



**FRAMING  
HUMANITY**

SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

Superlatives are hard to avoid when describing the work of Sebastião Salgado. Recently, one magazine hailed him as the ‘world’s greatest living photographer’ and while such statements are often thoughtlessly attributed to many lesser mortals, it is difficult to argue against such a claim for the Paris-based artist. Now 73, Salgado is renowned for the epic scale of his photographic projects, involving years of planning, travelling and editing, all with a painstaking devotion to create books as heavy as coffee tables and exhibitions that fill the world’s grandest museums.

SALGADO’S first great book, *Workers*, is a prime example of his ambition: over a six-year period, the Brazilian-born photographer travelled across 23 countries, taking more than 10,000 negatives of what playwright Arthur Miller later described as “the pain, beauty and brutality of the world of work on which everything rests.” For Salgado, who also wrote the text accompanying the 350 black and white photographs, *Workers* was, “a farewell to a world of manual labour that is slowly disappearing and a tribute to those men and women who still work as they have for centuries.”

Now, another quarter of a century later, he recalls *Workers* as a logical response to his formative years among the student radicals of 1960s Paris, before joining the International Coffee Organisation in London as a macro economist. He tells us: “I made my studies as an economist, I made studies of the macro economy and I made studies of Marxism where proletarians were important. So, you know what I wished to do? I started with the proletarians and went to photograph the workers of this planet over many years.” Salgado’s camera accentuated the harsh and grim reality of the working lives of shipbreakers, cane cutters, steel makers, miners and fishermen, while also bestowing a nobility and stoicism in the portrayal of his subjects that left no doubt about his own political sympathies. He

explains: “You see, everything that I did was linked to my preoccupations with my way of life, from the studies that I made from my political orientation. I love very much to work on long term projects where it is possible for me to put myself inside, have a dedication, a concentration and identification with the things that I’m looking at photographing.”

It was in his native Brazil in the mid-1980s, within the vast interior of an enormous open-cut gold mine called Serra Pelada, that Salgado made his seminal images of thousands of gold miners, stripped to the waist and dripping in mud and sweat. He wrote: “Anyone arriving there for the first time confronts an extraordinary and tormented view of the human animal: 50,000 men sculpted by mud and dreams. All that can be heard are murmurs and silent shouts, the scrape of shovels driven by human hands, not a hint of a machine.” The resulting pictures were published worldwide, securing his reputation and ensuring a heightened level of expectancy about the *Workers* project. When the book was finally published in 1993, more than 20 photos from Serra Pelada were included.

*Workers* covered more than impoverished manual labour in the developing world: Salgado also ventured underground to document the excavations of the Channel Tunnel and to the oil-drenched deserts of Kuwait in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991. ➤➤



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Of many dangerous assignments undertaken during his career, this was one of the most perilous, as he witnessed the seemingly unstoppable inferno of more than 700 oil wells set ablaze by Saddam Hussein's retreating troops (pictured right, and page 28). While he photographed the firefighters, Salgado captured a burnt-out landscape that was still littered with cluster bombs and the scorched remains of camels beneath a sky filled with acrid black smoke and soot, and the sweltering temperatures were so intense that one of his lenses warped. It is only in the past year that he has returned to this body of work to reveal the unpublished frames accompanying the now iconic prints of exhausted firemen desperately battling to tap the torrential black geysers of blown oil wells.

"This is a story that I made 26 years ago," he recalls. "At the time I made these pictures, I had an assignment with *The New York Times Magazine* and we published some of them." Their publication in June 1991 further enhanced Salgado's reputation and he was bestowed the prestigious Oskar Barnack Award. Seven of the Kuwait photos were published in *Workers* too, but after that the contact sheets and negatives remained undisturbed as Salgado became

immersed in a succession of epic publications: *Terra* (1997), *Migrations* (2000), *Africa* (2010), and the grandest of them all, *Genesis* (2013).

He continues: "Last year I make a decision; I must look again at this story. I am sure I have an interesting set of pictures. I looked at my contact sheets and I saw that I have a set of pictures that was reasonable and I went to my publisher." In all, a re-examination of Salgado's contact sheets turned up 83 exposures for the book, *Kuwait – A Desert on Fire*, published last November by Taschen, and now exhibited at La Photographie Galerie in Brussels. "About 70 per cent or 80 per cent of the pictures have not been published before," he explains. "We are showing them now for the first time."

For all his major works, Salgado depicts the world in black and white and obsessively scrutinises his contact sheets when making print selections for both his books and exhibitions. But in his early days when working for the Paris-based agencies Sygma and then Gamma, the young photographer shot many of his magazine assignments in colour – something that he recalls somewhat grudgingly: "Well, it was necessary for me to survive and I photographed in colour, but ➤➤



[Opening pages]  
Kuwait 1991  
[Previous pages]  
Brooks Mountains,  
Alaska, United  
States, 2009  
[Above] Kuwait 1991



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I am not a colour photographer, I do not see things in colour." For Salgado, colour is a distraction. By photographing in black and white he believes he can better understand the subject he is photographing and construct a photo story to match his vision.

He cites another pertinent and practical reason for eschewing colour in favour of monochrome: "In colour, it was slides that we were photographing at the time and when you select the two or three that are the good pictures of the few, you put the others aside and you lose all the sequence of the article and, in reality, you have a very short story. In my journey to photograph Kuwait, I select 10 or 20 pictures that I like the most and I leave the others. But now I can come back and on my contact sheet everything is there. I can rely on my contact sheets, one back to the other, and I see my story again and I am excited again. Black and white for me is a memory, it holds the story. Because all that I have photographed is in black and white, I have all my films, all my contact sheets, and I have everything. It is my life that is there."

Although Salgado's work is primarily film-based, the making of *Genesis* marked his switch to digital capture and the beginning of the digitalisation of his

archives. "I'm using digital to do my black and white pictures that I did 40 years ago, to digitalise the negative, and then I can have a much, much, much better print than I had before," he enthuses. But he remains less enthusiastic about digital manipulation: "I went with my wife on Saturday to see a show of photography. Oh boy! It is amazing how the people manipulate the pictures. We had no way to do this many years ago, but now is the fashion and we must accept that the evolution is like this. Me, I don't do."

Although using digital capture, Salgado still upholds an analogue style of working, producing digital contact sheets and making test prints of his chosen exposures. He says he doesn't look at his pictures immediately after he takes them and he deletes nothing; he still shoots as though his camera is loaded with film. "What I do with digital now is I do a contact sheet," he explains. "I cannot edit in a computer, I edit my pictures with a loupe and we choose and then my assistant makes for me the work prints and I choose and we print like this. But I am old-fashioned and 73 years old and I cannot judge a photographer who has just started and is using Photoshop. I cannot."



[Previous spread]  
Iceberg between  
Paulet Island and the  
Shetlands Islands,  
Antarctica, 2005  
[Above]  
Kuwait, 1991



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Salgado's passion for black and white photography and black and white printing is also matched by his devotion to depth of field in images. "Reality," he once said, "is full of depth of field." Look at any of his photographs and there is so much front-to-back sharpness and fine focus on areas in the frame that you can immediately see another reason to shoot in black and white and thereby reduce, as he says, "all the flashy colours, the red, the blue, the green" to simple shades of grey.

"Yes, I love depth of field," he tells us. "You see, with my eyes open here I can see the telephone that I speak with to you, I see the stairs going up, I see a wall, I can see everything and there is no reason that I want to photograph with my lens open to have just my telephone in focus and nothing else! I don't like this, I like to have the volume, like life gives me the volume, and my eyes give me the volume. I like to work very clear and I prefer to close my diaphragm, to work in f/16, f/19, because it is beautiful to see the separation, the spaces all inside the picture. I like to photograph large. If you look at my pictures there is a lot of information inside my pictures. To have that information I must give space and to give space I must give depth of field too."

The transformation of Salgado the economist to Salgado the photographer would not have happened if it wasn't for Lélia, his wife of 50 years, who used a camera to help with her architectural studies. "It was 1970, I was 26 years old when my wife bought a camera and I looked for the first time inside a viewfinder and for me it was so amazing. It was just fabulous. Fantastic," he recalls. From that moment, he says, photography "made a total invasion of my life" and he quickly acquired a darkroom and learned how to print. After a few years, the fierce passion for photography overwhelmed his professional work as an economist and he decided "to drop everything to become a photographer."

In those formative years, Lélia's early career as an architect funded much of Salgado's first tentative steps as a photographer, and ever since *Workers* she has been the creative partner of his books, as editor, designer and writer. It is a partnership that was consolidated in 1994, when Salgado left Magnum and the couple set up their own agency, Amazonas Images. Today, he is devoting more time to examining his earliest pictures from the days when he and Lélia were first establishing themselves in Paris. "Now I am editing all the pictures of when we were



[Previous spread]  
Kuwait, 1991  
[Above]  
Kuwait, 1991

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[Above]  
Kuwait, 1991

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young and I have some incredible things that I forget I have photographed,” he says. “I am looking at my life and it is so moving. Boy! How Lélia was pretty. Boy! Incredible. The most pretty lady on the planet was my girlfriend, my wife. It’s fantastic when I look at this. We made a life together and after that we were always together as a person. We made so many things together, we have suffered together, we have so much pleasure together, one life together.”

That life was famously documented in *The Salt of the Earth*, a 2014 film directed by Wim Wenders and the Salgado’s son Juliano, which brought to the forefront the role of Lélia in her husband’s success. In an interview to promote the film’s release, Juliano acknowledged the significance of his mother’s role by saying: “The thing is, she didn’t want to travel to go to these places, most of them were pretty tough and dangerous. Before she got involved, my father’s career wasn’t going too well, but when they started doing them together things started happening.”

After 53 years together – 50 of these as husband and wife – Salgado is even more appreciative of his wife’s influence and input when he declares: “The oddest thing is I want to die before her because I

don’t know, if she should die before me, how I will live without her. I’m 73 years old and Lélia is 70 and we are alive, but probably the most important thing in my life was the day I met Lélia. If my wife had not bought this camera most probably you would not have a photographer called Sebastião Salgado, you would have an economist instead.”

Given the discussion of mortality and his current fascination with revisiting the photographs of his past, I ask Salgado what he believes will be his greatest legacy. “No, I have no legacy,” he responds without hesitation. “You see, my photography is my life, it’s my way of life and if people, after I disappear, use my photography as a reference of the moment that I live, okay that can become a legacy, but now I cannot speak about legacy. I can speak only about my way of life. Photography is my way of life. It is my motivation to live, my motivation is to photograph. That is it.” ×

**Keith Wilson**

**Kuwait - A Desert on Fire is showing at La Photographie Galerie, Brussels until September 16. The book of the same name is published by Taschen.**



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[Above]  
Kuwait, 1991