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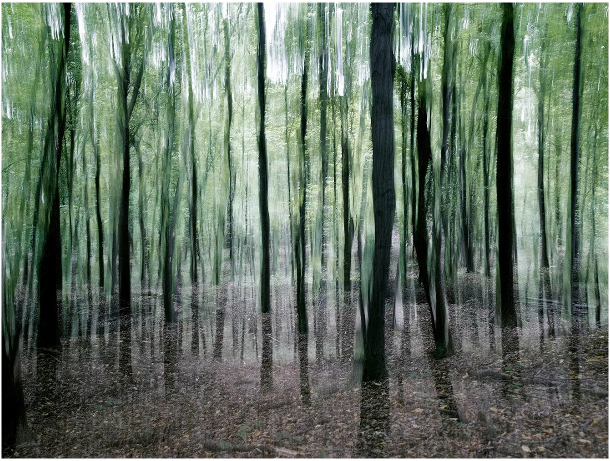
— LE MAGAZINE QUI MET L'ACCENT SUR LA CULTURE —

Barry Salzman : Close Up 14 *(Entretien)*

Aline Pujo / November 9, 2022 / Contemporary art , Close Up , Interviews , Exhibitions



Deliriously He Ran Nowhere and Everywhere - Chodów, Poland, 2015 © Barry Salzman. Courtesy Deepest Darkest Gallery

It was by questioning the meaning of numbers tattooed on his aunt's arm that Barry Salzman, still a young boy, was to embark on a long quest which, without his knowing it at the time, would definitively orient his life and his work.

The maturity of this questioning in the face of the horror of the genocides repeated several times during the 20th century is now revealed in the creation of a true work of testimony. This photographic work wants to mobilize and alert the collective consciences too easily forgetful of their stories. A problem that is all the more acute for us today, as this time seems to once again doubt the humanity of its world.

How did you become a photographer?

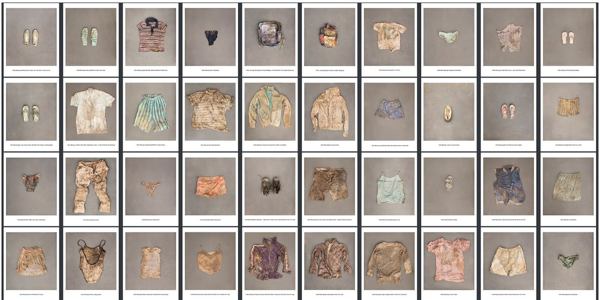
I got my first camera as a teenager. I lived in South Africa during Apartheid and used to go to areas that were for black people during segregation. The camera became a way for me to try to understand the civic, social and legal injustices that were happening around me. I really became a photographer at the end of my forties, like a second professional career.

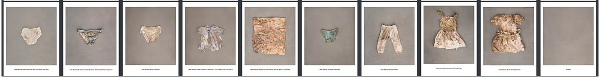
What issue motivates your photographic approach?

My family was very directly affected by the Holocaust. About ten years ago, I did a project that dealt specifically with the Holocaust, and when people came to tell me about this project, they said, “We know this story”. So if we know this story so well, how can we justify repeating it over and over again? It's this frustration that has motivated me to keep looking for new ways to re-engage people in topics we've neglected.

What type of images does your work show?

My main practice concerns landscape work. So far, I have photographed landscapes in Namibia, Poland, Ukraine and Rwanda, all taken near sites where acts of genocide were perpetrated. Namibia was the site of the first genocide of the twentieth century. I shoot each image using a single exposure, without any post-production intervention.





Partial view of the installation: The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim, 2018
© Barry Salzman. Courtesy Deepest Darkest Gallery

Your biggest photographic challenge?

There's a set of shots that were extremely painful to work on. When I was in Rwanda, where I was working on my landscapes, news came: a new mass grave had just been discovered in 2018. That is to say almost 25 years after the genocide. I went to the dig site, really to inform myself, but I was so moved to see these clothes and these human remains coming out of the ground that I felt compelled to do something with it as an artist . I took clothes as they came out of the floor, spread them out, cleaned them, laid them on the floor and photographed them as portraits of the people they were.

Which photo was the most painful to take?

Among this series of 100 photographs, there is one that I still find very difficult to look at, entitled “ *I was carrying my doggy backpack* ”. For me, it's a portrait of a little boy who was killed during the genocide and all that's left is this little backpack with the image of a dog with its eyes wide open. I can imagine this boy and his eyes wide open in fear as he was being murdered.

What status do you give to the texts that are under these images?

Each of the hundred images is underlined by a text spoken in the first person. For example, "I wore my favorite shoes", "I wore my favorite evening dress"... I really care about these statements because they help to communicate the very strong emotion I felt when I realized what I consider to be portraits of people and not still lifes of objects. The text is therefore part of the image. 99 are in the first person and say “I wore…”. In contrast, the very last image in the series is a simple gray square under which there are only the words "We were". This represents the millions of genocide victims who can never be individually identified.

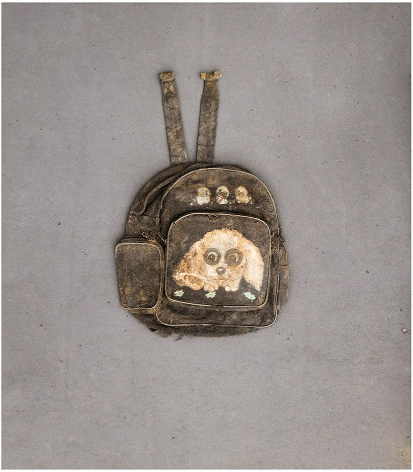
Which of your works has given you the most joy?

It's hard to be happy about a subject that deals with genocide. When I was in art school, I did a lot of nude photography to learn lighting and light. These exercises have given me far more joy than anything I have photographed in the last ten years, because these works deal with deeply substantial and heavy subjects.

Which artists may have inspired your work?

The artist Alfredo Jaar has inspired me a lot, especially the way he tackles crucial issues of socio-economic complexity, human rights, civil rights and economic injustice. He has produced an extraordinary work on the genocide in Rwanda, for which he is very well known.

Also the books of the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, who implores us to stay present. I quote it (roughly): *We can't afford to invoke the unimaginable, because the minute we tell ourselves it's so hard to imagine it, we give ourselves permission to stop doing show empathy, and in doing so, we become complicit in the problem.* Didi-Huberman says we have to force ourselves to stay in this oppressive place of the imagination. This intimation motivates much of my work. When I want to leave the weight of this subject, I hear the voice of Didi-Huberman which pushes me to continue.



I Was Carrying My Doggy Backpack

Installation detail: The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim, 2018
© Barry Salzman. Courtesy Deepest Darkest Gallery

What event has marked you the most recently?

Undoubtedly, this is war in Ukraine. In 2015 I worked in the forests of western Ukraine photographing the landscapes at unmarked WWII mass grave sites. It's just devastating to see today that these same landscapes are once again witnessing man-made atrocities. It is the reminder, which we unfortunately always need, that history does in fact continue to repeat itself.

What utopia, what hope for tomorrow?

I often say, when talking about my work, that my hope is for a more human tomorrow. I can't imagine a better utopia and a better future than a more human future, quite simply.

Installation detail: The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim, 2018
© Barry Salzman. Courtesy Deepest Darkest Gallery

Barry Salzman is represented by Deepest Darkest Gallery (Cape Town, South Africa), which will be present at the Grand Palais Éphémère for “Paris Photo” from November 9 to 13, 2022 (stand B2).