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ART & DESIGN

TENDER FABRIC: EXCAVATING THE TRAUMA OF RWANDA’S GENOCIDE

PHOTOGRAPHER BARRY SALZMAN’S POSTHUMOUS PORTRAITS BEAR WITNESS TO THE HORROR OF MASS SLAUGHTER

Words: Siphiwe Mpye

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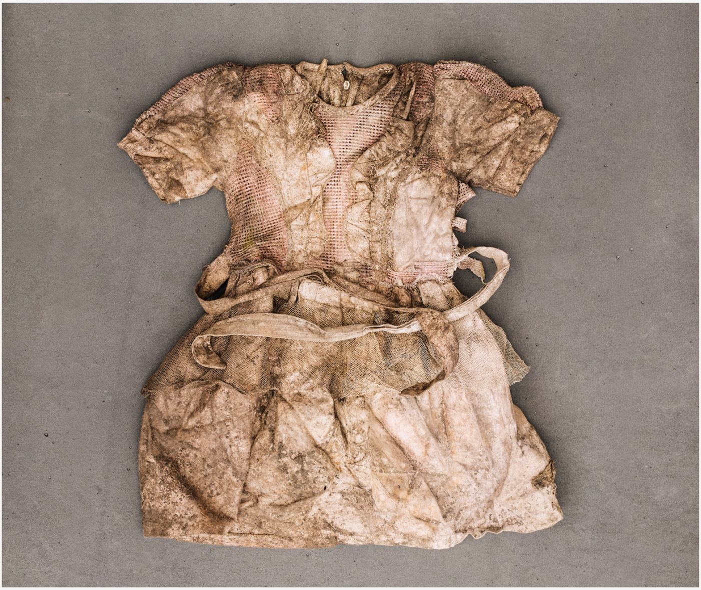


Kabuga clothes.

Image: Barry Salzman

Though the artist Barry Salzman has worked on numerous projects in his long and impressive career, he has fixated on genocide for over a decade. He describes his latest exhibition, The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim, as “a series of posthumous portraits of [Rwandan] genocide victims, as imagined through their recovered personal possessions”. We spoke to him at the recent Investec Cape Town Art Fair (ICTAF), where the work was first shown.

SM: How was the show received at ICTAF?

BS: Extraordinary, right across the board, because the subject matter I deal with is the recurrence of genocide.

I started working on this project because I had done something with the Holocaust and people kept saying, “Well, we know the story, we may not know that person, but we know the story.” I knew Holocaust survivors, I had relatives who had the Auschwitz tattoo and I also thought I knew the story. Then when I worked on my project in 2013, I spent about 100 hours with Holocaust survivors and their families and you realise we will never ever understand what those people went through. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life trying to understand it in different ways. So I started on the journey of examining why we, as a society, continue to enable the recurrence of genocide.

SM: You call this a lifelong pursuit now, since that 2013 experience?

BS: Yes. I’ve done other projects in the meanwhile, but this is for me an ongoing body of work.

Barry Salzman

Image: Supplied

I defined the arc of 20th-century genocide with six of the main genocides of the 20th century. For me that talks to the recurrence; you see the pattern, which is really my main critique of society. What it is about our negligence as witness that continues to enable us to repeat.

I started with the genocide in Namibia. Most people have said to me, “There was a genocide in Namibia? We didn’t know.” That was the genocide perpetrated by the German occupiers of what was then South West Africa against the Herero and Nama people. Because of modern-day politics, there's been an enormous amount of pressure not to label it a genocide, primarily from Germany. To have two genocides within 40 years tagged “German perpetrator” was not something that the German government was comfortable with. The ruling Namibian government, the majority in Namibia, is much more invested in German aid than in defining the Herero/Nama genocide as a genocide.

So, it was in fact a genocide. (Namibia) followed by the Armenian genocide in Eastern Turkey, followed by the Holocaust, followed by Cambodia and Rwanda.

SM: What is it about human nature that allows these things to happen time and time again?

BS: I don't know if it's my job to come up with answers as much as it is to raise questions and let people think about things for themselves But, the definite underpinning of the work deals with the ethics of seeing and what our role is as public witness. What is our responsibility as public witness? So I think a lot about the sort of metaphoric veils or filters through which we view history.

It's not that I have an answer, but I do feel like if we truly bore witness, and if we truly understood what happened in Rwanda or what each individual went through, or the Holocaust, we would have much more conviction behind the empty promise of *never again*.

I was wearing my little crochet leggings. Sometimes I slept in them too. Rwanda 2018. 34,8 x 44,4 cm.

Image: Barry Salzman

SM: Is there anything that surprises you after all this time, about human beings?

BS: I mean, there are things that surprise me about human beings all the time. We're strange creatures, but I don't mean to cast a moral judgment. I understand that the primary human imperative is to survive, and if you collapsed in a heap every time somebody else experienced trauma, we wouldn't survive. So we have this instinct that first and foremost is primal; we need to take care of ourselves. I completely do understand that.

The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim is very confronting work that I shot at a mass grave as it was being excavated and I've had a lot of people say to me: "What right do you have as a privileged white person, particularly someone who was a beneficiary of apartheid in South Africa, what right do you have to comment on black trauma?" I engaged with that seriously at the time while I was in Rwanda, because it was a gut-wrenching experience.

I was wearing my favourite shoes, one got lost. Rwanda 2018. 34,8 x 44,4 cm.

Image: Barry Salzman

SM: Were you expecting those questions to come up?

BS: On my first project that dealt with the Holocaust in 2013, I spent 100 hours with Holocaust survivors and their families. Yet, I was more touched, more emotionally exposed, more vulnerable to what I experienced in Rwanda than I was by the Holocaust, despite my immediate family connection to the Holocaust. So it got me thinking about why was I so truly traumatised in Rwanda? I think it's because … I know it's because the more you learn about the genocide in Rwanda, we understand most people were killed by somebody they knew. With the Holocaust, we demonised the Nazi; they're the other. I think that made it more palatable to reconcile what happened there. In Rwanda, there's nobody to demonise — it's citizen turned on citizen, neighbour turned on neighbour. You were either a perpetrator or a victim in that country. People who had never before killed, innocent citizens, neighbours, turned on one another and hacked one another to pieces with machetes.

I felt that was so confronting to the essence of how I understood humanity. I think Rwanda became particularly confronting because it calls into question the very fragility of humanity.

I very quickly dismissed that sort of race elitist, black-white issue. I said, this is my story and I have a duty to tell it because, more than any other possibly, it is truly the story of humanity. I think we all have a duty to stay enormously present and focused on the very fragility of humanity.

When it goes back to what surprises me, it's this overwhelming dominance of identity politics in contemporary art today. If I'm not black, I can't comment on race issues, or if you're not gay, you can't comment on gay rights issues. I've talked about that a lot, and I think those politics have in fact made us more divisive. If I can't be a voice for Black Lives Matter, and you can't be a voice for anti-Semitism, we're becoming part of that problem.

SM: For many people, identity politics isn't a choice. It's what you live with. If you grew up in apartheid South Africa, as a black person in a township, but had a life that was punctuated by a lot of code switching … I can't switch off my blackness for one second.

BS: But nor should you. I mean, that's not the point. I can't turn off my queerness, my Jewishness, my masculinity. I can't turn any of that off, but I actively seek out allies. I connect with straight people that validate gay rights across race lines. So that's the issue; I'm not suggesting for a minute we shouldn't own our identity. I think we should own it and celebrate it, but not be exclusionary about it.

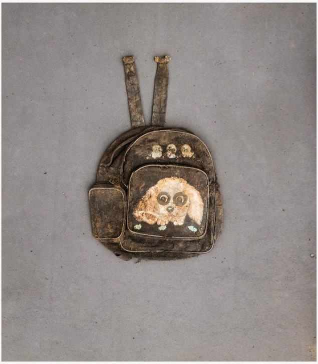

I Was Wearing My Doggy Backpack 2018, Rwanda. 34.8 x 44.4cm.

Image: Barry Salzman

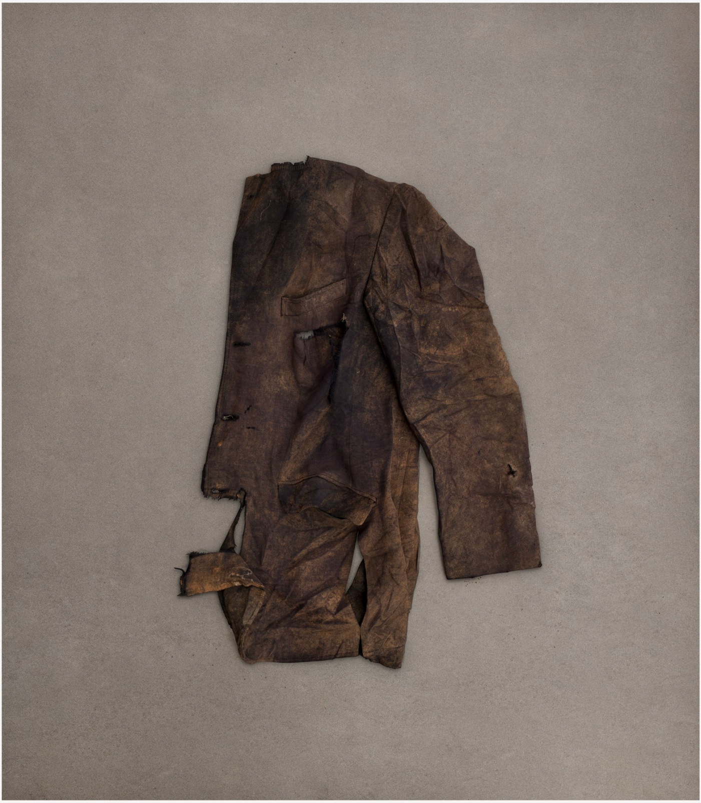
SM: For me, it's not a question of whether or not you have a right to document it or to illuminate what happened. I think everyone should, if you have an opportunity, talk about or illuminate any injustice. But I think the nuance there is how you go to the subject and how you treat the subject, depending on your proximity to it. So someone asks you what gives you the right as a white man, for example — let's forget your sexual orientation, let's forget the fact that you're Jewish, which is part of your identity. You move through the world as a white man, and therefore that obviously …

BS: … creates opportunities and also challenges.

SM: Right. So the question is, what is your role in it? Do you become centre of the story or are you just the lens? Have you found at any moment where you become the story in one way or the other? And how comfortable, if it has happened, have you been with that?

BS: I am conflicted by those issues. I think about them all the time and they come up all the time. I don't feel like the work (in this exhibition) is mine. I didn't set out to make that work. I didn't go there to shoot it. I specifically said to the genocide activists I was working with, I want to go and see it to inform my work. I want to feel what happened on this landscape, but I don't want to shoot there. We went to the mass grave and they had just discovered it — they were maybe 10 days or so into the digging. The two genocide activists I was working with from the Kigali Genocide Memorial had both found where their own family members had died by clothes that came out of a mass grave, which is not an uncommon experience in Rwanda because people were so badly mutilated and there were these mass sites of killing that when they started recovering clothing, people were able to recognise the clothing and thereby identify where their loved ones had fallen.

They took me to see it. It was an extraordinarily traumatising experience. But, in the same way that I'd been to Auschwitz, when I was working on the landscapes of Poland and Ukraine, I didn't make an art project with Auschwitz, I didn't take a picture. But I went there to inform my own process. So we went to the mass grave and they were excavating and clothes were coming out of the ground and they were piling up shoes. The two guys I was working with were incredibly emotional, as were the volunteers on the site. After two hours, I said, "All right, let's go. I feel like I've seen this and we can go."



I Was Wearing My Blazer. Only Half Is Left 2018, Rwanda. 34.8 x 44.4cm.

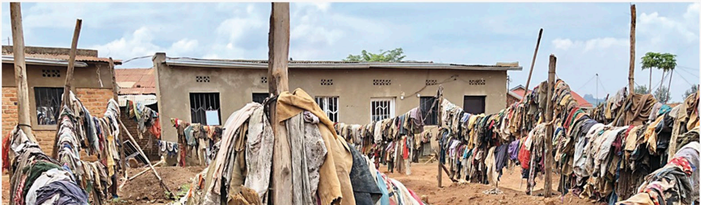
Image: Barry Salzman

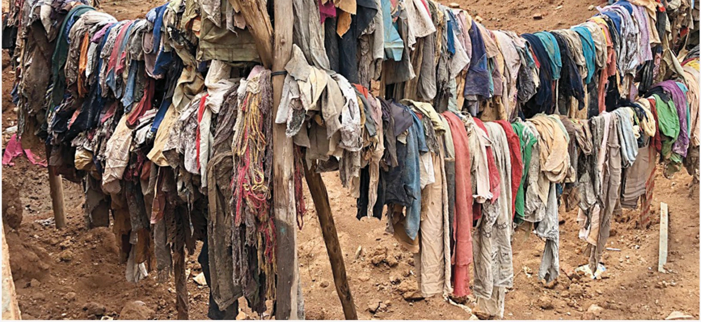
For two days afterwards, I couldn't work. I was completely traumatised. I kept having visions of this mass grave. I didn't sleep. I kept seeing these clothes piling up. And I said to them, I have to confront it. I have to engage with that because I can't make work and expect people to engage with genocide if I'm too traumatised to engage with the material. I need to go back and understand that every one of those garments of clothing coming out of the ground was a person, with a story, with families, friends, and we got permission to go back and lay the clothes on the ground as they were coming out of the grave. I cleaned them up a bit and I shot that work. Once I started, I wanted to stop. They were emotional. The people recovering the clothes were emotional. We were all crying. I kept wanting to stop. I kept saying to myself, you have to force yourself into this uncomfortable place in order to have any personal integrity and authenticity around my broader art practice.

Ultimately, when they were finished the excavations, they found the remains of 84,439 people; 24 years later, they're still finding sites at that scale.

I remembered a story I'd heard earlier from a genocide survivor, a woman. She'd said to me she survived by pretending to be dead lying under a pile of bodies. What was striking about what she said was that she was alive and she heard the perpetrators speaking between themselves and the one said to the other: "All I need is one more and I'll have 100."

It haunted me to this day because we will never understand the dehumanising circumstances under which genocide victims lose their lives. I forced myself to get to 100 because I thought if she endured what she could endure, I can shoot a hundred of these pictures. You'll notice they're not priced (and not for sale). They're not editioned. I feel like I'm custodian of those stories. I don't feel like they are mine.





Kabuga clothes.

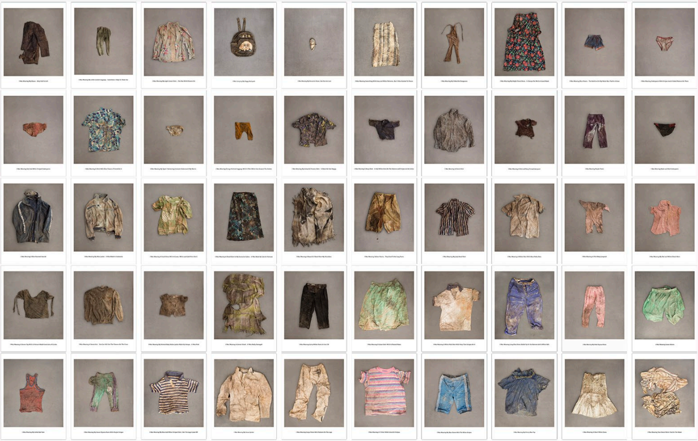
Image: Barry Salzman

SM: You don't feel this work should be in Rwanda?

BS: I personally do. They do not. The Kigali Genocide Memorial has a set of these images; they were with me when I shot them. The clothing for Rwandese people is too confronting because so many of them found their families through the clothing that, generally speaking, Rwandan people won't even look at that work. It's too confronting.

I would love nothing more than for this to live at the Kigali Genocide Memorial.

The one thing that I think is important because there are a lot of children's clothes here; when I made this work, I was very conscious of not being emotionally manipulative with it. I was working with these volunteers at the site and I said, "I want whole garments", because for me, I can see the man in this jacket. I had this feeling right from then that these were people, so they were bringing me garments and I was laying them out. I started realising that there were so much children's underwear, children's shoes, small little bathing suits, and I said to them, I don't want all children. I want a cross section of people who perished at this site. She [one of the volunteers] said to me, "Barry, you don't understand. You asked us for complete garments and most of the adults were hacked to pieces by machete. We don't have complete adult garments". So he has a man's jacket, it's half a jacket. I didn't want to photograph rags because, for me, I needed to see the person, but I did put two pieces in that were scraps of fabric that at some point had been a garment.



Contact sheet from Barry Salzman exhibition.

Image: Supplied

I felt like I had to put something in to reference the hundreds of thousands or millions of garment fragments that exist around Rwanda. I got to that one [the end one in the series of 100] and I was thinking, what am I going to put on the floor? I thought, I'm actually going to shoot a blank square and call that one *We Were*. For me, it is sort of symbolic of everybody that we can never individually identify.

• The Day I Became another Genocide Victim *will be hosted at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre from April 7 until mid-July 2022, in partnership with the Rwanda High Commission, as part of the 100 Days of Remembrance of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. For more details go to jhbholocaust.co.za*