

BARRY SALZMAN

BEARING WITNESS

I Was Wearing My Favourite Shoes, But One Got Lost

Barry Salzman is a Zimbabwean-born lens-based artist. His work addresses the universal themes of trauma, recovery and healing. He does so through the prism of twentieth-century genocide, specifically the recurrence of genocide and our collective responsibility as public witness to the indelible marks left by human-inflicted traumas on humanity. His African work is focused on the genocides in Namibia and Rwanda. Namibia was the site of the first genocide of the twentieth century, where the German occupiers of what was then South West Africa developed and tested concentration camps, which they brutally deployed against the Herero and Nama population from 1904-08. In Rwanda in 1994, almost one million people were killed in one hundred days – there is no landscape anywhere in that small country that did not bear witness to the atrocities. Salzman employs different aesthetic choices to interrogate landscapes that have borne witness to historical trauma. In the Rwanda works, he represents the “veils” through which we view history by moving the camera during the exposure. In the Namibian works, he symbolically deconstructs the landscape and then attempts to recomposite it, reminding us that we have an opportunity to recover and reconcile post conflict, even though the pieces never quite fit together again in the same way they did before. Salzman’s photographs compel us to confront uncomfortable truths, while fostering a collective consciousness that transcends geographic and temporal boundaries and the particularity of place. They remind us that “that place” can quickly become “any place.”

Art Talk Magazine: Good afternoon Barry! Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We always start with asking our interviewees what brought them to art, and who they think they would have become had they not chosen art as

a path and career.

Barry Salzman: Hello Carolina and Francois and hello to your readers. Thank you for your interest in my work. As it happens, I don’t have to offer a hypothetical answer to this question, since I did in fact pursue another career prior to moving full time into art. I had a business career, with a focus on the media industry. Fortunately for me, I was involved in the early days of the internet which was exciting, innovative and creative. However, as the internet evolved, much of the early thrill dissipated and I found myself longing for a creative outlet. My first love, as a teenager, was photography, so I decided to go back to school to further explore that early passion. I enrolled to do my MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media at The School Of Visual Arts in New York City, and have been working full time on my art practice since I graduated in 2014.

ATM: We discovered your art through Stefano Pesci, a deeply caring human being and understood immediately why he felt connected to your work. Let’s start at the beginning when you are a student in South Africa and you buy your first camera that you take to areas where, at the time, only black people are allowed to go, so you may understand the enormity of apartheid. What was it like as a teenager to enter these areas? Were you conscious of the dangers? How did the locals react to you coming in, and to you taking photos?

BS: With youth and idealism on my side, I never considered the potential danger of the situations I was putting myself into. As a teenager, I went to take pictures in the racially segregated areas under Apartheid where black people were forced to live in shacks -- it was my way of trying to reckon with the injustices I witnessed all around me. The camera is a powerful tool – an extension of the self.



Defiant Blooms, Kamonyi District, Rwanda, 2018



A Ravaged Land Healing, I-III, Karongi, Rwanda, 2018





I Was Carrying My Doggy Backpack



I Was Wearing My Swimsuit Under My Shorts. The Blue One With Stamps On It



I Was Wearing Something With Grey and White Patterns, But It Was Hacked To Pieces



I Was Wearing My Favourite Party Dress

It allows you to go places you may not otherwise go. It creates a reason. As a young person living in South Africa during Apartheid, having my camera almost compelled me to bear witness to racial injustice. The theme of bearing witness has stayed with me and continues to be resonant in my work many decades later.

ATM: The subject of genocide is a very personal one for you, with members of your family victims of the holocaust during the Second World war. How did you learn of this tragedy in your family? How did it fundamentally change your understanding of humanity, and the cruelty it is capable of?

BS: I don't remember first being made aware of the Holocaust. It was just always there. My grandmother's sister had her Auschwitz tattoo clearly stamped on her left forearm. We weren't allowed to ask her about it, but somehow we always knew the story, or so I thought. In some ways, the Holocaust remained an almost distant concept until 2013 when I started working on my project "It Never Rained On Rhodes." That work, available on my website at www.barrysalzman.net, is an exploration of my maternal heritage through the lens of the community of Sephardic Jews who lived for centuries on the Aegean island of Rhodes. In July 1944, the entire community was deported to Auschwitz. "It Never Rained On Rhodes" is a multimedia work that included extensive video interviews with Auschwitz survivors and their families. After hearing their first hand testimonies in person, I realized that we will never truly know their story. We will never be able to comprehend what a victim of genocide endures. And it was then that I committed to myself that I would never stop trying.

ATM: Let's talk about your project "The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim". In an article with the *Photographic Waves* you say (when witnessing the pile of clothes being taken out of a mass grave in Rwanda): "Because the piles of clothes were so big and so anonymous but each one is a person with a life story: a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, friends, teachers...And I think, by handling each one, and trying to clean it off, I started to understand the individual behind the mass atrocities". This resonates deeply with me as I feel it is the key to why humanity doesn't change and we repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Unless we witness an event, the consequences of an event first hand, it does not completely enter our consciousness. How did you feel witnessing such horror? What was the process you went through to imagine the lives of those who had worn the clothes, and imagined the sentences that accompany every item you exhibited?

BS: I do agree with you that there is no equivalence to being a first hand witness to human-inflicted traumas on humanity. I think those experiences place a burden of responsibility on those who do in fact have the privilege of bearing witness. Seeing clothes excavated from the ground at a mass grave in Rwanda was a turning point in my exploration of genocide in my work. It personalized the human toll of genocide in a way that I could never have imagined. It compelled me to find a way to make my first hand experience as real as possible for people who engage with my photography. The rest was spontaneous. It seemed obvious to me to dust off the garments and carefully lay them out to restore as much dignity as possible to their owners. In the moment, I felt that I was making portraits of people, not still life images of objects. The text in the first person is simply an

extension of what I was feeling at the excavation site in Kabuga Village in 2018, almost 25 years after the genocide.

My hope is that each of the posthumous portraits in “The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim” forces us to imagine, and therefore commemorate, the lives of those who were killed during the genocide. We can never comprehend one million dead people. We can, however, imagine the life story of the little boy carrying his doggy backpack, and each of the other people represented in this series. We can know them. Up until the day they were murdered, each lived at the center of their own life story.

I am excited to share the news that an exhibition of “The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim” will be opening in August 2024 at Museum Singer Laren in The Netherlands to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda.

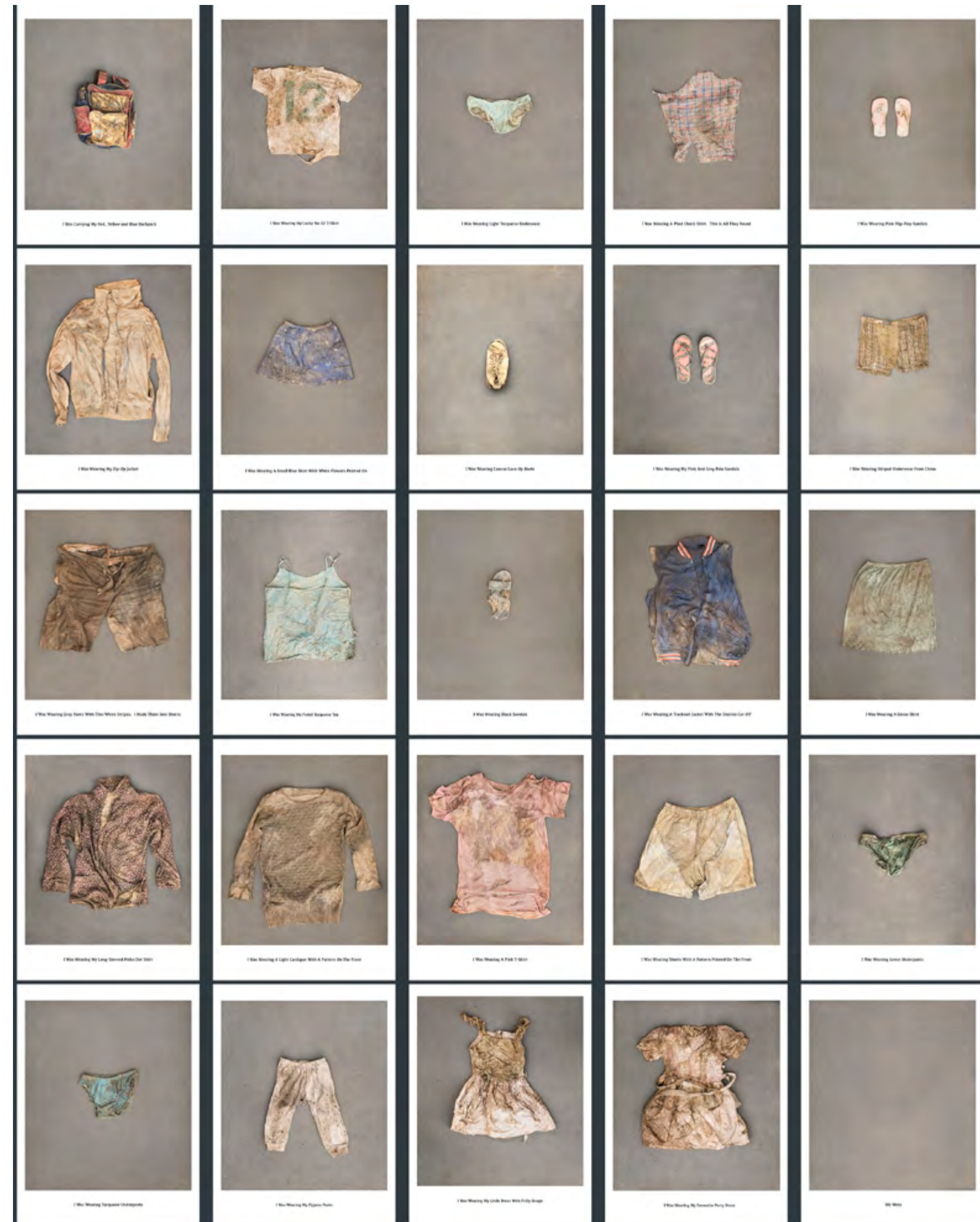
ATM: As a follow up to the previous questions, what reactions did you witness when your body of art was exhibited in a form and scale that replicated the size of the pile? Wouldn't capturing these reactions have been a project in itself?

BS: When making “The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim,” there were many moments I felt that I had to stop. It was simply too traumatizing, particularly for the two genocide survivors who were assisting me. They had both identified where their loved ones had fallen from clothes that had been excavated from mass graves because the bodies were mutilated beyond recognition. Working with me at the Kabuga Village excavation site in 2018 reignited their traumas. In those moments I reflected deeply on the words of French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman: “In order to know we must imagine for ourselves. Let

us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. We are obliged to that oppressive imaginable.” I realized that I had to stay present to imagine. I ask the same of my audiences. That process of imagining is a deeply personal one. I think any efforts by me to document the responses of audiences would distract from the authentic rawness of their own personal experiences of imagining.

ATM: As I shared previously, not witnessing an event first hand, I believe, doesn't allow it to fully enter our consciousness. I also believe social and mass media have had a detrimental effect in so far as it makes everything even less real, despite showing atrocities in real time, and in gory details. Recent events such as the war in Ukraine felt like they were a reality show, and it was shocking to see how quickly the world seemed to lose interest. Do you think this contributes to your question about our ability to learn from the past and to not make the same mistakes? Is it perhaps because with social media the past is measured in seconds and minutes rather than years and decades? We always need something new to fuel our thirst for the “next big thing”?

BS: Social media has no doubt changed the way information is disseminated and consumed, and generally not for the better. However, our collective responsibility for repeating the past predates social media. I think part of the problem is that we are left-brain saturated, i.e. the part of the brain that processes fact-based information. We are not able to fully process more literal accounts of trauma and human suffering disseminated in the same way. Artists can play a role in addressing this problem by activating





Beyond The Pictorial Dimension, Nyamure, Rwanda, 2018

the right-brain of public consciousness, since the left-brain is close to being saturated. In my work I am preoccupied with making aesthetic images not documenting brutal facts. By creating images, my hope is to provide for moments of reflection as viewers interpret the work in their own way and re-engage with subject matter we think we know.

ATM: When describing your “How We See The World” series, you say: “In contrast to the specific locations I shoot, the images are intentionally nonspecific. My intent is for the photographs to counter the way information on this topic is typically disseminated – through the precise lens of the photojournalist, historian, or documentarian. How I make each image is critical to the project’s concept – using a single exposure, without any compositing or layering in post-production. By using tools of abstraction, I try to expose the layered landscape: its complexities, varied interpretations, and the memories it evokes. I use the concept of “veils” frequently in my work. In creating a “veiled view,” by moving the camera during the exposure, I reflect on the self-imposed veils through which we bear witness, suggesting that it is our veiled societal view that continues to upend our unfulfilled promise of “never again.” You further reinforce your belief by saying: “Throughout modern history, Western governments have repeatedly and consistently failed to act in time to stop perpetrators of genocide. As policy makers and government leaders throughout Europe and the United States continue to reckon with their inaction to stop acts of genocide, notably with the post-Holocaust genocides in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Rwanda, so my work examines our role and responsibility as public witness.” Your photographs really illustrate that what happened (is

happening) in the loc locations you capture could happen anywhere, don’t they? What do you think it would take for individuals with the power to take action to ACTUALLY do it? Is it because we have allowed economic matters to become primordial, and for business to be more important than lives? Or is it something else?

BS: I do think there is a practical limitation to our ability to truly empathize with the suffering of others that does not impact us personally. It is part of our survival mechanism. There is only so much trauma we can process. However, even recognizing those limitations, we could all do a lot better if we could understand better. I would like to think that the responsibility sits with each of us, as opposed to a small number of individuals with power. In truth, in most Western societies, we are the ones who enable those with power. We can, and should, demand more of them.

ATM: In your statement with respect to your “The Other Side of Christmas” you state: “I often wonder what is in a label. What do the words we attach to ourselves tell us about our hopes and aspirations, our identity, community and place of belonging?...For a decade after leaving South Africa in 1984, I wanted nothing more than to become an ‘American’. I celebrated when I became a citizen...So when the time came for me to consider the next phase of my life as an artist (in America or elsewhere; and as it happens, I moved part-time to Cape Town), I first set out to understand what the label ‘America’ meant. I wanted to see beyond the flimsy veil of its official image of equality and opportunity, comfort and confidence – “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Leading into the holiday season in 2014, starting around the time of the Ameri-

can mid-term elections, the precursor to the divisive 2016 Presidential elections, I began to explore the notion of being 'American' in a body of work that became *The Other Side of Christmas*. The project is situated in the context of the rich tradition of the road trip in the history of contemporary photography, and the role of the open road as a facilitator for observing and understanding the USA. The camera's depiction of the American open road is almost as old as photography itself, but the seminal work that has come to define the genre was made by Swiss photographer, Robert Frank, in 1955-56." In 2024 it seems that we will have as divisive Presidential elections as the ones in 2016 and 2020, some going as far as believing the United States are on the verge of a civil war. Will you go "on the road" again, take a road trip across the US to capture the changes since 2014? Or perhaps during the run up to the elections to capture the face of democracy?

BS: I have no plans to do another road trip through the US in 2024. However, I think that the stage is set for the upcoming election to be the most divisive ever. The increase in public divisiveness is not particular to the US. Society has become increasingly polarized on a host of critical issues as a by-product of the short form dissemination and consumption of information on social media. I have made a piece of work for the Investec Cape Town Art Fair (February 15- 18, 2024) that specifically addresses this issue -- I have titled it "The Crudeness Of Binary Thinking." It critiques the polarizing impact of othering -- a contemporary reference to the state of the world and a historical precursor to genocide.

ATM: The number of women and children abducted worldwide is a staggering 27 million every year, and in 2023 over 40,000 individuals were lost to gun violence in the United States. Having a conversation about human trafficking is quasi impossible as it makes people incredibly uncomfortable (a threat too close to home?), and gun violence has absolutely no impact on gun policies. As a follow up to the previous question, and with reference to the way you captured and showed "The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim" series, how would you capture and show global human trafficking, or mass shootings in the US?

BS: I think humanizing complex and challenging issues is the most powerful way to get people to engage with them in meaningful ways -- to understand, relate and empathize. We cannot comprehend numbers like 27 million people, or even 40,000 victims. We can, however, very clearly understand and relate to the life and loss of an individual person.

ATM: If you could curate a group show, with living or deceased artists' artworks, which ones would you like to be shown next to your artworks? What would the title of the exhibition be? Where would we see it?

BS: There are many artists I would be privileged to share an exhibition with -- both well known and lesser known. Amongst those I most admire, Alfredo Jaar, Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter are artists that have addressed themes in their work similar to those I engage with. In Richter's case, it is specifically his paint-scraped abstract landscapes and the overpainted Auschwitz-Birkenau works that I would want to include. I would definitely include Alfredo Jaar's Rwanda Project and in Kiefer's case it would be his large-scale works that use the landscape to reflect on historical trauma. The practices of these three



The Passive Backdrop To Human Theater I, Karongi, Rwanda



In The Company Of Strangers, Ngauzepo (Otjinene), Namibia. 2023

artists continue to inspire my work. I'd title the show "Bearing Witness." There are two smaller European contemporary art museums that I'd love to invite you to see "Bearing Witness" at -- Museum Voolrinden in the Netherlands or The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen.

ATM: You live between New York and Cape Town. As an observer of humanity, what are the different beauties and struggles between these two cities? From a generational perspective, how do you see the difference between growing up in these two cities, between the United States and South Africa for young women and men?

BS: Both cities have beauty and challenges in abundance. In both instances, wealth inequality presents an enduring challenge and ever-increasing problem. Thirty years after a democratically elected government came to power, South Africa still struggles with the hangover of Apartheid. Especially in a post-COVID New York, economic disparity is its own version of apartheid. However, despite the challenges, both cities continue to offer vibrant and thrilling opportunities for young people. In Cape Town much of that is life-style oriented, since the city is rich in natural beauty. In New York, the thrill is more culturally and professionally driven; after all, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere!

ATM: The world is devoured by technology, and Artificial Intelligence is on everyone's lips! Have you explored AI in your photography? What do you think would happen if we fed machines every instance of war, conflict and cruelty (mass or individual) and prompted them to analyze the why of these instances, and asked them if we will ever learn to not repeat history?

BS: Ironically, for somebody that had a first career heavily focused on emerging technologies, I have been very reluctant

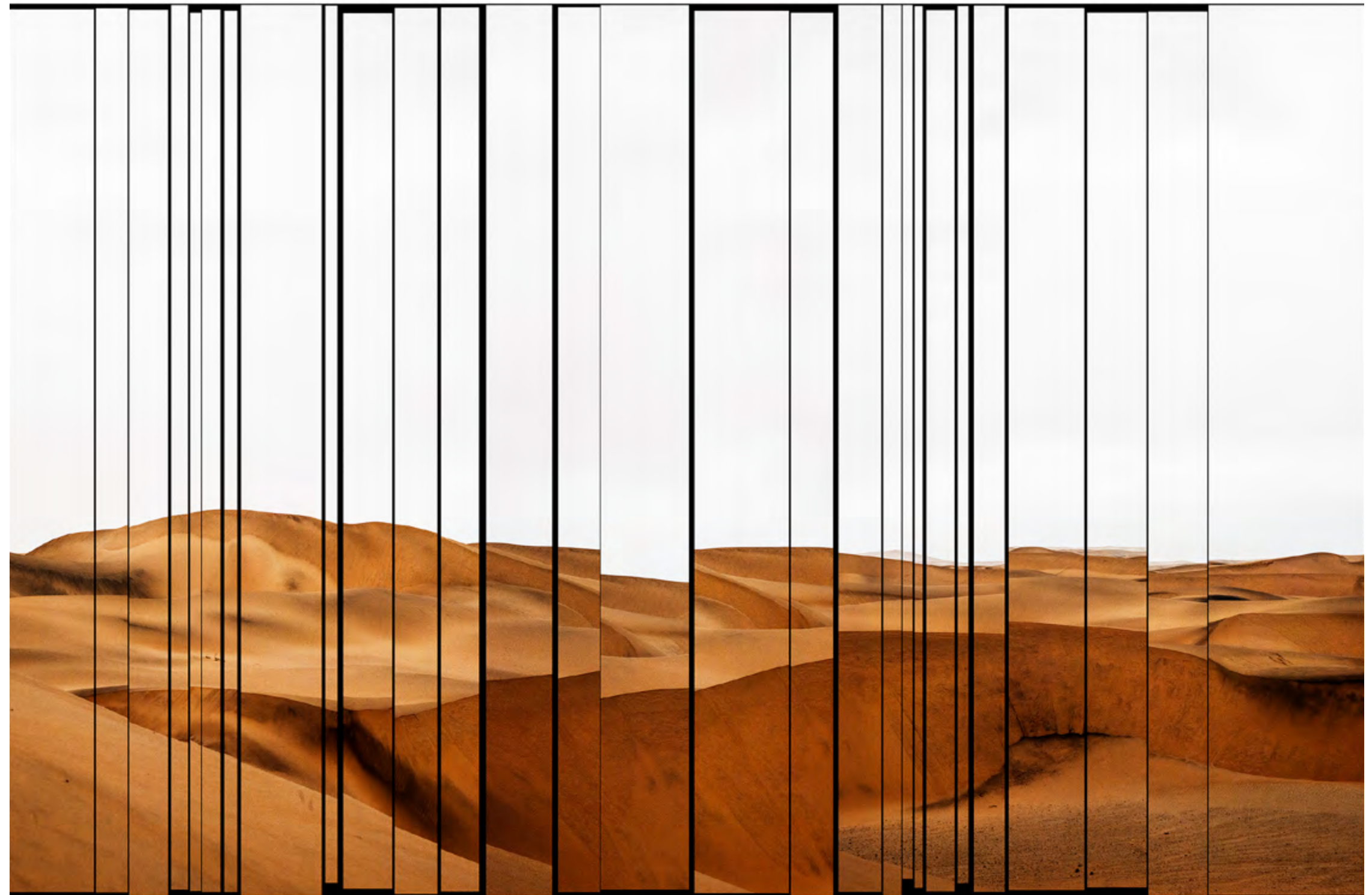
to incorporate new technologies into my work. I always want my work to fit comfortably under the umbrella of photography, and am less interested in making work that ventures into the domain of digital art. But your question intrigued me, so I referred your questions to the AI engine ChatGPT. It told me that while it “can process and analyze information, it’s important to note that I don’t possess personal opinions or emotions.” I think emotions and empathy are the cornerstone to addressing these challenges, so I must conclude that the responsibility for a better tomorrow falls on our shared humanity -- something we cannot and should not delegate to machines.

ATM: How important do you think art is in bringing awareness nearer people’s consciousness? How would you like your work to touch, and shift people and their views?

BS: Art is critical. It complements the more linear and didactic ways that we generally consume information and has the potential to be truly transformative. For that to happen, artists have a responsibility to make work that addresses the most complex issues we face as a society. Art can, and should, give us new lenses into the nuanced complexity of subjects that we think we know.

ATM: We are at the beginning of 2024! Can you share some of your resolutions for the year to come?

BS: To spend much more of my time shooting new work.



Sentinel And Witness, Swakopmund, Namibia. 2023.