The Story of His Life

Iconic photographer Sebastião Salgado to speak in Santa Barbara

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Few photographers have amassed a collection that rivals that of Paris-based Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado.

Be it a frail African famine victim, a swarm of muddied gold miners clambering out of an open pit, the seething amorphous mass of commuters packed onto an Indian railway station or a monolithic iceberg adrift off the coast of Antarctica, Mr. Salgado has produced some of the most iconic black-and-white images in contemporary photography.

Mr. Salgado will share his considerable visual legacy with Santa Barbara over the next two months. Along with an exhibition of his photographs that opens Thursday at Just Folk in Carpinteria, he will give an illustrated presentation of his work 8 p.m. March 2 at the Arlington Theatre as part of UCSB Arts & Lectures.

Although photography has played a major role in Mr. Salgado’s life, it wasn’t his first career choice. Born and raised in Aimorés, Brazil, he graduated from the University of São Paulo with a master’s degree in economics. In 1969, he and his wife, Lélia, left Brazil, eventually ending up in London, where Mr. Salgado worked as an economist for the International Coffee Organization.

His work frequently took him to Africa, and it was during those trips that Mr. Salgado started taking photographs. His increasing preoccupation with photography eventually saw him walk away from economics to pursue a career as a photographer.

At the beginning of 1973, the Salgados traveled to Paris, where Mr. Salgado began his life as a photographer. Making the leap from economist to photographer wasn’t as big as one might think.
"As an economist, I was a person capable of designing a project. I knew when to start and finish," Mr. Salgado told the News-Press by phone from his studio in Paris. "I had instruments to do analysis and synthesis and to organize a body of work inside of concepts."

But other influences helped shape his work.

"We also have a Down syndrome son and he has brought a lot to my life. We were refugees in France for a while and that brought a lot to my life. All of these contribute to my work."

Across four decades of photography, Mr. Salgado, who turns 72 on Monday, has documented the indigenous and peasant populations of Latin America, the African famines of the 1980s, large-scale industrial manual labor, the displacement and migration of the world's people, and, most recently, the beauty and power of nature.

In 1979, Mr. Salgado joined the Magnum Photos agency. After completing a number of assignments for magazines in American and Europe, he worked with the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders in 1984 on an 18-month project documenting the African famine. The resulting photographs were as striking as they were revealing and quickly established Mr. Salgado as one of the world's preeminent photographers.

Unlike photojournalists who work in a blur of anonymity, flitting from one assignment to the next, Mr. Salgado approached his work very differently. He earned a reputation for his scrupulous approach, immersing himself completely within his subject matter and often spending many years working on a single project.

"I never went to do a story just to do a story," Mr. Salgado said. "When I have done a story, it is because I am concerned about it, I could identify with it and I believed it was important. I haven't done many stories in my life — I have done only four or five — but I did these because they were important for me ... to be part of."

Mr. Salgado's next expose documented the declining age of large-scale industrial manual labor. Between 1986 and 1992, the photographer traveled to 23 countries photographing gold miners in Brazil, ship breakers in Bangladesh, tobacco harvesters in Cuba and metal workers in Kazakhstan for what became "Workers: An Archeology of the Industrial Age."

In 1993, "Workers" inspired a project that had Mr. Salgado documenting the world's migrant population. "Migrations" took him to 43 countries that spanned all seven continents to photograph people who have abandoned the countryside for the cities.

Having moved from a remote rural region of Minas Gerais to São Paulo in Brazil and then to Paris as a refugee, migration was a subject close to his heart.

"I am a migrant," Mr. Salgado said. "I am living here in France, but I am not French; I am Brazilian. For two years, I was a refugee here and then I became a migrant. So when I went to do this story of displacement populations, I was really doing my own story."

Another project that resides close to the photographer's heart is his latest
undertaking, "Genesis."

In 2004, Mr. Salgado started photographing the world's untouched nature, animals and indigenous populations.

The impetus for the work came after a post-"Migrations" retreat to his family's farm in Brazil. Finding the land ravaged by erosion and drought, Mr. Salgado and his wife started replanting trees. Having now planted more than 2 million of them, he said the land's rejuvenation has seen numerous species of animals return. The rehabilitation opened the photographer's eyes to the resilience of natural systems.

"We replanted the rainforest that was there before and we became very close to nature," Mr. Salgado said. "This gave me a big wish to go and photograph the planet and to see what was still pristine, to know the other animals and to know the mountains and rivers.

"This was my passion and this is what 'Genesis' is — it is my passion."

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IF YOU GO

The exhibition "Sebastião Salgado" opens Thursday and runs through April at Just Folk, 2346 Lillie Ave., in Summerland. For hours and more information, call 969-7118 or go to www.justfolk.com.

UCSB Arts & Lecture's "An Evening with Sebastião Salgado In Conversation with Pico Iyer" takes place at 8 p.m. March 2 at the Arlington Theatre, 1317 State St. Tickets are $28 to $38 general and $11 for UCSB students. For more information, call 893-3535 or go to www.artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu.