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## In Salgado's pictures: empathy, meaning and truth

In an exclusive interview, the great Brazilian photographer talks about the importance of pictures in our understanding of the world's complexity

- 10 Feb 2017 at 04:00
- NEWSPAPER SECTION: [LIFE](#) | WRITER: [APIPAR NORAPOOMPAT](#)



Sebastião Salgado, Church Gate Station, Bombay, India, 1995, gelatin silver print, 50 x 68 inches. Photo © Sebastião SALGADO / Amazonas images

Gaze at any of Sebastião Salgado's photographs and overwhelming emotion washes over you. The hauntingly magnificent black-and-white photos, which at times punch you right in the gut, depict the best and worst of the planet we live on. From the bleak mud-covered miners climbing hell-like pits of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil to petroleum-soaked workers in the war-torn oilfields of Kuwait, to the sun-kissed mountain ranges of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska -- Salgado's work possesses qualities many photographers today seem to have forgotten about in this image-saturated world: empathy, meaning, truth.

### **Sebastião Salgado: The World Through His Eyes**

Feb 8 - March 8

8th Floor, Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre Open Tuesday until Sunday

The exhibition will be on view in conjunction with bi-weekly screenings of *The Salt Of The Earth*, an award-winning documentary about Salgado and his work.

Salgado is one of the last great classic photographers. For 45 years, he has travelled to more than 130 countries, first documenting human conditions that one can scarcely imagine, and, later on, documenting untouched landscapes and civilisations that, again, no one would have thought real.

It was a huge revelation for fans when Salgado and his wife, Lélia (who works with him on every project and whom he credits repeatedly), presided over the launch of his critically acclaimed exhibition, "Sebastião Salgado: The World Through His Eyes", at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre this past Wednesday, which happened to have been his 73rd birthday.

The not-to-be missed exhibition, coming from a collaboration between BACC, Sundaram Tagore Gallery and the Royal Photographic Society of Thailand, is packed with more than 200 photographs from Salgado's most celebrated long-term projects -- *Workers* (1986-1992), *Exodus* (1993-1999), *Genesis* (2004-2011) and a special portfolio titled *Other Americas* (1977 onwards).

Salgado's photographs are already so powerful and explain so much on their own, but as his work is so interwoven with his life, his history needs to be understood to comprehend his talent and how important his photographs are in the world we live in today.



Sebastião Salgado, Serra Pelada Opencast Gold Mine, Pará, Brazil, 1986, gelatin silver print, 36 x 50 inches. Photo © Sebastião SALGADO / Amazonas images

In an exclusive interview this week upon arriving in Bangkok, Salgado talked, with great gentleness and wisdom, like an experienced grandfather reminiscing to his grandchild. Salgado frequently looks off into space, eyes glimmering as he talks about his epic journeys.

He was born in 1944 on a farm surrounded by forests in Minas Gerais, Brazil -- "the most beautiful place on the planet". And though he never touched a camera until he was 26, Minas Gerais helped make his photography instantly recognisable.

"I had incredible light when I was a child in Brazil," he recalls. "And this light stayed inside me. When I see my own photography, these are my lights from [Minas Gerais] that I bring with me. They are inside me instinctively when I photograph."



Sebastião Salgado, Nenets, Yamal Peninsula, Siberia, Russia, 2011, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. Photo © Sebastião SALGADO / Amazonas images

Salgado's projects, like his style, manifested themselves organically over time. With a very strong background in economics, and having travelled to Africa often for missions as an economist, his passion lies largely on wanting to understand and document important historical moments from his lifetime.

"I studied macroeconomics," he said. "It was a mixture of sociology, anthropology and mathematics. And these made a huge contribution to my cultural background. You see, my wife and I teach in a school for photography in Tokyo. We see some students who have a real eye. We then ask them to stop, go to university, and take classes on sociology, anthropology, geopolitics, history and geography. It's in order [for them] to identify and know the society they live in, for their photography to adapt to their reality. My background made me understand the society I lived in, to understand the moment that I'm living in, and to link my photography with this historic moment that I live in."



Sebastião Salgado being interviewed by Life on Feb 7. Photo: Anthony Ky

The grand narrative of Salgado's work over the decades -- the brutal, even fatal impact of globalisation, war and conflict on small people -- remains startlingly relevant today. *Workers* (1986-1992), for example, depicts the plight of the last manual labourers toiling away in an ever more industrialised and globalised world, and *Exodus* (1993-1999) came naturally after seeing people (especially in developing countries) uprooted from their homes by the same global phenomenon.

When working on his projects, Salgado would spend months, if not years, with these communities to truly understand and capture the most profound images for the world to see. No sensationalism, just pure truth.

"I put years into these projects," he said. "When you go live with a tribe in the Amazon, you need one or two months to understand the people, to see the way things happen so you get inside the movement of life, so you understand the reality, the climate and the activities. That's photography, you know? You need time to do photography. You take a photo in a fraction of a second, but you need time to arrive there."



A visitor strolls through the Genesis section of the exhibition. Photo: Apipar Norapoompipat

However, this lifestyle started taking a huge toll on him. Whilst working on *Exodus*, Salgado saw so much war, death and destruction in Rwanda and the Balkans that he started to physically and psychologically waste away. He saw bulldozers stack mountains of corpses from a cholera-stricken refugee

camp; he saw thousands of dying orphans laid out on train tracks and thousands more dying around them, and he himself was almost killed by a mob. He was dying. His doctor said his body was giving up on him, and he had to stop.

"I was so upset with the things that I saw," he said. "I became deeply depressed. I went [back] to Brazil, and we received the farm from my parents. I thought, 'No more photography. I'll become a farmer'."

Going back to the farm, Salgado saw that the forested paradise that he grew up in was, like him, mostly destroyed. From what had been 60% forest, only half-a-percent was left.

Not knowing what to do, it was Lélia who suggested he replant the rainforest. With help from friends and environmental organisations, Salgado was able to completely rehabilitate his land -- now known as the Instituto Terra, a non-profit organisation with a mission of reforestation, conservation and education on the environment.

Rehabilitating the land also rehabilitated Salgado's soul. "When we started, we became so close to nature," he said. "I then had a huge wish to go photograph the planet -- to see what was pristine. From there, we conceived the Genesis project."

For his latest and most universally relevant project, Salgado and Lélia for eight years travelled to the most unspoiled parts of the Earth to shoot untouched landscapes, wildlife and indigenous tribes that have had no contact with the modern world. Looking at the large-print photographs of Genesis in real life, you get a sudden urge to go out and protect and preserve what's left of the planet. This is something Salgado has been working on for more than a decade.

Asked for his opinion on what humans are doing to the environment, Salgado chuckled sadly.

"We are very stupid," he said bluntly. "We are not only destroying the planet, but we're destroying the base of our lives. We just arrived a few thousand years ago, but we provoked a modification in our planet. We destroyed so much of our environment and species. Humans have also lost their instinct for survival. People in [cities], if they live inside a jungle for a day, they're dead. We have become aliens in our own planet."

"We must go back to nature," he suggests earnestly. "Try to go back to the fields. Try to touch the ground, the soil, the trees. Take in the smells. It's necessary to rebuild what we've destroyed. Physically we don't have to live in it, but spiritually, we must go back to rebuild nature. Trees are the only machines that can transform carbon dioxide into oxygen. They maintain the system of water. They bring biodiversity. We need all the insects, all the birds, all the animals and all the vegetation in order to survive."

At 73, Salgado is still pushing his cause forward. His current project has taken him back into the Amazon, staying with tribes, which he calls the guardians of the forest.

"They are us, two to three thousand years ago," he said.

"They understand every tree, every animal, every noise. They are completely a part of nature. It's amazing. Probably in three to four years, we'll finish and create a show and book to see together what proposition we can make on how to deal with the Amazon, how to protect it, and how to protect the Indian communities. It's a contribution, I hope."