

Death and dying, or rather their abstract imprint, are not, one assumes, desired content for the arts and culture pages of a Sunday newspaper. Matisse, one glibly assumes, is more desirable, his arabesques of bold colour, filtered light and dance more soothing to his projected patron, the tired businessman taking a breather in his favourite armchair. But death and dying remain my theme, namely, their darkly tender expression in the photographs of Barry Salzman.

There is a reasonable framework to support the artist's focus: the fact that we have lived – are living – through a plague makes death terribly intimate. Who among us can truly say that they have not known death? Who has not shattered in the face of its chilling ubiquity?

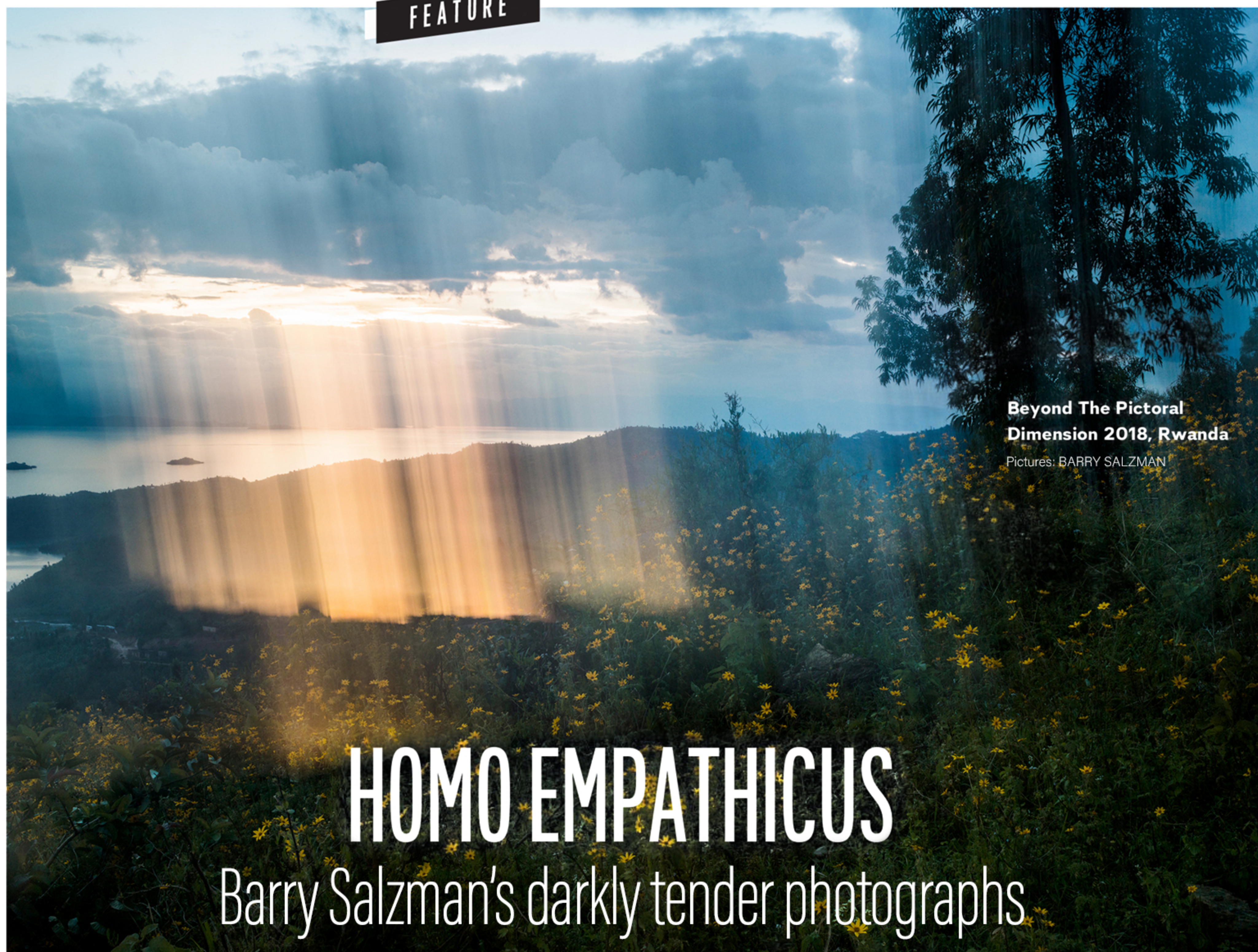
In the context of the Cape Town Art Fair – in which Salzman's photographs are showcased by the hauntingly named dealership Deepest Darkest – the images we are looking at are, surprisingly, restorative. Africa, as we well know through prejudicial machinations, is the proverbial "dark continent" in which extermination is inescapable, brutality a norm. The Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, has a name for this indigenous and exogenous interpretation of Africa – Afropessimism. Mbembe is examining a pathology, not endorsing it, yet such is the depth of an acculturated pessimism in Africa that a bleak phenomenon such as Afropessimism is perceived as fact, or worse, normative.

It is against this death instinct that Salzman positions his view of Africa. A Zimbabwean based between Cape Town and New York, Salzman's viewpoint is invariably refracted. This is not a judgment but a statement of fact. We all possess a vantage point that occludes far more than it includes. We are all, perforce, short-sighted, though many, in this newly minted absolutist era, would deny this fact. Salzman, on the contrary, is clear concerning the limits of his point of view. It is this honesty that accounts for the strength of his insight.

Salzman presents two related bodies of work – "How We See The World: The Africa Works" and "The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim" – which address human extermination in tens of thousands in Rwanda and Namibia. Why, one wonders, would a man, distinctly metropolitan, who segues between two major cities, both profoundly removed from Africa's heartland, choose to make this his focus?

Therein lies the perplexity and complexity. Salzman is profoundly drawn to loss, human trauma, our brutality, cruelty, blindness, that which transforms us into monsters. He perceives himself as a "public witness". His core question is: "What we see when we look?" If the inquiry is fundamental, it is because our being, our sense of self, our meaning, is inextricably bound up in how we look, what we see. For Salzman, however, this is not merely the basic premise for visual culture, it is the existential condition for being.

What we must understand is the artist's being – what he chooses to look at, what he gifts us – in order to grasp the existential unease which all of us, in this newly unstable geopolitical and zoonotic moment, are facing. That his focus on the genocides in Rwanda and Namibia are coterminous with his focus on the killing fields of Europe



FEATURE

Beyond The Pictorial
 Dimension 2018, Rwanda
 Pictures: BARRY SALZMAN

HOMO EMPATHICUS

Barry Salzman's darkly tender photographs

Ashraf Jamal reviews works by a photographer 'profoundly drawn to human trauma'

and "the fraying of the American dream" should remind us that the existential and visceral threat of extinction is a global reality. If we fail to grasp its enormity in Africa it is, tragically, because of an inherited dehumanised vision of the continent, Africa as a barbaric void in which slaughter is generic and commonplace, Kurtz's rallying call in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – "exterminate the brutes" – blithely acceptable. The previous US leader should have faced The Hague to answer for his gross maladministration of the Covid-19 pandemic in which more than 100,000 lives were unnecessarily lost.

Salzman's focus at the Cape Town Art Fair is Africa. What is he seeing? Two things: the tabula rasa that remains when the death camps are consumed by nature, forgotten by history, when what remains refuses any cognitive association that here, beneath this ground, lie a mountain of the dead. It is the eerie disconnect – what we cannot see, fail to see, must see again, if only imaginatively – which allows for the sustenance of memory, the living thread of compassion, the solace of forgiveness, the rites of transfiguration. The ground he photographs is sacred yet obscene. For all the natural beauty that remains – a beauty snarled in the artist's deliberately distorted and distorting lens, refusing flatness, enshrining layers, produced always in the moment, never in post-production – which profoundly explains his optic.

"How We See The World" is the summation of Salzman's photographic strategy. The pentimento effect he achieves – the image's atmospheric-vegetal-

geological layering – speaks to the need to expose what cannot be seen, but that must be seen – if never objectively, concretely. His Arcadian fields are, paradoxically, the very signs for horror.

"The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim" is, doubtless, more eerie and unsettling, because in that deeply personal body of work Salzman rearranges excavated traces of a genocide, namely, the clothing worn by those who were murdered. "A series of 100 posthumous portraits of victims of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda," Salzman's portraits are of things – clothing – and yet his persistence in naming what he does – in this obsessive-compulsion era obsessed with portraiture – adumbrates and shadows the complexity of what it means to be human, what defines us as such.

The titles of works comprising this series are bleakly poignant: *I Was Carrying My Doggy Backpack; I Was Wearing My Favourite Shoes, But One Got Lost; I Was Wearing My Blazer. Only Half Is Left; I Was Wearing My Little Crochet Leggings. Sometimes I Slept In Them Too*. These words do not suggest pathos, but bathos, the banality of evil which political philosopher, author and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt condemned – the blithely inconsequential grasp of gravity, the mortifying failure to understand, respect, and value the lives of others. Barry Salzman's gift is his ability to take us where we must go. If his vision is singularly his own, it is because it is a gift to himself and to others. His art is the definition of compassion. He is our *Homo Empathicus*.



Salzman

In his own words

Is it my story to tell?

I have questioned myself, and been challenged by others, about whether I have a claim to the genocide in Rwanda. I have thought about that question a lot, and am emphatic that it is indeed my story to tell. Even more so, it is a story that belongs to us all, and we have a duty to never stop telling it. This is why.

The genocide in Rwanda was perpetrated by everyday Rwandans. Many victims were killed by someone they knew. Citizen turned on citizen, neighbour on neighbour. Family members, doctors, teachers, clergy – the list continues – became murderers, mostly incited by propaganda spread over the radio. What would it take for any one of us to hack someone we know to pieces with a machete? The events of 1994 in Rwanda remind us that humanity hangs in a precarious balance.

The children

Many of the portraits in this series are of children, despite my deliberate effort to represent a cross-section of the people murdered at the site. The reason is twofold: first, it reflects an expressed goal of the perpetrators to kill even the youngest children, so as to ensure that future generations of the Tutsi people would be eliminated. Second, on location I endeavoured to find complete garments to reflect a more tangible story about the individual victims. However, as one volunteer at the site reminded me, most of the adults had been hacked to pieces by machetes and all that remained were rags.



I Was Wearing My Favourite Party Dress



I Was Wearing My Favourite Shoes, But One Got Lost



I Was Wearing My Blazer. Only Half Is Left.