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**Stolen moments: Taryn Simon on customs, counterfeits and the Russian media**

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*Installation view of 'Taryn Simon: Portraits and Surrogates' at Gagosian in Hong Kong*

‘It is the first time these works have ever been in conversation together so the show has a very specific conceptual intent in calling them portraits and surrogates,’ says the New York-based artist Taryn Simon, on her first solo exhibition in Hong Kong at the Gagosian.

With *Contraband* (2010), she presents a selection of images from her photographic archive of 1,075 items confiscated by US customs and postal service officials. Simon lived at the airport for an entire week photographing an eclectic array of items. From counterfeit handbags and dead animals, to intricately wrapped food items and pirate videos, the resulting images are a reflection on how people at the border are defined by their objects.

‘Counterfeit goods were the battlefield of immigration services at that time,’ Simon says. ‘You’d expect more dangerous items but it was an economic battle then.’

The artist is best known for her photography paired with text, as seen in her *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* (2015) series. Here, she worked with a botanist to meticulously reproduce the formal floral arrangements showcased at the signing of several important international agreements, accords and treaties.

The monumental photographs, accompanied by text about the treaty signing, are presented in mahogany picture frames that Simon says forms an integral part of the artwork. ‘Some of these flowers convey a certain public ceremony, but the aesthetics are completely different to what the texts are about,’ she explains. ‘For me, it is about that disruption of presumption and judgement and perception.’

The artist’s video self-portrait – made in collaboration with a Russian news programme – is the undisputed highlight of the exhibition. It shows how at the close of a video interview on Russia Prime Time, the artist was asked to sit silently and stare at the two newscasters for several minutes so that the extra footage could be used in the editing process. ‘It is about the ways in which you perform in what, at the end, looks natural but is really very awkward,’ Simon says.

Simon usually works on one project at a time – sometimes for several years carrying out painstaking research – without any idea of what the next project will be. ‘Each project is not a building block but almost a rejection. It is like the person who made that project is dead and there is a new author,’ she offers.

‘In my mind there are radical shifts that come from an exhaustion from the former project. There is a jump to a completely new construction of work.’ Good news indeed.