

Taryn Simon: discomfort zone

Behind the dramatic beauty of Taryn Simon's photographs lies a sense of foreboding, for her subject matter is the darker side of American society. We look at the work of the third finalist for this year's Deutsche Börse Prize.

By Drusilla Beyfus



White Tiger (Kenny), Selective Inbreeding, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation, Eureka Springs, Arkansas [detail] Photo: © 2007 Taryn Simon/ Courtesy Steid/Gagosian

Taryn Simon's picture-and-text stories typically arouse contradictory emotions. The strength and beauty of the imagery hits you first, followed by a sense of disquiet or foreboding. This dichotomy runs through *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a portfolio that has gained her a place as one of the four shortlisted nominees for this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize.

Representing one artist's journey over four years, generally using a large-format 4 x 5 camera and serious lighting equipment, the material focuses on the fault lines underlying US society. 'The subject selections are never easy and often loaded with complications,' Simon says. 'I worked within specific chapter headings - security, religion, government, science, entertainment. But under those headings discernable formulas were abandoned.'

Hence her way of looking at the death penalty, as reflected in the shot reproduced here and in the accompanying caption she writes. She viewed it through the architecture the inmates inhabit - 'a visual extreme that mirrors the extremes of the punishment exercised by a power structure.' It is tempting to see her as an undercover agent set upon turning up what is described by Ronald Dworkin in the catalogue (published by Steidl) as 'something we do not want to believe'. Perhaps that is why she goes for images that are, in her own words, 'constructed to seduce. They give a stage typically reserved for the produced and packaged to events and spaces that don't usually get such elaborate attention.'

Some examples. The frame of a Smith and Wesson .44 Magnum revolver is portrayed as a still life, red hot from the forge, calling attention to the 200 million privately owned firearms in the US. A detail of 'shredded, microwaved, disinfected medical waste' at Sanitec Industries, Sun Valley, California, is almost painterly in colour and highlights that the US produces between 600 and one million tons of medical waste each year, of which 15 per cent is potentially hazardous to the public. A realisation of the spookily banal Nixon Gift Vault at the US National Archives in Maryland serves as a reminder that Richard Nixon is the only US president whose records and gifts are subject to an Act of Congress and, as the accompanying text emphasises, the collection still lacks adequate public access or an independent review. However, not all is dark stuff. One subject is a tender study of a black bear suckling cubs in the depth of winter at Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia.

Born in New York in 1975, Taryn Simon is a Guggenheim Fellow and is widely published and exhibited. An extract from the nominated work appeared in this magazine last year. So what's next on her agenda? 'I'm working on something that at long last takes me outside of America's borders.'