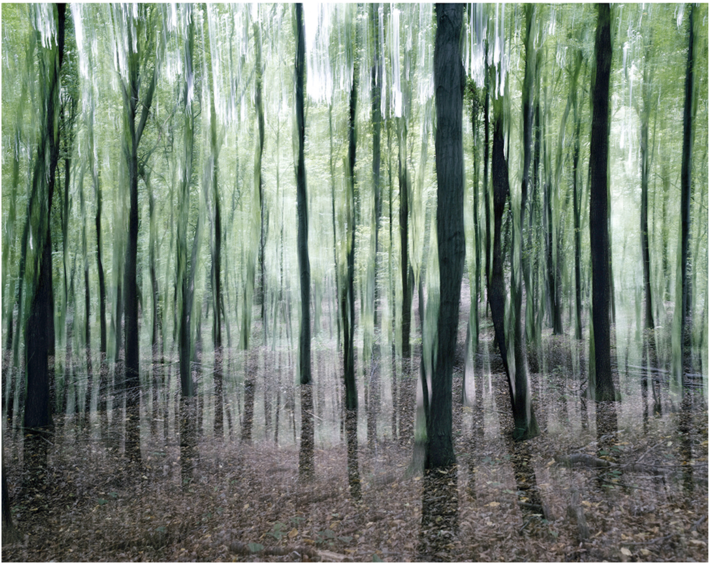
ARTDOC
Photography Magazine

Testimonies of covered cruelties

Barry Salzman

Barry Salzman visualises traumas of modern-day holocausts.

Words by · Artdoc



© Barry Salzman | Deliriously He Ran Nowhere And Everywhere, Chodów, Poland, 2015

His pictures are artistic testimonies of the past; of the cruel past that earth should not cover. The blurry and distorted landscapes and the sharp and detailed records of victims' clothes unearthed 30 years after the Rwanda genocide must keep the spectator alert about the barbarous violence. Visual artist Barry Salzman uses different artistic approaches to address the trauma of modern-day holocausts.

Barry Salzman was born in Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, and schooled in South Africa. After high school, he spent a year in Canada and later moved to New York. "It completely opened my eyes to what was possible outside of Southern Africa. Remember that apartheid was still enforced; there were international sanctions on Rhodesia then. You couldn't travel without a passport. International people were not including South Africa. We lived in an incredibly closed society." After some years in Canada and New York, Salzman returned to South Africa, where he still felt the repression and a lack of room for expression. South Africa was still a much closed country. "Until I left South Africa at 21 or 22 to go to New York, I never knew what Nelson Mandela looked like because his image was banned in South Africa."

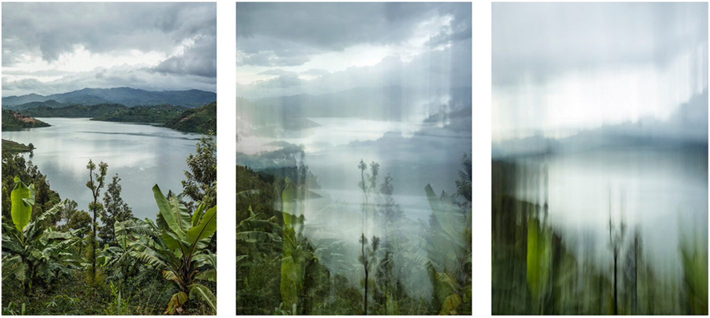
© Barry Salzmann | Defiant Blooms, Kamonyi District, Rwanda, 2018

Critical theory and history

Back home in Cape Town, he devoted his life to becoming an artist. "I already had an extreme passion for photography as a young student, and I had used it as a vehicle to grapple with apartheid ever since I was old enough to understand that there were these social injustices." He used his camera to go into the African townships and discover what was happening there. "I wanted to explore what life looked like outside of the very secluded white neighbourhood I grew up in. And so, my first relationship with photography was almost a sort of advocacy. It was using the camera as a tool to go someplace I might not have otherwise been able to go."

> I already had an extreme passion for photography as a young student.

Photography as a technical tool wasn't much of a challenge, but Salzman wanted to base his work within the context of the critical theory and to place it in the history's context of photography. "My relationship with photography has always really been about using the camera to understand challenging socio-political geopolitical issues."



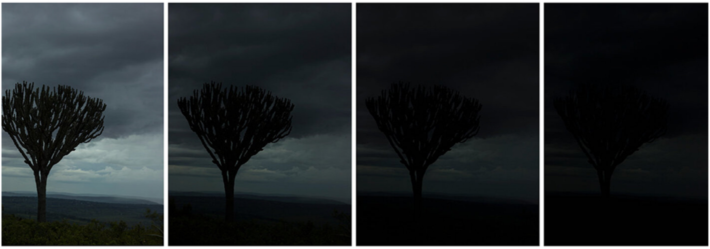
© Barry Salzman | *A Ravaged Land Healing, I–III*, Karongi, Rwanda, 2018

How we see the world

The subject of the series *How we see the world* is quite burdensome. It treats landscapes from sites of 20th century genocide, including Poland, Ukraine, Rwanda and Namibia. For Salzman, this heavy topic is not a remote affair. In 2013, he made a body of work called *It Never Rained On Rhodes*, referring to the Aegean island of Rhodes where his grandparents came from. "Towards the end of the war, they deported the entire Jewish population of the region to Auschwitz. It was the furthest place from which the Nazis transported Jews to Auschwitz. Many of my family members were victims of the Holocaust." Showing his work, critics told him they knew the story of the Holocaust. But Salzman realized many people would never know the genuine stories of genocide. "We will never really understand what happened to those people. And it was then that I decided I would never stop trying to explore it. I would do whatever I could as an artist to look at it slightly differently. I would say if we know it so well, why does it happen repeatedly?"

© Barry Salzman | *Last Mile To Anyplace II*, Chelm To Sobibor,Poland

In the series *How we see the world,* the landscape has become the witness of the brutal and horrific scenes. For the work *A Ravaged Land Healing (Karongi, Rwanda, 2018*), Salzman photographed landscapes he combined in a triptych. From left to right, the scenic, almost idyllic views become more and more blurry. It is important to note that the blur came about by physically hitting and pushing the camera and tripod, simulating the historical fact, recreating the feeling of delirious motion, and not by using Photoshop afterwards. The beautiful and peaceful lake seems to tremble from the heavy memories. "The landscape witnesses everything. It does nothing. It stands by and watches; it becomes complicit. And it sheds its leaves and covers up the evidence. I found the landscape to be a fascinating metaphor in exploring the role of humanity in continuing to enable perpetrators of genocide."



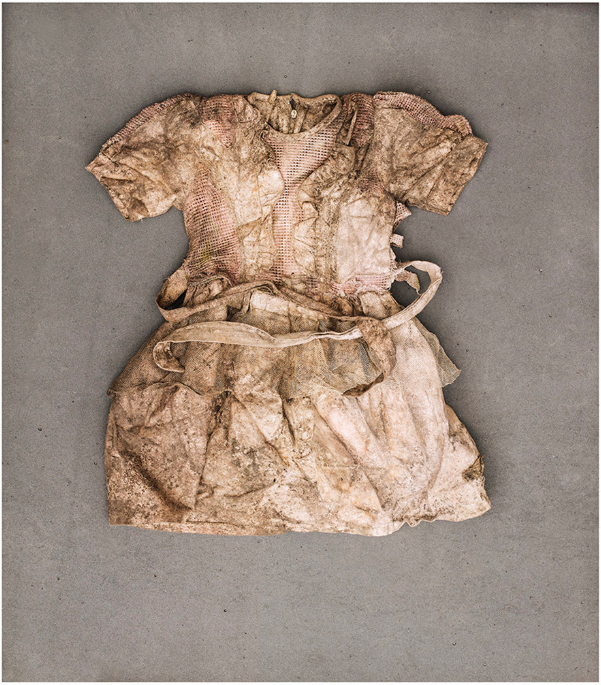
© Barry Salzman | Mining The Landscape For Metaphor 1–IV, Kayumba Hilltop, Rwanda

Artistic approach

Barry Salzman consciously did not want to use the journalistic or documentarian approach because the human ability to process historical facts has become saturated and impedes us from feeling empathy and indignation. "If the journalistic approach had worked, we would never see another genocide. But at some point, our ability as humans to process facts has become saturated. All of that fact-based stuff, those awful images of the liberation of Auschwitz, of the devastation in Rwanda, all of that sort of penetrates our left brain, the rational brain, the fact-based brain, to a point where we become left-brain-saturated."

> If the journalistic approach had worked, we would never see another genocide

The job of a visual artist is different. He should engage the viewer in an emotional and a graphic, non-discursive way. "My job as an artist is to take that difficult material, but engage you on the right brain side, the side that leaves you some room to interpret the work on your own." Instead of convincing with mere facts, Salzman wants the viewer to draw his own conclusions. "That's why I create aesthetic images because I think when you have that aesthetic treatment of a site of trauma, it puts the viewer into this uncomfortable place of saying: how do I reconcile the beauty I'm looking at with what I know happened there?"

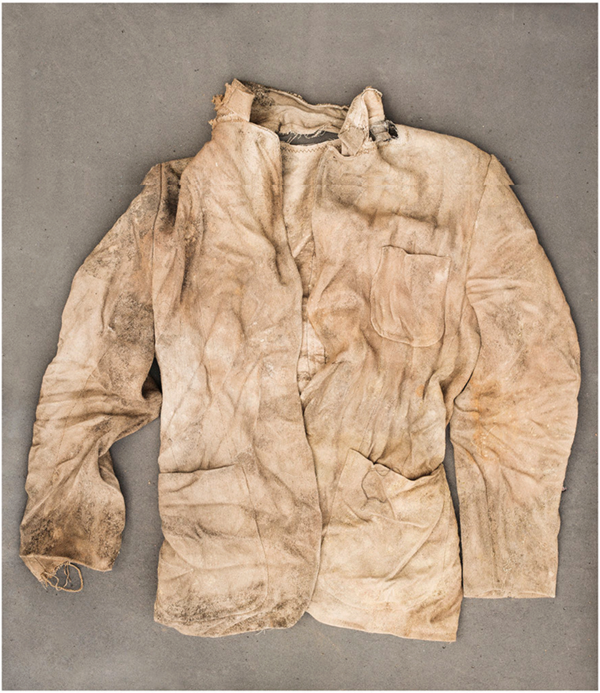


I Was Wearing My Favourite Party Dress

© Barry Salzmann | The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim

Victims' clothes

Another series made in Rwanda is not accidentally prosaically called *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim.* The exhibition was scheduled to open in 2020 at the Holocaust and Genocide Centre in Johannesburg to commemorate the 26th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, but became cancelled because of the covid. The series comprises 100 images of clothes victims wore on the day they were slaughtered. The lugubrious remains of what once in 1994 were clothes are photographed against an even grey backdrop. Only one image is empty, showing the grey background. It symbolizes the vast majority of genocide victims that can never be individually identified. The photos have similarities with the work of the Japanese photographer Ishiuchi Miyako, who captured women's clothes 70 years after the bombing of Hiroshima.



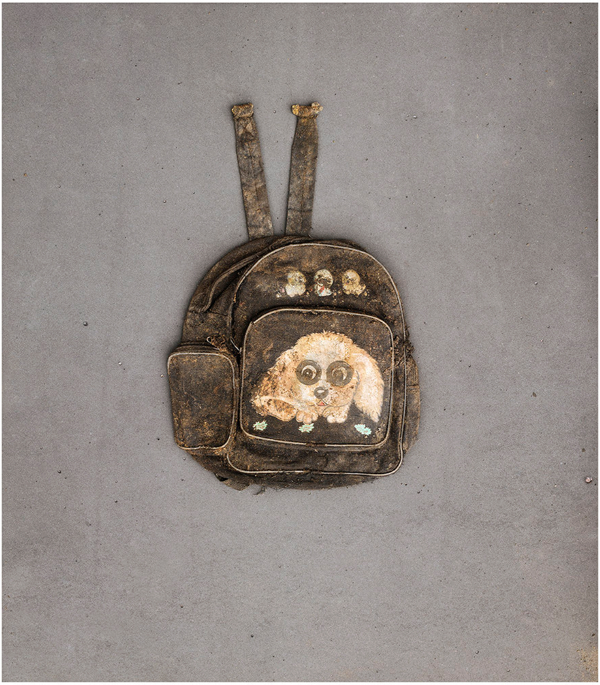
I Was Wearing My Smart Jacket

© Barry Salzmann | The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim

Salzman's work evolved from a visit to a mass grave that was being excavated. "It was very, very emotional. There were piles of clothes they were recovering. For the next two days, I was so emotional and so traumatized by what I had seen and the realization that each one of those garments was a person who had a whole life and a life story and friends and relatives, and yet they were killed in the most dehumanizing way."

> You literally give the voice of the person back.

Barry Salzman created this project by photographing the garments and adding text underneath each picture. For example, one photo shows a woman's dress, brown coloured by the mud and wrinkled by years in the mass grave. The text underneath dryly and therefore poignantly says: I Was Wearing My Favourite Party Dress. "If you would have put it in the third person, it would be just you talking about it. But now, in the first person, it's like you hear the voice. You literally give the voice of the person back. I wanted people to take the time to look at each image and not to glance through them quickly because they were clothes of human lives. The text is a device to encourage people to spend a moment longer with each image."



I Was Carrying My Doggy Backpack

© Barry Salzmann | The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim

The art of photography
An artist needs to be politically aware, says Salzman. He feels his responsibility in many ways. He agrees with the idea that the job of the contemporary artist is analogous to the philosopher's role in history. "The artist has a duty to say something of significance or trying to communicate a concept or an idea. And I took that on board seriously. And so that is very much how I feel about the subject that I deal with in my art practice, and it's evolved to become an even stronger commitment the more my practice develops."

Salzman will be exhibiting select works from *How We See The World* and an installation of all 100 images from *TheDay I Became Another Genocide Victim*, at the Investec Cape Town Art Fair (February 18–20,

2022) at the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

Barry Salzman is an award-winning contemporary artist who works in photography, video, and mixed media. Salzman was born in Zimbabwe and schooled in South Africa. He emigrated to the United States when he was twenty-one.
He has an MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media from The School of Visual Arts in New York City, a Bachelor of Business Science degree from the University of Cape Town, and an MBA from Harvard Business School.
His projects have been shown across the globe and his work is widely published. He was awarded a 2018 International Photographer of the Year award from the International Photography Awards (IPA) for his project The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim, which endeavours to humanise victims of the genocide in Rwanda.

www.barrysalzman.net

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