

Commentary by Ronald Dworkin

Secrecy is an enemy of justice and shame is its ally. We need to see much that we cannot see, and we need to see it as Taryn Simon presents it – starkly, without political gloss. Simon explores not only what is hidden but the nature of the hidden. She shows the ways and dimensions of secrecy and its many shades of containment; in particular she reveals how much we can contrive, out of policy, distaste or shame, to hide from ourselves.

Some of what she shows is hidden in a straightforward way: it is inaccessible by nature and requires effort that is nearly impossible for most of us. We know that bears hibernate in forests somewhere but we have no way of confronting a bear sow hibernating with cubs at her breast. These are secrets of delight. We take pleasure in our own place in nature and discovering what is hidden there expands our world's limits.

Much else, however, is hidden not by nature, but by people attempting to perpetuate illusion. We trust juries as engines of justice where truth shines through to ordinary citizens and we shrink from the sight of the jury simulation room where lawyers practice how to manipulate this process. Some of what is hidden from us is hidden by people with the power and will to hide. We are not allowed to enter the CIA headquarters in Langley where the nation's deepest secrets are kept, and are therefore among the privileged few when Simon shows us what it is like to be there, lets us stare at the terrifying over-lit hall that rises from the gigantic emblem sculpted in the floor. Of course the CIA needs to keep secrets, but the grandeur of its headquarters declares the aesthetic authority of powerful people who make secrecy their way of life.

Many of Simon's photographs surprise us in a different way: they show us something that we want not to believe. We are entertained by exotic animals in our zoos and circuses but not the casualties, like the defective white tiger, that the required inbreeding creates. We do not want to see the woman in a gynecological chair having her hymen sewed so that her future husband will not doubt her virginity, or racists in the trappings of their bigotry, or sexual assault kits that remind us how routine rape has become. These are not, we think and hope, American sights. But they are, and she makes us acknowledge them.

Some of her photographs confront us with the laws we enact, the policies our government pursues in our names. We struggle to keep poor immigrants from our country, but ignore the complicated rituals executed daily on our Mexican border. We want security, but are disturbed by the group portrait of South American trainees at the Institute for Security Cooperation because we worry about what they are being trained to do. Most of us want, apparently, to kill murderers in our prisons, but we do not want to watch them while they wait for death. We do not want to see the ghoulish "recreation facility" that Simon captures in her most chilling picture. This is the secrecy of guilt: we want not to see the suffering we create and inflict ourselves, collectively, for our own comfort – comfort that turns to shame when we are forced to gaze on what we have done.

A great many of Simon's photographs are also strikingly beautiful, and that raises a further question. This beauty may be only an added, independent bonus – a gift from an artist with a magic eye

and a large camera that is unrelated to her theme. But I don't believe so. The qualities that make, in their different ways, these objects hidden also charge the aesthetics of their photographic impact. The beauty of Simon's pictures – her powerless Great White shark in its glass cage, her radioactive waste glowing blue and deadly, the molten frame of her revolver cooling for murder, her pitifully chaste cryo-preservation chamber holding frozen people from the past, her elegant flayed African Oryx killed for expensive sport – is heightened by the anxiety we feel when these strange worlds are unhidden.