

the day
I became
another
genocide

text

BARRY SALZMAN

photography

***The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim* is a series of 100 portraits of genocide victims, as imagined through their recovered clothes, photographed at Kabuga Village, Rwanda in May 2018. I photographed these items, worn by genocide victims on the last day of their lives, as they were taken from the ground at newly discovered mass graves, almost 25 years after the genocide.**

The series of 100 images is based on the testimony of a survivor who shared her experience of pretending to be dead lying underneath a pile of bloodied dismembered bodies when she heard her killer say, "I just need one more and I'll have 100."

All, but the last image in the series, are individual pictures of what victims were wearing on the day they were murdered, with a text statement in the first person. The final image is simply a grey background, without a person represented, and the text reads, "We were." For me personally, the text reflects the experience I had while making the images -- the overwhelmingly emotional feeling that I was shooting portraits of people, and not still lives of objects. As a result, I feel compelled to refer to the images as "portraits" when I write or talk about the project.

Each of these posthumous portraits forces us to imagine the life story of one dead person out of the one million victims of the Rwandan genocide. They humanize people who would otherwise be forever dehumanized. We can never comprehend one million dead people. We can, however, readily imagine the life of that little boy, carrying his doggy backpack or the other people represented in this series of portraits. They were each clubbed to death or dismembered by machete-wielding perpetrators. We can know them. Each lived at the very center of their own life story until the day they were murdered.

Many of the portraits are of children, despite my deliberate effort to represent a cross-section of the 5300 people murdered at the site. The reason is twofold: first, it reflects an expressed goal of the genocide's perpetrators to kill even the youngest of children to ensure future generations of Tutsi would be eliminated. Second, on location I endeavored to find complete garments to reflect a more tangible story about the individual victim. However, as a volunteer at the site reminded me, most the adults had been hacked to pieces by machetes and all that remained were rags. Consequently many of the portraits in this series include children's clothes, shoes and underwear. I was in Rwanda in 2018 working on my ongoing genocide landscape project when news broke about the discovery of new mass graves in Kabuga Village.



I Was Wearing My Favourite Shoes, But One Got Lost



I Had My Sun Hat On



I Was A Baby So Was Wearing My Little Jumpsuit With Flowers Embroidered On



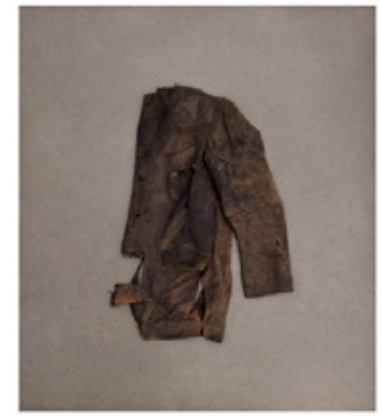
I Was Wearing My Little Crocheted Leggings. Sometimes I Sleep In Them Too.



I Was Wearing A Beautiful Shawl Over My Shoulders



I Was Wearing My Light Pink Knitted Jacket With No Sleeves



I Was Wearing My Bloomers. Only Half Is Left.



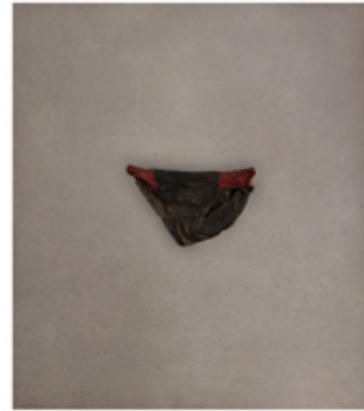
I Was Wearing My Jelly Band Shirt



My Shorts Were So Tiny



I Was Wearing My Blue and White Polka Dot Overalls



I Was Wearing Black and Red Underpants



I Was Wearing My Blue and White Striped Polo, But The Logo Came Off



I Was Wearing Turquoise and White Striped Shorts



I Was Wearing My Bright Floral Dress. It Made Me Happy.



I Was Wearing My Blue and White Polka Dot Shirt



I Was Wearing My Red and White Checkered Shirt



I Was Wearing My "Buddy" Polo, White and Blue Striped Polo



I Was Wearing My Green-hued Pants With Purple Stripes



I Was Wearing A Short White Dress, But The Shoulder Straps Came Off



I Was Wearing My Swimming Costume Underneath My Shorts



I Was Wearing My Blue Floral Shirt



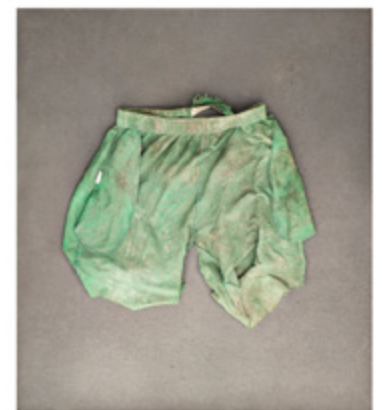
I Was Wearing A Floral Skirt In My Favorite Colors



I Was Wearing My Little Red Top



I Was Wearing My Striped Polo Shirt



I Was Wearing Green Shorts



I Was Wearing Two Checked Shirts And A The Waist



I Was Wearing Long Blue Pants Rolled Up At The Bottom



I Was Wearing My Pink Pajama Pants



I Was Wearing My Favorite Party Dress



I Was Wearing My Lucky No. 12 T-Shirt



I Was Wearing My Little Blue and White Striped Socks



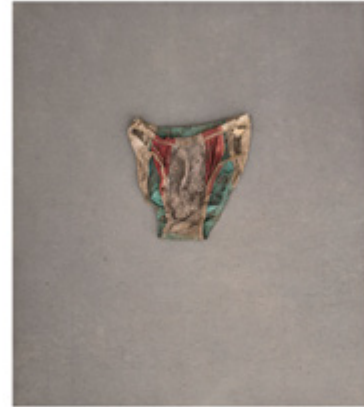
I Was Wearing My Blue Shorts with the White Stripes



I Was Wearing My Furry Blue Top



I Was Wearing A Trackout Jacket That Looked Like Adidas



I Was Wearing Red, White and Green Underpants



I Was Wearing Light Turquoise Underwear



I Was Wearing White Underwear



I Was Wearing My Zip-Up Jacket



I Was Wearing A Skirt With Pastel Stripes



I Was Wearing Striped Underwear



I Was Wearing Shorts With A Face on Printed On The Front



I Was Wearing A Pink T-Shirt



I Was Wearing My Little Dress With Red Stripes



I Was Wearing My Bear Jacket



I Was Wearing A White Undergarment



I Was Wearing A White Sleeveless T-Shirt With Pastel Stripes



I Was Wearing My Long Pants



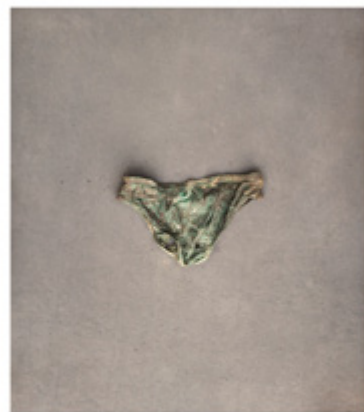
I Was Wearing My Light Turquoise Top



I Was Wearing My Red Running Shorts



I Was Wearing My Long-Sleeved PoKa (See Size)



I Was Wearing Green Underpants



I Was Wearing Something Green and Red, but Not Much Of It Remains



I Was Wearing My White Plastic Shoes, The Ones With Little Cut-Out



I Was Wearing Something With Grey and White Patterns, but It Was Packed In Plastic



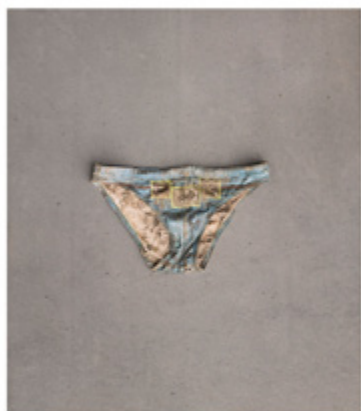
I Was Wearing My Favorite Pants



I Was Wearing My Little White Panties, With A Flower In The Middle



I Was Wearing My Light Green Slippers, but Most The Flowers are Destroyed



I Was Wearing My Favorite Under My Shorts, the One One With Straps On It



I Was Carrying My Red, Yellow and Blue Backpack



I Was Carrying My Duggy Backpack



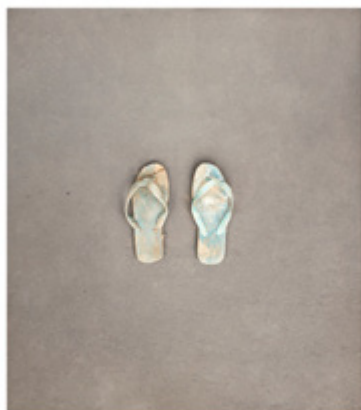
I Was Wearing Black Slippers. They Used To Have A Red Pattern On The Back



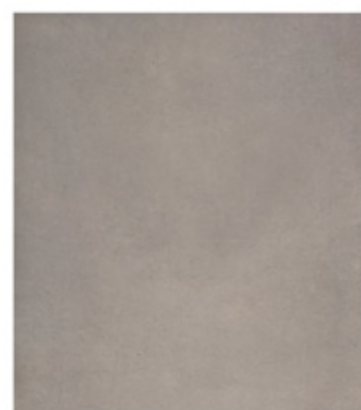
I Was Carrying My Purple and Blue Backpack, The One With The Cartoon Characters



I Was Wearing My Pink And Grey "Polo" Slippers



I Was Wearing My Slippers And The Design On The Straps Looked Like The Sun



We Were

I went to the excavation site before continuing to the landscape locations. I had no intention of shooting at the mass grave, but knew the visit would help connect me emotionally to the trauma of 25 years ago and better inform my landscape work. But for days afterwards I was haunted. The vast piles of unidentified crumpled clothes and rags troubled me. It felt so anonymous -- like it was compounding the dehumanizing way in which these people had died. I realized I needed to separate the items and consider them individually, as each was a person with a life story. I returned to the excavation site to photograph the victims' belongings. As each piece was carefully laid out, still damp from the earth, I found myself imagining that person's story.

My work attempts to challenge the universal fatigue that has set in around the genocide narrative. It is work I make to protest our collective complacency that makes us each complicit. Research by the UK National Holocaust Center (and others) identifies, through empirical data, the sequential steps that are precursors to mass genocide. They repeat themselves with alarming consistency. Since the steps are readily identifiable, we can predict with almost certainty when genocides are about to be perpetrated. Since that is the case, it is absolutely possible to put an end to the recurrence of genocide. That can only happen if we care enough to pressure our elected officials and governments to take action.

In *Caught By History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory*, Ernst Van Alphen (2-3) claims that we stop hearing Holocaust narratives because they rarely allow for a personal response since the appropriate response is "already culturally prescribed or narratively programmed." He argues against "the unassailable axiom in Holocaust studies that historical discourse, such as documentary is much more effective in teaching about the Holocaust than imaginative discourse," framing the debate between the approach of the historian and that of the artist. As an artist, I endeavor to engage the viewer's imagination, often by using abstraction. Whatever impact a more didactic approach can have (the disciplines of the historian, archivist, documentarian, photojournalist or news reporter), I would argue has already happened. Yet the glaringly wide chasm between knowledge and action has still not been bridged. I hope that by engaging the viewer's imagination, I am able to make the work more personally resonant. Personal resonance can translate into action.

While working at Kabuga Village in Rwanda, I thought a lot about the words of French philosopher and art historian, Georges Didi-Huberman, "Let us not invoke the unimaginable, but instead, force ourselves into that difficult place of imagining."

I thank you for imagining with me.

Barry Salzman

Note: I am deeply grateful to [The Aegis Trust](#) and [The Kigali Genocide Memorial](#) for their enormous support with the research and logistics that made this project possible. The Aegis Trust campaigns to prevent genocide worldwide. It founded the [UK National Holocaust Centre](#), coordinates the [UK Genocide Prevention All-Party Parliamentary Group](#), funds the [Genocide Prevention Group \(Canada\)](#) and is responsible for the [Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre](#) in Rwanda.