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PETALS TO THE METAL

At first, artist Taryn Simon's flower-centric show at Gagosian beguiles its audience. But she's tracking a scent that is far from sweet.

BY TED LOOS

Artist Taryn Simon's latest exhibition at Gagosian Gallery's 24th Street space in New York is called "Paperwork and the Will of Capital." You'd be forgiven for thinking that sounds like a graduate seminar at Berkeley.

In fact, it is a show composed of flower art—bouquets that are photographed, then dried, pressed and lovingly sewn onto fancy paper—and much of it is drop-dead gorgeous.

Simon is bookish and brainy and the show, on view until March 26, is a classic one-two punch from this artist. She draws you in with beauty, then pulls out the rug from under you by revealing the inner workings of a world that seems mighty complicated and even sinister at times.

"I'm kind of trying to create a mind-scramble," says Simon, 41, with relative cheer over a cup of split-pea soup at her local Greenwich Village cafe. She is working through the fatigue that comes with having recently had the second of two children with her husband, the filmmaker Jake Paltrow.

For someone so young, Simon has a surprisingly long-standing relationship with Gagosian Gallery, dating back to 2003. But she largely avoids art world gamesmanship, preferring to spend her time digesting massive amounts of information and then turning it into dense layers of artistic production.

"Paperwork and the Will of Capital" takes as its subject and inspiration a series of contracts, agreements, treaties and decrees between nations from 1968 to the present day. Simon has that artist's ability to see what no one else does, a kind of aesthetic peripheral vision. In the elaborate photographic documentation of these agreements—notably filled with men, not women—she noticed that in each image, there's an elaborate and stunning bouquet of flowers between the signers.

Simon got a botanist to identify all the flowers, ordered them up herself (some 4,000 specimens) and re-created the arrangements in her studio. Simon's flowers were all sourced from Amsterdam's Aalsmeer Flower Auction, the world's largest flower market and the hub for the international trade. "It's the Amazon of flower markets," says Simon. "You can get anything at any time. Instant gratification. No matter where the flowers are grown, they come through there."

The show consists of 36 arresting, seven-by-six-foot photographs of the arrangements, styled with strikingly colored backgrounds relating to the scene in the historical photographs. "The work is about global politics, economy and the power invested in this paperwork," she says. "The contracts all have an economic foundation, even if it's a nuclear deal."

The photographs surround 12 sculptures, Simon's version of flower presses. They are dark concrete columns bound by metal straps. Some

are closed and menacing-looking, while others are open so the viewer can see what's inside each: pressed flowers sewn to herbarium paper, next to mounted photos of the flowers and provocative texts by Simon. "The work is about the hidden and what's revealed," she says.

Every one of the sculptures contains all of the contracts she references. "They are pressing all 36 agreements in a race against time," she says. "What's going to last? The artificial and constructed, versus the real?" She notes that dried flowers have been found in Egyptian tombs that are thousands of years old.

Simon grew up in the New York area, in the City and on Long Island. "My father and my grandfather were both obsessive collectors," she says. "I grew up around packrats—there were books, jars, spoons, photographs."

Her hobbyist father took photographs and her grandfather made his own telescopes for fun, so it's not too hard to see the wellspring of Simon's impulse to document, classify and order the world. "I only sort of came to acknowledge that as the root of all this—I never accepted it, but it's so obvious," she says, laughing.

Simon attended Brown, graduating in 1997, but her artistic education also took place at the nearby Rhode Island School of Design, where she took classes throughout college. She worked in many jobs when she was starting out, including assisting various photographers and also shooting photographs for *The New York Times Magazine*.

While working there, she applied for a Guggenheim grant for an independent project that would become her debut in the art world, *The Innocents* (2002). "I got the grant," she says. "It changed my life." It funded the project, including a two-year, on-and-off, cross-country road trip that she and two friends took to film and photograph the lives of people wrongly convicted of crimes, largely the result of a witness or victim misidentifying a photo.

From the start, she was questioning the inherent truth of images. "A photograph could lead, through a series of steps, to someone losing their life," she says.

These days she works with just two assistants in her Flatiron studio—she's hands-on in the extreme. Simon's next big project is a fall performance piece at the Park Avenue Armory, details of which are still hush-hush.

You can be sure, however, that it will seduce and then unsettle its viewers, since that dynamic is the underpinning of Simon's art. "I spend a lot of time on the seductive, formal qualities," she says. "But it's schizophrenic, because I am simultaneously thinking about reason and mathematics. For it to function for me, I need them to collide."

*Bratislava Declaration, Bratislava,
Slovakia, August 3, 1968, 2015*



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