

# GALLERY GUIDE



## WORKERS SEBASTIÃO SALGADO

Sebastião Salgado's photo essay on the changing world of large-scale manual labor bears witness to the collective strength and enduring spirit of mankind. His series *Workers* stands as a testament to the world's laborers at a time of transition. From 1986-1993 Salgado toured 23 countries to photograph age-old agricultural practices and modern mechanized industries in the developing world. The dignity in these anonymous individuals' portraits surpasses the overpowering landscapes of mountains and machines where they work. Throughout his thirty-five-plus years as a photographer, Salgado has remained committed to documenting humanity's challenges and hopes.

Sebastião Salgado's background as an international economist and activist motivated him to undertake this epic photography project on global labor. Born in 1944 in a small Brazilian town, he earned a Master's degree in economics in the late 1960s, and for two years worked in Brazil's Ministry of Finance. Salgado moved to London to work as an economist for the International Coffee Organization, an intergovernmental effort to stabilize markets and politics in coffee-producing countries. While taking photographs in this capacity from 1971-1973, Salgado developed a passion for documentary photography. For 15 years Salgado worked as a freelance photographer for the esteemed cooperative photography agency Magnum Photos, started by Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson. During this time, the several major photography projects he created focused on migrations of the poor, famine, the use and misuse of natural resources, labor, and the world's children.

*Workers* is admirable for the scope of locations and labors documented, including agriculture, food, mining, industry, oil, and construction. The series' strength is how Salgado's dramatic black-and-white portraits reveal the simple truth that, "all the goods that we have were made by a human movement."<sup>1</sup> His photographs serve as reminders that global economies rely on the physicality of people, often laboring against seemingly insurmountable tasks in severe conditions. And of the laborers' bodies polished like stone by work, Salgado explains, "it's not the men that make the product; it's the product that men make that makes the man."<sup>2</sup> Yet, if work defines their bodies, it doesn't control their spirits. He captures the pride of workers in repose with

portraits of a lone Spanish woman fishing for mussels and Indian men emerging darkened by the dust of a coal mine. A timeless spirituality pervades the work, made clear in photographs of a Moses-like fisherman commanding his Sicilian crew and Brazilian gold miners condemned to stagger through a hellish quarry. This art is part of a longer tradition honoring the enduring spirit of the working class. Like murals by Mexican artists Diego Rivera and David Siquieros, and documentary photographs by Americans Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, Salgado's art pays tribute to workers' contributions with iconic images illustrative of a specific time.

Salgado undertook this project to witness changes in the way people work around the world. Reacting against globalization, the activist artist set out to document how mechanization affects modes of production and economies in the developing world. Fifteen years later, *Workers* stands as his manifesto. Many agricultural practices in the third world, represented in the timeless photographs of Brazilian cocoa or Cuban sugarcane harvesting, have remained unchanged for centuries. In the last decade, rising powers India and China (countries in which Salgado captured dying labor practices) have undergone an industrial revolution, replacing unskilled workers with machines. Using images, Salgado consciously reveals that much of the world's work force labors to make goods they cannot afford. With growing inequity between the first and third world, this body of work resonates today. Americans have called attention to the importance of class and the concerns of workers during a presidential election marked by economic issues. Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* remains a photographic epic, an elegy to changing methods of work, and a tribute to the humanity of the world's workers.

—Andrea Mellard, Curatorial Associate/Manager of Public Programs

<sup>1</sup>Salgado, Sebastião. 2008. Telephone conversation with author, 25 September. <sup>2</sup>Ibid



## CELL PHONE AUDIO GUIDE

Hear Sebastião Salgado speak about his photographs.

**Step 1** Call 512.895.9154

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Kindly refrain from cell phone conversation, use of speakerphone, and photography while in the galleries. Please set your phone to silent ring mode.

Cell phone audio guide produced by Andrea Mellard, Curatorial Associate/Manager of Public Programs and delivered by Guide by Cell.

Image: Sebastião Salgado, *Workers emerging from a coal mine, Dhanbad, Bihar State, India, 1989*, Gelatin silver print, 19 7/8 x 23 1/2 inches. Sebastião Salgado | Amazonas Images



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## ***Workers: Photographs by Sebastião Salgado*** **November 15, 2008–February 8, 2009**

**SPONSORS:** The Friends of the Texas Civil Rights Project; and The Austin Center for Photography with support from David Lykes Keenan, K2 Press, Inc., John Langmore, Kerry Tate, and Robert Wynn. | **2008 EXHIBITION SPONSORS:** Berman Family Foundation, Michael A. Chesser, Hines, Bettye and Bill Nowlin, and Vinson & Elkins LLP. **2008 EDUCATION SPONSORS:** 3M, James C. Armstrong, Katelena Hernandez Cowles and James Cowles, The Moody Foundation, Target, and donors to the Education Fund and the Laura W. Bush Endowment for Education and Outreach. **2008 PROMOTIONAL SPONSORS:** News 8 Austin and Time Warner Cable, The Austin Chronicle, and KUT Radio 90.5. The Austin Museum of Art is funded in part by Art Alliance Austin, Museum Trustees, Members, and Patrons. Additional support is provided by the City of Austin through the Cultural Arts Division, the Texas Commission on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.

