

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

PURPLE

TARYN SIMON ARTIST, NEW YORK

on conceptual photography

interview by LOUISE NERI

portrait by MARK SELIGER

hair by GAVIN HARWIN at The Wall Group using ORIBE

make-up by ALICE LANE at The Wall Group using NARS

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AGREEMENT TO CONDUCT IMPACT STUDIES OF THE GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM ON NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES. KHARTOUM, SUDAN, AUGUST 26, 2014, FROM THE SERIES PAPERWORK AND THE WILL OF CAPITAL (2015), ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT IN MAHOGANY FRAME WITH TEXT IN WINDOWED COMPARTMENT ON ARCHIVAL HERBARIUM PAPER, 215.9 X 186.1 X 7 CM (FRAMED)

LOUISE NERI — You're a storyteller whose investigative drive is matched by an obsessive attention to aesthetic detail, where research is put at the service of image-making. How has your artistic method and conceptual investigation evolved?

TARYN SIMON — There are always oppositional impulses in my work. It is prompted by reality, but doesn't cleave to it. There are many degrees of filtering and refinement as a new work evolves.

LOUISE NERI — Can you discuss the heuristic nature of your process? You trawl a huge amount of information on a constant basis. In the course of trawling, things present themselves to you that might not have any seeming connection to each other — and there your work begins, to stitch together these disparate and improbable connections, as in your most recent series, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2015), which started with a 19th-century book of botanical specimens; an image of Hitler, Mussolini, and Chamberlain at the Munich Conference; and the concept of the "impossible bouquet" from the Flemish Enlightenment.

TARYN SIMON — It usually collides with a sense of failure in those early or formative moments. I don't necessarily understand how it all fits together as I'm collecting the crumbs. A constellation forms as I chase and piece together my research.

LOUISE NERI — In a recent public Skype interview in Prague for your exhibition at the Rudolfinum, the exhibition curator Michal Nanoru touched on skepticism and doubt as driving forces in your work. Is this what you mean, that your motivation is born out of your perception of the inbuilt failure of systems or institutions?

TARYN SIMON — Yes, including my own systems and processes of working. In the same way that I am attuned to seeking out the missteps or ambiguities in operations and controls beyond myself, I am also always seeing them in myself and in my work in these formative moments.

LOUISE NERI — Does this anxiety also explain your obsessive attention to detail?

TARYN SIMON — You have witnessed firsthand how I handle the writing in my work and how I can labor over single words within a sentence for hours. Ultimately it might be insecurity or neurosis, a refusal to believe that writing is ever going to be able to convey what I am actually feeling — and I say "feeling" as opposed to "thinking" because for me it is something beyond language, something that language literally cannot allow. And even if it be through an image, I feel that it is never going to be actualized in the way that I am *truly* looking for. In the past, I have related this feeling to white noise, a certain indescribable anxiety and conflict that are at the center of all my works. So I think that my obsession with all these details is somehow an attempt to find that space — which can't ever really be found. The process of circling back to this imagined space is a process founded in doubt, and it is the doubt that leads to the subjects themselves, as well as an unquenchable doubt in the work itself and in the structure by which I compose the work.

LOUISE NERI — Your work has an exquisite sense of "making," not only in terms of the object-quality of what you do, but also in terms of conceptual details. And I don't think this is something that preoccupies all artists working today; in fact, I think the contemporary art world is very divided about it.



happening, and it usually coincides with complete exhaustion — of funds, of physical ability, of my mind being even able to be in, or on, the subject anymore. It's a complete feeling of deflation at the end.

LOUISE NERI — So, what is a survey exhibition for you? You have had quite a few already, and you even produced a book recently to that effect, with Tate Modern, entitled *Rear Views, A Star-Forming Nebula, and the Department of Foreign Propaganda*.

TARYN SIMON — When I see multiple bodies of work on the wall together, it is quite emotional and shocking for me. So much of the work lives in storage or as buried digital files on my computer or in closed books that I forget what I have actually done. I often feel like I am looking at the work of someone who is not me. Because the person who made those projects is gone. For example, when I look back at *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII* (2008-11) and the massive efforts that it entailed, I just can't imagine being able to conceive of it and do it.

LOUISE NERI — So then, do your consecutive series speak to each other across time? I'm thinking, for example, of the idea of the gap or elision, which can be found throughout your oeuvre. This idea could be a survey exhibition in itself.

TARYN SIMON — These gaps usually represent rejections that I initially perceive as a permanently damaging malfunction and collapse. It is only with time that these unrequited needs become very important "making" components of the work. They represent the out-of-control in my system. Thank god for them — they are consistently my favorite moments in the work — it just takes me

TARYN SIMON — This fact negates my work as art in some people's minds. My work can easily be dismissed as being the complete opposite of what "art" is meant to represent, do, and be born from. I actually see it as abstract, but my definition of abstraction is radically different from its popularly distributed form.

LOUISE NERI — Abstract, or rather anti-expressionist?

TARYN SIMON — It's the "thinking too much" often linked to my use of language. I find this resistance a pathetically limited interpretation of what words do and what they can be. I see very little difference between word and image. I have little interest in anything that comes easily. It's clear to me, at this point of my trajectory, that part of my medium is torture ... sadly. [Laughs]

LOUISE NERI — Torture or exactitude? Italo Calvino in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* spoke about exactitude as one of the qualities that would lead us into the future. He saw it as a saving grace of culture, rather than a curse.

TARYN SIMON — Yes, but in my work, there is a central contradiction because it is so precise and seemingly calculated with all edges refined, and yet all of the projects concern and acknowledge the impossibility of ever having an answer, or the inevitability of misinterpretation, or the difficulties of translation. I fight myself, like an autoimmune disease! [Laughs]

LOUISE NERI — Given all this, what does the concept of closure mean for you? What does completion feel like for you? Or are you eternally dissatisfied?

TARYN SIMON — All series reach a close when I see certain repetitions

years to see or acknowledge this. But when I look at all the projects in a row, I can see a root in *The Innocents* (2003). This experience of being face to face with the potentially lethal implications of the invisible space between image and text, and how we as humans are unable to reach understanding with each other, whether strangers in politics or lovers. This inevitability of solitude is a big part of my persistent interest in interpretation and communication.

LOUISE NERI — How did you make *The Innocents*?

TARYN SIMON — It was a long cross-country journey. At first I went north of New York and started photographing people who had been misidentified and, consequently, wrongfully convicted — just photographing them and collecting data — then I went back home and started looking at the images and realized that it was a complete failure, that it didn't at all reflect what I was thinking about and experiencing, and I needed somehow to embed my experience in the work. And so I got rid of the idea of "image-making," and the sites that were physically present in the images became much more important. The beautifully composed image wasn't the point. I looked for whatever the subject was — that is, the scene of the crime. I wanted it to have the strange relationship between truth and fiction embedded in the visual itself. That was where I let go of aesthetics in a more conventional sense. I feel that I am still deeply invested in aesthetics, but in a different way: it has to have a root beyond the visual. And so I went back on another trip north before heading cross-country and redid all those photographs that I had taken.

LOUISE NERI — I didn't realize that! You mean you went back and actually rephotographed the same subjects?

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AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE OF ERITREA AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA. ALGIERS, ALGERIA, DECEMBER 12, 2000, FROM THE SERIES PAPERWORK AND THE WILL OF CAPITAL (2015), ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT IN MAHOGANY FRAME WITH TEXT IN WINDOWED COMPARTMENT ON ARCHIVAL HERBARIUM PAPER, 215.9 X 186.1 X 7 CM (FRAMED)



TARYN SIMON — Yes. I wanted to capture that collision of truth and fiction in the image itself, so I went back and redid all the original photographs from scratch with that new parameter in mind. I guess it was the first instance of where I created very tight parameters for a project. Since then, all my projects have been subject to mathematical and regulatory systems, which I arbitrarily generate but adhere to quite strictly.

LOUISE NERI — Obviously that first project, completed while you were in your mid-20s, was heavily freighted, morally speaking. Since then, you have moved into zones that seem more morally ambivalent. *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) did contain similarly loaded images, such as a nuclear waste storage and encapsulation facility, but taken all together, it has something more of the alternative taxonomy in Borges's "Chinese encyclopedia," from the white tiger to the Death Star. As your career has progressed, some of your series are actually perversely humorous, such as *Birds of the West Indies* (2013-14), which juxtaposes the two James Bonds — the ornithologist and the playboy Secret Service spy. *The Innocents* is generally macabre, but there is also something ironic in how you managed to overtly theatricalize the convicted subjects in the reenactments for the photographs, like the man you pictured sandwiched between mattresses. This irony persists, right up to *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* and its lurid floral arrangements that witnessed major events in world policy. Where will irony take you next?

TARYN SIMON — I am actually now coming to a space where I want to commit to a non-ironic position. But I don't know how to, and, ultimately, I don't even know if I believe it exists. On the other hand, I am tired of the constant assertion that space *isn't* there.

LOUISE NERI — Irony has prevailed for a long time, but sincerity isn't a soft option. It can be very positively confrontational.

TARYN SIMON — It's a slippery slope because the desire for sincerity is also what can lead us as a nation to be confronted by a phenomenon like Donald Trump, who — like George Bush before him — is who he is, acknowledges his faults, speaks without hesitating (or thinking, for that matter). This satisfies a certain public craving for "authenticity" and "certainty." I crave authenticity, too, but when I contemplate the really hideous flip side of that desire in national and international politics, it certainly gives me pause...

LOUISE NERI — Maybe it is also, finally, about the limits of representation. And this is where we come to the project that you are currently developing: *An Occupation of Loss*, which involves professional mourners from different parts of the world. You use terms like "the inchoate nature of grief" to describe the unrepresentable elements of the project. Some of the mourners use words, but others use nonverbal sounds to express their grief. You describe another gap or void — that grief generates — and how this void can be safely and effectively filled by a performance. That's the grand paradox: that the void is being filled by something utterly theatrical and professional masquerading as a form of authentic response.

TARYN SIMON — It also inhabits that space where you can't really determine where the theatrical ends and the authentic begins. They get lost in the moment, the space, and in the profession itself. I find that complexity quite scary — that we don't even know who we are, even in the most extreme moments of being. Are we still operating in

the machine and under certain instructions that we are not even aware of?

LOUISE NERI — You mean as in romance? We have learned to become suspicious and skeptical of romance, although we'd still like to believe in it.

TARYN SIMON — Exactly.

LOUISE NERI — It occurs to me that the inception of *An Occupation of Loss* happened around the time you were expecting your first child. In terms of these issues of limits and authenticity and primality, there is no negotiation in having a child.

TARYN SIMON — The second that child comes out of you, all you can think about is death. It's impossible to think about anything else.

LOUISE NERI — Doesn't it also make you more ferociously protective? The stakes are higher. You become more fearful for yourself, for your child, for the environment, for everything.

TARYN SIMON — For sure. It's survival beyond your own self. It's probably no coincidence that the other work I began at the same time as *An Occupation of Loss* is *Black Square XVII* (2015) in Russia. In 2015, one thousand years after its creation, this work, made from vitrified nuclear waste and containing a letter to the future that I wrote, will be permanently displayed in the Garage [Museum of Contemporary Art], Moscow. This is a work of art not for my generation, nor my children's, nor for their children's, but for a distant future generation that perhaps no longer even speaks the English language.

LOUISE NERI — Are you thinking of intelligent single cells on Mars? [Laughs]

TARYN SIMON — Very large rats. [Laughs] Being a mother also means making



DECISION OF GENERAL PRINCIPLE TO BAN THIRD-PARTY OWNERSHIP OF PLAYERS' ECONOMIC RIGHTS. ZURICH, SWITZERLAND, SEPTEMBER 26, 2014, FROM THE SERIES PAPERWORK AND THE WILL OF CAPITAL (2015), ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT IN MAHOGANY FRAME WITH TEXT IN WINDOWED COMPARTMENT ON ARCHIVAL HERBARIUM PAPER, 215.9 X 186.1 X 7 CM (FRAMED)

projects where, by necessity, I am more physically rooted in one place. My projects have often involved intensive and active fieldwork, and although *An Occupation* is also deeply grounded in fieldwork, it has been carried out in a completely different manner, where I am sitting still, but in 19 different countries.

LOUISE NERI — This also relates to your project with Aaron Swartz, *Image Atlas* (2012), which is the acme of that idea — the virtual archive. And, by extension, we could discuss *The Picture Collection* series of 2013 and its expanded future, which you are also currently working on. For this, you looked no further than your local library, one of the most symbolic libraries in America, possessing an arcane collection of images that is very much along the lines of the Chinese encyclopedia, again: an alternative inventory of topics, from Moustaches to Express Highways. And several years later, working from the limitations of this analog picture collection, you are expanding the concept into a virtual archive of infinite potential.

TARYN SIMON — The genesis of *The Picture Collection* project was actually in response to the making of *Image Atlas*. It was only in unpacking with Aaron the algorithms by which visual material is organized, and in the creation of our own presentation of the cultural differences and similarities that exist in interpreting images in search engines throughout the world, that I started thinking about *The Picture Collection* in a different way. At that time, I was in a mode of seeing everything as unoriginal and existing from a preexisting human impulse, which was now just in another form.

LOUISE NERI — It's like the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.

TARYN SIMON — And where nobody is the revolutionary; s/he just happens to get the spotlight for that moment, and it coincides with whatever is happening industrially or technologically. I went to The New York Public Library Picture Collection as a young child and constantly returned to it for ideas. But at the time, I didn't see the library itself as an idea. I just loved going into all its physical folders and sifting through all that material. I still find it to be one of the most compelling places in New York. I went back there after working on *Image Atlas* so that I could reconsider it in its relationship to "search" — and the ways in which it represents the organizing of visual material according to a certain American psychology, and a certain class and position in academia, and how images were interpreted in that circle. That collection is also designed for a public audience, and it's interesting to consider what those influences led to in its organization versus how searches occur online, where the distinction between high and low is supposedly blurred. There is an assertion of "neutrality," which does not actually exist. The algorithm to find a random number is, in fact, the hardest algorithm to achieve. While working on my larger *Picture Collection* project, I am also continuing to work on *Image Atlas* — which, in turn, is becoming an even bigger project. I am simultaneously creating another image library in which the governing algorithm will be "power." I want to examine how the people who hold authority interpret certain terms visually, and what the differences and similarities in that process are.

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