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Taryn Simon at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow

Arielle Bier



Installation view of Taryn Simon's "Action Research / The Stagecraft of Power" at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. (© Garage Museum of Contemporary Art)

Moscow

Taryn Simon

Garage Museum // Through May 22

This exhibition brings together two recent bodies of taxonomic work by New York-based Simon—"Paperwork, and the Will of Capital" (2015) and "Black Square" (2006–ongoing)—each comprising a series of photographs and a single accompanying sculpture. As an artist, Simon prides herself on her ability to catalogue sociopolitical issues generally hidden from view or inaccessible to the general public with staged photographs of carefully identified subjects. In this case, she offers an aesthetic puzzle of the history of contemporary capitalism and cold war politics, presented in the shadows of nuclear annihilation.

The images in "Paperwork, and the Will of Capital" are interpretations of archival photos that document meetings of government officials or economic leaders when significant contracts, treaties, and agreements were signed—affiliates of the 1944 Bretton Woods conference, which laid the groundwork for economic globalization. Simon's versions are large-format, color or black-and-white photographs of the flower arrangements that bore witness to these meetings, referred to here as castrated symbols of formality and status. The flowers are set against two-

toned backgrounds, distilled from the qualities of the original photographs. For example, a sampling of desert succulents lying upon a nut-brown surface against a flat, pale-gray background represents the 1981 conference at which President Ronald Reagan authorized training Afghan “freedom fighters” (mujahedeen) to counter Soviet power in the region. Painstakingly specific decisions, from the sourcing of the flowers at a Dutch flower auction, birthplace of the Dutch East India Company—hence, capitalism—to the massive mahogany frames, which resemble boardroom furniture, create an airtight structural logic based on man’s determinism. The sculpture *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, 2015, which classifies the flowers as dried specimens on herbarium paper, further archives and materializes evidence of each event, with a likeness to 19th-century horticultural experiments in survival and evolution.

“Black Square” is an open-ended project that looks forward a millennium, but first back a century at Kasimir Malevich’s painting *Black Square*, 1915. For the series, Simon has sought subjects to photograph against a black background, depicting inventions and disruptive marks in history. Combined, the images form a time capsule full of contradictions about contemporary society, among them a human-skin wallet; the “Picturephone”; a 3-D-printed handgun; an artificial heart; and a portrait of Henry Kissinger—chosen as an impenetrable object, a human encasing of data. *Black Square XVII* is the exception. It’s a sculpture built in collaboration with Russia’s State Atomic Energy Corporation from irradiated material that will vitrify into solid black glass and deactivate over the course of 1,000 years and then, in 3015, be embedded into the museum wall. Whereas Malevich’s *Black Square* was a radical gesture marking the end of history with absolute nothingness, Simon’s is a material message to the future made from the ultimate lethal weapon of our times—a sobering reminder that man’s ultimate creation is also one of final destruction.