

Time Out

Hong Kong

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SPECIAL ART ISSUE

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May 25–June 7, 2011
Issue 80 **HK\$18**

THE WOMEN WHO RULE ART
MEET THE QUEENS OF THE SCENE

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A QUICK DIP GUIDE

PLUS
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SIR PETER BLAKE
& 'MR TATTOO'

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The renowned Brazilian photographer's work comes to Hong Kong

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Edited by Edmund Lee • edmund.lee@timeout.com.hk

Recurrence and transience Church Gate Station, Western Railroad Line, Bombay, India (1995)



Art

IMAGES: ©SEBASTIAO SALGADO/AMAZONAS IMAGES

Unearthly pursuits

One of the world's greatest photographers, **Sebastião Salgado** has spent decades capturing timeless images from every corner of the planet. He talks to **Edmund Lee** ahead of his Hong Kong exhibition

Sebastião Salgado is always on the go. An economist by trade before taking up an acclaimed career in photography, the 67-year-old Brazilian has been taking his poetic vision to every last shore on which human civilisation meets the natural world. As we caught him on the phone at his Paris studio, Salgado, a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, had just returned from a month's stay with the nomads in the north of Siberia, and was already preparing for his next trip to the Kluane National Park in Canada. All these will constitute part of the tireless photojournalist's ongoing *Genesis* series, for which he has spent years – since 2004 – documenting the eco-regions of the planet, from Africa and the Amazon to Alaska and Siberia. A small sample of these is being showcased at

Salgado's current exhibition in Hong Kong, his first solo presentation here.

How would you describe your relationship with nature, seeing that you've been photographing it for such a long time?

Well, you know, we have in Brazil a big environmental project [to restore parts of the Atlantic Forest], of more than 20 years now. We have the advantage of having rainforests in Brazil, and our involvement with nature is very close. I say "our" because we work in a team: my wife [Lélia Wanick Salgado] is the designer of my book, and we organise this project in Brazil together. We created this foundation in Brazil, where we employ more than 100 people who work very hard on this operation. As my wife is the president of this foundation, when I

say "we" it's because I'm not alone in this. My relation with nature is very close, and the decision that we do this *Genesis* project – that I started more than seven years ago – was to do a kind of homage to this planet. We have close to half of the planet, about 45 or 47 percent of it, that is [still] completely there, that we [have] not destroyed [yet]. And for many years, I'm doing a new presentation of the planet.

When it comes to describing your work, the term "sublime" often comes into the discussion. Do you think these sublime images can

only be found in nature? Or also in the urban world?
What, what's the question?

The sublime quality of your work. My English is not that good. What other word does this mean?

'Sublime' is an extraordinary kind of beauty that can't be easily put into words.

Ah. Put [me] to the question again now.



We made a choice being human – that's nonsense. Because we forget that we are like any other animal

Do you think you can only find that kind of extraordinary images in nature – instead of, say, the modern world?

No, no, no. You can find that everywhere. That's not special for nature. It's a problem of

identification with what you are photographing. To photograph something real [and] deep, you must have identification. You must have a real life involvement. You must be

100 percent inside [the environment you photograph]. What you bring from there is something more than just going there and taking a picture – you put your life inside, you know? It's quite different.

So when you decide on the subjects for your photographs, what exactly is going through your mind?

You know, my subjects are my life. It's a complete coherence with my way of life, with what I trust. My philosophy, my etiquette, my concept of beauty... they [are] all mixed inside. I have the motivation, and I go! I like very much to work [on] long-term projects. At least I can have total dedication, and that's become my way of life. When you put in eight years to photograph a project, it's [become] my life. I must have a big identification; if it's the contrary, I cannot do that.

You began as an economist, and then you changed to become a full-time photographer in 1973. Do you still recall that moment?

It's relatively slow. It took me three years to take a decision to become [a] full-time photographer. Before, I finished my PhD in economics in Paris, and I went to work as an economist for the International [Coffee] Organization, doing mostly trips to Africa. The first picture I took in my life was [in] 1970; until then I had never made a picture – I had no interest, and I was concentrating on other things. But the moment I got a camera and started to photograph, photography took a total invasion in my life. I had a total identification with it. I dedicated three years of preparation [for it], and then I went to a school. I saw many books, and I went to many shows and many museums. By that time, photography was so exciting [for] my life that I made the big decision to abandon my career and become a photographer. That was 1973.

Since then, you've always worked in black and white, often backlighting your subjects. Is this for aesthetic reasons, or is there a conceptual rationale behind it?

You know, I started in black and white from the beginning. I tried also to do colour, but colour for me... I lose my concentration because of colour. If I photograph, let's say, something in colour, and I have one red spot there, this red spot becomes so red it takes so much of the visual part of the thing that, for me, it's a huge disturbance. The sky becomes so blue. In reality, it was a little bit [of an] exaggeration. In black and white there's no distraction. But for me, all the greys represent the old colours, the old things much better. When I'm photographing something very important and want to concentrate on this point, it was

much more possible to identify what was most powerful in black and white than in colour, for me. And little by little, I took a decision to do black and white, and after a month of photographing only in black and white, it became my life.

Your choices of subjects regularly revolve around developing countries or nature. Is this a nostalgic response to your childhood in Brazil?

Well, I do take into considerations

photograph against the light. These kinds of things made a big influence on you, because it's your origin [and] you cannot deny it. And, it's true, I photograph a lot in nature, of course. But I was born in the nature. I was born in a farm in Brazil; until [I was] 15 years old I [had] lived in the fields, I lived inside a farm. My liaison with nature is very big. And if you go back to my old pictures, when I photograph human beings they're [always] inside the nature – most of them [were].

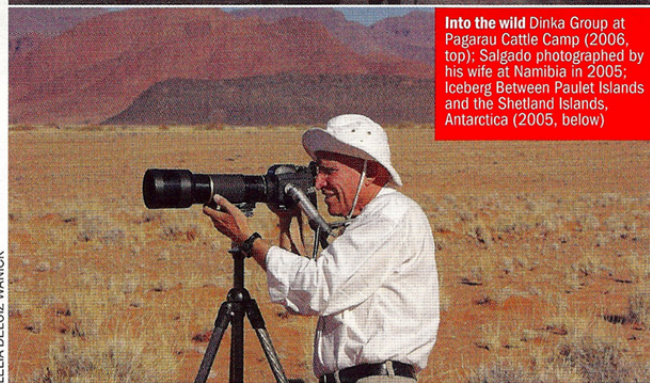
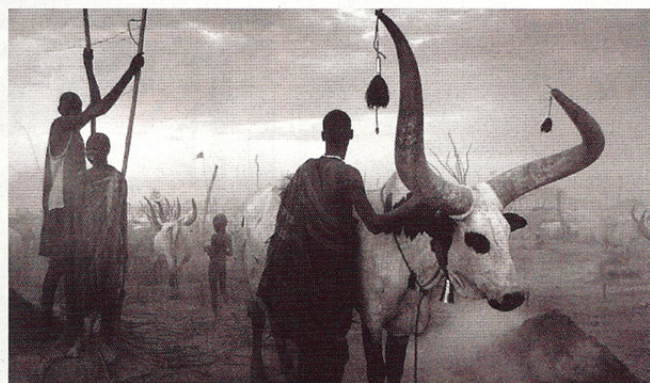
I knew my wife. I started with my wife very young – I was 19 years old – and I'm with my wife until now. I love her very much, we live in a very special way. We were able to get away from Brazil to France because of political reasons when it was not possible to stay in 1969. The moment I abandoned my work as an economist to become a photographer, to start a new life, this moment was a very important one for me [as well].

You wrote in *The Guardian* a few years ago that urbanisation has put our existence in danger. How do you feel about the recent earthquakes and nuclear crisis in Japan, and the predictable pattern of natural disasters setting off human ones?

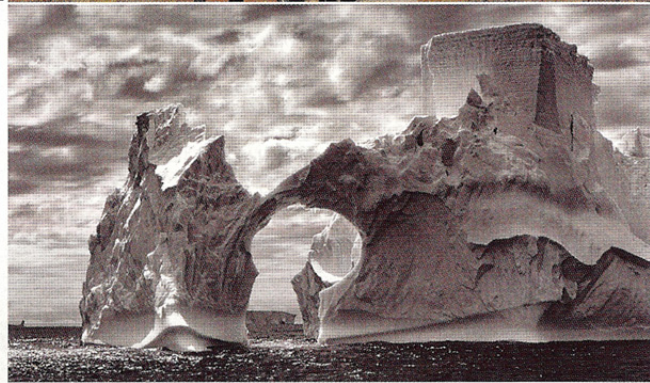
Today, Japan is one [example], but only in China, there's [a] big consumption of oil [that's] polluting everywhere with [its] residues of oil, plastics, and all the things that come from the same origin – this excessive consumption of energy. You see this in Hong Kong, you have a huge consumption: there must be air conditioning all year long. Why are we using energy that we don't have the right to use, while destroying so many things in the planet? We made a choice being human – that's nonsense. Because we forget that we are like any other animal. The only thing that made us survive other species until now was our spiritual part and our instinctive part. We use the planet only for us; in a moment, it will be very difficult for us to go back to our planet. I hope we soon realise that we are nature, so we must respect nature. We must choose a much sweeter way of life [and be] less aggressive. The contrary would be very complicated for us, and for the other species. This disaster in Japan now, you see the power of nature in a second. Things can happen in a fraction of a second in a way we don't understand.

For the public, you're already considered one of the greatest photographers in the world. But personally, what kind of a legacy do you want to leave behind?

No! [Laughs] Working is my life and my way of life. If my work lights up a store and becomes a resident, it'll become a legacy. If I'm wrong, then it'll become nothing. I mean, it's my life, I love what I'm doing, I put my full life inside [my work]. But it's much more for my satisfaction, for my pleasure, then to leave something [behind].



Into the wild Dinka Group at Pagarau Cattle Camp (2006, top); Salgado photographed by his wife at Namibia in 2005; Iceberg Between Paulet Islands and the Shetland Islands, Antarctica (2005, below)



my origin. I was born in a developing country; I was raised in a developing country; I've spent most of my life in a developing country. This for me is my life. It's not because I don't believe in life in the north part of this planet, but I was born on the other side. I was always in shadows because the sunshine is so strong in our country. Probably that's made most of my pictures against the light – but I love to

Looking back at your career, what've been the most memorable moments?

Ah! [Laughs] Well, I have a few important moments in my life. One of them was probably when I was 15 years old. I was living on a farm until then, and when I was accepted to [a secondary school in a large town], it was a big shocker. It was a big, big change for me. And I had a big stabilisation in my life when

LÉLIA DELUIZ WANICK

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Sebastião Salgado's Hong Kong exhibition, **The Global Photographer**, is at Sundaram Tagore Gallery until **Jun 25**.
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