

GAGOSIAN

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A Thousand Words, a Million Times Over

The New York Public Library's Picture Collection, an archive of more than a million printed images that Andy Warhol used as a proto-Pinterest, is celebrated in a new book and Gagosian exhibition by the artist Taryn Simon.

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Taryn Simon and Arnold Hinton Illustration by João Fazenda

The majestic renovation of the New York Public Library's Mid-Manhattan branch, now known as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library—new atrium, new children's room, new roof deck, new name—also resulted in a homecoming of one of the N.Y.P.L.'s underknown marvels. That marvel, the Picture Collection, is an archive of more than a million loose, printed images, organized in folders alphabetized from Abacus to Zoology, which are available for visitors—immigrants, historians, illustrators, set designers, and beyond—to sift through and check out, like books. For many years, beginning in 1915, the collection was in Room 100 of the Fifth Avenue research library; now, after decades at Mid-Manhattan, it's there again. On a recent Wednesday, the head of the library's art division, Joshua Chuang, met up there with the photographer Arnold Hinton and the artist Taryn Simon. Simon researched the Picture Collection for nine years; in the course of that, she met Hinton, who worked at the library in the fifties and sixties. Hinton, eighty-one, wore a shirt with a print of bright-yellow lemons and leaned on a wheeled walker. He looked around with a keen expression. "This area held where we worked: tearing, cutting, snipping, putting the pictures in folders," he said. "There were gray bins about this high. People were supposed to take things out and work at a sitting area. But most people, including Andy Warhol, would just stand at the bins and pick what they wanted."

Of all the famous artists who used the Picture Collection in the twentieth century—Diego Rivera, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Joseph Cornell, Art Spiegelman—Warhol is perhaps the most notorious. “People would steal things,” Hinton said. “Andy Warhol would take the pictures and not return them.” Warhol was a regular. “I guess the biggest thing that I remember of Andy Warhol was handing him stuff,” Hinton went on. “And Romana, she always thought he was a joke.” Romana Javitz was the collection’s influential longtime curator. “People say, ‘Well, what did you think of him?’ We were both young, and I was too busy thinking about myself as opposed to whoever he was. He was just this thin guy with blond hair, is basically what he was.”

Simon, a lifelong New Yorker, was fascinated by the Picture Collection as a child, and her art often focusses on systems of organization; her new book, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Collection,” and its accompanying exhibitions at Gagosian and the N.Y.P.L., revel in the collection’s intricacies and history, as well as in Javitz’s outsized role in distinguishing it. (Simon is making a short film about Javitz.) Holding Simon’s book, Chuang turned to photographs that Simon took at the Warhol Museum archives: collages that Warhol made from ads for Dr. Scholl’s, Coca-Cola, and Campbell’s soup. “You see, there’s a stamp here that says ‘New York Public Library Picture Collection,’ ” Chuang said.

“They correspond to the paintings, and the dates line up,” Simon said. She was double-masked (“I have kids”) and wore a green pinafore dress over a green shirt. “There’s a painting called ‘Dr. Scholl’s Corns’ that is directly from this.”

“You’re also looking at this layer of interpretation,” Chuang said. He flipped through a folder. “I love this: classified as ‘Accident.’ Here’s a horse accident. Here’s a candlestick accident.” Librarians noted patrons’ requests. “People were asking for things that you’d never thought about: ‘Milking a cow without a stool,’ or whatever,” Hinton said. In a handwritten logbook dated 1917-25, many requests had been fulfilled (“airships,” “telegraph,” “harvest”); some hadn’t (“Hop o’ my thumb,” “bootblack in the act,” “Alex the Gt. cutting the Gordian knot”).

On the third floor, in the elegant Prints and Photography Study Room, the three sat at a polished table and looked through valuable prints—Evans, Lange, Weegee, Brassai—that were eventually culled from the circulating-images collection. “They were afraid of someone like Andy Warhol checking them out,” Chuang said. He opened a box. “So, Arnold, the way we found you was through this box,” he said. “Do you recognize this?” He handed him a photograph of a double-Dutch scene in Harlem in 1963, featuring a man jumping rope in a suit.

“Wow,” Hinton said, peering at it.

“That’s what I said,” Chuang said. “ ‘Wow! Who is this Arnold Hinton?’ ” Hinton, who grew up in Harlem, studied at the Pratt Institute and the New School, with Lisette Model; he found success as a photographer after leaving the library, with Javitz’s encouragement. “A lot of my photographs are done from waist high,” Hinton said. “I don’t look in the camera. Lisette would always ask me, ‘How did you do that?’ A lot of it dealt with being in environments where it was physically harmful, or in a country where I was the only one that looked like I looked.” Hinton is Black. “I have had guns put to my head, film taken, been locked up for being a photographer,” he said. They passed around more early-sixties Hinton: “Black & white spectators,” “Girl skipping manhole,” “2 Black nationalists.” “That young lady was with Muhammad Ali at a Black Muslim rally, and I photographed her,” Hinton said. Then: a double take. “Jesus,” he said. It was a closeup portrait of a woman in Mexico, from 1963. “I have been looking for this,” he said. “This

is the photograph that Romana saw that made her realize that I was a photographer.” How his work ended up in the Picture Collection, he didn’t know.