

Wired.com
February 2011

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Q&A: Photog's Descent Into the Underworld

By Rachel Somerstein

January 31, 2011

12:00 pm

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Photo: Dana Lixenberg

Photographer Taryn Simon has spent the better part of the past decade crisscrossing the US in search of rarely documented, illicit, and sometimes brutal subjects. Her straightforward images capture everything from wrongly imprisoned men exonerated by DNA evidence to confiscated counterfeit watches to a mentally retarded tiger kept illegally in Arkansas. The Guggenheim Foundation fellow's work has been shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum, among other venues. Gorgeously rendered but often grotesque, Simon's photographs transform viewers into voyeurs.

For *Contraband*, your most recent project, you spent five straight days in the customs office at JFK, sleeping on an air mattress and photographing 1,075 objects—from Cuban cigars to chicken feet—prohibited entry to the US. What did that experience reveal to you? One result of that relentless documentation of seizures was an unexpected awareness of the overwhelming volume of black-market and counterfeit goods that are removed from economic circulation. The threat to the original implied by these products was interesting for me as a photographer, because photography is making a copy of something seemingly original or real, and here I was taking copies of copies. The objects couldn't cross custom's border, but the photographs could—and they could become commodities in another economy.

What was the most shocking or strange object that you encountered? A large bird corpse came through in a paper envelope with some other animal parts. I was told by customs that they get these occasionally for witchcraft purposes.

American culture is obsessed with "underworlds." Why? I don't know how particularly American the tendency is; we're all subject to that seduction. There is a universal, undeniably seductive effect of something declared to be forbidden or secret.

OK. So why is interest in the underworld so universal? Because it represents an unknown. Attachment to the unknown is at the foundation of religious pursuits and even promoted by institutions, states, and governments. Through the promotion of the

unknown and the illusion of an answer beyond one's reach, it's easier to create a belief in institutional authority, security, or dependability.

An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar features images of objects and classified areas rarely seen by the public. Can you give an example of a site that **wouldn't let you in?** Disney denied me access to its underground facilities. Considering all of the high-level, off-limit areas I was entering for this work, it was one of the last places I anticipated being barred from. That said, the company's faxed letter was far better than any photograph I could have taken. Its closing read, "Especially during these violent times, I personally believe that the magical spell cast on guests who visit our theme parks is particularly important to protect and helps to provide them with an important fantasy they can escape to."