

Bookshelf



Kuwait: A Desert on Fire

By Sebastião Salgado



A shepherd with his flock as, in the distance, an oil fire rages on

The Gulf War was perhaps the first war of its kind. Never before had a war been televised live. Such was the rolling coverage of the event, at times the conflict went even further and took on the sheen of a Hollywood blockbuster. The central antagonist Saddam Hussein was billed as a super villain who had to be taken down at any cost. Many came to suspect that the exercise was designed to demonstrate the power of the West. However, the consequences of the conflict were all too real. This was perhaps summed up best in one recurring scene, and it's that scene that is the subject of this new book by Sebastião Salgado.

Towering infernos

In 1991, as part of their scorched-earth campaign (a policy of destroying anything that may be useful to the enemy) the Iraqi military set fire to around 700 oil wells in Kuwait. The fires were so intense that firefighters took ten months to extinguish



A firefighter with an epic task ahead of him

the flames. It also meant that roughly six million barrels of oil were lost each day. You can see why this would have been a viable target for Iraq. The burning oil fields, outrageous as they undoubtedly were, are equally stunning to behold in both film and the still image. Salgado was there to document this event and, typically, succeeded in creating images that were both terrifying and hypnotic.

The conditions he faced were about as fierce as it could get. The heat was so intense one of his lenses warped. However, the images he came back with are some of the most incredible ever taken in the theatre of war. The columns of fire are so large as to be beyond belief. Look at any number of images of footage of erupting volcanoes and you're somewhere close to the spectacle of this event.

As with all of Salgado's work, the images are in stark black & white, meaning we have more than a straight documentary work. What we find instead are a series of images that grab us with its aesthetic mastery before drilling the message home that yes, this did happen, and yes, it was devastating.

Previous volumes by Salgado have shown the endurance and beauty in humanity. This one perhaps stands apart in its ability to demonstrate that he's not a photographer impervious to our shortcomings, particularly when it's on the battlefield.

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Also out now

The latest and best books from the world of photography. By Oliver Atwell



© SOPHIE CALLE

And So Forth

By Sophie Calle, Prestel, £55, 508 pages, hardback, ISBN 978-3-79138-204-3

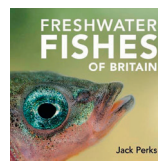


SOPHIE Calle is a difficult person to talk about. Generally, the people who love her can wax lyrical about the personal intensity of her work – its rawness, wit, honesty and humanity. Those who hate her will decry the borderline narcissism endemic of a confessional culture, and an art world out of ideas and hiding behind impenetrable prolix ideas.

This book follows on from Calle's previous retrospective volume *Did You See Me?* and highlights her most recent work. It's also unlikely to dissuade her detractors. However, it confirms that Calle is one of the most interesting artists working today (you can see which side of the fence I occupy). There are some lovely ideas in her work. The project 'Take Care of Yourself', for example, features 100 women offering their interpretations of a break-up letter Calle received from a former lover. In another project, she documents her time spent ringing a public phone box to initiate conversations with strangers. To accuse Calle of being a narcissist is to miss the point. Her projects are built wholly upon the blurring of private and public. ★★★★★

Freshwater Fishes of Britain

By Jack Perks, New Holland, £16.99, 224 pages, hardback, ISBN 978-1-92151-777-8



IF YOU'RE not a fan of French conceptual artists (see above), then perhaps you could be persuaded to try out some freshwater fish. Jack Perks is a natural-history photographer and has set out to

document every species of freshwater fish in the UK, from the pike to the grayling. Each entry has its own image and a plethora of information, including interesting little bits of trivia (for example, bitterlings lay their eggs in living swan mussels). As we've mentioned before in these review pages, the mark of a really good photography book is one that can hold your attention even when you have virtually no interest in the subject matter. This is one of those books. Perks' commitment to his subject shines through on every page, and as a result you can't help but engage with it. ★★★★★