

# There Will Be Bloodlines

## Taryn Simon untangles the ties that bind

By Richard Lacayo

### HAVE LENS, WILL TRAVEL

To produce the hundreds of portraits in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, Simon visited 25 countries in four years. Even a single bloodline might have members scattered across several nations

IF TARYN SIMON HADN'T BECOME A PHOTOGRAPHER, she could have made a fortune in sales, because she has persuasive powers that the rest of us can only dream of. For her 2007 exhibition and book *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, she got herself admitted to dozens of places where outsiders with cameras aren't usually allowed, including a nuclear-waste storage facility and a reconstructed crime scene at a forensic research center, complete with a rotting corpse. For another project, *Contraband*, she persuaded the wary authorities at John F. Kennedy International Airport to let her photograph every item seized by customs over a five-day period, from counterfeit Viagra to cow-dung toothpaste. Despite a personal manner that's the last word in low key, she has a way of getting what she wants. "If somebody closes the door," she says, "I have to find another way to get in."

Simon, 37, had to find a lot of ways in for her new show, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, which is on view through Sept. 3 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City before moving to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The organizing principle for this project is what she calls bloodlines: all the living descendants, plus any living forebears, of a single man or woman who sets a story in motion. Traveling to 25 countries, Simon tracked down hundreds of family members bound together by not just genealogy but often some curious or painful fate. In India she located living people officially declared dead, a predicament involving corrupt bureaucrats scheming to seize their property. In Bosnia she followed the bloodline of young men killed in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of Muslims by

Bosnian Serbs. In Brazil she inventoried rival clans trapped in a decades-long feud—people condemned by kinship to an endless cycle of bloodshed and revenge. Hauling around a sizable 10-by-13-cm tripod-mounted camera plus lights and neutral backdrops, she photographed any family member who would agree to sit for her.

A project like *A Living Man Declared Dead* is more labor-intensive than a lunar landing, so it's impressive that Simon accomplished it with just two regular associates, her sister Shannon Simon and assistant Douglas Emery. "I work all the time," Simon says matter-of-factly. (She paused long enough last year to marry filmmaker Jake Paltrow, Gwyneth's brother.) Simon began *A Living Man Declared Dead* with a marathon of research and investigation. "I'll pick the brains of anyone around me," she says. "I'll get ideas from something I've seen in a film or a scientific journal." International aid groups helped lead her to families she might include. So did the freelance intermediaries whom foreign correspondents—and Simon—like to call fixers: ground-level operators who know the locals.

Then comes the delicate part, persuading people to take part in that odd post-modern phenomenon, the conceptual art-documentary photo project. Some of her subjects, like the "living dead" in India, were happy to publicize their predicaments. Others, not so much. Some descendants of Hans Frank, Hitler's personal legal adviser, who was executed after being convicted of war crimes at Nuremberg, weren't keen on advertising their Nazi ancestry. So you might say they came halfway out of the closet: they





**LINES OF INQUIRY**

Above, a chapter from *A Living Man Declared Dead*; right, a detail from the same triptych, which maps the bloodlines of Nazi official Hans Frank. Each chapter of Simon's project consists of three framed panels: one contains the portraits, another sets out the story of that bloodline, and a third contains related images, like Old Master paintings purloined by the Nazi hierarchy

declined to be photographed but sent Simon articles of their clothing instead, which she put before her camera in neatly folded individual bundles. “They respected what I was trying to accomplish,” she says. “They just didn’t want to be physically present.” Simon didn’t have the same problem with one of her oddest bloodlines: laboratory rabbits infected with a deadly virus by researchers looking to reduce Australia’s massive overpopulation of rabbits in the wild.

But even when Simon had the full cooperation of her subjects, other perils sometimes emerged. In Tanzania, she photographed the bloodlines of albinos, who are sometimes preyed on by ghoulish poachers who kill them to sell their hair and body parts to healers; because the subject is a touchy one with Tanzanian authorities, Simon had to sneak her bulky cases of gear across the border from Kenya. In Bosnia, where she tracked down the mother of four sons killed in the Srebrenica massacre, she had to arrive clandestinely at the woman’s home. “Though it was a decade since the massacre and this woman had lost everything,” she recalls, “there was an incredible fear of retaliation.”

Simon’s own bloodline has its share of avid photographers, including her Russian-immigrant grandfather, who owned a pinball arcade in Times Square and was an amateur naturalist who built his own telescopes. “He was always collecting images with very precise data,” says Simon, who grew up in the New York City

suburb of Dix Hills, N.Y. “My father also took pictures constantly, but his were more about environments and people around the world.” For a time he worked for the State Department; the slide shows he brought home from Russia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East so captivated his daughter that after she arrived at Brown to study environmental science, she also pursued photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. By the time she graduated in 1997, Simon was committed to the camera, though she wasn’t yet sure what she wanted to do with it.

Simon’s big break came a few years later when the *New York Times Magazine* assigned her to produce a series about people who had been exonerated after serving time—sometimes many years—for violent crimes they didn’t commit. That led to her first book, *The Innocents*. In the decade since, Simon has become a well-established name in the art world. Her gallery is the mighty arsenal of Larry Gagosian, and *A Living Man Declared Dead* has already made stops at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and the Tate Modern in London.

Simon depicts bloodlines as flowcharts of small portraits—like a living periodic table of the elements. What resonates is the persistence, and finally the insufficiency, of ancestry and kinship as systems for making sense of unruly destinies. To show that blood lineage can be an extremely loopy line, she sought out unlikely subjects; one is a Lebanese man who

claims to be reincarnated, so he pops up more than once in his family history. “I was always looking for a surreal twist,” she says, “something that would lead to a collapse of logic.”

All the same, even the most outlandish chapters have their universal element. As Simon puts it, “We’re all the living dead, pieces of what came before.” What she means is that we all carry the DNA of our forebears; their ghostly current pulses through us. The intricate machinery of her project is designed to show that blood ties are a weak line of defense against the blows administered by history, politics or sheer unlucky circumstance. And in some cases, as with those feuding Brazilians or the Bosnians slaughtered for their ethnic identity, kinship may just be a burden no sane person would want to bear. In some of Simon’s portraits, the subjects—links in an endless chain of breeding stock—stare out at us from their perches on the family tree with an expression that seems to say, *Get me out of here*. Especially the rabbits.

But at least the rabbits didn’t squabble among themselves, which is more than you can say for many of the humans Simon had to contend with. “You’re always dealing with family members who aren’t speaking to other members—all these dramas,” she says.

I tell her that I sympathize, because I could never get my entire family to sit for her camera.

Without missing a beat, she responds, “I bet I could.”

I bet she could too. ■

TO SEE MORE OF SIMON'S PHOTOGRAPHS, GO TO [time.com/tarynsimon](http://time.com/tarynsimon)



Four Hours in Lisbon: Got half a day in the capital of Portugal? Here's what to do

IF YOU'RE BOUND FOR PORTUGAL'S SMALL BUT sprightly Estoril Jazz Festival, staged inside Europe's largest casino from May 11 to 20, then one of the continent's most compact capital cities is but a half-hour away by coastal highway or commuter train. Starting and ending at the rail terminal of Cais do Sodré, here's a half-day tour of undulating hillsops and tram-traveled boulevards to take in the instantly intimate scene of Lisbon—a stately white city, a scholar's fair, a seafaring hub —JOHN RICH

... After exiting the terminal, take the steep, cobbled climb toward classy Chiado and get a feel for Lisbon's burgeoning bohemia: organic bakeries and design stores ply their trade alongside more traditional restaurants and shops of the famous explorer (the ringed tiles, known in the stately Largo do Camões at one of the characteristic hi-ops that have recently been lovingly refurbished with new paint and stocked with nostalgic vases and party treats. Within a few blocks are the youth hangouts of the Bairro Alto, as well as two of Lisbon's most enigmatic haunts—the overly touristy Cais a Brasileira

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