

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Birds and Bond in Taryn Simon's Latest Project

In her new exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, "Birds of the West Indies," Simon takes stock of 007's favorite toys – from the Aston Martin to Pussy Galore – alongside stills of all the birds that appear within the films, as a nod to the real James Bond, an American ornithologist



Taryn Simon "A.31 Bibi Dahl (Lynn-Holly Johnson), 1981", Birds of the West Indies, 2013 Gagosian Gallery

A Honda "Tuk Tuk" taxi from 1983 and a "Leg Cast Missile Launcher" from 1995 are some of the inventory of objects, vehicles, and weapons that appear in James Bond films—and now in Taryn Simon's latest body of work, "Birds of the West Indies." Interested in hidden, secret, and little-known narratives, as well as archival materials, Simon's deeply researched artworks have taken her through the vaults of the CIA's art collection and to New York's JFK Airport, where she explored the 1,075 items that were detained or seized from passengers and mail entering the U.S. Now she takes on the story of the real James Bond, an ornithologist whose taxonomic book *Birds of the West Indies* the creator of the fictional Bond, Ian Fleming, owned, prompting him to borrow the name for his iconic character.

Pursuing various, alternative lines of inquiry into her subjects, Simon approaches the Bond franchise like a detective, creating her own taxonomy of the femme-fatales, gadgets, birds, and vehicles that appear in the films—in effect transposing the real Bond's method onto his fictional other—and photographing all those she was granted access to. Simon captures *1984 Aston Martin V8 Volante*, used in a 1987 Bond shoot, and *Golden Gun*, from a 1974 shoot, against

black backgrounds and in studio lighting, reflecting their status as fetish objects while also reading like the components of a forensic investigation. Among the photographs Simon took of female characters in Bond films, Honor Blackman cuts an elegant figure with coiffed hair in a gold lamé shirt, black pencil skirt, and heels, while Denise Richards—one of the younger representatives of the Bond-girl cohort—is unassuming in denim cut-offs and a white tank top. Simon suggests the afterlives of all the numerous elements that make up Bond and, elevating its more marginal narratives, deconstructs and demythologizes a fictional character deeply embedded in the popular imagination. We caught up with Simon to weigh in on her absorbing new body of work, now on view at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills.

Artsy: How did you arrive at the subject of James Bond, the ornithologist and namesake for Ian Fleming's fictional James Bond?

Taryn Simon: I was researching the mechanisms and formulas behind the success of the most globally adored and economically successful film franchise of all time (with adjusted dollars)—James Bond. Focusing on patterns and substitutions in the film's narratives led me to Ian Fleming's writings, which then led me to a taxonomy of birds, titled *Birds of The West Indies*, by an ornithologist named James Bond. This taxonomy was with Fleming during the development of his iconic fictional spy. He used the name for his lead character because he found it to be perfectly plain and appropriate for "a blunt instrument in the hands of the government."

Artsy: What interested you about the little-known narratives of the real Bond and Nikki van der Zyl—the voice for several characters in Bond films?

TS: The heart of the project rests in an effort to look off-center—to look into the background of the background. Both Nikki and the real James Bond inhabit this space. They also both illustrate methods of construction and creation through substitution. Nikki is the voice of several characters, including Ursula Andress, in the films. These lead women are fragmented together like virtual characters or robots; a futuristic form, ahead of their time. Their voices are not their own. And Nikki's voice is associated with a different body. There's a scrambling afoot.

I'm also exhibiting correspondence, awards, and bird study skins from the collection of James Bond the ornithologist. It's almost impossible to read about his hunts, travels, and expenses without thinking it is the fictional James Bond. Reality and fiction collide and open up a space that is neither.

Artsy: What was it like to shoot 65 Bond girls so many years on? Did your subjects have input into how they were presented?

TS: My work often involves accessing difficult subjects. Mistakenly, I assumed this would be easier terrain than usual as I was dealing with performers and props, not government sites or corporations. Yet I met the one thing I couldn't trespass—a form of vanity, I guess. Ten of the 57 women I approached to be part of "Birds of the West Indies" declined to participate. Their reasons included pregnancy, not wanting to distort the memory of their fictional character, and avoiding any further association with the Bond formula. I represent each missing woman by reinserting the black rectangle cut from the mat to frame their would-be portrait, covering and at the same time representing their absence.

Artsy: Your larger practice has often explored the archive, and in “Birds of the West Indies” you create your own taxonomy of birds that appear in James Bond. The process of indexing and cataloguing could be endless and some of your work is conducted over several years—how do you know when you are finished with a particular research project?

TS: This one was finite. The films were watched obsessively in an attempt to capture every speck that passed by the lens. They [the birds] often appear as dust on a negative—a form that has disappeared with the perfection Photoshop allows.

“Birds of the West Indies” is on view at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, through April 12, 2014.