



Six years.

Thirty five countries.

Three hundred sixty three photographs in one book.

Eighty three photographs in a companion book.

One hundred thousand copies published each in six languages.

Sixteen exhibitions.

One photographer.

At any given moment -right now for instance- there are any number of photographers risking everything from their financial health to their physical safety, to document circumstances around the world. None of these photographers are on assignment, nor is there any assurance that their work will be published. Anywhere. Truly motivated from inside out -called and wholly kept as they are by an unrestrained passion for their subjects- these photographers exemplify the highest practical standard and tradition of documentary photography, essentially fulfilling the highest promise of photography: the act of witness. (Witness and objective truth are not necessarily interchangeable here.)

Sebastião Salgado has always been high on everyone's list of documentary photographers. But with *Migrations* and *The Children* (Aperture), his two recent books, Salgado has propelled himself into his own category with a body of work that could silence even his harshest critics. Telling the story of humanity on the move, *Migrations* documents refugees in Africa, Asia and Latin America, fleeing everything from war, poverty, repression & ethnic cleansing, to the promise of a better life. Given the premise of this work, that "the world has gone from majority rural to majority urban", *Migrations* is not simply a document but a photographic reference book that bears witness to one of the greatest population upheavals in modern times.

And the work is beautiful. The very least of these photographs function narratively, telling the story within a story, something very few photographers do as well as Salgado (Eugene Richards

comes to mind also.) A young girl is seated between parallel bars while she is being fitted with a prosthetic leg. A man of gentle confidence leans over her from behind, covering her eyes with one hand, tenderly holding her chin with the other. She is laughing. She is being loved (p.179). A Palestinian woman, clearly old enough to remember what happened in 1948, is living in a refugee camp in Southern Lebanon. She is looking into the camera. Does she still have the key to her home in Palestine like so many Palestinian refugees do? Is there hope for her? How long will she wait and toward what end? It is the simple honesty of images like this that make this book an extraordinary document.

But Salgado goes further. Using a sophisticated visual vocabulary well, he is able to venture from the literal toward the poetic and metaphorical. Unlike someone like Koudelka, whose main thrust is esoteric (while maintaining strong ties to documentary photography), Salgado does this while trying to maintain full ties to the narrative. And this is where he gets in trouble with some people. Is he telling us how he feels about what he sees, or how we should feel about what he's photographing? Is this the act of a heavy hand or simply a personal truth fully reflected?

Understandable as these questions may be, this body of work lays them to rest. And it is these photographs that will certainly endure the test of time and the ones I am most interested in. In a refugee camp in Tanzania (pp.184-185) people are tending to their everyday life, caught unaware under a threatening sky. There are make-shift cloth tents everywhere. It seems like just another day, except to the photographer. The gathering storm clouds are emphasized in part because they actually appear to be sharper than the camp below. Is this heaven and hell, beauty and sorrow, all in the same frame, seen in the same moment? Is hope alive in this camp? Or is it about to be washed away forever? It is this use of the poetic that I am attracted to in this work, and for which Salgado deserves unqualified praise. With Migrations he has refined his mastery of this kind of dramatic imagery.

His first book, *The Other Americas*, was filled with a raw, less refined form of this kind of imagery and was very well received. *Workers*, his second book, contained some remarkable and memorable images, but was less effective as a book. First because it was poorly edited. And second because it was trying to be an epic at the turn of every page. But where *Workers* failed, *Migrations* succeeds. This is partly because the use of repetition, which was the failing of *Workers*, was used wisely in *Migrations*, letting us know that the same human misfortune is going on at the same time in different countries around the world. This alone raises the work to near epic proportions.

Migrations & The Children by Sebastião Salgado

Written by Nubar Alexanian



THE CHILDREN SEBASTIAO SALGADO



<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/sebastiao-salgado.html>