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Taryn Simon's 'A Living Man Declared Dead' at MOCA maps order, mess

Distinct histories unfold in Taryn Simon's 'A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII' at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary.

By Jori Finkel



Taryn Simon's show is entitled "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII." (Jay L. Clendenin, Los Angeles Times / November 14, 2012)

New York artist Taryn Simon was a year or two into what became a four-year photography-anthropology project before she realized that the project's blind spots might be the most interesting thing about it.

For each "chapter" of "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII," Simon chose a person from a particular ethnic, political or religious group and tried to photograph all of the person's living ancestors and descendants.

"I was interested in making a catalog that is already determined, where I have no curating or editing power, where I'm not making the decisions," she said on a recent visit to MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, where the series runs through Jan. 7.

In this way it resembles her acclaimed 2009 series, made by photographing contraband seized at John F. Kennedy airport — in essence letting customs agents curate the selection of objects from animal parts to counterfeit Viagra.

Only this time, with families as her subjects, she kept encountering obstacles, even with the help of her sister Shannon as a researcher-producer in New York and a full-time assistant.

There was the relative who could not be found, or the mother who did not want her son to be photographed. Or, for the chapter on Hans Frank, the Nazi lawyer executed in 1946 for war crimes, several descendants declined to participate.

"In the beginning I thought if anyone was missing, it was a failure and I couldn't use it," Simon said. "It was only through butting up against resistance again and again that I realized those were the most interesting engagements I was having, and I started figuring out a way to incorporate those rejections in this work."

"Now," she added, "I think some of the absences are more important than the presences."

For the Frank chapter, she photographed clothes as stand-ins for some camera-shy descendants. For a chapter on Bosnian Muslims killed in the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, she violated her own rule of not including references to anyone deceased and showed some teeth and bone remains.

She did a chapter on rabbits that reflects their population explosion in Australia, upsetting the expectation that she must document people. She did another within the Druze sect in Lebanon on reincarnation, which turns a typical family tree into what she calls "a surreal math equation" by which one man "is both his father's son and his father's father."

These messy particulars of family history emerge from what, at first glance, looks like an orderly scientific display. Each chapter gets the same treatment: a grid of portraits at left, a slim text panel in the center that begins to describe the bloodline and its significance, and a scrapbook-style set of related images at right. They represent three different, perhaps even competing, ways of accumulating and communicating knowledge about the world.

Simon, 37, said this multi-channel way of working — collecting both data and images — feels natural for her. Raised in New York, she used to join her grandfather, an amateur telescope builder, on nature expeditions, taking photographs of plants and minerals as well as gathering facts. When she studied at Brown University, she started off in environmental science before turning to semiotics.

She said she has never formally studied genetics but is fascinated by the issues it raises. It offers "this order we accept as an absolute," she said. "But with modern technology and artificial wombs and learning that people across the world are connected to each other genetically, that order breaks down. It becomes a bit of a mind scramble."

The series, also published in book form, has already been shown at the New National Gallery of Berlin and the Tate Modern in London, with a smaller selection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. MOCA has all but two chapters, omitted for space reasons.