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Taryn Simon, artist

In her latest work, one of the world's most sought-after international contemporary artists explores the collision of order and disorder



Since the success of her 2007 work, [*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*](#), in which she explored the underworld of American cultural life, exposing sites and systems largely hidden from public view, [*Taryn Simon*](#) has become one of the most sought-after international contemporary artists. Her works typically combine photographs and texts that both exploit and question the nature of visual evidence. Her latest work, [*A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*](#), was launched with a major exhibition at Tate Modern in May. Simon travelled the globe for four years, tracing the bloodlines of 18 subjects and their living relatives,

sequencing the portraits in large grids on the gallery wall. The work questions the degree to which an individual's destiny is decided by inherited factors, how much by external social, political and economic factors, and how much by chance – or fate.

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Where did the idea for ‘A Living Man Declared Dead’ come from?

Each work begins as an imagined idea. I then look for a real-life rendering or adaptation. I may have read about something in a novel, seen an article, heard or even misheard something in a conversation – I then start down a path of research which often webs out into something I could never invent. In my past projects I’ve worked in serial form, cataloguing something that is fairly abstract, yet through a determined title and presentation assumed the appearance of being comprehensive. In this new work, I wanted to find an absolute catalogue that couldn’t be edited, interrupted or curated by choice. This led me to blood. A bloodline is determined and ordered. But the work centres on the collision of order and disorder: the order of blood butting up against the disorder in the often chaotic and violent stories that are the subjects of my chapters.

Do you enjoy risk? Were there tough situations on your travels?

I don’t. But I don’t allow it to keep me from producing work. There were difficulties to avoid along the way: flash floods, landslides, carjackings, authorities that didn’t want me photographing certain subjects. In Tanzania, for example, our equipment was seized by corrupt authorities. I was there to photograph the bloodline of the director of the Tanzania Albino Society. Albinos in Tanzania are hunted by human poachers who trade their skin, limbs and organs to witch doctors who promote the belief that albinos have magical powers. The authorities are not keen to publicise it. But in the end it worked out.

Do you have a close network of support?

I produced this project with my sister (who produced two of my earlier projects) and my assistant Douglas Emery. We worked in near isolation for several years.

What do you hope people who see the work come away with?

I’m interested in the unarticulated space between all the stories I construct – the disorientation found in the gaps between all the collected information. It is human nature to look for purpose, to want to feel that all of these stories amount to some sort of vision of the world. But I am interested in these uncomfortable spaces where we don’t have answers. The way the works are designed is meant to convey a struggle to find patterns and codes in the narratives that surround the lives we lead. I’m trying to look at the machine-like production of birth and death, with unending stories between, and consider if we are evolving or are more like a record on skip.

Can you recall what stage you were at this time last year?

I was struggling with the frames for these works and with plans for the installation in Berlin. It was a massive construction in which we built stacks that resemble Mies Van Der Rohe’s library stacks in the basement of the building – but on steroids. I was fact-checking and editing my writing. That meant a lot of back and forth with individuals in Lebanon, Ukraine, Bosnia, Australia, India, Nepal, Brazil, Israel, Scotland ... I was struggling to find an original copy of the lawyer Hans Frank’s diary entry from 1944, in which he reflects on his 25-year relationship with Hitler. And I was in touch with individuals in Kenya about a discrepancy in the number of wives the man who is the focus of my chapter had. Turned out that one of his nine wives had died during treatment for evil spirits.

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Do you know if any of the people included in the work have visited the exhibition?

Yes, several came to the openings in Berlin and London. The others have seen it in book form.

Has this year changed you in a way that you can identify?

My life is almost schizophrenic. Production, which is the bulk of my time, is often in isolation and extreme conditions physically and psychologically. To be honest, I'm pretty exhausted. The aftermath of a project, like this past year, is public and more cosmopolitan. It's definitely a big shift – but there's always a return.

What was the highlight of your year?

Pressing send on the final book file. Shipping the crates with the completed works. Reaching the finish.

'A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters' is at Tate Modern until January 2; the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, until January 1, and opens in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in May 2012