

The Guardian, 'Cow-dung toothpaste? Taryn Simon's book Contraband unloads America's baggage', by Sean O'Hagan, 3 January 2011.

Cow-dung toothpaste? Taryn Simon's book Contraband unloads America's baggage

It took five sleepless days and nights inside an airport for Simon to capture these shots of seized goods, from counterfeit jewellery to deer penis. The result is a testament to the ingenuity of those attempting to bring banned goods into America – and those preventing them

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Taryn Simon's Bird corpse, labeled as home décor, Indonesia to Miami, Florida (prohibited), 2010. Photograph: Taryn Simon/Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

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Taryn Simon's latest book, [Contraband](#), consists of 1,075 photographs of items confiscated by US customs and the US postal service international mail facility at John F Kennedy international airport, New York, from 16 November to 20 November, 2009.

The seized items include various drugs (Xanax, anabolic steroids, Ritalin, khat, ketamine, hashish), counterfeit jewellery, bags, hats, sportswear, shirts, DVDs and watches as well as several kinds of plants, seeds, grass, nuts and foodstuffs. Among the more exotic confiscated substances are deer antlers, deer blood, deer penis and deer tongue, as well as cow-dung toothpaste and cow urine.

The book is an inventory of the illegal and the prohibited – but it's also a testament to ingenuity, both of those attempting to bring banned goods into America and of those who try and prevent the illegal traffic of goods across international borders. It tells us, too, that we are living in an age in which the market for counterfeit goods, particularly fake designer-label goods, is seemingly insatiable. "The proliferation of the fake has been one result of the enormous shift of commodity production to the south and east in recent decades," writes [Hans-Ulrich Obrist](#), the curator and art historian, in his introduction to the book, "where there is in general far poorer protection of intellectual property, and hence ... a greater opportunity to make knock-offs without fear of reproach."

The experience of photographing the 1,075 objects was a disorienting one for Simon, who lived in the airport for five days, worked long hours, found it hard to sleep, and was able to take only one shower over the entire time. You would never know that, though, from the end result. Her photographs are detached and impersonal to the point of forensic: each item was placed on a grey-white background and shot as if it was a scientific specimen – which, in a way, of course, it was.

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Contraband, in both its style and content, recalls another inventory-style book made in another airport: Christien Meindertsma's *Checked Baggage*, a record of the 3,264 prohibited items seized at Schiphol, Amsterdam, in a single week. It was published in 2004, and made in the wake of the September 11 attacks in New York, when increased airport security meant that many ordinary items carried by passengers – nail scissors, tweezers, lighters, hairspray, toy guns – were suddenly viewed as potential weapons that could be used in a mid-flight terrorist attack.

The confiscated items in *Checked Baggage* are the result of airport security searches on more than 600,000 travellers, and, whereas Simon has opted to arrange her objects under alphabetised categories (alcohol, animal corpses, apples, bananas, beef etc), Meindertsma opted for generic sub-categories (potato knives, potato peelers, cheese knives, kitchen knives, small daggers etc). Again, though, the visual inventory gives no clue of the labour and sustained bouts of intense concentration that underpinned the project. With books like these, one longs sometimes for an accompanying short documentary relating the trajectory of the undertaking, shedding light on the process that underpins the end result. (Playfully, the publishers of *Checked Baggage* included a confiscated item with every book in their limited edition print run. As a result, the book now changes hands for around £1,000.)

With her small, but influential, body of work, Simon, at 35, has already become one of the leading visual anthropologists of American culture. Her preoccupation is with the hidden or overlooked, as evinced by two of her previous books, *The Innocents* (2003) and the acclaimed *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007).

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The former is a series of American portraits in a highly lit, almost unreal style that is formally redolent of the work of [Gregory Crewsdon](#). Her subjects, though, are victims of miscarriages of justice, all of whom Simon photographed at places that had some link to their wrongful convictions. The latter is a series of 70 photographs made over five years, again in the wake of 9/11, of some of America's hidden objects and sites, including a nuclear storage facility, the interior of the CIA headquarters, an avian quarantine facility and a cryopreservation unit. On one level, the book is a collection of curiosities – it also includes an image of a Braille edition of Playboy, a hibernating bear and a serpent handler. It is also an elliptical portrait of America at a pivotal and anxious moment in its history.

"Over a five-year period following September 11, when the American media and government were seeking unknown sites beyond its borders, most notably weapons of mass destruction," Simon said of the project, "I chose to look inward at that which was integral to America's foundation, mythology, and daily functioning. I wanted to confront the boundaries of the citizen, self-imposed and real. And confront the divide between privileged and public access to knowledge." (You can [watch her talk about the series here](#)).

Whereas *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* is a wide-ranging book, almost epic in its scope, *Contraband* is narrowly focused, the result of an intense period of engagement with a single, but endlessly intriguing, subject. Both say much about contemporary America. In one way, as the American photographer and critic Aaron Schuman has pointed out, Simon's work is in a tradition best described by Robert Frank as "the making of a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present", but it also subverts that tradition by focusing not on the everyday America of Frank – or Walker Evans or even William Eggleston – but on an unfamiliar, often ominous and clandestine, America.

Simon has intimated that her next project will be pursued out in the world, beyond the America she has photographed in such a singular and illuminating way. She is a major talent and I, for one, cannot wait to see the results.