

ONE ON ONE WITH TARYN SIMON

THE AMERICAN ARTIST presents two bodies of work, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) and *Contraband* (2010) on until 6 May at The Pavilion, Downtown Dubai. The former presents hidden aspects of contemporary American culture through a photographic and textual investigation. The project led to *Contraband*, which saw Taryn Simon take images of items seized by US customs at New York's JFK International Airport. *Contraband* comprises 1075 images of over 1000 forbidden articles – from counterfeit clothing and pharmaceuticals to Cuban cigars and firearms. Abdulla Al-Turki and Princess Alia Al-Senussi interview Simon on her fascination with images, text and the cultural reception to her work.

AS/AT: Would this have been your first time to Dubai?

TS: I visited Dubai five years ago; I wanted to experience its rapid development and I produced a work at the ski slope. I've spent a lot of time in the Middle East, primarily Lebanon and Syria.

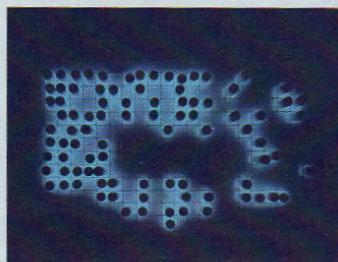
AS/AT: To have your work travel, and its content being about disparate places, does that make you a cultural ambassador?

TS: No. The interesting component of its movement across borders is what it enacts in each location. The reception can't help but be guided by certain cultural differences and interpretations. *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* was produced just after 11 September when there was an effort by the American government and media to seek the hidden, secret and unknown beyond its borders. I wanted to look within American borders at that time and confront the boundaries between public and expert access and knowledge. But, what that effort looks like with changing times and changing administrations is not constant. The work looks different under the Bush administration than it does under Obama's. The work looks different in Germany than it does in China or Dubai. It mutates. My medium is photography, text and graphic design – but it's also the invisible space between all of these elements where translation, misinterpretation and ambiguity reign. Photography and text are vulnerable and not stationary spaces. They are always in flux and subject to context, time's passage and history's unfolding.

AS/AT: In cross-cultural terms, you've incorporated image and text in www.imageatlas.org

Imageatlas.org is a search engine I developed with programmer Aaron Swartz, who tragically passed recently.

In it, you type in any word like 'gentleman' or 'America' and it will translate that word into every language; it then enters that word into the local search engines in every country and pulls up the top images associated with that term. You can thereby look at the cultural differences and similarities in visual interpretation throughout the world. As writing and verbal communication fade with the onset of abbreviated text communication, symbols and image sharing, I wanted to explore the possibility of a visual language. Emotions tend to reveal a flattening response whereas politics, religion and gender bring about radical differences.



AS/AT: You packed in a crazy year last year. Are you slowing down or ready for the next project?

TS: I'm already in the next project. I'm not good at stopping, that's when depression sets in. 

Taryn Simon; *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherekov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State, 2005/2007*. Chromogenic colour print, 94.6 x 113 cm. Edition of seven. © Taryn Simon. Images courtesy Gagosian Gallery.