PHOTOGRAPHY

Good Intentions

Sebastião Salgado is the photojournalist of the moment. His reputation has been on the ascent, and although the heyday of photojournalism is past, his career proves that there is still a hunger for the kind of social-documentary picture stories that flourished in magazines in the thirties, forties, and fifties. In a relatively short time, he has had a number of books published, his images have been used prominently in major news stories, and there have been heavily publicized exhibitions of his work. He has, in fact, had two shows this year, only six weeks apart, at New York's International Center of Photography. In the spring, the uptown branch of I.C.P. housed Salgado's travelling retrospective "An Uncertain Grace," which originated at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and this summer at I.C.P.'s midtown branch one could see "Kuwait Epilogue," an exhibition of his shoot of oil-well firefighters in Kuwait, done right after the Gulf War, and, in another room, his photographs of gold miners in Brazil, many of which had just been on view in the retrospective uptown.

It's rare for a photographer to be as widely trumpeted as Salgado. And it's rare—even rarer today than it was in the past—for a working photojournalist's pictures to be shown in a museum. That limiting, fragmenting system which divides people who use the medium into categories—fine-art photographers or commercial photographers or news photographers—may have had many exceptions and challenges over the years, but it's still firmly in place. No matter that, for instance, a photographer's imagery is highly inventive, and

stands on its own: if it was originally produced on assignment, he or she is still pigeonholed as "less" than an artist, and has a harder time being taken seriously than someone whose pictures are first seen in an art gallery. Salgado's photographs, though, have been welcomed in a variety of milieus. They are generally the result of self-assigned projects, and they look as carefully composed as still-lifes. Indeed, this "art" quality has contributed greatly to the work's success as photojournalism-plus-much-more.

"Kuwait Epilogue" underscored how bright a spotlight there is on this photographer, while confirming that there's something exaggerated about all the attention he's getting. The Kuwait pictures are mostly stagy shots of men at work, trying to cap the gushing wells, or at exhausted rest. But they constitute an expression of Salgado's ongoing interest in manual workers—for the last few years, he's been involved in a project called "The End of Manual Labor"—more than they constitute a narrative of what happened to Kuwait's landscape in the Gulf War. There's no deep observation of the place and its new scars. The oil that's such a looming presence in the photographs and that appears to cover everyone and everything identifies the series as a product of the war, but the images add no special meaning to the sense of ecological devastation transmitted over the wires while the war was going on—something they seem to be striving to do. Salgado's portraits of the firefighters are remarkably similar to his portraits of gold miners; the firefighters just happen to be covered with oil, not mud.

What stood out most about this exhibition was its promotional tone. Two press displays were installed in Plexiglas boxes, one showing spreads from the issue of the Times Magazine in which the Kuwait images first appeared, and the other containing an appreciative article on Salgado, from the same issue. You don't come across press clippings as an installation element at many exhibitions. It could be argued that there's interest in seeing Salgado's Kuwait images in their original photo-essay format, but why display the article on the photographer? It's a piece of feature journalism about his life and his work which, though it covers his time in the Gulf, is the type of background article that usually stays in the background, separate from an actual presentation of the work. Just imagine what it would be like if curators regularly displayed magazine articles on artists as part of their exhibitions—a show, say, of Jasper Johns' paintings and, with it, his press clippings. Nor was this the only place in the I.C.P. exhibition that hinted at a collapse of the usual separation between curatorial practice and publicity. Salgado's biography, installed on a placard, ended with something more like an after-dinner speech than like

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an educational device: for the years 1988 through 1990 — years in which Salgado did a great deal of work — all it cited was a list of awards.

It makes sense that the International Center of Photography is enthusiastic about Salgado’s pictures, which are clearly trying to echo the endeavors of the group now referred to as “concerned photographers” — the group whose humanistic mission was the inspiration for I.C.P.’s founder and director, Cornell Capa, who is the brother of Robert Capa, a hero in the field. (Cornell Capa, in fact, is credited with coining the term “concerned photography,” and Robert Capa was a founder of Magnum, the prestigious agency of which Salgado is a member.) Yet I.C.P. isn’t exceptional in its fanlike attitude toward Salgado’s work. From the tone of other recent Salgado projects, including the texts that are part of his books and shows, it’s clear that neither he nor his admirers believe his photographs to be anything short of acts of enlightenment, and great pictures to boot, the premise being that they bestow honor on the people in them. Included in this claim is the suggestion that the images are powerful enough to change perceptions.

The cult of appreciation that has developed around Salgado sets him up as a photojournalist whose pictures have a transforming power over, say, ethnocentrism, racism, and classism. From Salgado’s choice of projects, from his titles, and from the photographs themselves, it appears that he aspires to be a spokesperson for forgotten people and also for soon-to-be-lost ways of life — a worthy ambition, but one, unfortunately, that resists the oversimplified yet heavy-handed means by which he attempts to achieve it.

Salgado’s subjects are often so weighty, and are so weightily presented, that it is inevitable that his work has come to be credited with weightiness. It’s no coincidence that his images of starvation, and of other situations in which human beings undergo intense physical stress — such as slogging in and out of a barren mine — are the ones that have brought him the most notice; subjects like these embody matters of conscience and, by their very nature, pull at the emotions. But other photojournalists have photographed such subjects. It’s Salgado’s manner — his visual rhetoric — that has given his work so much clout. His compositions, crops, lighting, angles, and toning stand in sharp contrast to the usual lack of insistent style in photojournalism. He goes in for aura. What’s more, many of his photographs suggest both religious art and the kitsch products resulting from the commercialization of religion. Salgado is given to including cross-like forms in his pictures, for example, and all too frequently he presents people in a way that implies a connection to saints, martyrs, and various other figures familiar from Judeo-Christian iconography. It is work that is sloppy with symbolism. And his religiosity seems to be catching. At times, a curator’s or a commentator’s partisanship can become so extreme that it feels as if the artist’s work is being worshipped instead of examined. You can see this happening in the exhibition “An Uncertain Grace,” and it’s there in the book of the same title, which was published last year, by Aperture, when the show opened.

“An Uncertain Grace” is a package deal, with basically the same format, plus or minus a few images, at each museum where it appears. (It is now at the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia, and will eventually be seen at San Diego’s Museum of Photographic Arts; at Washington, D.C.,’s Corcoran Gallery; at Harvard’s Carpenter Center; and at the North Dakota Museum of Art, in Grand Forks.) The photographer’s proponents may make claims for the power of his pictures, but the presentation of this show doesn’t reveal much faith in the viewer’s ability to grasp what Salgado is doing without help and hype. The captions that accompany the photographs have an inflated, pseudo-educational tone, and the introductory wall label, written by Sandra Phillips, of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, who conceived of and organized the show, begins this way: “Sebastião Salgado, a Brazilian by birth, is probably the most important contemporary Latin American photographer and one of the most important artists in the Western Hemisphere.” No faint praise here. There’s something off-key about the lionizing of the “artist” that in-
forms "An Uncertain Grace" (both the show and the book) when one considers Salgado's subjects—particularly the people in the Sahel region of Africa, whom he has photographed, it appears, in order to convey the effect that famine has had on them. The photographs of these people have been fostering discussions of courage, but not the courage of those who really deserve recognition for it. It is Salgado everyone seems to end up admiring—for getting so close to such suffering. (You also hear people discussing the Sahel photographs as if what mattered were whether or not they themselves had the courage to look.)

At I.C.P., "An Uncertain Grace" was installed so that before you got to the photographs of starvation and death in the Sahel you came upon a statement from the American branch of the French aid organization Médecins Sans Frontières telling you that the group was "proud to be associated with I.C.P. for this exhibition," and that Salgado's "humanitarian concerns parallel our own." No doubt, the doctors have great respect for Salgado and for his work, and there is plenty of evidence that he is serious in his efforts to help fight starvation. (For his most recent Sahel pictures he was working with the cooperation of Médecins Sans Frontières, and when the photographs were published as a book in France and Spain he donated the profits to it.) But his seriousness cannot eliminate the evident disparities—between claims for the work and what is actually there in the images; between intentions and results.

CERTAINLY, what Salgado is trying to accomplish is difficult to achieve. He wants his portraits from the Sahel to reveal the inhuman scale of the tragedy there, while also capturing the dignity of the people he is photographing. Furthermore, the images are supposed to work as educational vehicles, as calls to action. But this is the kind of endeavor that requires an El Greco or a Goya, and though Salgado is treated as if he were such a visionary, regretfully he isn't one. In the history of photography, there are many who have tried to use photojournalism to change the world as well as to capture it, and a few have had some effect. Others have simply been naïve—even deluded—about what they were doing. Still others are complicated mixtures of high aspirations and presumption. It seems to me that Salgado is one of these.

Salgado's imagery is often linked to the work of a photojournalist whose pictures include moments of brilliant humanitarian communication: W. Eugene Smith. Indeed, Smith's work has been a strong influence on Salgado, and the two men have much in common, most particularly their passion for making the world "see" injustice. Smith's photographs of war-ravaged Saipan and Okinawa, of the leper colony where Albert Schweitzer worked, and of the mercury-poisoned Japanese fishing town of Minamata are among the projects of his that remain a touchstone for many who practice concerned photography. Smith took photographs you can never forget once you've seen them, and he also took pictures that were heavy-handed and hackneyed. But Eugene Smith is his own story, and its usefulness to viewers of Salgado's work lies in something that Smith once said: "I frequently have sought out those who are in the least position to speak for themselves. By accident of birth, by accident of place—whoever, whatever, wherever—I am of their family. I can comment for them, if I believe in their cause, with a voice they do not possess." Such presumption is at the core of what is self-aggrandizing about Salgado's photography. To quote Smith again, in a moment of clarity about his work (and he had moments that went in the other direction) he described his camera and film as "the fragile weapons of my good intentions."

Salgado is working in a time very different from Smith's. As has frequently been remarked, the advent of television—with the resulting loss of mass-circulation magazines committed to supporting and publishing photo essays—has meant that photojournalists have few outlets today; there is no way they can compete with television in terms of immediacy or the public's attention. And in responding to the remaining magazine opportunities, they do not have the same sense of authority they had a few decades ago. Even though they never had real control over the presentation of their images, at least back then there was a healthy editorial demand for what they did. That has changed, and so has the way
photographs are viewed. For instance, we, today’s audience, know that pictures can “lie,” and, like the photographers themselves, we assume that magazines can use pictures to slant things. Meaningful photojournalism today requires an appetite for challenge, a belief in the power of the medium, and an internal alarm system against stereotyping. For the first two of these, Salgado deserves credit, but his work suggests that his consciousness of the deeper issues of representation in this kind of photography—such as how one’s approach can skew things or how the subjects themselves might feel about being “honored”—is only partly developed.

Still, it’s tricky to unravel what is meretricious about his work, because it’s all so uncompromisingly serious. His dedication to making people visible whom powerful institutions—governments, say, or the media—have typically ignored is strong, and he is aware of how the image of “the victim” can perpetuate victimization; he features pride instead of its absence. But often there is something else in his compositions: beauty. In fact, “beauty” is a word one hears a lot when Salgado’s photography is discussed, and you can see why people respond to the formal beauty of his pictures. You can also appreciate why he has chosen to challenge the usual clichés about poverty by underlining the beauty in its midst—he means to negate the revulsion that can take over when disease and hunger are on display. But beauty as a formula—and this is what it has become for Salgado—is as much of a cliché as what he’s trying to avoid, and as artificial as any other blanket approach. A photographer can’t lose with heart-wrenching subject matter like the situation in the Sahel: a fleshless child hoisted up in the air to be weighed; two sick-looking children sucking on breasts that look more like wrinkled pieces of leather than like oases of nourishment; a man bending over a child who has a skeleton’s body and an old man’s face. Getting our attention with such material is easy; what a photographer does with that material is what counts. Salgado is far too busy with the compositional aspects of his pictures—with finding the “grace” and “beauty” in the twisted forms of his anguished subjects. And this beautification of tragedy results in pictures that ultimately reinforce our passivity toward the experience they reveal. To aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it. Beauty is a call to admiration, not to action.

Salgado’s approach has inspired much laudatory writing, such as that by Fred Ritchin, who wrote the main text of “An Uncertain Grace,” and who is the guest curator of the exhibition. Ritchin’s expertise in photojournalism, as well as his long professional relationship with Salgado, which began in 1979, made him a natural choice for these tasks. His knowledge of the work is evident, as is his respect for it, but this very closeness to it seems to have forestalled an overview. To Ritchin, Salgado’s use of Biblical themes is impressive, not pretentious, and so is the formalized beauty of the Africans. In fact, he makes a point of the contradictions between the look of the pictures and what’s happening to their subjects:

Fathers march for days with dying children draped across their arms. . . . Children are weighed, suspended as if in the agony of the cross. . . . There is an exalted beauty to the people—an emaciated boy using a cane stands nude before a withered tree on a carpet of sand, a woman with diseased eyes radiates a visionary sadness. A bruising conflict is created between the formal radiance of the imagery and their agonizing content as a proud, attractive people suffers so.

No question, Salgado’s depiction of the woman with diseased eyes gives her an oracular presence. But the fact that her affliction has been turned into something spiritual—seeming is exactly what’s disturbing about the photograph. Yes, he’s trying to counter the fear and horror that her disease can cause others to feel: he’s attempting to attract people to her plight—to involve us in it. And, yes, it’s a “beautiful” photograph. But Salgado’s strategy here fits into a long and convenient tradition of coupling human suffering and God’s will. Finally, the photograph suggests that the woman’s blindness is holy—in other words, that it needn’t be seen as something to cure.

There is a widely felt yearning today for photography and art that matter, and Salgado’s work has benefited from it. But what do his pictures really succeed in doing? In a photograph of people in a refugee shelter in the Sahel, two young figures loom in the foreground, one sitting and the other slightly propped up. Salgado’s
perspective creates the impression that the viewer is close enough to touch the boy who is propped up: his elongated body and bald head stretch along the bottom half of the picture. His bone-thin legs are spread apart, and his shorts bunch around the tops of his thighs, which have a much smaller circumference than the shorts seem made for. Yet despite the sculptural image that he has become in Salgado’s photograph, this boy is made of flesh, not wood. The shock of what he looks like is strong, but Salgado’s objectification of the boy’s body makes the image a setup—and, like most setups, it evokes reactions that are mechanical. Typical of the comments I overheard during several days of visiting the show at I.C.P. was one made by a young woman standing in front of this image: “I can’t look at this picture. It makes me cry.” Yet she looked at it, and she didn’t cry. It isn’t fair to make Salgado responsible for how we do or do not respond to the content of his pictures, but there are certain gimmicks and attitudes in them that seem designed to trigger specific reactions and reflexes that are insulting to the people being portrayed.

Ritchin explains Salgado’s approach this way:

It is a romantic view that he espouses, one that is loyal to the dignity of the person depicted while circumventing some of the complexities of his or her existence. But when one juxtaposes the images with their various contexts, the lyricism can become particularly searing—the fact, for example, that in the Third World 40,000 children die daily of diseases we in the industrialized world have learned to cure long ago, like measles and diarrhea.

The statistics about the children are an effective way for Ritchin to segue out of the issue of Salgado’s romanticism, but they don’t resolve the big problem with his work—the unrelenting application of the lyric and the didactic to his subjects. His is not photography in which the facts are allowed to sing for themselves, which is how Lincoln Kirstein once described Walker Evans’ work. Evans’ approach to photojournalism was the polar opposite of Salgado’s. As Kirstein so trenchantly put it:

The most characteristic single feature of Evans’s work is its purity, or even its puritanism. It is “straight” photography not only in technique but in the rigorous directness of its way of looking.... It is also the naked, difficult, solitary attitude of a member revolting from his own class, who knows what in it must be uncovered, cauterized, and why. The view is clinical. Evans is a visual doctor, diagnostician rather than specialist. But he is also the family physician, quiet and dispassionate, before whom even very old or very sick people are no longer ashamed to reveal themselves.

There has been no need for Evans to dramatize his material with photographic tricks, because the material is already, in itself, intensely dramatic. Even the inanimate things, bureau drawers, pots, tires, bricks, signs, seem waiting in their own patient dignity, posing for their picture. The pictures of men and portraits of houses have only that “expression” which the experience of their society and times has imposed on them. The faces, even those tired, vicious, or content, are past reflecting accidental emotions. They are isolated and essentialized. The power of Evans’s work lies in the fact that he so details the effect of circumstances on familiar specimens that the single face, the single house, the single street, strike with the strength of overwhelming numbers, the terrible cumulative force of thousands of faces, houses, and streets.

In general, Salgado’s subjects are too much in the service of illustrating his various themes and notions to be allowed either to stand forth as individuals or to represent millions. He’s a symbolist more than a portraitist—the people in his pictures remain strangers. It is true that what certain men, women, and children in the Sahel are suffering has overwhelmed them to such a point that they appear to be embodiments of hunger, thirst, and disease. Still, there are choices a photographer makes every time a picture is taken, and Salgado’s strategies here consistently add up to aestheticization, not reportage.

While the Sahel photographs stand out because of their distorted humanism, they constitute only one chapter of Salgado’s work. “An Uncertain Grace” is divided into four main sections. There’s a section titled “Diverse Images,” a non-thematically grouped collection of photographs taken between 1974 and 1987 in Asia, Africa, and Europe. There’s a group from the worldwide project “The End of Manual Labor,” begun in 1986. And then, under the heading “Other Americas,” there’s a gathering of images taken in Latin America between 1977 and 1984. In these portraits from Ecuador, Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, and Guatemala, Salgado is just as hooked on displaying his artistry in matters of composition as he is in his African pictures. But here it is the picturesque that dominates, rather than beauty. (Actually, the African work, too, offers a number of images in which one can see Salgado pursuing picturesqueness. A couple of the photographs from the Sahel aren’t all that different from the chic desert shots in Bertolucci’s ponderous film “The Sheltering Sky.”) Some of Salgado’s Latin-American photographs recall images made by others—Bravo, Penn, Sander, Arbus—and his attraction to the cross motif really gets a workout in this
section. But at least here the religious content is appropriate, not dragged in, the way it is in the African work. It's still empty, though, because it's still formulaic. Taken as a whole, the “Other Americas” images—men in ponchos, a village wedding, a fiddler, bright-eyed kids—have that special Salgado weightiness; they're making points, but not very original or interesting ones. And in the group called “Diverse Images” there are shots very similar to the work of earlier influential photographers such as Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa. A 1976 photograph of a soldier running in the Spanish Sahara is so close in feeling, if not in detail, to Capa’s famous Spanish Civil War picture “Loyalist Soldier, Spain, 1936” that it almost qualifies as a remake. It's possible, even probable, that Salgado intended his picture as an homage, but he is not a postmodernist appropriation artist, so it's hard to believe that all his derivative works are intended as quotes—certainly, that's not how they've been presented.

“The End of Manual Labor” is perhaps Salgado’s largest-scale Gesamtkunstwerk to date. It already includes photographs taken in Cuba, Bangladesh, India, the Soviet Union, North America, South America, and France, and apparently Salgado plans to shoot in forty or fifty locations eventually. From Ritchin’s text it appears that “The End of Manual Labor” is conceived literally as an homage to laborers—he tells us that the project is “a paean to the end of an era before robots, electronics, and computers take over production.” No wonder that in their earnestness some of these images would look at home in corporate annual reports, or the Fortune magazine of the thirties. Occasionally, the content of a photograph—such as pigs waiting in a slaughterhouse—leads one to believe that the project may turn out to be deeper than it seems. But that hope may stem from the over-all confusion in Salgado’s work between what is actually present and what he intends.

Salgado himself seems to sense that there’s more to his topic than celebrating the worker. Consider his alternative title: “The Archaeology of Industrialization.” Nevertheless, unlike many works of art that deal with industrialization, Salgado’s photographs are basically uncritical of its effects on human beings and on the environment. This is characteristic of his approach—it's his way of being “sentimental, nostalgic, heroic, lyrical,” as Ritchin puts it. Such a romanticizing of this multilayered subject is almost breathtaking in its narrowness—particularly in the light of Salgado’s supposed attunement to the lives of the powerless. His stiff photograph of a coal miner in India and his arty depiction of a silhouetted worker in an iron plant in the Soviet Union seem startlingly inadequate when looked at in the context of photographs that have been taken of subjects like these ever since industrialization went into gear. Compare Salgado’s “Archaeology of Industrialization” with Lewis Hine’s early-twentieth-century indictment of industrialization’s inhumane use of lives. Hine was a photojournalist who did affect injustices: his photographs of children in factories and mills were so lucid and convincing that they can be credited with hastening the creation of America’s child-labor laws. Salgado’s work here, as in the Sahel, is too aestheticized, too caught up in itself, to fully acknowledge what’s happening to others.

Within the workers’ story there is, however, one group of photographs that stun the viewer—the pictures of miners in Serra Pelada, in Brazil. Like the Sahel images, these have immediate power. They can evoke awe and horror, for they are of an immense human spectacle: thousands of men working a gargantuan gold mine. Visions of such waves of labor and physical exertion, of a mass of men so jammed together that their backs and sacks and legs look like a repeating pattern, are the stuff of nightmares and of wonder. But even these powerful pictures reveal Salgado’s reliance on cliché. There’s one shot, for instance, that looks like a gloss on Michelangelo’s Sistine “Creation of Adam” and “E.T.”’s appropriation of it. When I first went to the “Uncertain Grace” exhibition, I had just seen the film “Spartacus,” and several of Salgado’s other images recalled the more kitschy slave-crowd scenes in that movie. And his use of his favorite sign of the martyr and the miraculous—the cross—mirrors the climactic shots of Kubrick’s movie, except that with
Salgado there is no Tony Curtis and no Kirk Douglas.

WHEN Salgado’s admirers want to make the point that he understands what it is like to be outside the spheres of power, they bring up the fact that he lived in Brazil before moving to Paris. But since when did being a Brazilian qualify someone as the voice of Africa or of India—another assumption that creeps through the Salgado myth? A second aspect of Salgado’s earlier life that buoys his reputation as a man deeply in touch with his themes is that he started out as an economist. Fred Ritchin explains in his text how Salgado made the transition from economics to photography: “It was while on a work assignment [for the International Coffee Organization] in Africa that he decided, on the basis of initial attempts with a camera he borrowed from his wife, that rather than work at the remove of a social scientist he preferred spending more time with the people he was drawn to, photographing them. He found that he could depict them more vividly in photographs than in economic reports.” Vivid Salgado’s photographs are, but the people in them, and the situations that he is supposedly penetrating, rarely are.

Actually, Salgado’s most vivid image is one that is atypical of his work as it has progressed, and it’s not about a subject that seems close to his heart. It’s his “lucky break” picture: an on-the-scene shot of the attempted assassination of President Reagan. Salgado was tracking Reagan on an assignment from Fred Ritchin, who was then picture editor of the Times Magazine, and the famous photograph that he took in the instant after the bullets were fired is in almost every way the opposite of the imagery that has led to his current acclaim. It looks like something from a whodunit movie: the image explodes with energy and action. The punch of the Reagan image comes from our realization that here is a figure of megapower made vulnerable before our eyes. The photographs that have made Salgado’s reputation also have punch, but it comes from the pathos of the lives of his subjects.

And therein lies his power over the viewer. This is photography that runs on a kind of emotional blackmail fueled by a dramatics of art direction. Salgado undoubtedly gets away with so much because of viewers’ sympathy and guilt. What is more terrible than someone starving? What is more tragic than a dead child so thin that his or her body looks like a stick wrapped in a piece of cloth? Unless we have no heart, when we see such things happening to us. The feeling can last for a moment, it can last forever; it can make us want to help, and it can make us actually help. Salgado’s work has produced all these reactions, but I believe that this speaks more for the power of his subjects than for the quality of his work. Two photographs in the “Kuwait Epilogue” exhibition were almost identical—of a bird covered with oil, drowning in it, as it were, since the bird could no longer fly. We had seen such images during the war; in fact, one just like it, taken by someone else, became a symbol of the madness that the Gulf War was. It is in keeping with Salgado’s approach to his work that he picked up on such a “button pusher” of an image. But the button pushing may not end there. Salgado used the phrase “paradise lost” in a caption he wrote to go along with one of the bird pictures—and both his image and his reference to paradise reminded me of the more kitschy aspects of Eugene Smith’s work. Smith used the phrase “paradise garden” as a title for a photograph, one that ranks among his most famous—and schmalziest—images: two small children walk hand in hand, in a forest, their backs to the viewer. This is greeting-card stuff; it became the emblem of Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibition, and has been reproduced countless times in advertisements and as a greeting card. Some of Salgado’s photographs have appeared in postcard form; as yet, they haven’t been reproduced as greeting cards. But who knows? The manufactured poetry that is so dominant an aspect of his aesthetic could turn the people in the Sahel into emblems on greeting cards for all of us who want to express our humanity. These photographs are less than their subjects deserve. We can be sure that if truly appropriate images should ever surface they will not be so “beautiful” that they could work as packaged caring. Salgado’s sentimentalism, for all its earnestness, isn’t any kind of breakthrough. Unfortunately, his champions aggravate the bullying quality of his work by presenting it as if it were the Second Coming. —INGRID SISCHY