

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### The New York Times

# From Chaos, The Illusion Of Order

BY RACHEL DONADIO

PARIS — World Press Photo, the renowned journalism prize organization, rescinded a top award this month amid controversy over whether a documentary photographer had crossed the line into staged art. The American artist Taryn Simon pushes the boundaries in the opposite direction, creating art photographs that draw on painstaking reporting.

For her 2011 portrait series “A Living Man Declared Dead,” Ms. Simon spent four years researching the complex family histories of 18 people, including a man who had been removed from a land registry in India after someone reported him dead, a family that lost several members in the Srebrenica massacre of Muslims in Bosnia in 1995, and descendants of a top aide to Adolf Hitler in Germany. She also photographed several generations of each family.

Four of the 18 sections in that series are now on view in the first major retrospective of Ms. Simon’s work in France, running through May 17 at the Jeu de Paume museum here. (The remaining 14 are being exhibited through May 31 at Le Point du Jour art center in Cherbourg, and a smaller show of her work

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just closed at the Almine Rech gallery here.)

Deceptively subtle but highly political, Ms. Simon’s work explores the relationship between individuals and the state, the ways bureaucracy exerts control over human lives and the hidden power dynamics intrinsic to the organization of information, whether by governments, libraries or the seemingly impersonal algorithms of the Internet. Often her work is about trying — and inevitably failing — to impose order on the bloody chaos of history.

“I’m most interested in looking at the paperwork of power,” Ms. Simon said in a recent interview at the Jeu de Paume, one of Paris’s premier centers for viewing photography. She said that the retrospective examines systems of power and governance and asks, “Where are the boundaries in terms of what the public or myself can access or do within those limitations?”

Ms. Simon, 40, who grew up in New York, said her work was inspired by boxes of Kodachrome slides that her father, a State Department employee, would bring back from his travels to hot spots around the world.

The show at the Jeu de Paume draws on five bodies of Ms. Simon’s work, from her first major project, “The Innocents” (2002), portraits of some of the first men exonerated through the use of DNA evidence, to her most recent work, “Anthem” (2015), 50 tiny music boxes that viewers can wind up to play the national anthems of 50 countries ranked by gross domestic product, in a sendup of nationalist bombast.

The exhibition opened to favorable reviews in France. Some were taken with her video “Cut-aways” (2012), outtakes from an interview on the television program Prime Time Russia in which Ms. Simon was asked to look at her interviewers silently for several minutes. As art, it can be seen as a commentary on the staging and vacuousness of TV news.

Many works in the retrospective play on the disconnect between almost clinical, straightforward portraits — in “A Living Man Declared Dead,” the people are photographed against a white background, looking directly at the camera — and the vicissitudes of often-brutal history. This idea surfaces, for example, in the portraits of the descendants of Hans Frank, Hitler’s personal legal adviser, who manipulated the law to license horrors and was later executed for war crimes.

In the series, for which Ms. Simon wrote detailed footnotes displayed as wall text, “I’m playing on all those forms of appearance of authority,” she said. By tracing the bloodlines of Frank’s family and other families in the series, she said, she is exploring “this illusion of order in really chaotic narratives.”

For “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar” (2007), she photographed hidden or seemingly hidden places across the United States, including nuclear storage sites, a clinic where women undergo surgery to reconstruct the hymen, and Abstract Expressionist and Color Field art in the lobby of the Cen-

# From Chaos, the Illusion of Order: An Artist Dissects the Dynamics



2014 TARYN SIMON, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

*“Troy Webb,  
Scene of the crime, The Pines, Virginia Beach, Virginia. Served 7 years of a 47-year sentence for Rape, Kidnapping and Robbery  
The Innocents, 2002”*

For this series, Taryn Simon photographed men exonerated through the use of DNA evidence at the sites where the crimes took place.

tral Intelligence Agency. She said she was fascinated by the C.I.A.'s investment in abstract art during the Cold War as an ideological counterpoint to the Socialist Realism that was still pervasive under Communist governments.

In her 2013-14 project “Birds of the West Indies,” which was shown at the Almine Rech gallery, Ms. Simon captured black-and-white film stills of birds in the margins of the frame in James Bond films, stepping in as a kind of rogue agent who ignores the espionage mission to focus on something seemingly ir-

relevant. (Ian Fleming named his character after James Bond, an ornithologist and the author of several books on birds of the West Indies.)

In “The Picture Collection” (2012), Ms. Simon examines the power structures behind the organization of information. She has photographed collages of images from the folders in the photography archive of the Mid-Manhattan Library in New York, a resource for artists and advertising writers since 1915. Over the years, the library had organized the images by theme, including swimming pools, financial cri-

ses, and the rear ends of people and animals.

The catalog for the *Jeu de Paume* exhibition includes images of a work Ms. Simon made for the new Louis Vuitton Foundation museum here for which she photographed the traces left at the site by construction workers. (The building, designed by Frank Gehry, opened to great fanfare last fall.) In one, a worker from the Democratic Republic of Congo had written in marker on a wall, “There is more money here than in my entire country, D.R.C.!”

The lives behind objects are at

the heart of “Contraband,” a series of images from 2010, some of which were published in *The New York Times*. Ms. Simon photographed items confiscated from passengers or from mail packages at Kennedy Airport — illegal drugs, sausages, Chinese sexual stimulants, a deer penis, African wood carvings and presumably fake turquoise boxes marked Tiffany.

The items, which all suggest rich back stories, are displayed matter-of-factly against a white background. “Like portraits,” Ms. Simon said, “without the person even present.”