

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE

Taryn Simon on Her Alluring New Show at Gagosian

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*Taryn Simon. Photo: Rineke Dijkstra*

Flowers have long served as vehicles for secret messages, signaling—in art or real life—everything from innocence and faithfulness to erotic availability. Once faded and pressed between the pages of a book, they call to mind not only the lost hour of their freshness, but also the flight of time and the inevitable elisions of memory.

Such sentimental considerations are given a global political perspective in Taryn Simon’s “Paperwork and the Will of Capital”—an exhibition of 36 large-scale, lusciously colored photographs of elaborate floral arrangements, accompanied by a dozen sculptures incorporating pressed flowers—which opens at Gagosian’s West 24th Street gallery on February 18.

Simon is perhaps the preeminent conceptual photographer of her generation, one who not only takes pictures but also addresses the role of images in shaping personal and political history. Now married to director and screenwriter Jake Paltrow, and the mother of two young children, Simon first made a name for herself with “The Innocents” (2002), a project for which she traveled the country, finding people who had served time in prison for crimes they never committed, and photographing them in locations related to the crime or their arrest. Most of the wrongful convictions hinged on mistaken identifications, often arising from photographs. Since then, the artist has applied her eye and research skills to such subjects as the hidden recesses of

power in American life, and objects detained or confiscated from airplane passengers as contraband.

The bouquets in her new series are based on floral displays present at the formal signings of dozens of agreements between nations and other dominions. They are part of the “stagecraft of power,” as Simon describes it—silent witnesses to the unfolding of world events. Using archival sources, Simon worked with a botanist to identify the various species in each bouquet. After ordering some 4,000 blooms from Aalsmeer, in the Netherlands (“the Amazon.com of flowers,” she says), she re-created and photographed them, surrounding the resulting images with heavy mahogany frames reminiscent of boardroom furniture. The flowers themselves were then dried, flattened, sewn into herbarium paper, and placed in columnar concrete presses that Simon designed.

The results are both visually alluring and teasingly philosophical, combining the sensual delights of a painted still life by Chardin or Fantin-Latour with the sharp bite of a photo-and-text essay by that avatar of ’70s political art, Hans Haacke.

“I only wanted ‘impossible bouquets,’” says the artist, now 40 and unnervingly beautiful, as assistants in her busy Chelsea studio were helping prepare both the Gagosian show (which will travel to Moscow’s Garage Museum in March) and an as-yet-unnamed performance piece to debut at the Park Avenue Armory in September. She was referring to a luxurious genre of 17th-century Dutch still life painting, which represented on a single canvas flowers that could never be grown in the same place and season. Those earlier “impossible bouquets” had this much in common with Simon’s—both referred to a fantasy, whether in art or in politics. Because all the accords Simon chose to focus on proved illusory or problematic for the future.

When President Ronald Reagan sat down with mujahideen to reauthorize covert funding for the Afghan insurgency in 1983, for example, desert blossoms, such as dwarf aloe and kalanchoe, graced the table. (A young Saudi named Osama bin Laden, we learn from Simon’s caption, later joined the rebels, galvanizing Arab support.) In 1968, over white carnations, representatives of the Czechoslovakian government signed the Bratislava Declaration with the Soviet Union, “reaffirming their commitment to Marxist-Leninism”—but the Soviet army invaded Czechoslovakia less than three weeks later, crushing democratic reform there. And so on.

“I was interested in the idea of these men who feel they can control the evolution of the world through their language and assertions, and the flimsy paperwork that they are about to sign,” Simon explains. “And nature is just this castrated, decorative thing that sits between them.”

Simon takes the long view. “It’s a race against time,” she says. “What is going to last as a record? Will the English language itself survive? We know that flowers have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs from thousands of years ago. So I’m putting those two realities up against each other and wondering which one will endure.”