

MUSEUM REVIEW

A moral examination



COURTESY WILSON CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

A COLD AESTHETIC: Taryn Simon's carefully organized portraits in "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII"—above, Ukrainian orphans—show people decontextualized, often almost expressionless. Her explanation of her work focuses on the contrast between the portraits, which are all in some way about bloodlines or lineal descents, and the chaos into which her subjects—genocide victims, AIDS patients and others—are cast.

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BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

Taryn Simon's art doesn't look like it was made by an individual. Her photographic displays are so orderly and spare that one might think they were assembled by a committee, perhaps human rights activists documenting some horrendous government crime, or lawyers laying out their case for a class-action suit. Row after row of relentlessly similar portraits have the limited expressive power of a high school yearbook, or a Most Wanted poster on a post office wall. Every portrait is carefully numbered, and every number refers to a minimalist caption on a text panel nearby. The aesthetic is cold, methodical and meticulous.

The tone of Simon's monumental photographic project, "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII," now on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, is so at odds with

its subject matter that one at first suspects a joke, a conceptual smirk hidden somewhere in its reams of material. For four years, Simon traveled the world documenting the impact of genocide in the former Yugoslavia, the effects of thalidomide on a family in Scotland, polygamy, faith healing and AIDS in Kenya, and 15 other “chapters” that are almost equally serious and sobering. Every one of her chapters has the basic ingredients of a National Geographic cover story: a view through the lens of anthropology, environmental science or sociology into some essential conflict between ancient and modern values, some lingering historical trauma, some collision of religion and modernity.

But Simon’s work lies on the antipodal dark side of the planet from National Geographic. Her portraits show people decontextualized, not in their homes or going about their business, but sitting on a stool, against a generic background, and often wearing almost expressionless faces. People reduced to data points.

Simon assembles her own idiosyncratic archives, clinical troves of evidence rather than emotional, activist or inspirational narratives. As she lines up galleries of orphans in Ukraine and albinos in Tanzania (whose skin color leaves them under constant threat of violence from human “poachers”), the dispassionate documentary tone becomes confusing. What is at the heart of this project? Is it about human misery? Or about the way photographs are used to document that misery? Or is there something perversely “artistic” underneath the whole thing, a game, a bit of performance art, an artistic imitation and critique of the documentary impulse, as if Simon is a one-woman representative of the juridical wing of the Dada movement?

Even the catalogue of the exhibition, an enormous black volume, seems to wink at the very misery it contains. Its 773 pages are contained in a heavy, official-looking cover that looks as if it should be a collected library edition of an obscure medical or scientific journal.

Simon’s explanation of the project focuses on the contrast between the portraits, which are all in some way about bloodlines



CAROLINE LACEY/CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

or lineal descents, and the chaos of life that leads people into the maw of fortune, into war, or exploitation, or crime, or in one case a deadly blood feud between two Brazilian families. But this explanation is almost as confounding as the project itself, as dry and unhelpful as the captions that form a central part of her display.

Terrifying, brilliant work

So consider the rabbits. Chapter VI turns away from human conflicts and takes up the subject of rabbits, but with the same thorough, seemingly institutional approach. In 1859, her text panels says, “twenty-four European rabbits were introduced to Australia.” Those rabbits had no natural predators, and they have multiplied to such an extent that their depredations have become an environmental disaster for the native ecosystem.

Using the same photographic approach, the same simple bench and pale, ivory background, Simon has photographed dozens of Australian rabbits, carefully organized to show their descent in three basic bloodlines. But the rabbits are part of an experiment: Scientists are searching for diseases with which to inject them, and thus reduce or eliminate the non-native rabbit population. Nearby, just as she does with her human chapters, Simon has a box of texts and captions that give a minimal explanation of the rabbits and the disease that has been introduced to kill them, including the observation that all the rabbits in her portraits either died of the disease or were euthanized. Another panel shows an image of dead rabbits, and a rather absurd chocolate “bilby,” an Australian marsupial that has been promoted as an alternative to the Easter Bunny.

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COURTESY WILSON CENTRE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

'A LIVING MAN DECLARED DEAD': These images gathered by Taryn Simon, carefully numbered and divided into chapters, help tell the story of genocide carried out against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Simon's work asks viewers to think as an institution would, without appeal to emotion, to see problems rather than people.

Simon acknowledges that this chapter is one of the rare — perhaps the only — instance of humor in her series. But it is Swiftian humor, dark and cutting, and it brings the whole project into focus.

Consider a basic set of reactions to the rabbits, which are photographed under glass and carefully numbered like her human subjects: The rabbits are adorable, but environmentalists tell us they are destroying the ecosystem; therefore, they must die. We must harden our hearts against their cuteness. If we trust science, we must resist their appeal to our more tender sympathies.

It is that appeal to harden the heart that makes Simon's work so terrifying and brilliant. In a stroke, the viewer is in exactly the same place as a mid-level bureaucrat authorizing the use of trucks for ethnic cleansing, or a military leader signing off on a little collateral damage as the bombs begin to fall. Simon's rabbits make the banality of evil palpable, the way in which we learn to look past the humanity in an image when some higher power — political, religious, scientific — tells us it's necessary.

Confronting a dark history

One of the most disturbing things about Simon's archives is their obvious affinity

with some of the most ugly photographic projects of the 20th century. Her images remind one of the photographic documentation of human physiognomy made in the service of the pseudo-science of eugenics, or Francis Galton's efforts to use composite photographs to reveal basic criminal types, or the meticulous photographic records of genocide victims kept at Tuol Sleng, the notorious Khmer Rouge prison in Cambodia. The photographic archive has a dark history, which Simon's work confronts daringly but elliptically.

No surprise, then, that one important chapter in her series directly addresses the Nazi past, although in a typically oblique and unemotional way. The descendants of Hans Frank, "Hitler's personal legal adviser and governor-general of occupied Poland," are catalogued in Chapter XI, though many of them declined to participate for obvious reasons. Standing in for the missing relatives are blank photographs, and in some cases, photographs of clothing, a personal substitute for the absent subjects. One assumes that those who were willing to participate did so because they've made their peace with the long shadow cast over the family by Frank's crimes, that the connection "by blood" to a perpetrator of great crimes is ir-



CAROLINE LACEY/COURTESY CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

ORGANIZATIONAL FETISH: Simon's exhibit is at the Corcoran Gallery of Art through Feb. 24.

relevant to their personal values and sense of responsibility or guilt.

The Nazi chapter demonstrates how the closeness of "blood" relation still haunts us, how the sins of the father are still visited down the generations. Simon's charts, organized by what seems at first a fussy or arcane obsession with family or blood connections, remind us of the astonishing and outsize role these connections continue to play in moral life. Everything is tribal.

A different perspective

When religion fails us (a recurring theme of several harrowing chapters), when science can give no moral certainty, we tend to focus on preserving and helping those closest to us. A simple example might well be how many millions of Americans think about global warming, which threatens the whole family of man: Even as we acknowledge the threat, we fall back on the necessity of getting our kids to school, preserving our immediate lifestyle, taking care of those closest to us.

Simon's chapters, although seemingly dry and archival, emerge as remarkably profound meditations on how we sort through the world, what ethical and moral impulses we honor and which ones we squelch. Her work insists on a more fundamentally rational relationship to photographs, and especially to photographs of people. It stands in stark contrast to projects such as Edward Steichen's 1955 Family of Man exhibition, which used photographs from around the

world to create an essentially sentimental view of the supposedly universal bonds between people of vastly different cultures. Her portraits call into question the fundamental appeal of the human face, the sense that looking into the eyes of someone in a photograph somehow establishes a real and emotional connection. Although it seems, at first, that anyone who can't respond to the humanity of the faces staring out of these photographs is morally stunted. But the crux of many chapters, and ultimately of the entire exhibition, is that the appeal of the face is blunt, primitive, and inadequate to sorting through the larger moral and political questions raised in the exhibition.

So the organizational fetish, the institutional tone, emerges not just as an approach or style, but as the subject of the entire project. Simon's work asks us to think, for a moment, like an institution, without appeal to emotion, to see problems rather than people, to sharpen the moral sensibility on the hard edge of pure utilitarianism. It doesn't endorse this kind of thinking, but it invites us to indulge it, so we can see it in operation, understand its appeal and its power. It's a cliché to praise art for its ambiguity, its lack of hard answers. But the hollow, dizzy feeling you may have after "A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters" is the real and vital shock of being left without answers of any sort, confused and numb about the way forward for a species that manufactures so much of its own misery.

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