

Hyperallergic: 'Taryn Simon Mines the Empty Aesthetics of Diplomacy' by Christian N Kerr, March 10th, 2016

Taryn Simon Mines the Empty Aesthetics of Diplomacy



There's a certain pomp necessary to reinforce the power of politics. The countless international agreements that loosely hold our world together are, in essence, nothing more than paper promises written in authoritative script and signed with honorific titles. In large part, it's their presentation that imbues them with power. So, whenever governments get together to present some new accord, it is always done in style — in expensive suits on rich tablecloths with beautiful bouquets bearing silent witness. Such artifice transforms men into masters of the universe, and paper into the ill-fitting harnesses that govern our globe. This is what Taryn Simon calls “the stagecraft of power,” and it's the central focus in her arresting installation, *Paperwork and the Will of Capital*, currently on view in Chelsea's Gagosian gallery.

Paperwork and the Will of Capital is a project in two parts. There are 36 large-scale photographs of floral bouquets on stark, duochromatic backgrounds. They are visually striking, like Pop art reproductions of oversaturated Old Master still lifes. Then, scattered across the gallery's main room are 12 small, sentry-like sculptures of glass-encased black, concrete plinths that double as flower presses. Each sculpture displays a book of 64 herbarium pages, each spread bearing pressed flower specimens featured in Simon's photographs alongside information about the historical event that inspired them. The plinths and photographs, shown here for the first time together, work in tandem to escalate the intensity of Simon's focus.



The photographs, high-gloss inkjet prints hung overhead, dominate the gallery's visual space. Their apparent simplicity begs a simple descriptor: pretty, and, from afar, that's all they are. But if you get close enough to read the small lettering on the card inset in each photograph's thick mahogany frame a layered meaning takes shape. Each arrangement, we learn from the tiny text, is modeled after one that sat on the table of a signing ceremony for a treaty, accord, or decree drafted to influence international trade. The photos' prettiness becomes pathological — diplomacy distilled to its empty aesthetics.

Take, for example, the lovely photo of the heap of frilly flowers set before a blue and beige backdrop. In the card we read the photograph's title, "Agreement Establishing the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation," and learn that the arrangement was presented at a 2006 ceremony to promote Sharia-compliant trade laws throughout the Islamic world that ban, amongst other things, transactions involving the vices of alcohol, pork, and pornography.



With this backstory, the line that breaks the background into uneven blocks of drained sky and desert sand, so definitive from a distance, becomes a blurred gradient, and the distinct identities that Simon hopes her colors suggest, in this instance, Western and Islamic, likewise become blurred in ambiguity. Such an agreement — one that seeks to define the Islamic world's economy as something ethically separate from the West's — actually reinforces the idea that the two cultures aren't so different after all, since it shows they're susceptible to the same morally questionable monetary practices that make up the West's economy. The white hydrangeas, too, now seem to take on a symbolism of their own, suggesting the purity promoted in such an idyllic, if unsustainable, agreement.

It's an interesting irony that these impossible bouquets are made possible by a global market held together by a slew of similar trade agreements — Simon sourced her specimens from the Dutch Aalsmeer Flower Auction, which sells and distributes over 20 million flowers a day that it has shipped in from hundreds of suppliers at the distant ends of the earth. Just as the bouquets of the signing ceremonies conceal the sometimes dirty diplomacy that led to their arrangement, the clean composition of Simon's photographs belie the convoluted infrastructures integral to their creation.



Simon's sculptures explore the facade of politics on an existential level. The books give a sense that man's political history is bumpy and still being written; the pages can't come flush together, with the stems of the preserved specimens hidden in the pages past and the ones to come. The plants, cut and pressed into lifeless artifacts, and neatly arranged across from their documentation, illustrate the divide between politics, a man-made instrument of control and incremental progression, and nature, which is wild, cyclical, and eternal. Our decrees, despite the beautiful regalia with which they're presented, are temporary splints on an ever-changing world.

Simon's work shows that it's human nature to categorize and compile — we're taxonomic creatures confined to the limits of our history, able to understand ourselves only in relation to one another and the past. And because our individual consciousness ends at our death, we create entities to outlive us, paper tiger governments meant to ground the uncontrollable nature that exists within human nature. Paperwork and the Will of Capital displays the dialectic of man's political power, that it is at once attractive and empty, necessary and futile.