

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Fleurs du mal: how artist Taryn Simon constructs political bouquets

Known for her ability to evoke symbolism of mundane objects, Simon's staged, emotionless photos of floral arrangements lay bare the politics within the petals

Thessaly La Force



Taryn Simon: 'A rose is so robust, it can survive practically anywhere. Our desire associated with it is linked and encouraged by market intentions.' Photograph: Taryn Simon/Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

At New York City's Gagosian gallery on Thursday afternoon, Taryn Simon has just finished installing her new show Paperwork and the Will of Capital, an exhibition of 36 large-scale photographs of floral bouquets, alongside a dozen sculptures of concrete plinths with flower pressings. On until 26 March, the show is Simon's American debut of the completed work. (She showed the pressed flowers and plinths at the Venice Biennale's Arsenale last June.)

Simon is much loved in the New York art world, both for the gravitas of her work, which is excerpted in magazines such as Vogue and the New Yorker, but also for the glamorous figure she cuts. Later that evening, the gallery was packed with the artist's high-profile friends – Bono, Wes Anderson, Marina Abramović.

Though Simon's work is highly conceptual and often quite humorless, it is also strangely relatable. As an artist, she possesses the uncanny ability to catalogue the mundane objects and scenes of our lives while gently pointing to the fraught nature of what they symbolize politically.

In her latest exhibit, she has turned eye to flowers.

For the last three years, Simon has immersed herself in the literature surrounding flowers, beginning with the work of George Sinclair, a British imperial gardener of the 19th century. The flower as a symbolic entity intrigued her – its feminine associations of beauty, as well as its visual and tactile qualities. But it was, as with much of Simon's work, the more political element dominated her fixation.

The more Simon looked, the more she saw how with every major accord, treaty, contract, decree or agreement – where world leaders and corporations met in a room together to have their picture taken – there existed a flower arrangement made to accompany this historic event. One floral arrangement in an expressionless photo of Hitler, Mussolini and Chamberlain, taken at the 1938 Munich conference, first caught her attention. Simon says the banality of the gathering just seemed perfectly encapsulated in the flowers, which was in a shallow bowl in the middle of a coffee table.

Working with a botanist, Simon began to piece together the floral components of arrangements – from the roughly arranged palm fronds made for a 2000 agreement between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, to the pile of pink lilies present the day a Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons treaty was signed between Russia, Ukraine, the US and the UK in 1994. She sourced her bouquets from the famous Aalsmeer Flower Auction in the Netherlands, where 20m flowers are sold each week.

“I’m now so aware of the modifications flowers have undergone,” says Simon.

“If you go to the bodega, you’ll see how a flower has had its stamen and ovaries are removed so it can survive longer. Also, you learn about the slow elimination of certain flowers from the global market because of their fragility. Or conversely, how rose is so robust, it can survive practically anywhere. Our desire associated with it is linked and encouraged by market intentions.”

The resulting photographs are flat and devoid of sentiment. They express nothing, which is her point. Simon’s photographs are artfully staged, well-lit productions. Her work has never been interested in what spontaneity or emotion the lens can capture.

To her, the power of the photograph is in understanding how quickly an image can convey information, but also of how simple it is for our eyes to be deceived.

Her earliest work, *The Innocents* (2002), was a collection of portraits of men who had been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned. In each, the subject is placed within a setting that contextualizes this event in his life, be it a bar where he had an alibi or the scene of the crime. They are cold and unsentimental, the images don’t evoke the kind of empathy one might expect to feel when confronted with such injustice. These men don’t look guilty, but neither do they appear innocent. This, however, is exactly Simon’s point: the criminal justice system uses photography to manipulate our perception. Here, she won’t.

And yet, despite such impersonal aesthetic outcomes, Simon’s own boundaries and constraints create work that is unique to her – history, after all, is narrative, too. Her reinterpretation of the significance of these flower arrangements is partly why they are so compelling: this is her act of revision.

“Everyone at my studio kept laughing at me,” Simon admits. “For years, I’ve just been looking at all those photos as though those things are listening. A photo eliminates sounds, and so many other elements, so we are forced to imagine. And I am imagining it representing a certain innocence and purity.”