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ARTNEWS

Flower Power: Taryn Simon on Her New Show at Gagosian

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Installation view, "Taryn Simon: Paperwork and the Will of Capital," 2015.
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In 2002, scientists at Johns Hopkins University determined that the average color of the universe is a pale beige, a hue that has since been named Cosmic Latte. This rather benign color also happens to be the foundation on which Taryn Simon builds her color palette, though her work is no less ominous than Kazimir Malevich's monochromatic *Black Square*. "I've always loved that black square," she told me on a recent afternoon in Chelsea, during a break from installing her new show, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital," at Gagosian Gallery. "If you had to think about what the color of the universe would be, it would be black. Beige is the complete antithesis of what you would expect, though it also implies a certain history and record and authenticity." White, on the other hand, is too sanitized, too disposable and flimsy for her purposes. White, she said, is the color "of the trash. The cream is what you keep—it's the color of important paperwork."

Paperwork is the Gagosian show's true concern, although its visibility in the show is limited by metonyms in the forms of 36 flag-like, large-scale photographs of meticulous recreations of flower arrangements present at the signing of some of the most significant political, economic, and social decrees of the 20th century. Surrounded by intimidatingly masculine mahogany panels—a nod to boardroom décor—the centerpieces are displayed amidst a contrasting foreground and background in beiges or muted, complementary secondary colors. For Simon,

who entered Brown University in 1994 with the intention of studying environmental science and matriculated with a degree in semiotics in 1997, the project represents an appropriate synthesis of her artistic origins.

“I entered into [this project] very differently than I have in the past to other works. I felt like I was going the complete opposite direction in object, material, and source,” Simon told me. She was specifically referring to her last project, *Image Atlas*, the visual search engine she created in collaboration with late activist and programmer Aaron Swartz for Rhizome and the New Museum in 2012. This time, Simon retreated from the virtual realm, instead finding inspiration in a book called *Hortus Gramineus Woburnensis; or, An account of the results of experiments on the produce and nutritive qualities of different grasses and other plants used as the food of the more valuable domestic animals*, written by a gardener named George Sinclair and first published in 1816. “I came to [*Paperwork*] from a very aesthetic place,” she said. “[Sinclair] did an experiment on grass for a duke he was working for, and he pasted grass specimens into the pages of this book, which managed to withstand the test of time. It was so beautifully tactile.”

After reading Sinclair’s book, Simon started studying plants and their place in history. In doing so, she came across a Hitler and Mussolini at the Munich Conference. “They were sitting around this bouquet of flowers, and I was just imagining the flowers listening to what was going on in the room,” she said. “I was also thinking about how these men were thinking that they had some sort of influence over the evolution of the world, with nature being this sort of castrated participant in the room.”

To recreate the bouquets, Simon imported over 4,000 flower and plant species from the world’s biggest flower auction in Aalsmeer, Netherlands, contributing her own touch of environmental domination to the project. “It was like a game of Telephone,” she said. “I was using the archival images that were coming from different resources, like presidential libraries and archival image databases like Corbis and Getty and Reuters but also distant Pakistani newspaper archives. Then, of course, I had to use archival books and articles and the actual decrees themselves to construct the texts and garner all of that information as well. There’s this conceptual conceit in it, an acknowledgement of the slipperiness of this process. I don’t believe in 100 percent accuracy.”

All of the countries represented in these memorialized convergences also participated in the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference in New Hampshire, during which 730 delegates from 44 nations met to organize international monetary systems following the end of World War II. “It was this way of allowing capitalism to function globally and yet have margins,” Simon explained. This meeting would lead to the establishment of both the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund, along with other programs that have either failed or have been discontinued. Typical of Simon’s works, wall text plays a huge importance in contextualizing the works; each photo is accompanied by a detailed explanation of the accord it represents.

The majority of her photographs are accompanied by encyclopedic descriptions of calamitous consequences, such as *Agreement to Develop Park Hyatt St. Kitts Under the St. Kitts & Nevis Citizenship by Investment Program*. Many of those that seem benign, like *Gdańsk Agreement*, a 1980 decree which allowed for the formation of Polish trade unions, turn out to have been otherwise. (On the two-year anniversary of the Gdańsk Agreement’s signing, at least seven people were killed by the police during anti-government demonstrations.) “I started thinking about decisive moments as more than just a conversation, like where something is actually

happening and man is saying, 'OK, this is being done,' ” Simon said. “I got to the idea of the signings, but then so many of the signings I selected actually represent failures—things that were decided and then completely negated or forgotten fifteen years later, or led to some other horrible thing.”

Although her photographic installations often center around politically charged topics—2002’s *The Innocents*, for instance, depicted men wrongfully accused of crimes—Simon in no way considers herself an activist. “I always think of what I do as existing in this very amorphous zone that’s involved in so many different domains, but it’s not meant to make something happen,” she told me. “It’s usually just about a certain chaos, a certain unspeakable noise and then finding a way to somehow, through a work, create the experience of that noise, I guess. Discomfort, or the lack of an answer—something like that just keeps folding in on itself again and again and again in my work. I think of activism as being more like, ‘Do this! Do that!’ ” She pounded her fist in her palm for emphasis.

“I don’t like saying I don’t know why I do these things because I dedicate so much damn time to it, but it’s something that just controls me.” Simon shrugged, laughing. “But I don’t think I ever have ‘fun’ while making these things; my process is really stressful. I have moments of genuine satisfaction, but they’re quickly erased by the next wave of complexities. It’s a real labor.”

Besides the photos and their surrounding wood panels, which Simon considers a medium in themselves, the show also features twelve sculptures, the product of Simon’s first foray into the medium. Slightly less than four feet tall, the black tomb-like capsules contain dried flower specimens laid opposite their documentation, so as to decay together. “The show has lots of different mediums in it,” Simon told me. “I’m not married to photography. My next work is going to be a performance. At this point, I really feel like I’m using photography as a machine. Here it was about reproducing these color fields and using a medium of mass distribution. The idea of the impossible bouquet only previously existed in painting, but now it’s possible in reality. Reality and photography are bound to each other. It just went along with the idea best. I think of photography much more conceptually.”

Simon credits her father, also a photographer and data collector, for cultivating her magpie tendencies toward documentation, perhaps most in evidence in her 2008 exhibition “An American Index Of The Hidden and Unfamiliar,” for which she photographed things that most often remain out of sight and out of mind—an inbred white tiger, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection contraband room, a nuclear waste storage facility, a cryopreservation unit, a research marijuana crop grow room. “He was a conspiracy theorist,” she said. “Everything was a conspiracy, from my bowl of cereal to the names of streets. To him, being paranoid often just meant knowing the facts. So I never really made the decision to become an artist in any sort of calculated way. To be honest, I didn’t even know about the art world when I started out. It just wasn’t a thought to me.”

I asked her if, in the process of collecting data, she’s observed any recurring patterns in human nature. She sighed.

“I think, sadly, that the only thing I’ve learned is the exhaustion of having to constantly second-guess and continually revisit what you think are reliable certainties. There’s always going to be a certain lack of trust, I guess.” She perked up a bit. “But I need that, the anxiety and chaos. That’s the part of my work that keeps it continuing to turn.”