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Taryn Simon The Picture Collection

By Kenneth Baker

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New York artist Taryn Simon came to San Francisco recently for the opening of her exhibition "The Picture Collection" at the John Berggruen Gallery.

It consists of Simon's photographs of arrays of existing pictures drawn from the topical folders in an immense archive: the Picture Collection of the New York Public Library.

Simon's previous projects have also involved surveys of little-considered realities. "Contraband" had her spending days at John F. Kennedy International Airport, photographing all items seized by airport security or by customs officers. "An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar" examined places and things peculiar to various institutions - government, medicine, entertainment - that the public never sees.

"The Picture Collection" continues her fascination with systems of sorting, cataloging and conceptualizing.

Q: With what sort of self-set rules did you approach this project?

A: I always have too many rules. I was trying to let myself be a little freer with this one. I'm going into a system that's already ruled.

I actually started with the words, looking at their list of folders and selecting some that interested me. There are 44 pieces in total. You're only seeing an abridged version here. And then I'd go to the folders and see what they contained, and then decide if I still wanted to work with the visuals.

Q: Why did you stop where you did? It seems like this could be endless.

A: It could. I don't know, I always find myself stopping a series at a certain number. It's usually around the same number, actually.

Q: How does this follow from your previous work?

A: The impulse to archive for me is about being able to say something you can't say, that we collect all these things and something is said in the mass, but it's between the lines. In the process of seeing all those images, something happens between it all that's maybe unspeakable and

uncollectible. ... I feel that the library itself has that character, and I wanted to look at that in comparison with an online project I started. You can see it at imageatlas.org. I did it with Aaron Swartz, the Internet activist who just committed suicide. ... We built this search engine where you can take any term - "vulture" or "wealth" or "swimming pool" - and type it into this search function. It then translates that word into any of several languages and then inserts that word into all the local search engines in all of those countries. ... And it'll show you the top six images associated with that word in all these different countries. Sometimes there is a flattening, a word like "sadness," say, and then there are words where there are incredible differences.

Q: Considering its obsolescence, is the Picture Collection in jeopardy of being destroyed?

A: I've asked them that and they don't answer directly, but you definitely get that sense when you're there. Maybe someone will swoop in and purchase it. ... It's kind of like the map, this beautiful way of organizing that becomes an art form in itself because it's no longer practical. ... I don't think anyone will junk it. It's more likely to become this precious, valuable item.

Q: There's a good deal of humor in your selection. Is that inherent in it, or is that just you?

A: It's both really. I just decided to go in that direction.

Q: There's no sense of the volume of material in any of the folders.

A: No. I almost wanted it to be as if you're there, pulling these things out.

Q: Do you consider yourself a photographer, a conceptual artist or something else?

A: My medium is text, graphic design and photography, combined and equally important. I spend a lot of time on the research, this invisible process that lies behind what you see. But I always start with an idea. I'm not going around looking for images. It's much more about the concept, and then I use whatever means I need to promote that concept. Right now I'm working on a performance piece that has absolutely no photographic element. {sbox }

Taryn Simon: The Picture Collection: Photographs. Through March 30. John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., San Francisco. (415) 781-4629. www.berggruen.com.