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Finding Flower Power, On a World Stage

In the art of Taryn Simon, flowers serve as accessories to power and symbols of market forces



Artist Taryn Simon with her photo of a flower arrangement recreated from a 1994 nuclear non-proliferation meeting. Her new photo and sculpture exhibit at the Gagosian Gallery re-creates and documents the bouquets that sat on the tables where world leaders brokered major international geopolitical events over the last 70 years. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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In the art of Taryn Simon, flowers do more than spruce up the room. They also serve as accessories to power and symbols of the market forces behind sometimes messy geopolitical affairs.

In “Paperwork and the Will of Capital,” her new exhibition opening Thursday at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, Ms. Simon re-created floral arrangements crafted for momentous meetings of world leaders—bouquets that served as both decoration and

silent witness to hard negotiations, ceremonial signings and handshake photo opps.

“Extreme decision-making surrounded by these seemingly benign arrangements struck me: the idea that these castrated flowers, removed from their natural state, are placed in this decorative position around men believing they can influence the course of evolution and politics and economics and whatever else,” Ms. Simon said.

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The show, which

expands on work she showed last year at the prestigious Venice Biennale, consists of large-scale photos of the reconstituted bouquets, along with sculptures that contain the actual floral specimens, delicately preserved.

The starting point for her project was the 1944 United Nations conference in Bretton Woods, N.H., which led to the formation of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, an event that helped precipitate economic globalization.

Focusing on nations that attended the conference while scouring archival photographs and newsreels, she fixed on 36 international accords that took place between 1968 and 2014, seeking to identify the flowers at each.



Works by Taryn Simon as her new exhibition "Paperwork and the Will of Capital" was being installed at the Gagosian Gallery. The show opens Feb 18. PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Events range from a 1974 nuclear-cooperation agreement between France and Iraq

(hybrid tea roses) to a 1994 accord internationalizing intellectual-property rights (miniature date palm) to a decision to ban third-party ownership of soccer players' economic rights (cymbidium, lobster claw).

Ms. Simon said she was particularly interested in cases where political alliances fluctuate and economic forces prompt “reversals of behavior” between nations.

A 2008 settlement between Libya and the U.S., for example, settled all outstanding terrorism-related lawsuits with money whose origin wasn't ever disclosed, but which was believed to have come from U.S. companies with Libyan investments.

One 2014 deal brokered by Australia, meanwhile, allowed it to unload refugees to Cambodia in exchange for economic aid, despite the latter nation's problematic human-rights record.

The idea that principles can be pliable and that intended outcomes often backfire or dissolve ties into Ms. Simon's previous work, which has often focused on the instability of “facts.”

Her 2002 photo series “The Innocents,” for example, featured wrongly convicted prisoners after their release. And “A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII,” a 2011 set of photographs and text with deep research into bloodlines around the globe, contemplated elements of chance bound up in fate.

For the flower series, Ms. Simon painstakingly recreated the bouquets she found in historical images and then photographed them herself, to display in large 7-by-6-foot scale on the wall.

Each photo is framed in thick mahogany, to evoke the aesthetics of executive meeting spaces, with a notch cut out for written descriptions of the agreements each bouquet attends.

All the flowers were identified with assistance from botanist Daniel Atha, conservation program manager at the New York Botanical Garden, who helped Ms. Simon pinpoint flower species from sometimes-difficult old photos and film stills, and who likened her detailed approach to that of a taxonomist.

“The moment you start to scratch the surface of her work you become aware of this incredibly meticulous and exacting research and immense curiosity,” said Louise Neri, a director Gagosian Gallery who worked with Ms. Simon, 41 years old, on the decidedly



Taryn Simon's work "Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia. Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014." PHOTO: TARYN SIMON/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

information-dense and conceptually interconnected show.

Once identified, the blossoms were ordered from the world's largest flower market in Aalsmeer, Netherlands, which moves about 20 million flowers a day from origins around the globe.

Such sourcing calls attention to the idea of the "impossible bouquet," a concept from old-master still-life painting that valued representations of flower arrangements that couldn't exist all at once at the same time.



Source image with botanist's identifications, for "Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Government of Australia Relating to the Settlement of Refugees in Cambodia. Ministry of Interior, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, September 26, 2014." PHOTO: SIV CHANNA/THE CAMBODIA DAILY/TARYN SIMON

Before air travel and speedy networks made everything ever-accessible, flowers were dependent on season and locality as opposed to “operating in this instant-gratification flow of goods,” Ms. Simon said.

Once photographed, each flower was pressed on herbarium paper to be displayed as specimens in sculptures that will also stand sentry in the gallery show. These pieces were inspired by Ms. Simon’s interest in work by a Scottish horticulturalist, George Sinclair, who was believed to have informed Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and its “survival of the fittest” aftereffects.

While “Paperwork and the Will of Capital” ranks among Ms. Simon’s most complex works, it is in some ways among the most simple.

“There is a comedy in them,” Ms. Simon said of unwitting bouquets that sat in on meetings that could be both blundering and profound. “There’s something amusing when you deconstruct any stage of power.”