

TheNational : 'Taryn Simon exhibits her photography in first Dubai show',
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A rotting pig's head is wedged in the centre of the image. Its crinkling snout is pushed up against an unripe corn cob and it is surrounded by a pile of organic matter including curry leaves, dried orange peels, fresh eggs, a giant African snail, various seeds and maggot-infested rats.

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The items are seized goods, collected over 48 hours at customs in John F Kennedy (JFK) International Airport in New York. The photograph is a result of a slow and deliberate artistic process where Taryn Simon intervened with the confiscated items and rearranged them to resemble a still-life painting. «I am not just interested in documenting what's there,» she says. «Part of my photographic work is aesthetic intervention.»

The image is part of Simon's exhibition *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, which began as an idea in 2002 and culminated in 2007 with a collection of 70 images. It was a direct response to September 11, 2001, and the ensuing international search for weapons of mass destruction, she says. «While the US government was looking for secrets outside its borders, I was looking inside for the hidden and out-of-view.»

The retrospective show was unveiled for the first time in the Middle East last week at The Pavilion, Downtown Dubai and Simon admits that with every new audience, the images are allowed a new lease of life. «Any re-engagement ignites how the works change with the evolution of time and with different geographical presentations. Their interpretation will depend on political, social and historical events and because of the title, they will bring with them whatever notions people have about America, too. That's what I find fascinating - I am interested in the space I can't control.»

Simon's work combines photography, graphic design and text. It is intelligent, thorough and presented in a simple yet meticulous fashion, with every detail accounted for - even the walls of the gallery have been painted in a specific shade of white and the windows frosted over to create the correct ambience.

«The presentation of my work is highly controlled and ordered,» she says, «but in fact it is about the lack of ability to control any situation and the responses of anyone else.»

It is these kinds of incongruities that characterise Simon's portfolio. An American Index includes seminal images such as a collection of nuclear waste encapsulation units shaped as the outline of the US, a genetically deficient white tiger half-smiling, half-grimacing at the camera and abstract impressionist art adorning the walls of the CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia. She says they are purposely «awkward» in their juxtaposition and attempt to confront the viewer with unanswered questions exploring the impossibility of absolute understanding. «Actually [my work] is about the inevitability of solitude; even if you think you understand someone else or something else completely, you will always be at a distance.»

Alongside the 2007 works, The Pavilion is also exhibiting Contraband, one of Simon's more recent shows. She describes it as a more of a performance piece because she «moved in» to JFK airport for a week and, without sleep, continuously photographed items detained by customs. The result was 1,075 images set against plain white backgrounds and housed in glass cabinets. Whether illegal substances, guns, fake designer goods or decaying fruit, the presentation gives them a neutral quality and invites the viewer to see them through the microscopical eye of Simon's inquiry.

«I presented the images in jewellery-like cases to explore what I saw as the commodification of the copy,» she says. «During my time in JFK I was overwhelmed by the proliferation of copy goods. What I saw was a battle to protect the brand and the consumer economy that completely defines western culture. It prompted me to explore the economy of the image. I was taking photographs, which is another form of copy and entering those copies into the art market, another form of economy.»

The show came to fruition in 2010 with a show in New York's The Lever House and the Beverly Hills branch of the Gagosian Gallery (by which she is represented) and an ensuing book.

This is the first time any of her work has been shown in the region and it is certainly a coup for The Pavilion, which has been in talks with Gagosian and Simon for almost a year. «We are really excited to be showing these two exhibitions,» says Gabriella Moore, the arts and communications coordinator for The Pavilion. «Taryn Simon is such an established artist and having her work here shows how the arts scene in Dubai is maturing.»

Although the images themselves are easily accessible through a simple web search, nothing can compare to seeing them up close and personal. The photographs are powerful, but it is the combination of their presentation and accompanying description that packs the punch.

Simon herself describes the process as somewhat intangible, saying that while each image has «multiple truths» and can float away into the space of the imagination, the text acts as a «cruel anchor» bringing the viewer back to some kind of reality.

«I present the image as if it is something solid you can enter into, something that addresses the unspeakable space between reality and fantasy and those difficult collapses we all experience. The viewer gets the comfort of it being something tangible until afterwards - then I let it collapse.

Taryn Simon bio:

Born in New York in 1975, Simon graduated from Brown University in Rhode Island with a BA in art semiotics. She learnt photography at Rhode Island School of Design and has been a visiting artist at Yale University, Bard College and Parsons School of Design. Her work has been exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, as well as the Victoria and Albert Museum and Tate Modern in London. She also had a piece in an international show at the Danish Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale exploring freedom of speech.