

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Taryn Simon

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Taryn Simon's work deals in disorientation. Culled from intense research, her perfectly ordered photographs walk the data line between bureaucracy and conspiracy. Though intellectual, her work isn't insular. It engages with other images and esoterica; it suggests that archives are all we have to figure out what the hell is happening on this spinning planet, while acknowledging that photography has at times been complicit in its worst injustices. Whether in "The Innocents," 2002, her incredible first series for which she photographed wrongfully convicted men at the sites of their alleged crimes, or of their alibis; "Contraband," 2010, featuring items seized at John F. Kennedy International Airport, including cow-dung toothpaste, butterflies, and unidentified biohazards; or *Image Atlas*, 2012, made with the late programmer Aaron Swartz, which collected top image results on search engines for particular words at various geolocations, Simon's photos are packed with global context, even as they present restrained, minimalist portraits of individuals and things.

This can present a challenge to criticism: By the time you are done explaining their complicated background, there's little room for *your* analysis. They don't need you, in other words. Which can feel a little cold. This is ever more true in her most recent project, a dazzling array of botanical arrangements that were present at international political meetings throughout modern history—meetings whose acronymed agreements finance packages for the construction of pipelines, draft treaties banning cluster bombs, negotiate nuclear armament and diamond trades and privacy laws—photographed on neutral, bright backgrounds. Thirty-six large photographs of these blooms filled the galleries at Gagosian, all but three in color, and one with a blank ground because its original plant was fake, mounted in stunning, thick mahogany frames inset with labels that flatly describe the political gathering at which the bouquet initially appeared. (The exhibition's catalogue features some uncanny source pictures—a palm frond just visible behind the head of Fidel Castro; a plastic bamboo tree in the corner of a Transnistrean-railroad agreement—indicating Simon's sharp eye for history's punctum.) And there were twelve plinth sculptures that hold paper stacked

or myth, we have an overlooked detail—the decorative touch that someone thought to include to bring some elegance (or control) to often fraught proceedings. Bunches of carnations, lilies, and tea roses, sprays of gladiolus and asparagus fern and cymbidium, take on the central, pyramidal form found in history painting's compositions, swapping one of the lowest genres—the still life—for the most exalted. In its feminized symbolism, the flower, as the forgotten arm candy, the mute witness, points to history's gender imbalance, too.

The best artists make us see things differently, even—or especially—if that thing is just a still life. We wouldn't typically spend a long time on kitschy arrangements. But Simon brings us in close to the photograph's surface to read the discursive paragraphs embedded within its frame. It's almost as if we are leaning in to smell the flowers, but instead catch history's dizzying fumes.

—Prudence Peiffer

Taryn Simon, *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia*, Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014, 2015, ink-jet print and text on paper in mahogany frame, 85 × 73¼ × 2¾". From the series "Paperwork and the Will of Capital," 2015.

like endless records, the top sheets showing more agreements and dried specimens from the depicted arrangements.

Lit and staged like a luxury advertisement with lots of blank space, the photographs absorb their context into brilliantly flat tones. The flowers demonstrate a Western classification system and global sourcing—a snapshot in miniature of world commerce—that acknowledges modern capitalism's origins with the Dutch flower trade and tulip speculation in the seventeenth century, up through the genetic modifications that keep blooms fresher for our consumption.

Simon's photographs have the scale and context of history painting, but not its heroic subject. Instead of a figure in an epic battle

