

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Slate

The Eccentric Overlap Between Bond Girls and Bird-Watching

David Rosenberg



A.6 Pussy Galore (Honor Blackman), 1964, "Birds of the West Indies," 2013
Copyright Taryn Simon. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

James Bond the ornithologist and James Bond the secret agent all play a role in Taryn Simon's "Birds of the West Indies," currently on view at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, Calif.

Even hard-core fans Bond films might not be aware that Bond series creator Ian Fleming was an avid bird-watcher. He read a taxonomy in 1936 titled *Birds of the West Indies* written by James Bond; Fleming figured the flat and colorless name of the author would be perfect for the title character of his books.

Simon's take on *Birds of the West Indies* is a two-part series that, in a nod to the Bond taxonomy, creates an inventory of the women who played Bond girls in the films as well as the weaponry and luxury cars found in the films. "I was interested in looking at the most economically successful film franchise (in adjusted dollars) that has global reach and an incredibly long lifespan," Simon said. "I wanted to dissect the components that led to such a formidable entity."

Once she began digging into the franchise, she was struck by how the lines were blurred between fantasy and reality. It began with the discovery of the real-life ornithologist James Bond and

continued when she found out that Nikki van der Zyl had provided the voice for Ursula Andress (as well as for other actresses) in the movie *Dr. No*. “It got more and more surreal as I went along—fiction and reality both disappeared and opened up a space that is neither,” Simon said.

For the second part of the series, Simon cast herself as James Bond the ornithologist and painstakingly went through all 24 Bond films, photographing and classifying every bird that makes an appearance in the films. Playing with the fact-versus-fiction narrative, she assigned each bird either a real or imagined home (including names of the settings for the Bond missions).

Simon said creating the taxonomy was tricky but also played into the movement of photography from film to digital. “A blink can lead to missing a bird,” she wrote about the process of identifying them. “There are of course scenes where they are evident, but often these birds fly in the background of the background. It takes some training to make your eye not focus on the ‘center’ or the ‘action.’ The results often appear like dust on a negative—something that has vanished with the onset of digital processes,” she said.