

Taryn Simon

LEVER HOUSE ART COLLECTION

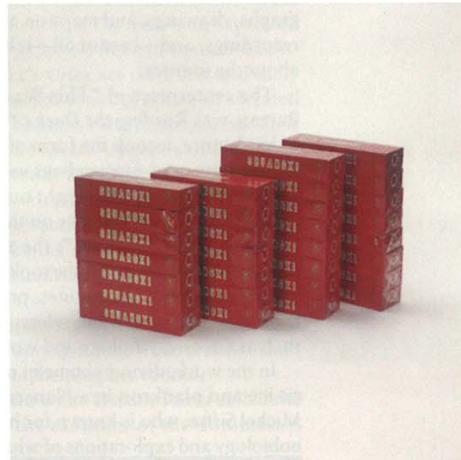
To shoot the 1,075 images that constitute her project “Contraband,” 2010, Taryn Simon erected makeshift photo studios at the US Customs and Border Protection Federal Inspection Site and the US Postal Service International Mail Facility at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Then, she and her team meticulously documented items confiscated by customs agents over the course of five days: heroin, envelopes with unknown medication, counterfeit BlackBerry batteries, shark fins, South Korean dog treats made with unidentified meats, Russian diet pills, a Haitian goatskin drum, Pakistani steroids, Ukrainian lard.

Simon groups the images according to the identifications used by the agency, such as “animal corpses,” “unidentified biohazard,” “money orders,” “nuts,” “miscellaneous pharmaceuticals.” And in this regard, the project can be situated within photography’s long classificatory tradition, from Victorian ethnography up through the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who, with their typologies of obsolete sites of industrial production, seem especially salient here. After all, Simon’s images, too, distill the essence of contemporary production regimes—in her case, the global circulation of goods in postindustrial capitalism, here arrested midflow. Photographed under uniform light, positioned against a neutral background, and surrounded by substantial white space, the pictures look like high-end advertisements. This visual style applies particularly well to the abundance of counterfeit or pirated goods in the collection: the Louis Vuitton ties, BMW hood ornaments, and copies of Season 4 of *Lost*.

But you don’t learn much about the black market for knockoff luxury items from Simon’s work (or, for that matter, the black market for deer tongues, zolpidem, or soil). Again like the Bechers, her aim is not to instruct; she supplies her audience only the limited information provided to her by the border agents (this might include the identity of the object, its country of origin or destination, and the reason it was seized—“Injectable *Diazepam*, Georgia [illegal],” for instance), which tells us little about the sociohistorical or economic significance of these items. But that is not to say that the images, considered individually, do not suggest stories. Indeed, some of the items are quite poignant: The foreign food products seem most overtly like nostalgic tokens of culture, smuggled across borders for a taste of home. A confiscated Burger King hamburger is probably the remnant of a preflight meal, stuffed in the luggage for later. If fast food is America’s most notorious export, it’s contraband when it returns.

But it’s the accretive effect of the images’ illicit subject matter that seems to be the real point. In its quantity and diversity, this collection

Taryn Simon,
Cigarettes, Shuangxi, China (prohibited),
2010, color photograph, 6¼ x 6¼".
From the series
“Contraband,” 2010.



of contraband is staggering, intensifying the vertigo, not to say the anxiety and dread, that subtends global connectivity. And, interestingly, Simon's project filters this representation of globalization's entropy through the cool, administrative procedures that endeavor to contain it. Like the television show *Cops*, "Contraband" is shot from the perspective of a law enforcement agency, providing a titillating glimpse of criminality, though without *Cops*'s moralizing narrative. By highlighting this tension between illegality and control, "Contraband" paints a fascinating portrait, both panoramic and specific, of the movement of goods today.

—Lloyd Wise