

Magazine

## Capital, Diplomacy and Carnations

On Photography

By TEJU COLE NOV. 29, 2016



Comprehensive claims settlement agreement between Libya and the United States. Tripoli, Libya, Aug. 14, 2008, from "Paperwork and the Will of Capital," 2015.

A few weeks ago, I stepped into a gallery in Brussels to see an exhibition by the American photographer Taryn Simon. The walls were covered with large color photographs of flower arrangements, 13 in all. Each photograph was framed in wood, and embedded in each frame was a long caption. One began: "Agreement establishing the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation. Al-Bayan Palace, Kuwait City, Kuwait, May 30, 2006." Another: "Framework agreement for economic cooperation. Quito, Ecuador, Jan. 12, 2012." It was these captions that made the arrangements legible, confirming that, far from being merely decorative, the flowers were charged with historical meaning.

I saw this new exhibition — which has the intriguing title “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” — in late October, and decided to write an essay about it. When I returned to the United States in early November, I was caught up in the presidential campaign and too distracted to write anything; I figured I’d get to it on Nov. 9. The shock of that morning’s election result was not mine alone. I lay in bed in grief and confusion. I was not merely “sad.” I was derailed. All my work suddenly seemed pointless. It was so difficult for me to organize thoughts into language that I felt as if I’d had a stroke. It wasn’t until late on Nov. 10 that language slowly returned. The return of the ability to write felt like resistance, the reclamation of an insight: Even at the worst of times, there is nothing pointless about the work we do as critics or artists.

So I looked at Taryn Simon again. Take, for instance, her photograph of an arrangement of spray rose and lisianthus. The flowers are piled on a chartreuse table or plinth; the wall behind them is the color of raw linen. The caption begins: “Comprehensive claims settlement agreement between Libya and the United States.”

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What could a flower arrangement have to do with an agreement to settle claims between two nations? “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” originates in the press and official photographs made at signings of agreements, declarations, memorandums, treaties, communiqués, conventions, contracts and other formalized moments of accord. Simon noticed the ubiquity of floral displays at these occasions. To refocus attention on the workings of power at these signings, she took an oblique approach: a re-creation of the flower arrangements. The flowers were originally a decorative note, a reflex to signal the importance of the occasion. Reconstructed, they are not mere decorations. The people are gone. The documents are absent. The isolated arrangements are like secrets that can be parsed only with the help of their captions.

The caption to the spray rose and lisianthus continues, with punctilious official language: “United States Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch and head of U.S. affairs in the Libyan Foreign Ministry Ahmed al-Fatouri signed an agreement settling all outstanding lawsuits to provide compensation for damages claimed by their respective nationals.” The text goes on, offering details about claims made in the 1986 bombing of a Berlin discothèque, the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi by American forces the same year and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. The photograph looks innocent (what could be more innocent than flowers?), but the caption is a whirlwind of actions and consequences, of decisions and their political fallout.

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Similar tensions propelled Simon's earlier projects. "An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar" (2007) was about secret sites in the United States, from a nuclear-waste facility to a deliberation room for jury simulations. For "Contraband" (2010), Simon spent a working week at John F. Kennedy International Airport, making over a

thousand photographs of items that had been seized by customs officials, from dead animals and exotic fruit to a parade of counterfeit pharmaceuticals and luxury items. In the most complex of her projects, "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I – XVIII" (2008-11), she used portraits and captions to look at families in several different countries. In each "chapter," the story was woven around one individual, to whom all the others were related. The project was systematic at the same time that it revealed the impossibility of systematic accounts of human experience: The more detail Simon supplied, the more the observer became aware of how

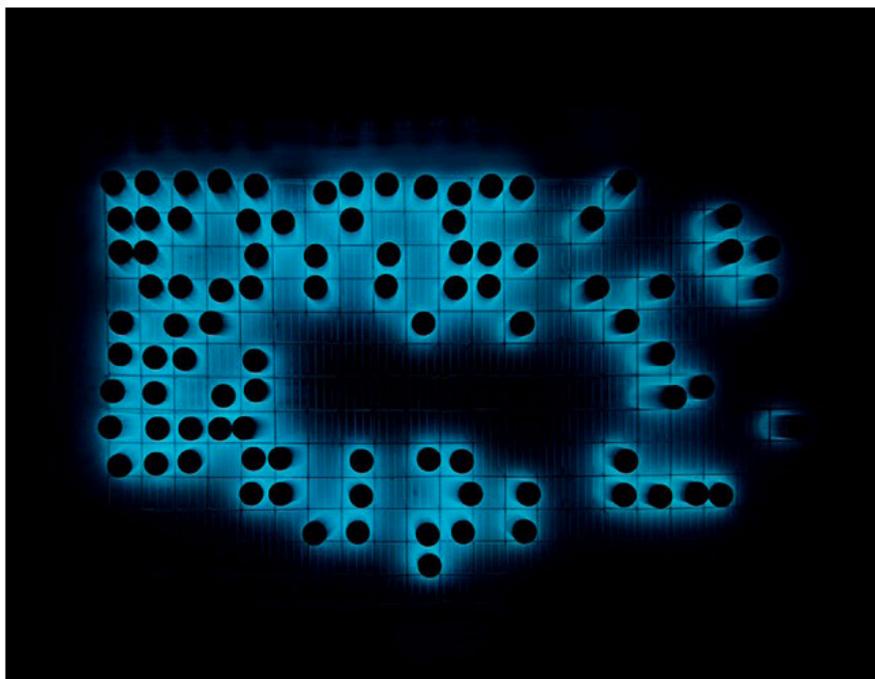
Photojournalists give us images that work by themselves, or seem to. A photograph in a work by Simon is different: It verifies, or purports to verify, the claim made in its caption, rather than the other way around. The photograph is reduced to the status of evidence: It is there to testify to something that is not a photograph, something that predated its making. But matters are not so simple, because this "evidence" is itself carefully made and lushly presented. Simon's art is ambidextrous, catching us with both its narrative and its technique.



Source image with botanist's identifications. Mahmud Turkia/AFP/Getty Images

If “A Living Man Declared Dead” was about the nature of personal fate, “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” uses a different set of tools to think about political fate. Powerful men (it is usually men) meet to sign some papers. Afterward, the world is not the same. And yet few of those whose lives are altered by whatever was signed could conceivably trace their circumstances to that event. All they know — all most of us know — is that there are powerful forces in the world that shape our day-to-day realities. Simon’s project brings the scattered light of those forces to clear points of attention.

Consider another arrangement. Beside an assortment of spray carnation, baby’s breath, cornflower and oxeye daisy is the caption: “Classified ‘Spare Parts’ deal. Oval Office, White House, Washington, D.C., United States, May 16, 1975.” This one is especially opaque, so I read the next paragraph. “United States President Gerald R. Ford, United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, held a classified meeting in which they discussed a plan to provide material support to Turkey by funneling supplies through Iran.” A longer paragraph describes how Ford and the shah circumvented the arms embargo Congress imposed on Turkey. Simon’s project evokes 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings in its crisp attention to detail and in the impossibility of the bouquets it presents: flowers that bloom in different seasons, or that would never be found growing in the same terrain. And just like those baroque paintings, “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” is made possible by the global flow of goods and money.



Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State, from “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar,” 2005/2007.

Submerged in a pool of water at Hanford Site are 1,936 stainless-steel nuclear-waste capsules containing cesium and strontium. Combined, they contain over 120 million curies of radioactivity. It is estimated to be the most curies under one roof in the United States. The blue glow is created by the Cherenkov Effect, which describes the electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle, giving off energy, moves faster than light through a transparent medium. The temperatures of the capsules are as high as 330 degrees Fahrenheit. The pool of water serves as a shield against radiation; a human standing one foot from an unshielded capsule would receive a lethal dose of radiation in less than 10 seconds. Hanford is among the most contaminated sites in the United States.

God is in the details, it is said. Or just as often: The Devil is in the details. Perhaps we should leave theology out of it and simply say that what is human is in the details. Turkey, Iran, Kissinger, Ford: It all seems so long ago. But we don't turn to history because it is demonstrably relevant, and we don't look at art only because it is monumental or beautiful. Taryn Simon's work happens to be relevant, monumental and beautiful. But the greater consolation in thinking about this work at this moment lies in its details. It is in the deadpan meticulousness it embeds, its unruffled testimony about the highways and byways of history.

On those immediate postelection mornings in November when I lay in bed aphasic and estranged from myself, whatever did not address the current predicament seemed unworthy. But what became clear was that "the current predicament" was precisely this condemnation of detail. This erasure of historical nuance can be the anteroom to hopelessness. Sure, clear and direct opposition to bad policies has to be part of the response to the coming years. Marching will be important, and there might be a need to shout slogans. But no less necessary will be our commitment to detail, to meticulousness, to all the accumulated forms of patience that guarantee, rather than merely decorate, our lives. ♦

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