

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

PLAYBOY

TARYN SIMON'S

Birds of the West Indies

IN HER LATEST PROJECT, ACCLAIMED
CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER TARYN SIMON
TRAINS HER LENS ON THE JAMES BOND FRANCHISE

A few facts to consider: A “bird” in the snappy slang of swinging London is a babe. The real-life James Bond—an actual flesh-and-blood man whose name Ian Fleming lifted for the spy 007—was an ornithologist and the author of *Birds of the West Indies*, a book published in 1936 that exhaustively catalogs more than 400 species of birds in the Caribbean. Every installment of the James Bond franchise since 1962’s *Dr. No* has included three elements without which a Bond film would not be a Bond film: a hot babe, a cool car and stylish weaponry. Most also include glimpses of actual birds aflutter in the distance.

All these facts inform artist Taryn Simon’s ambitious new photographic installation, *Birds of the West Indies*, images from which are included on these pages. Simon is best known for her documentary photo series *The Innocents* and *Contraband*, which portray, respectively, wrongly convicted former inmates

and illegal goods seized at JFK airport. For *Birds of the West Indies* she set out to catalog all the women, weapons and vehicles in the Bond universe—and to photograph every on-screen bird sighting.

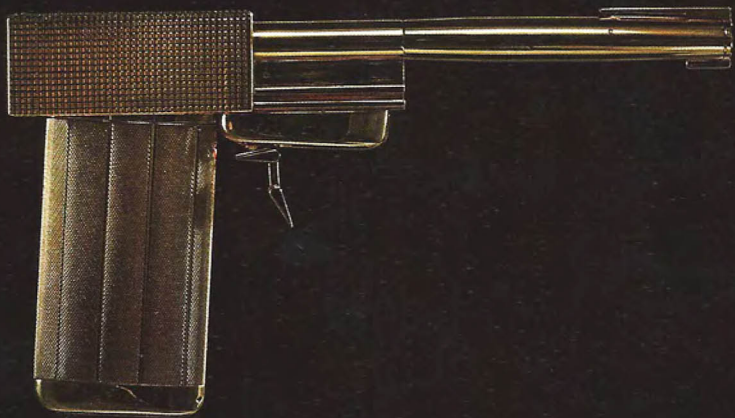
Why? Perhaps because, as Simon’s work shows, James Bond has always existed somewhere between fantasy and reality, with interchangeable parts that vary from one film to the next yet somehow always add up to a recognizable whole. In retrospect, the women (photographed in their own clothes as they are today), the weapons and the vehicles represent more than 50 years of us—our culture’s desires, fears and dreams about the technological future.

Seeing these strangely familiar women and props out of context in Simon’s stark but glamorous images

sometimes leaves you shaken—remember the knotted rope thwacking Daniel Craig’s bare balls in *Casino Royale*?—but more often leaves you stirred.

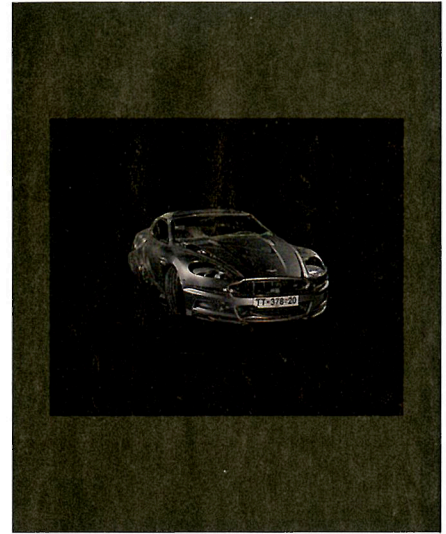


The original *Birds of the West Indies* inspired the cover design of the book that accompanies Simon’s exhibit.

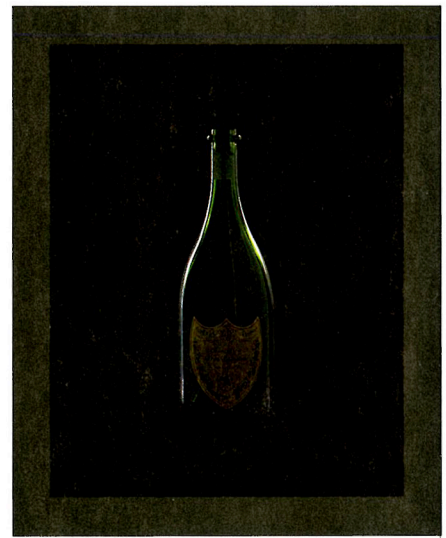




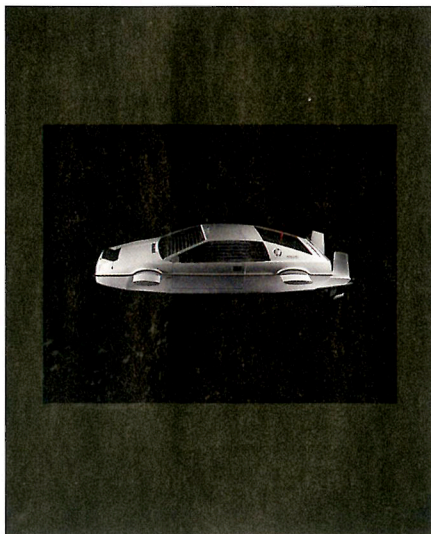
A.64 *Sévérine* (Bérénice Marlohe), 2012



C.40 2006 *Aston Martin DBS* (with roll damage), 2006



B.1 *Dom Pérignon*, 1962



C.14 1977 *Lotus Esprit S1 'Wet Nellie'*, 1977



A.52 *Dr. Christmas Jones* (Denise Richards), 1999



B.68 *Bikini Hip Knife*, 2002



A.6 *Pussy Galore* (Honor Blackman), 1964



C.7 1967 Wallis Autogyros WA-116 'Little Nellie,' 1967



B.22 *Steel Teeth*, 1977

Q&A

WITH
TARYN
SIMON

THE ARTIST DISCUSSES THE MASSIVE UNDERTAKING BEHIND HER LATEST WORK

Q: *There are approximately 2,900 minutes, or about 48 hours' worth, of James Bond movies. What was your strategy for watching them? How many times did you have to watch the films to feel confident you'd spotted all the birds?*

A: The films were watched chronologically in a binge and then reviewed again and again. The entire studio was involved. At times there were specks we weren't certain were birds. We'd all gather round and discuss dust on a negative versus a living creature. It required training the eye to look away from the seductive action and seek the invisible, fleeting and noncentral players that inhabit the margins. This stood as a metaphor for my other work.

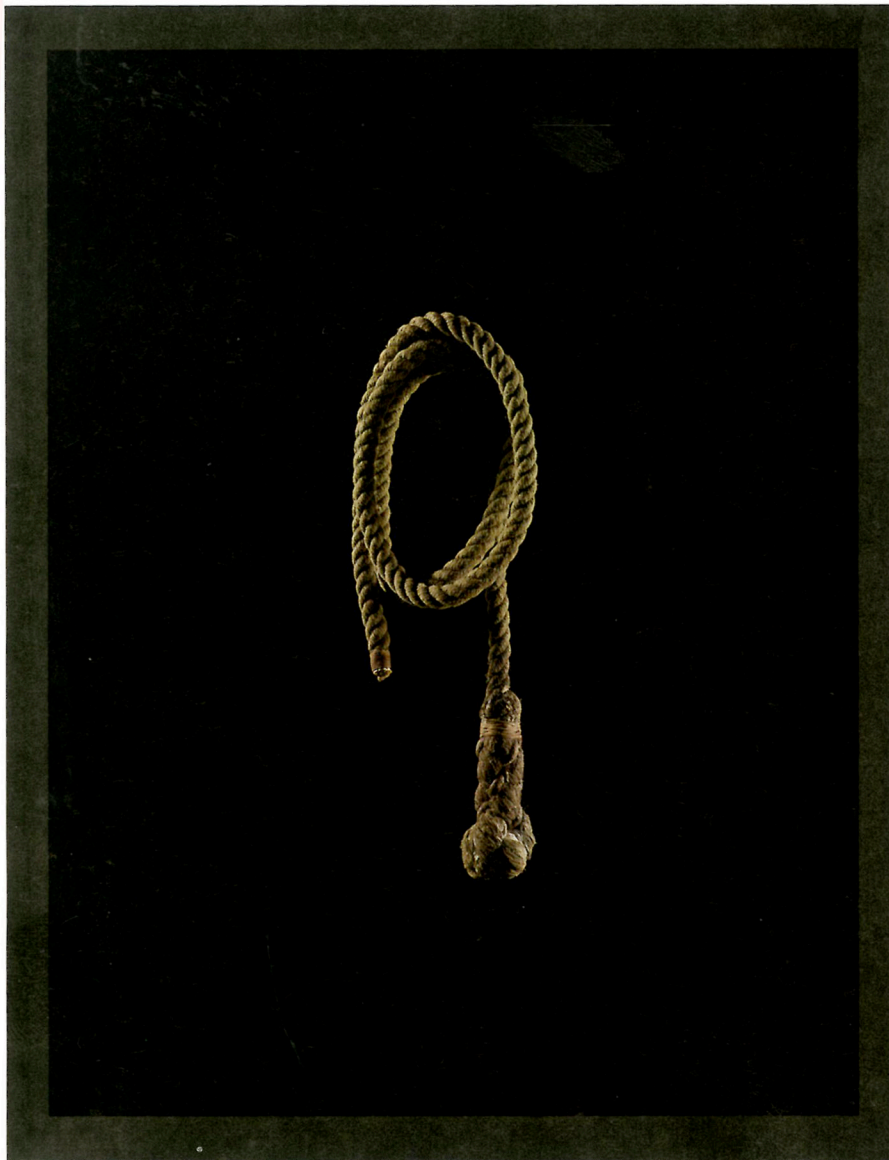
Q: *How did you manage to locate the weapons and vehicles?*

A: They came from different sites throughout Europe and America: the official Bond archive, auction houses, private collectors, museums. The earlier items presented more obstacles because the value of the franchise had not yet been established and elements of the films weren't preserved as they are today. I'm always interested in archives that develop before value is established and how they mutate once it is recognized—the collision of low and high art.

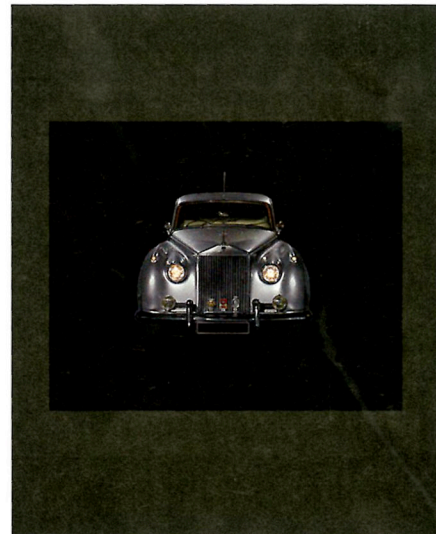
Q: *What was the hardest prop to photograph?*

A: Cars are never easy; nor are boats—big, shiny reflective surfaces that demand a lot of control. It's difficult when you need a crew to carefully move a precious collectible.

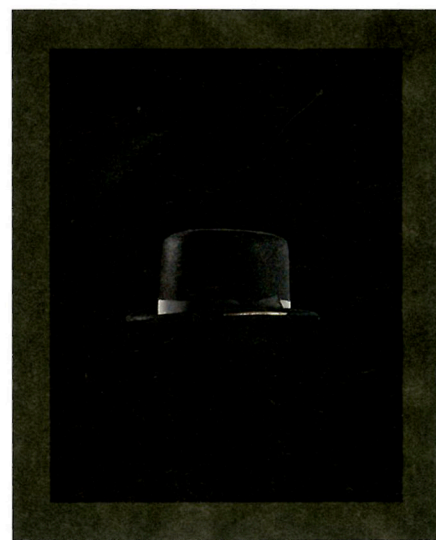
Q: *Inevitably a few of the props take on a life of their own as quasi-independent objects—some as cool fetishes of consumer desire (the 1963 Aston Martin DB5 from *Goldfinger*), some as goofy misguided predictions about the future (the Bath-O-Sub from *Diamonds Are Forever*) and some as brilliantly iconic design statements (the golden gun from *The Man With the Golden Gun*). Does any one prop stand out as being particularly loaded with meaning for the entire Bond franchise?*



B.74 Knotted Rope Whip, 2006



C.23 1962 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud II, 1985



B.7 Razor-Edged Bowler Hat, 1964

A: I always liked the Hasselblad camera signature gun from *License to Kill* as a metaphor in which a camera is a weapon of death.

Q: *A few of the actresses declined to be photographed—including, of course, Ursula Andress. Did you think at any point that their absence would prevent you from completing the project, especially since it is essentially completist in its approach? Why did you then decide to register their absence with blank images?*

A: When Ursula declined to participate, I was sure the project was in jeopardy of failure. She is *the* Bond girl. I became obsessed with getting her image and her history, and in that process I discovered that the voice of her character in *Dr. No* was dubbed by an uncredited English woman named Nikki van der Zyl. Ursula's character, Honey Ryder, is a fragmented

creation, pieced together to compel. In the end Ursula's absence was a blessing. I created a film in which Nikki, who had always been invisible in the Bond universe, reads the complete lines of Ursula's character—and becomes visible.

Nikki was the most prolific agent of substitution in the Bond franchise. From 1962 to 1979 she provided voice dubs for more than a dozen major and minor characters throughout nine Bond films. For me she underscores the interplay of substitution and repetition in the preservation of myth and the construction of fantasy.

The empty portraits disrupt the archive and present obstacles I couldn't transcend. In my work I'm often associated with access to difficult and complex areas and subjects. I assumed this project would be a break from those difficulties. Surprisingly, it was even more difficult. Ten of the 57 women I approached to be part of *Birds of the West Indies* declined to

participate. Their reasons included pregnancy, not wanting to distort the memory of their fictional character and avoiding any further association with the Bond formula.

Q: *Why did you decide to ask the women to style themselves and choose their own poses for the portraits?*

A: I see the women's portraits as existing in this strange liminal space between reality and fiction, or a space where both reality and fiction disappear and a third space that is neither opens up. The mark of a Bond girl is so indelible, there is often no room for another reality or identity. Their poses and clothing play a part in that push-pull.

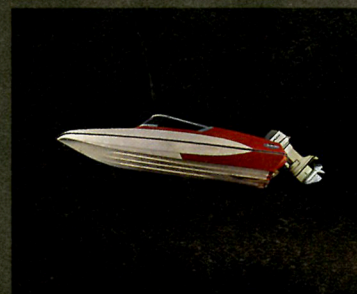
Q: *How did your understanding of Bond and the Bond franchise change during the*



A.23 *Solitaire* (Jane Seymour), 1973



B.2 *Tarantula*, 1962



C.12 1973 *Glastron Carlson GT-150*, 1973

course of watching and rewatching all the films for this project?

A: The films journey through economics, race, gender politics, weapons development and proliferation, branding, identity, global politics and aesthetics in such a radical form. They truly stand as a powerful record of culture's role in all these categories.

Interestingly I was told that MI6 at one point looked to Bond for weapons-development ideas, as opposed to the other way around. Perhaps that's the way it goes: imagination and fantasy first.

Q: Will you be in the audience for the next installment of James Bond?

A: Of course! I eagerly await every iteration until I die, and then some. ■



Playing the role of the ornithologist James Bond, Taryn Simon cataloged every bird in every James Bond film. The details above come from a piece that features bird appearances in scenes filmed in Istanbul, Turkey.