The third time, yet the same. That's the feeling when you photograph these places and conditions. Sometimes you take a lot of risk when you go to a new place, but that's alright, you adapt to it. You adapt to danger, you adapt to the lack of luxury or food, but the suffering of human beings in front of your eyes, that you can never adapt to.

**What makes you keep pursuing photography?**

**You adapt to danger, you adapt to the lack of luxury or food, but the suffering of human beings in front of your eyes, that you can never adapt to.**

It is my way of being. Photography allows me to have a connection to the world around. When I went to Africa, when I went to Latin America, it was my life, to show the human condition. For me, the most honest way to live is through what I do. It's not about taking a couple images in one place for a few days — it's about staying in and going into the depths of that reality. I think of photography as visual writing.

**How does the Internet and technology like photoshop and the digital world affect the art of photography?**

Very sincerely I don't think it neither hurts nor helps. It's just a part of the evolution. When I started working we were using telex. Then we had fax. Now email. We change the tools, but the question remains the same: we have a part of the population who have access to basic rights—education, health-care, water, home—and another who doesn't. So what do we do about that? It's not about what tool you use to bring in the images to light, it's about answering the question, it's about the manner in which we live and the way we treat the planet. No matter the tool or era, a photographer continues to see the same way, to be motivated, to seek.

**You recently started using digital in your work. Why?**

I work with both — film and digital. I've always done black and white, and I continue to do so. I have a digital and film archive. It has not changed anything for me; it's about having plastic over digital. The camera has the same optic, the quality is more or less the same. The essential is to ask the question through the lens.

**You began your professional life as an economist. How did you decide to abandon all and embrace photography?**

One day I discovered it just like that. It didn't interest me before. We came to Paris in 1969 with my wife. In 1970 I took a picture for the first time in my life. My wife, who was an architect at the time, had bought a camera. I looked through the optic, and I found such an interesting way to build a relationship with the landscape and people around, it was magical to be able to capture things that are so strong. I knew I had to do it. Three years later I was a professional photographer. I abandoned everything for it. I had studied and worked in macro economy, which includes studies of anthropology, sociology, history, geography, politics, and it gave me a basis to better understand the world, it has served me well in my approach to photography. Even to this day I love read-

ing newspapers like the Wall Street Journal or the Financial Times. These newspapers are about pure facts: it's not about lies or flowery words, it's about solid research, to the point, and straightforward information. When a young photographer comes to me for guidance I advise to go to university and acquire a general education first and only then go into photography. You cannot be ignorant and blind to the world around you.

**Your current exhibition at Peter Fetterman Gallery in Los Angeles is a collection of pictures from several journeys you've taken to Africa.**

I do projects that inspire and intrigue me at the depth of my soul, otherwise I could not commit to it for so many years. It's my passion. I hope people who view it feel a little of what I felt at the moment I took the pictures. We need to respect one another. We need to find harmony. The way someone lives in Africa is harsher than in Los Angeles. The privileged ought to realize we should have more compassion and understanding towards people who are not like us, who are not from the same background or belief system. This planet belongs to us all.

**In other words, we ought to be more understanding and cultivate solidarity.**

Precisely! It's not because one lives in a third world country that he/she doesn't have a sensibility to beauty. It's not only misery there. They may not have the luxury, urban, occidental goods like hotels and cars, but it's a different kind of wealth — not material but a wealth in terms of nature and values. It's so important to understand the other. We cannot say that Indians who live in the Amazons

who wear almost no piece of clothing are less human or less civilized than us. They are as proud and live in a place as beautiful as ours; we are the same specie.

**How come despite all the wealth in the world, all the technological and scientific advancements, we are yet to end world hunger, yet to ensure our children have vaccines and education, yet to establish universal peace?**

We have a tendency to see things short term. We want immediate solutions. Take the example of the United States of America. USA said that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, so what did they do? They went there right away and destroyed infrastructures and life. They broke and destroyed mercilessly. I'm not preaching for Saddam Hussein, but at least before there was social security for old people, there was an established school and health system, people had homes, and a certain security. One day a small group of people at the White House decided to go to Iraq and break the country down, and then they realized that after all there were no weapons of mass destruction, so what to do? Well, suddenly, it's not that interesting anymore, it's too much of a problem, too many soldiers dying, so they decided to retreat, leaving behind a country completely destroyed. What good did all the suffering and death do? What about that? If we think in long term instead of jumping in quick solutions with a mentality of warmongering and genocide, then maybe we can make better decisions and build a better understanding of the other. Our history is written in war, conflict, and bloodshed. Humans are profoundly aggressive species. We have cut all the trees and polluted all the rivers. We have to take responsibility for what we have done. We can change.

**Can we? Truly?**

In Brazil we have an environmental project, we are going to plant 104 million trees with 100 million dollars, which is half the cost of an army aircraft. We do have resources, we do have everything that's needed, but we choose to dedicate it to war and destruction instead. Hopefully in the years to come we'll change this mentality.

**How was it growing up in Brazil in the '40s and '50s?**

I was born on a farm and lived there until I turned 15 years old; it was paradise! It was my father's farm, with lots of children and families living together, in touch with nature. At 15 I went away for school, my father wasn't a rich man, so I worked and studied. In the meantime Brazil was modernizing and urbanizing extremely fast which caused a lot of problems.



*by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. Tea Picking in the hills of the Gisakura plantation, Rwanda, 1991*



*by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. Villagers in exodus between Tokar and Karora walk in the hope of reaching a refugee camp. Red Sea Region, Sudan, 1985*



by Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas-Contact, courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, 2008

In a piece you wrote for the *Guardian*, you explain "Genesis," the project you are currently working on as a "potential path towards humanity's rediscovery of itself. I have named it Genesis because I want to return to the beginnings of our planet: to the air, water, and fire that gave birth to life; to the animal species that have resisted domestication; to the remote tribes whose 'primitive' way of life is largely untouched; and to surviving examples of the earliest forms of human settlement and organization. It is designed to propose that this uncontaminated world must be preserved."

I started it in 2004 and will finish by 2011. I took the decision to go around the world and show that there are still untouched places on the planet. We have destroyed a lot, but there is still 46% that

has not been, and are intact as the day they were created, like the day of the Genesis — some vast deserts, tropical forests, freezing cold forests of Siberia, Canada, Alaska — and that 46% is land. I'm not even speaking about the oceans. We need to preserve our planet. Image doesn't need translation. It has its own universal language. Image is reality. Image has power.

#### Why always black & white?

I love color but black & white is my voice. For me black and white is like going back to the abstract, back to when it all started, it allows us to focus on the subject.

#### Does it ever get still in your mind or do you always think in images?

I was just in Alaska for 30 days, overlooking splendid mountains, near the Arctic. I was alone, with an Eskimo guide, and

the majority of the time I spent there was in stillness and quiet. When we take pictures, we are captivated by silence, we wait for things to come to us. To find the image, you've to let things be and only then will it come to you. The image comes to you if you're patient. You don't have to look for it constantly. If you allow it to be, it will come, like anything else in life. You have to respect the landscape. Landscapes have long histories. Imagine what a tree has lived through — the rainstorms, winds, droughts. We are all a part of this planet. ▼

*Sebastião Salgado's exhibition Africa is currently on view at the Peter Fetterman Gallery in Los Angeles, 2525 Michigan Avenue, #A7, Santa Monica, California. For more information visit [www.peterfetterman.com](http://www.peterfetterman.com) or [www.amazonasimages.com](http://www.amazonasimages.com)*