

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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An Illicit Whole Earth Catalog at J.F.K.

By MIKI MEEK

Passengers, airliners, workers, baggage, cargo, taxis and trains flow ceaselessly through Kennedy International Airport.

Taryn Simon recorded another ceaseless flow — one the public rarely sees: contraband detained and seized from international flights.

Ms. Simon, 35, a Guggenheim fellow who lives in New York, spent five days and nights at Kennedy, barely sleeping. Her daily rhythms were driven by the relentless arrival of newly impounded goods.

After setting up makeshift studios at inspection sites in Terminal 4, Ms. Simon photographed 1,075 items that were taken from passengers and express mail. They ranged from banal bags of nuts to a falcon corpse from Indonesia in a package that declared it to be “home décor.”

“This is a look at an attempt to control what is considered threatening to economies, to personal safety and to a nation,” Ms. Simon said.



She has meticulously cataloged every item alphabetically for a 500-page book, “Contraband,” that Steidl will publish this fall. The New York Times Magazine is featuring an excerpt of 40 images.

Viewed collectively, her simple, uniform images offer a fascinating portrait of the world through objects from “alcohol” to “zolpidem” (Ambien).

Some items turn up again and again: sexual stimulants, counterfeit luxury goods and drugs. “I think it’s a depressing reflection of what everyone is chasing — all these forms of escape that create quite a flat representation of human desire in all corners of the world,” Ms. Simon said.

Fake Louis Vuitton handbags, steroids from Pakistan and counterfeit boxes of Viagra from China (labeled “USA American Visagra”) are just a few of the images that serve as a time capsule of contemporary desire. Not everything is so predictable, however. Among the more surprising objects were two dead guinea pigs. They were taken from a passenger flying in from Ecuador, where the animal is considered a delicacy.

”You have people arriving from different cultures with the normal parts of their everyday life, and then these suddenly take on a wild identity under U.S. Customs,” Ms. Simon said.

The idea for the project emerged from a 2006 session photographing seized food in the same terminal for “The American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar.” In this book, Ms. Simon made the inaccessible accessible, from C.I.A. headquarters to the den of hibernating black bears.

After negotiating for four months with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Ms. Simon received permission to photograph all newly arriving contraband from Nov. 16 to Nov. 20, 2009. She used a large-format camera and a neutral backdrop.

“I wanted the shoot to be somewhat of a performance piece, where my photographs were replicating the actual flow of goods during a very fixed period of time,” she said.

The process was exhausting. “There’s video footage of me at the end of the shoot, being woken up by someone to press the shutter,” Ms. Simon said. “I was literally falling off my seat.”