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Photographer Taryn Simon on broadening her work beyond the lens

James Adams



Taryn Simon's work, such as An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, falls somewhere in the realms of art and photojournalism.

Four years ago, The Guardian went all out anointing Taryn Simon with words. She was not just “an Annie Leibovitz of the conceptual world,” she was a “contender for the title of most important photographer of her generation.” Calling Simon, now 40, a photographer, though, is to understate the reach and complexity of her work. Yes, the camera is involved but so is writing, graphic design, reportage, scientific inquiry and much else.

Unsurprisingly, what this New Yorker eventually hangs on the walls of an art institution or slips between the hardcovers of a book is the result of considerable thought, labour and a deep engagement with the world: *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, an elaborate presentation of the bloodlines of 18 precisely chosen families, for one, required four years' preparation before its premiere in 2011 at Tate Modern.

Simon recently gave birth to her second child, a boy – she's married to director/screenwriter Jake Paltrow, brother of Gwyneth – but this does not appear to be slowing her down. She's at the University of Toronto Friday evening to give a lecture/slide show, the conclusion of a three-city tour, organized by the Canadian Art Foundation, that earlier took her to Montreal and Ottawa. She spoke recently with The Globe and Mail from her home in Manhattan.

So what can people expect at your presentation?

A book just came out, from the Tate, that's a survey of past work and the slide show is sort of a reflection of that book in many ways. The book's called *Rear Views, A Star-forming Nebula, and the Office of Foreign Propaganda* [388 pages, with an introduction by Salman Rushdie]. I'm also

going to be speaking about one work not in the book. It just came down at the Venice Biennale and is going to be opening at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in February, then travelling to different places like Moscow's Garage Museum.

This is *Paperwork and the Will of Capital: An Account of Flora as Witness*, yes?

Exactly. It's a combination of sculpture and photography. Something different. The sculpture is a plant press, essentially, made out of concrete, but quite elaborate, with dried flowers and text and images, and almost functions in book form in vitrines.

I heard somewhere that you are working on some performance piece.

Yeah, I am. I'm doing a project with the Park Avenue Armory in New York and Artangel in London [premiering fall 2016].

Is this your first foray into performance?

Yes.

I read a few years ago you were getting disillusioned or tired of photography. Is that prompting the move into performance?

I don't have any disappointment with photography. It's always a part of what I do. Maybe it's more that I had sort of moved away from privileging the single image and aesthetics in a certain way and started to use the camera in a much more machine-like form. For me, the medium, whatever it is, is an instrument to allow for whatever the idea is that I am working on. So much of my work is on the creation of these concepts and the writing, then using whatever means is best for what I'm trying to achieve. Each project is its own iteration.

Performance doesn't mean an abandonment of photography?

No, no, never, never, ever, never. Have I told you I hate absolutes? [She laughs] I love photography.

Are you physically appearing in the performance?

Never [laughs]. That I can be absolute about.

Your practice is so varied, I have to confess I don't know whether I should address you as a social scientist, an art photographer, a photojournalist, a private detective with a public mission, an installation artist ...

I like that that is your understanding of it. Because I sort of resist slipping into any easy envelope. But, yeah, it has elements of so many different domains and I don't quite know how to define it either.

The play between text and image, the gap between, is one of your big motifs. It's almost as if you're saying, 'A picture needs or deserves a thousand words and even that may be too little,' that the image in and of itself isn't enough; it requires elaboration, explanation.

Well, I think in the art world, most feel it shouldn't have further elaboration. It's not exactly a popular position. But it's something I came to very organically [in 2002-03] with *The Innocents* [a book, documentary and exhibition about wrongfully convicted Americans and photography's role in miscarriages of justice]. It just sort of happened again and again. I'm interested how language is used, how it establishes a kind of authority. I don't see the text as captions to the image. I see them as works in themselves.

It seems your inspiration doesn't come so much from the artistic world as from, say, photojournalism, political discourse, what's going on out there. ...

But, y'know, I'm so deeply interested in aesthetics and formalism and geometry and colour and graphic design and all of those things and I spend an enormous amount of time on those qualities of the work. But, simultaneously, I'm interested in these other directions – of politics, anthropology, science, even entertainment. So it's not really one or the other; it's a mix.

You do, I think, want your work to be. You want your imagery to be something more than a Henri Cartier-Bresson shot of a guy leaping off a plank into a puddle of water.

I'm not capturing anything. By the time I get to actually taking a photograph it's been extremely worked on. It's not a moment. The picture itself is the culmination of enormous preparation, writing, imagination. And then after the photograph, there's a ton of work laying it out, working up the associated text. It's more like this big mass equation that never reaches its solution, a lot of calculated elements that then don't reach one definitive thing. It just is.

This interview has been condensed and edited.