

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Banned goods at JFK Airport shed light on American desires

By **Helena de Moura**, CNN

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(CNN) -- There were containers filled with Botox-making ingredients, fake Louis Vuitton handbags and dead guinea pigs. There were animal parts, cigars and steroids. Viagra from China and GBL, the date-rape drug, freshly arrived from Europe.

This is a glimpse into the underworld of illicit commodities trying to get through federal inspection sites at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, the busiest international air passenger gateway to the United States.

And it was at JFK that Taryn Simon, an internationally renowned photographer, spent five days and nights in 2009 sleeping on an air mattress, documenting this ordinary deluge of bizarre goods into a major port of cargo and passenger entry into the U.S., an Ellis Island of sorts for illegal commodities.

"Myself and my team got very little sleep under the blinding fluorescent lights. It was torturous. I could barely stand on the last day," said Simon.

Before she set up camp on the weathered floors in one of the airport's busiest terminals, Simon spent several months explaining to airport authorities what her project was about.

"There was a long period of letter writing and many phone calls behind my stay at JFK," said Simon. "The difficulty was that I was requesting a lengthy shoot -- five continuous days, on 24-hour rotations," she said.

The result is "Contraband," a 1075-photographic series that will be exhibited in New York and Beverly Hills, California. A 500-page book with the same title is coming out soon.

Simon says cataloguing what is banned and unseen is a way to understand American identity through what we are allowed to consume and what we are not. "You confront American desire through the endless counterfeit goods that traffic through customs, said Simon.

"There's a numbing repetition to its mainstays -- Louis Vuitton bags, Nike sneakers, counterfeit gold, counterfeit Viagra, illegal steroids. The photographs collectively build a portrait of escape and consumerism while revealing a new world of black market production that threatens American business interests," she said.

Simon, whose works are on display in several major galleries around the world, has become known for her take on the photographer's ability not just to portray reality, but also to own it.

"I've always been interested in photography's ability to catalog but in this, I was most intrigued by photography's ability to transcend the law and physical boundaries, said Simon.

"These prohibited, counterfeit and illegal items were denied entry into the United States by customs, but the photographs of these items could enter and multiply," she said.

"Contraband" will go on display September 22 at the [Gagosian Gallery](#) in Beverly Hills, California.