

Wmagazine: 'Taryn's World', by Joan Juliet Buck, November 2011.



Taryn Simon

Taryn's World

Traveling from deep inside the C.I.A. To the outer reaches of Chechnya, Taryn Simon has made a career out of photographing the far-fetched. On the occasion of two major museum shows, Joan Juliet buck tracks down the intrepid 36-year-old.

By [Joan Juliet Buck](#)

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In Taryn Simon's studio there is a printer that can handle 64-inch-wide paper, a map of the world with pushpins stuck into places no one goes, a photograph of Simon's grandfather's family in Belarus, and a collection of other people's datebooks from the Seventies that her sister Shannon found in a junk shop. There is also an abundant supply of BioPure Protein powder, ProGreens "super food," baby wipes, hand sanitizer, and Clif Bars—as dense and fruity as bear scat—along with Pepto-Bismol tablets, two of which, taken after every meal, can reduce the chances of getting a food-borne illness by 40 percent. The tablets are left over from Simon's travels of the past

four years, when she trekked to 18 countries with a 4x5 camera and 500 pounds of equipment to take the 922 portraits that went into her most recent show, “A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters.”

The exhibition, which opened at Tate Modern in London in May, confirms Simon’s reputation as a unique, complex, and somewhat overwhelming figure in contemporary art. The Museum of Modern Art in New York will display a partial version of the show beginning next May. Says MoMA photography curator Roxana Marcoci: “The work that she has done—I believe it is her most ambitious and successful to date.”

Although the show’s ostensible subject is bloodlines—the direct connection from parent to child through blood—Simon’s aggregations of small, formal portraits and precise, clinical text tell stories that raise questions about life, death, and fate. Udo Kittelmann, director of Berlin’s Nationalgalerie, where the work will be on view through January 1, 2012, explains: “First you see the image, then you start to imagine what the image tells you, and then you have to read the text. It’s the first time the words are as important as the pictures.”

At Tate Modern, the 18 “chapters” fill five enormous rooms, their gigantic frames displaying multiple portraits aligned in grids as strict as the periodic table. The first chapter, which gives the exhibition its title, shows a farmer in Uttar Pradesh, India, along with his children and grandchildren. The text reads: while visiting the local land registry office, shivdutt yadav discovered that official records listed him as dead. his land was no longer registered in his name.

Simon likes to record things that do not officially exist, did not happen, and cannot be seen. Others who possess this urge generally write fiction. Simon sets out to photograph the impossible and the forbidden: posing the unjustly convicted at the scene of crimes they never committed for “The Innocents,” her breakout show at MoMA PS1 in 2003; capturing the braille edition of *Playboy* magazine, the CIA’s art collection, and a repository of nuclear waste in “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar,” her 2007 one-woman show at the Whitney Museum of American Art; and documenting every prohibited curiosity, counterfeit handbag, and drug confiscated from passenger luggage at JFK Airport in the space of five sleepless days and nights for “Contraband,” exhibited at Manhattan’s Lever House in 2010.

Taryn Simon herself does not like to be photographed. Her preferred pose is a street urchin’s wary glare at the camera, arms flat by her sides. At 36, she is tall and waiflike, with an intense magnetism she tries to disguise with shy shuffling or shatter with moments of teenage glee. At five feet nine, she claims to weigh 120 pounds, though she looks bonier. She cuts her own hair, not often—it reaches to her waist. She favors long skirts, mud-colored sweaters, pebbled taupe tights, men’s lace-up shoes, sometimes a vintage dress—usually not a flattering one. Her uniform is a long skirt with suspenders like those on toddlers’ clothes—custom-made by a tailor whose name she either presses on you or refuses to reveal, depending on her mood—that add to the impression of a wayward Thirties schoolgirl.

She’s also nervous on planes, repulsed by sushi, and has stopped going to movies in New York for fear of bedbugs. “Taryn is more frightened of sleeping alone in a house in the country in the U.S.,” says her best friend, Juman Malouf, “than of any of the dangerous places she goes in the world.”

Despite Simon’s efforts to deflect attention, men break off in midsentence when they catch a glimpse of her—mud sweater, taupe tights, long black hair—and lose their composure. “She’s why we have the expression ‘mind fuck,’” says one smitten male, who asked not to be named. “First there’s the flashing beacon of the intellect from across a room; then you find this stunning woman, her beauty magnified by her intensity and intelligence.”

Simon was born in 1975 and raised in Locust Valley, on New York’s Long Island—the second of three daughters of Susan and Richard Simon. When Taryn was 11, Richard, an adventurous entrepreneur who spent years in Thailand with the State Department and then on business of his own, took her to the hill-tribe villages in northern Thailand to see something “radically different.” A tireless amateur photographer, he bought her the 4x5 Sinar she uses today, and he’s still the one she calls when she gets into trouble overseas, or even in New York City.

At Brown University, Simon studied semiotics, while also taking photography classes at the Rhode Island School of Design. Her Brown classmate Nico Baumbach, who teaches film at Columbia University, remembers helping Simon during their junior year abroad with an assignment to take a photo in a Paris location chosen at random from a map. Simon decided to photograph herself showering in the street. “Her photo stuff was always an event,” Baumbach says. “She had to be in some kind of physical danger; there had to be some kind of risk. What attracted me to Taryn back then—and still does—is that you don’t ever know what’s going to happen around her.”

While at Brown, Simon worked for the late Michael Hoffman at Aperture, organizing his library of photography books. She was already fascinated by August Sander, whose 1929 collection of black and white photographs of Germans of all social strata, *Face of Our Time*, is one of the great records of the 20th century. After graduating, Simon assisted a man who shot for Kids “R” Us, and later she photographed rappers for Vibe.

I met Simon not long after, when I was editing *French Vogue*. Her talent impressed me, and I asked her to shoot portraits for the magazine. One day the art director came in, frantic: “Taryn’s going to Chechnya. You have to do

something.” I picked up the phone and told her that terrible things would happen to her in Chechnya, and that she should not go.

“I should save myself so I can do more sittings for *Vogue*?” she asked.

“Go to Chechnya,” I said.

Simon threw herself into serious work. She shot heads of state for *The New York Times Magazine*, whose photo editor, Kathy Ryan, sent Simon on the assignment that would become “The Innocents”: portraits of men just released from prison, exonerated of their crimes. “I started shooting and realized the photos weren’t representing the gravity of what I was encountering,” says Simon. “So I decided to go to the sites that were integral to the cases I was covering. The crime scene was what I sought above all, as it was a place these men had never been but that had changed their lives forever—highlighting the difficult relationship, in their lives and in photography, between truth and fiction.”

In 2002, Simon teamed up with Joseph Logan (now the design director of this magazine) to turn “The Innocents” into a book. Logan has since collaborated on all four of Simon’s books, culminating in the 800-page, ten-and-a-half-pound Brobdingnagian bible that is *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*. “She’s inherently mistrustful of photography and the way people think of it,” Logan says. “She never wants to use the tricks of photography to manipulative effect—it’s as blunt as it can be. She still uses lighting, but you never get the sense she is using it to idealize or seduce or fix.”

In 1999, Simon met Jake Paltrow, a screenwriter and director; they married last year in a tiny ceremony at the United Nations chapel. The fact that Paltrow’s sister is Gwyneth brings a whole new set of flash points. “Taryn is very wary about the connections she has to certain worlds—Hollywood versus the art world,” Logan explains, “and what kind of attention she gets.”

People seem more dazzled by Simon’s close friendship with Salman Rushdie—who continues to make up for his 10 years in hiding with gregarious ubiquity—than by her sister-in-law. Simon and Rushdie met in France through Malouf’s mother, the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh. “Taryn told me about her pictures,” Rushdie says, “and asked if she could show them to me back in New York. I was astonished and impressed. Soon after, very carefully and almost shyly, she asked if I would consider writing a preface for the book accompanying the Whitney show. She’s implacable in pursuit of what she wants. She has become,” he adds, “one of my most trusted friends.”

“I just gave him notes on his memoir,” says Simon.

Brian De Palma asked Simon to take the photograph that is the last shot of his 2007 film *Redacted*. She traveled to Jordan to shoot a young Iraqi actress, Zahra Zubaidi, posed as if lying raped and burned, the victim of American soldiers. The image is shocking and ends the film with a lasting chill. Zubaidi has received death threats from family members, who consider *Redacted* pornographic, and is seeking asylum in the U.S. Simon arranged for the photograph to be shown at this year’s Venice Biennale to draw attention to Zubaidi’s situation. “It had its own wall,” De Palma says proudly.

Adam Weinberg, the director of the Whitney who showed “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar,” describes Simon’s work as “innocence and darkness—she’s both. She looks at things freshly, directly, and romantically; it’s beautifully seen, composed, and structured. But there’s a very dark side. This is a case where getting to know the artist, you see that they match the work.” The photographer Clifford Ross, who met Simon around the time of “An American Index,” notes: “Her approach is deadpan, her effect operatic. The experience of the artist is every bit as exciting as the art itself—intellectually rigorous but at the same time luminescent. Her seriousness and her intensity get people nervous, but they make me feel alive when I talk with her.”

Others are more measured, noting her knack for attracting the right backers. “She’s very comfortable with people in power,” allows one collaborator. She’s also comfortable with strangers. One day, while “An American Index” was up at the Photographers’ Gallery in London, an unknown man approached Simon and said he would be interested in financing her next project. The man was Michael Wilson, a wealthy collector with a photography foundation, and it’s thanks to him that “A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters” exists.

Two days after the opening at Tate Modern, laboring under a monumental cold, Simon prowled the exhibition, hauling a huge bag and talking through a sore throat. Sickness in the family had kept her parents in New York; the opening party had come and gone, and Simon should have been in bed.

It was the end of May. The day before, Simon had driven halfway across the U.K. with Simon Baker, Tate Modern’s curator of photography, to the literary festival at Hay-on-Wye to promote the book based on the show. She then took the cold, which got progressively worse, to Venice; twice to Berlin; to the Arles photography exhibition, where she won best photo book of 2011 and engaged in a series of public conversations with the critic and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist; and back to London.

There was work to be done for the work, now that the work was done.

In London, Simon could not stop walking people through the show: art-school students, foreign curators, friends, patrons, collectors, critics, writers—her dedication was compulsive. Watching her scan the room for who among

the Sunday visitors was looking at what, it was clear how great an artist's hunger is for the response of outsiders, for proof that the work exists.

Honking and coughing, accepting the compliments of those who came up to ask, "Are you the artist?" Simon took me through the stories: the 158 descendants of Cabrera Antero, a Filipino man who was exhibited in a "human zoo" at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904; the descendants of Hitler's lawyer, Hans Frank, who appropriated Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady With an Ermine* while he was governor-general of occupied Poland; and the family of Abdillah Omari, the treasurer of the Tanzania Albino Society, the accompanying text of which reads: albinos in Tanzania are under constant threat of attack from human poachers seeking their skin, hair, body parts, blood, and organs for traditional healers who maintain and promote the belief that albinos have magical powers.

"In all my past projects," said Simon, "I created a catalog that had the appearance of being comprehensive but at the end of the day was something edited, curated by me. The reason I wanted to do bloodlines is that they're catalogs that are directed scientifically. These aren't family trees. I'm literally tracking people who have the same blood. I take a point person, their parents, and their children, but never the wife or the husband—just blood."

As Richard Marshall, curator for the Lever House Art Collection, points out, artists like Sol LeWitt, Ed Ruscha, and John Baldessari have centered their work on following systems (LeWitt's, for instance, was to draw a line from one corner to another). "When I saw Taryn's 'American Index' at the Whitney and realized that part of her process is getting approvals, I thought, This artist is on to something," says Marshall. "Although she uses photography as the medium to express her concepts, I consider her a conceptual artist. She's operating in a unique area of sociopolitical exploration."

In typically elusive Simon style, the point person is not identified by any distinguishing mark in the grid of portraits printed on five-by-seven-foot paper. "Chapter VII," for instance, is about the Srebrenica massacre of Bosnian Muslims in 1995, but the text does not tell you the whole story. To find out who the women in the photographs are and how they are related to the bones and molars next to them in the grid, you have to read the names and dates under the text and deduce through the presentation—August 30, 1955–July 12, 1995—that Ibro Nukić was one of the victims, and that Zumra Mehić (December 9, 1950–) and Remza Muminović (April 10, 1954–) are his surviving sisters. "She's like an investigator," says Larry Gagosian, who has been Simon's gallerist since 2004. "Her pictures are not just photographs; they're documents."

Douglas Emery, who assisted Simon on all the expeditions for the current show, also endured the sleepless rigors of "Contraband." "Mentally, she's the toughest person I have ever encountered," he says. "You realize you are participating in something unique, with a rare person who has more energy than anyone you will ever meet in your life." Obrist understands: "The endurance component of her work is, in a way, performance art—one doesn't see it, but it is still inside the work."

Back at the Tate, Simon and I came to "Chapter XIV," which centers on Ribal Btaddini, a Druze from Lebanon. The Druze believe in reincarnation, and Btaddini, whose portrait recurs 15 times in the 120 pictures tracing his bloodline, is the reincarnation of his own grandfather. Accordingly, each time he is listed it is with two birth dates: December 22, 1897, and March 16, 1986. The sequence of faces becomes like a math problem, and that delights Simon. "I'm trying to find things that keep twisting and disorienting, as disorientation feels like the closest thing to confronting a possible truth," she said.

"A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters" is itself currently living two lives: It will continue at Tate Modern even while it is on display in Berlin. Udo Kittelmann built new walls inside the Mies van der Rohe–designed Nationalgalerie to accommodate the huge panels of pictures and text. "Taryn documents the soul of the world. The only work I can compare it to is 'The Family of Man,'" Kittelmann says.

"The Family of Man" was a show at MoMA in 1955 (and later a best-selling book) that defined midcentury romantic humanism. The curator, photographer Edward Steichen, put together 503 images of life around the world taken by 273 photographers. The exhibition was reassuring—full of awe and wonder at the way humanity was moving forward. It addressed the heart more than the head.

A half century later, "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters" offers only the misery of one impossible situation after another. The show sows dislocation and doubt; it offers no closure, only more questions. "Steichen had a determined answer to his project—an agenda," Simon tells me. "My project is the opposite, or the antidote. I try to avoid answers or an agenda. I prefer a position of not knowing."