

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

Taryn Simon at Gagosian, New York
Through March 26

Kim Levin



Taryn Simon, 'Paperwork and the Will of Capital,' 2016, installation view, at Gagosian.
ROBERT MCKEEVER/©TARYN SIMON/COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Last summer, Taryn Simon unveiled *Black Square XVII* at the inauguration of Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. But Simon's *Black Square*, a cube of vitrified nuclear waste in the dimensions of Malevich's *Black Square*, wasn't there. It was at Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation, where it will remain, encased in steel and concrete, until May 21, 3015, when its radioactivity diminishes to a safe level. A cubic void in the wall of Garage awaits its arrival 999 years from now. Simon considers it "a letter to a distant future." Her multilayered art, while planted firmly in the present, deals with inaccessible infrastructures, secret sites, and the precariousness of temporality. She is, one might say, concerned with the half-lives of objects, facts, and fictions.

Here, in "Paperwork and the Will of Capital," Simon investigates "the stagecraft of political and economic power." Inspired by a photograph of Mussolini and Hitler flanking a floral centerpiece at the Munich conference, the artist started thinking about the flower arrangements as witnesses to the purported "masters of the universe trying to control the evolution of the world."

Based on archival photographs of the signatories of international accords and treaties, with their obligatory iconic centerpieces, this research-driven work refers to the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference in Bretton Woods in 1944, which established the IMF and the World Bank, and also to George Sinclair's 19th-century horticultural study, which influenced Darwin. After a botanist identified the individual flowers in the "impossible bouquets," Simon imported

4,000 specimens from the Netherlands in order to re-create 36 floral arrangements from various agreements. These vivid, airless, large-scale photographs, encased in heavy mahogany frames, have text inserts that name names, treaties, purposes, and violations. The dozen plinth sculptures (included in the 2015 Venice Biennale)—with stylized flower presses and pressed flowers—are their fragile opposites. There is a funereal aura about the installation.

The agreements speak to our globalized economy: George Bush signing the Patriot Act opens the exhibition. An agreement between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez details an exchange of technological know-how for petroleum. Sudan and Ethiopia divide water rights to the Nile; DeBeers secures dominance of the diamond trade; China and Pakistan share satellites; Transnistria and Moldova declare freight railway protocol. A few, like the Bratislavan declaration of 1968, signed shortly before the Soviets violated it to invade Czechoslovakia, are historic. Others hint at flashpoints in places such as Ukraine, Kuwait, or Libya. Read between the lines, and the workings of our global economy expand ominously. Only one thing is missing from this exhibition: the archival news photos. It would be nice to see the men who signed the treaties, as well as the actual bouquets—if only to compare archival pretense and manufactured fantasy with the spent and reprocessed manipulations of capital that led to our global predicament.