

THE FINAL FRONTIER

Sayandeb Chowdhury travels to the ends of the earth with renowned photographer Sebastião Salgado's magnum opus, *Genesis*.





Sebastião Salgado. *Mursi village of Dargui in Mago National Park, Ethiopia.* Photograph. 2007.

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Sebastião Salgado sets himself tasks only a few can hope to fulfil. Bracketed along with masters like Man Ray, Margaret Bourke-White, Robert Mapplethorpe and Henri Cartier-Bresson, Salgado is counted as one of the foremost photographers in the world and is now at the height of his formidable powers. In his latest exhibition, which premiered at the Natural History Museum in London (from the 11th of April to 8th of September) and subsequently toured museums in Paris, Lausanne and Sao Paulo, the Paris-based Brazilian photographer continues to scale new heights. Baptised *Genesis*, the black-and-white show is symptomatic of the colossal visual and scopic ambition that Salgado is famous for. While other

Galapagos Islands to the Alaskan wilds, from the habitats of the wandering black-browed Albatross to that of the Southern right whales, from the Namibian wilds to the Ethiopian heartland, he cannot but dwell on the sheer fragility of this ecology, of nature's final frontier. No wonder Salgado has stripped most of his photographs of 'human' presence except those in which members of various tribes appear, as if to reinforce the images as statement of their difference from 'us'.

It is this debilitating, unnerving stealth of modernity that haunts and melancholises this outstanding series of photographs. As one stands in front of his large, spectacular

photographers have set their sights on a period, a site or a community, Salgado sets out to chronicle time itself; time with all its mythic, symbolic, cosmic and ecological signification.

In a brief introduction to the exhibition, Lelia Wanick Salgado, the photographer's wife and the curator of this show, writes: "*Genesis* is a quest for a world as it was, as it was formed, as it evolved, as it existed for a millennium before modern life accelerated and began distancing us from the very essence of our being." With any other artist, such a claim would risk an overreach or slip into philosophical gobbledygook. But with Salgado, whose previous projects like *Other Americas*, *Migrations* and *Workers* have explored global issues and conflicts on an unprecedented scale, this breadth of vision comes naturally. The result is extraordinary, to say the least.

The photographs span the length and the breadth of the planet – from Patagonia to New Zealand in the south to Siberia in the north, with stops at the forests of Indonesia, Africa and the Amazon, sites where the primal and 'pre-historical' still survive, resisting, more or less, the advent of modernity. But at the same time, it seems like each of these sites and those who inhabit them, each in their haunting monochrome beauty, with their kaleidoscopic scale and effortless grandeur, are tottering on a tightrope. Any day, any fateful day, they may all be gone. And that is precisely why his photographs seem to be making one last plea to leave these places alone. The distance of these fantastic terrains from human habitation is accentuated by a haunting epiphany: it is this distance from us, this distance from all our teleological 'civility' that has given these places an autonomy that is distinctly their own. Only because we stay away, that these theatres of nature's primal instinct have survived the onslaught of *historical* time, of human voracity and technologies of oppression. But perhaps with the predicament of *our* distance comes the lingering fear of *our* accursed presence. As Salgado's lens travels from the

prints, one is dwarfed by them, overwhelmed, pained by the pettiness of our daily desires against the unfolding of an unforgiving and epic landscape, like an Andrei Tarkovsky film or a novel by Hungarian modernist Laszlo Karsznahorkai.

Salgado has worked for eight years on this project. He has lived in extreme terrains for long periods, having trailed elephants in Botswana, giant petrels in South Georgia, the Chinstrap Penguins on Sanders Island and seals along the coast of the Valdes Peninsula. He has travelled with the Nenets in freezing Siberia, the Zo'é tribes of Brazil and the Mudmen of Papua New Guinea. His lens has caressed the Brooks Range in Alaska, the giant icebergs on Paulet Islands, the Bryce Canyon in Utah and Mount Roraima in Venezuela. It is obvious that he has spent enormous hours in planning and executing his vision in such exacting and lonely landscapes.

Perhaps, that is why Salgado is able to infuse far more poetry in his black-and-white representations of the 'origins' of our planet than one can ordinarily 'see'. In an interview published in a pamphlet accompanying the show, Salgado talks about our discord with nature, how we have come to delink ourselves from our surroundings and are oblivious to this separation. His plea is not as much to demonise the 'civilised' world but to make us aware of our natural legacy and its unimaginable breadth and beauty. We would do good to see his photographs as a passport to a world that we might have otherwise banished out of our safe haven of reason and greed. In the same interview he talks about how the Nenets travel on the Siberian steppes, in temperatures nearly forty degrees below zero: "Because they live in the most extreme weather, they carry with them only what the reindeers can take on their sleds. It's the minimum we need to survive". If that's not a lesson of a lifetime for what we have marked as 'our' metropolitan modernity, what is?

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