

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# MOUSSE

### TARYN SIMON: PAPERWORK AND THE WILL OF CAPITAL

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Taryn Simon interviewed  
by Eva Fabbris

**Eva Fabbris:** “The Innocents”, a series from 2002, documents the stories of individuals who served time in prison for violent crimes they did not commit. You photographed these men at sites that had particular significance to their illegitimate conviction: the scene of arrest, the scene of the crime, and so on. Was your intention to create a display of counterevidence?

**Taryn Simon:** My goal at the time was to photograph the innocents at the scene of the crime—a site to which they’d never been but that changed their life forever. It was about highlighting the complex relationship between truth and fiction in their narratives and also in photography itself.

**EF:** For the series “A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII” (2008–11) you spent four years researching different bloodlines and the stories behind them. How did you select the subjects you documented in this work?

**TS:** Each bloodline functions as an archetypal episode—something that felt as if it was from a distant past and a distant future at the same time. I was focused on repetition, codes, and patterns in the chaotic narratives that make up our lives and trying to imagine a mathematics in it all.

**EF:** “The Pictures Collection” (2012) concerns an investigation into the various factors that shape and determine the organization of the New York Public Library’s vast image archive. What were your impressions about the methodologies you explored in such an incredible collection?

**TS:** The New York Public Library picture archive is, in many ways, the precursor to all of the image applications that surround us: Instagram, Google Search, Pinterest, et cetera. It shows a human impulse to archive but also the arbitrary nature of the systems by which we do so. These systems, which appear neutral, are steeped in cultural implications that become clear in simply looking at how one image ends up in the “blue” folder versus “swimming pools”.

**EF:** Can you give your own definition of “taxonomy”?

**TS:** The pockets we elect to slip things into.

**EF:** The photographs you create often rely on preexisting images or iconographical traditions. In your works in the exhibition “Paperwork and the Will of Capital”, you refer to archival sources and to the tradition of still life. How do you relate to the existing imagery in your practice?

**TS:** I was fascinated by the concept of the “impossible bouquet” in seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting, a concept that emerged alongside the development of modern capitalism. These were paintings of floral combinations that could never have bloomed in the same place at the same time due to seasonal and geographical limitations. What was then a fantasy is now a reality, due to the global flower market that services consumer desires irrespective of natural limitations.

The existing imagery is all data. For the photographs, I distilled the imagery down to its aesthetic elements: the color fields of the background and the surfaces upon which agreements were signed. And then a record from which another record was generated—neither of which is the real one.

**EF:** Can you describe the realization process for both the photographs and the sculptures?

**TS:** After identifying all the various flowers in my selected archival source images with a botanist, I imported them from Aalsmeer, the world’s largest flower market, in the Netherlands. With a florist I reconstructed the original floral arrangements, then photographed them against their respective backdrops in my studio. I designed the mahogany framing to emulate the aesthetics of boardroom bureaucracy.

The sculptures are based on plant presses. They are fabricated from pigmented concrete, pressing the thirty-six agreements, treaties, and decrees against each other. I was imagining their closed form as a cacophony of economically motivated controls on the fates of governments and citizenry. Inside the press the English language and photographs press up against their actual subject in a race against time. We know herbarium specimens have survived for thousands of years in Egyptian tombs. Who knows how long the English language or human documentation of history (photography, film) will survive?

With the wall works I was thinking about bombast, flag making, transparent color fields. The shadow play is in the “impossible bouquets” themselves.

**EF:** What about the perishable natural life cycle of the flowers? Does this work relate to any form of aspiration to eternity?

**TS:** A photograph removes its subject from time’s continuum. It preserves the moment of ceremony and vitality. Given that many of these works reveal broken promises and reversals, the herbarium specimens highlight the turning and tarnishing of the real, after the stagecraft of power. They reveal the precarious nature of survival.





Top: Taryn Simon, *Agreement to develop Park Hyatt St. Kitts under the St. Kitts & Nevis Citizenship by Investment Program*. Dubai, United Arab Emirates, July 16, 2012, "Paperwork and the Will of Capital", 2015. ©Taryn Simon. Courtesy: Gagosian Gallery