Sebastião Salgado, Genesis

Genesis is a photographic project by Sebastião Salgado which resulted from a research started in 2004. After its inauguration at the Natural History Museum, in London, in 2013, it was transformed into an itinerary exhibition curated by Lelia Wanick Salgado.

This project follows two important works in Salgado’s career – “Workers” (1993) and “Migration” (2000) – while at the time being associated with the release of the documentary “The Salt of the Earth”, directed by Wim Wenders and Juliano Salgado, son of Sebastião Salgado who closely followed the shooting.

With his work, Salgado has sought to sensitise humanity to the dilemmas of poverty, hunger, refugees, territorial and labor struggles, and to the mass displacement of populations through the twentieth century. Salgado, alerts us to the incredible process of urbanisation and development that has been transforming the world, particularly in his home country, Brazil. A country that over the last 40 years has become a real “production machine”. Therefore, Genesis is the result of an eight-year journey along more than 30 countries, looking for unexplored places without the influence of modern civilisation. These images that depict a world that has been lost in this manner. It is a celebration of origins that each viewer lives and identifies with.

In this documentary photography project we are transported to imaginary virgin territories. The exhibition is divided into five geographical areas, which together form a mark of the wildest and most authentic places that remain today, at the same time, revealing the fragility of this condition.

Salgado’s documentary photography lives on two elements: light and shadow. The absence of colour, he says, let’s you eclipse the accessory information and focus the viewer’s gaze to what is essential. This way of communicating by Salgado, and in particular this project, touches us architects and urban planners in a particular way. It reminds us of the territory where every day we work on and our active role as professionals. From this celebration of the origins we recover an image in particular. A photograph of the Nenets and their nomadic buildings.

This takes us back to the representation of the primitive hut and the realm of Doxi and Espírros, the history of human habitation. In a reminder of the technological development and the rapid growth of cities around the world, this archetype of construction, the genesis of the whole architecture, (re) reminds us of its first principle: to shelter.
This exhibition is presenting Struth’s works made in the context of two different recent projects, interwoven in Marian Goodman Gallery for the first time: Photographs that Struth made in Israel and Palestine as part of “This Place” and of places of scientific and technological research in California.

Struth travelled to Israel and Palestine six times between 2009 and 2014 and worked in East Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Golan Heights, Ramallah, Al–Khalil/Hebron, Nazareth and the Negev. His visits were informed by listening to the stories of his guides and other people he met along the way, ‘my exploration was about observing the human drama and what seemed to touch me most. In essence, it was about the reading of the signifiers and the pictorial possibilities of the place’. And, in eschewing the colossal for the personal, Struth set himself ‘the challenge of how to condense an epic narrative into a still image’.

Struth was aware, from the very beginning, of the inherent conflicts and obstacles in approaching such a politically laden region as a subject, and he commented, ‘as an artist who has always been politically conscious and interested in the organisation of society, I was not sure what it meant to work in a conflict zone, or if you can do justice to it at all...moral and ethical questions are impossible to avoid: you have to acknowledge social and political injustices in this area...’ So, rather than assume a self-or-derained role as moral arbiter, Struth attempts to represent what he refers to as ‘a particle of the conflict of the region’.

Silwan, East Jerusalem is emblematic of Struth’s work in Israel and Palestine. While it is executed with his meticulous eye, he remained open to the serendipity of the moment, achieving a work he describes as a portrait, rather than a landscape, ‘you can only look at a landscape as a potential location for human experience... a landscape doesn't need me, you or anybody. It becomes interesting if it can be the ground plan for human experience, projection or desire’. For Struth, the act of journeying and seeing when scouting for locations is crucial. He combines a personal analysis of an instinctive sense and narrative of a place with a formal topological view, to create a composition that elucidates something revelatory.

Some of the Israel and Palestine images recall Struth’s early interest in street photography, studying the urban landscape and architecture of Europe, North America and Asia, characterised by deep, distant perspective, long views and knowledge of place. However the signs and remnants of conflict and division are still evident here and inescapable within the Israel and Palestinian landscape, marked by blockaded roads, metal and concrete barriers and impassable landscapes.