

No more secrets

The American photographer **Taryn Simon** will step into a room full of glowing nuclear waste if that's the of the *Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a new collection of photographs in which she throws light into some of the

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things,' the poet Robert Browning wrote in *Bishop Blougram's Apology* (1855). It is a line that has inspired writers from Graham Greene, who said in his 1971 memoir *A Sort of Life* that it could serve as an epigraph to all his novels, to Orhan Pamuk, who sets it at the beginning of his novel *Snow*. It could equally well serve as an introduction to the photography of a woman whose aesthetic is one of stretching the limits of what we are allowed to see and know, of going to the ambiguous boundaries where dangers – physical, intellectual, even moral – may await. Taryn Simon doesn't think twice about entering a room filled with nuclear waste capsules glowing blue with radiation that, were you not shielded against it, would kill you in seconds. I am always immensely grateful to people who do impossible things on my behalf and bring back the picture. It means I don't have to do it, but at least I know what it looks like. So one's first feeling on looking at many of these extraordinary images is gratitude (followed quickly by a momentary pang of envy: the sedentary writer's salute to the woman of action). I once knew a sports photographer who bribed a course attendant at Aintree racecourse to allow him to sit wedged in at the foot of Becher's Brook so that he could bring back 'impossible' photographs of the mighty racehorses jumping over his head. If one of them had fallen on him, of course, he would almost certainly have been killed, but he knew, as Simon knows, that one of the arts of great photography is to get yourself into the place – the radioactive room, the animal disease centre, the racecourse fence – in which the photograph is about to occur, and seize it when it does.

'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence,' the narrator of my novel *Midnight's Children* reflects. If Saleem Sinai had seen Simon's photographs he would have realised that he was more right than he knew. Look at the innocent orange and yellow cables coming up through the floor in an almost empty room in New Jersey, protected only by the simplest metal cage: they have travelled 4,029.6 miles (Simon likes to be precise) across the ocean floor from Saunton Sands in north Devon to bring America news from elsewhere – 60,211,200 simultaneous voice conversations, Simon says. The point about these cables is that you might have guessed that such things probably existed but you almost certainly had no notion of where they were, or how many, or how thick, or what colour, until you saw this picture. You could not have imagined your voice into this banal yet magical room, but it has been here, transformed into little digital parcels of energy. Every day we pass through secret worlds like the worlds inside these cables, never suspecting what is happening to us. Which, then, is the phantom world and which the 'real': ours, or theirs? Are we no more than the ghosts in these machines?

Ours is an age of secrets. Above, beneath and beside what Fernand Braudel called the 'structures of everyday life' are structures anything but everyday, lives about which we may have heard something but have almost certainly seen nothing – and other lives about which we have never heard and yet others in whose existence it is hard to believe even when we are shown the pictorial evidence.

How do you get into the world's most secret places, and get out with the picture? The great journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski said he survived the world's most dangerous war zones by making himself seem small and unimportant, not worthy of the warlord's bullet. But Simon doesn't deal in stolen images; these are formal, highly realised, often carefully posed pictures, needing full co-operation.

When so many make such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of people, an artist such as Simon is an invaluable counter-force. (*Turn to p55*)

US Customs and Border Protection, Contraband Room

John F Kennedy International Airport, New York

All these items (including African cane rats infected with maggots, Andean potatoes, bush meat, giant African snail, pig nose and raw poultry) were seized from passengers arriving in the US at JFK Terminal 4 over 48 hours.

Prohibited agricultural items can harbour foreign animal and plant pests and diseases that could damage US crops, livestock, pets and the environment. All items seized are identified, dissected and then either ground up or incinerated



only way to catch the image she wants. **Salman Rushdie** introduces *An American Index*
world's most hidden places



© TARYN SIMON/STEDL/GAGOSIAN

**Transatlantic
Sub-marine Cables
Reaching Land
VSNL International,
Avon, New Jersey**

These VSNL sub-marine telecommunications cables extend thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean. Capable of transmitting more than 60 million simultaneous voice conversations, these underwater fibre-optic cables stretch from Saunton Sands in north Devon to the coast of New Jersey. The cables run below ground and emerge directly into the VSNL International headquarters, where signals are amplified and split into distinctive wavelengths enabling transatlantic phone calls and internet transmissions



**Playboy, Braille
Edition**

**Playboy Enterprises
Inc, New York**

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, a division of the US Library of Congress, provides a free national library of Braille and recorded materials for the blind and physically handicapped. Magazines are selected on the basis of demonstrated reader interest. They include a Braille edition of *Playboy*. Approximately 10 million American adults read *Playboy* every month. It has included articles by writers such as Norman Mailer, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut and Malcolm X





Avian Quarantine Facility
The New York Animal Import Centre,
New York

The picture shows European finches seized upon illegal importation into the US and African grey parrots in quarantine. All imported birds not of US or Canadian origin must undergo a 30-day quarantine in a US Department of Agriculture animal import quarantine facility. Birds are placed in incubators called isolettes that control the spread of disease. Each year the New York Animal Import Centre processes upwards of 4,000 horses, 400 swine, 40 llamas and 1,100 species of bird



Cryopreservation Unit
Cryonics Institute
Clinton Township,
Michigan

This cryopreservation unit holds the bodies of Rhea and Elaine Ettinger, the mother and first wife of cryonics pioneer Robert Ettinger.

The Institute offers cryostasis (freezing) services for individuals and pets upon death. Cryostasis is practised with the hope that lives will ultimately be extended through future developments in science, technology and medicine. A person is infused with ice-preventive substances and quickly cooled to a temperature where physical decay virtually stops. The Institute charges a one-off fee of up to \$35,000 for cryostasis



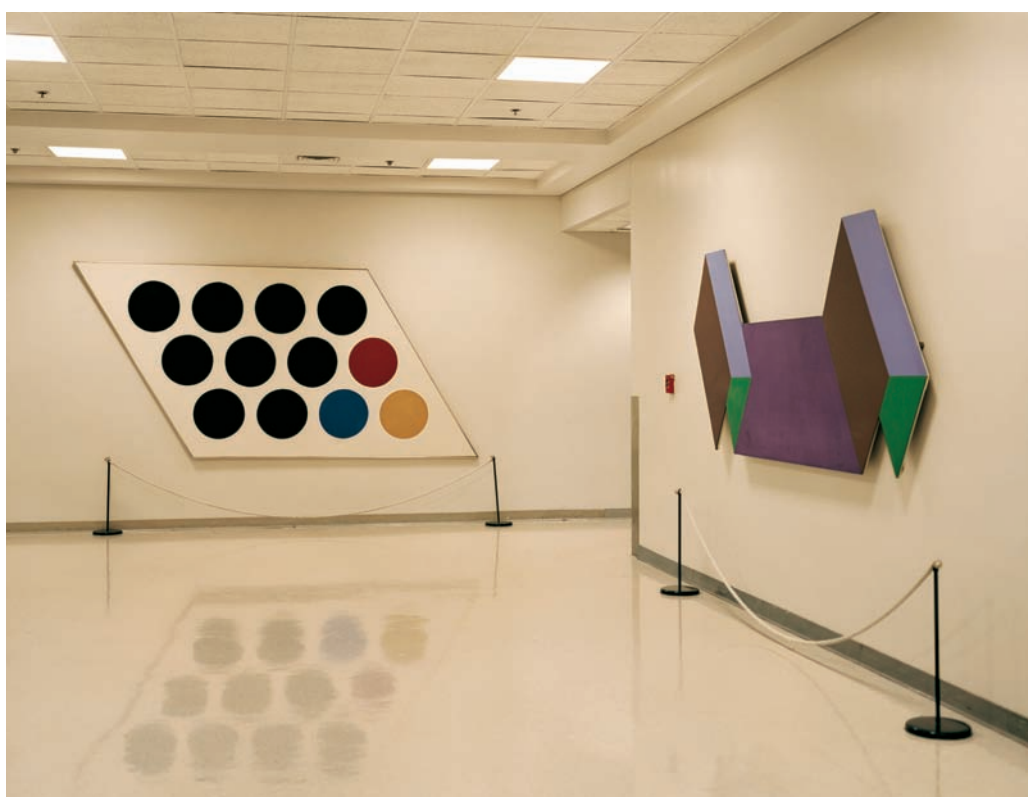
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**Research Marijuana Crop Grow Room
National Centre for Natural Products
Research, Oxford, Mississippi**

The National Centre for Natural Products Research (NCNPR) is the only facility in the US licensed to cultivate cannabis for scientific research. It is also responsible for analysing seized marijuana for potency trends, herbicide residuals such as paraquat, and fingerprint identification. While 11 states have legalised the medical use of marijuana, a 2005 Supreme Court decision allows for the arrest of any individual caught using it for this purpose

**The Central Intelligence Agency, Art
CIA Original HQ, Langley, Virginia**

The Fine Arts Commission of the CIA is responsible for acquiring art to display in the Agency's buildings. These pieces are by Thomas Downing, a member of the Washington Colour School. Since its founding in 1947, the CIA has participated in both covert and public cultural diplomacy throughout the world. It is speculated that some CIA involvement in the arts was designed to counter Soviet Communism by helping to popularise what it considered pro-American thought and aesthetic sensibilities



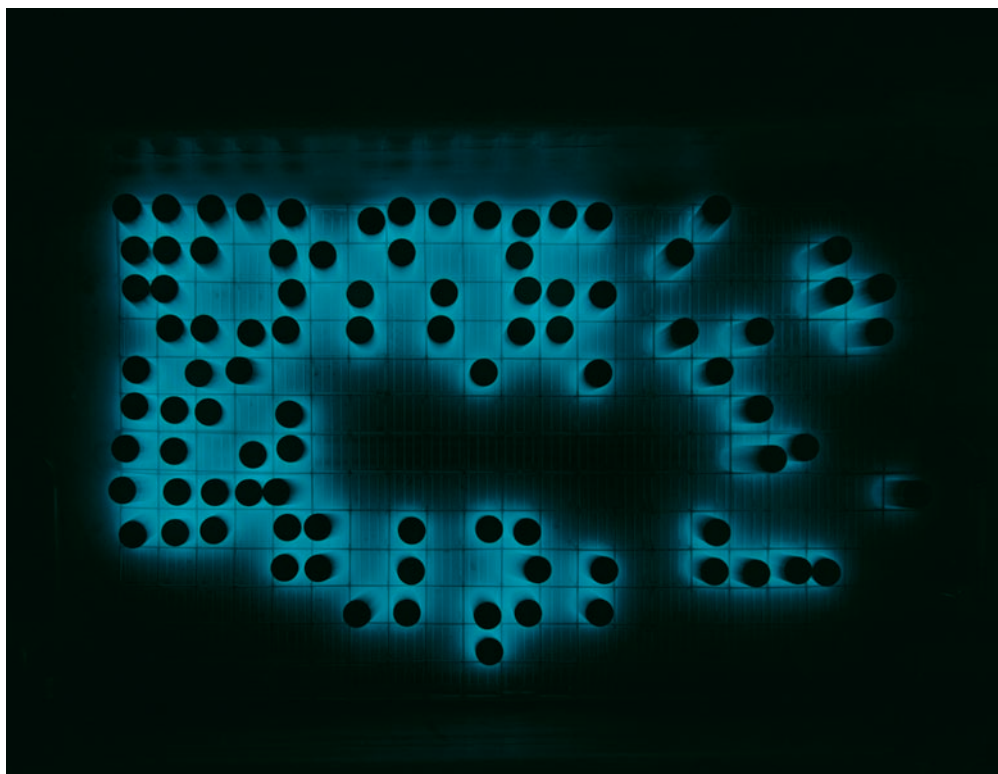
Democracy needs visibility, light. It is in the unseen darkness that unsavoury things huddle and grow. Somehow, Simon has persuaded a good few denizens of hidden worlds not to scurry for shelter when the light is switched on, as cockroaches do, and vampires, but to pose proudly for her invading lens.

Not for her the shaky hand-held camera, the grainy monochrome film stock of the 'real'. Her subjects – parrots in quarantine cages, marijuana plants grown for research in William Faulkner's home town of Oxford, Mississippi – are suffused with light, captured with a bright, hyper-realist, high-definition clarity that gives a kind of star status to these hidden worlds, whose occupants might be thought to be the opposites of stars. In her vision, they are dark stars brought into the light. What is not known, rarely seen, possesses a form of occult glamour, and it is that black beauty which she so brightly, and brilliantly, reveals.

Simon uses text as few photographers do, as an integral part of the work. There are images that do not reveal their meaning until the text is read. There are (rare) instances when the text is more bizarrely interesting than the image. Cataloguing the confiscated contents of the US Customs and Border Protection Contraband Room at John F Kennedy Airport, Simon offers up a kind of surrealist fugue, an ode to forbidden fruit (and meat) that outdoes even her cornucopia of an image.

For the most part, however, her images easily hold their own. The smoky, white-on-white portrait of the degree-zero cryogenic preservation pod in which the bodies of the mother and wife of the cryonics pioneer Robert Ettinger are frozen is beyond spooky, speaking so eloquently of our fear of death and our dreams of immortality that few words are necessary. And in at least one instance there's a remarkable piece of 'found' art. Who could have predicted that those 90 stainless-steel capsules containing radioactive cesium and strontium submerged in a pool of water and giving off that blue radiation would so closely resemble, when photographed from above, the map of the United States of America? When a photographer comes up with an image as potently expressive as that, even a dedicated word-person such as myself is bound to concede that such a picture is worth at least a thousand words.

Taryn Simon: 'An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar' (Steidl), is available for £40 plus £1.25 p&p (expect at least 30 days for delivery). To order, call Telegraph Books on 0870-428 4112. The exhibition is on at the Whitney Museum of Modern American Art, New York, until June 24



© TARYN SIMON/STEIDL/GAGSIAN

The Hoh Rainforest Understory and Forest Structure Olympic National Park, Washington (top)

This is the largest preserved coastal temperate rainforest in the world. It is considered to be the wettest spot in the continental US, receiving 140-167 inches of rain per year. Located within Olympic National Park, the Hoh is fully protected from commercial exploitation. Rainforest beyond the park's borders has been logged heavily over the past century. Pacific Yew, specific to the region and once considered insignificant, was recently discovered to harbour Taxol, a natural compound now being used to treat cancers

Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility

Cherenkov Radiation Hanford Site, US Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State

Submerged in a pool of water at Hanford Site are 1,936 stainless-steel nuclear-waste capsules containing cesium and strontium. Combined, they contain more than 120 million curies of radioactivity, estimated to be the most curies under one roof in the US. The blue glow is created by the Cherenkov Effect which describes the electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle moves faster than light through a transparent medium. The temperature of the capsules is as high as 330F. The water shields against radiation; standing a foot from an unshielded capsule, you would receive a lethal dose in under 10 seconds