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404 George Street  
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+613 9417 1549  
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AN AMERICAN INDEX  
OF THE  
HIDDEN AND UNFAMILIAR

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TARYN SIMON

15 OCTOBER – 12 DECEMBER 2010



Presented with  
Melbourne International Arts Festival

**IMA**  
Institute of  
Modern Art

An Institute of  
Modern Art,  
Brisbane touring  
exhibition

“*In a historical period in which so many people are making such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of the people, an artist like Taryn Simon is an invaluable counter-force. Democracy needs visibility, accountability, 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, brandishing their tattoos and Confederate flags.*

*Simon's is not the customary aesthetic of reportage—the shaky hand-held camera, the grainy monochrome film stock of the 'real'. Her subjects...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 opposite of stars. In her vision of them, 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.”*

—Salman Rushdie, 'Foreword' in Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Steidl Gottingen, Germany, 2007, p.7.

## DESCRIPTION

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In response to the traumatic events of September 11, 2001, North American photographer Taryn Simon created the series, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2006). Taryn Simon chose to examine North American culture from within. Her photographic subjects range across realms of:

- Science and Medicine
- Visual Art and Popular Culture
- Structures of Government, Citizenship and National Security
- Religions and Belief Systems

Drawing together a bewildering range of images and issues, Simon's *Index* is a collection of photographs that unveil aspects of US national identity through its obscurities, curiosities and secrets. Her subjects include glowing radioactive capsules in an underwater nuclear-waste storage facility, a Braille edition of *Playboy*, a death row prisoners' exercise yard, a genetically inbred tiger, a human corpse rotting in a Forensic Research Facility, a black bear in hibernation, piles of food seized at customs, the Death Star from *Star Wars* and a great white shark in captivity.

Simon's images confront the divide between those with and without the privilege of access. Shot over a four-year period, mostly with a large-format camera, Simon's images are in turn ethereal, foreboding, deadpan and cinematic. Simon's *Index* encapsulates vivid insights into the contemporary American psyche.

Making the images required full co-operation from each subject, authority or organisation. According to Taryn Simon the biggest obstacle to doing her work is gaining access to particular locations. It took her up to a year to gain permission to photograph some of the high-security zones like government-regulated quarantine sites, nuclear waste storage facilities, death row and CIA offices. Discovering, negotiating and securing permission and access is a significant aspect of Simon's project, adding to the comprehensive and overwhelming effect of the exhibition.

In this body of work, Simon makes use of the annotated photograph's capacity to engage and inform the public. Through combining text and image, the project underscores a complicated relationship between the photographs and their contexts. Simon's aesthetic tends to be very direct and unsentimental. The images in this exhibition are compelling for their exceptional content and stark visual clarity. The strangeness of US culture shines.

### COVER IMAGE

Taryn Simon  
*White Tiger (Kenny)*  
Chromogenic print  
94.6 × 113 cm



*U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Contraband Room*  
John F. Kennedy International Airport  
Queens, New York

African cane rats infested with maggots, African yams (dioscorea), Andean potatoes, Bangladeshi cucurbit plants, bush meat, cherimoya fruit, curry leaves (murraya), dried orange peels, fresh eggs, giant African snail, impala skull cap, jackfruit seeds, June plum, kola nuts, mango, okra, passion fruit, pig nose, pig mouths, pork, raw poultry (chicken), South American pig head, South American tree tomatoes, South Asian lime infected with citrus canker, sugar cane (poaceae), uncooked meats, unidentified sub tropical plant in soil.

All items in the photograph were seized from the baggage of passengers arriving in the U.S. at JFK Terminal 4 from abroad over a 48-hour period. All seized items are identified, dissected, and then either ground up or incinerated. JFK processes more international passengers than any other airport in the United States.

Chromogenic print, 94.6 × 113 cm framed, edition of 7

## RELEVANT CURRICULUM LINKS

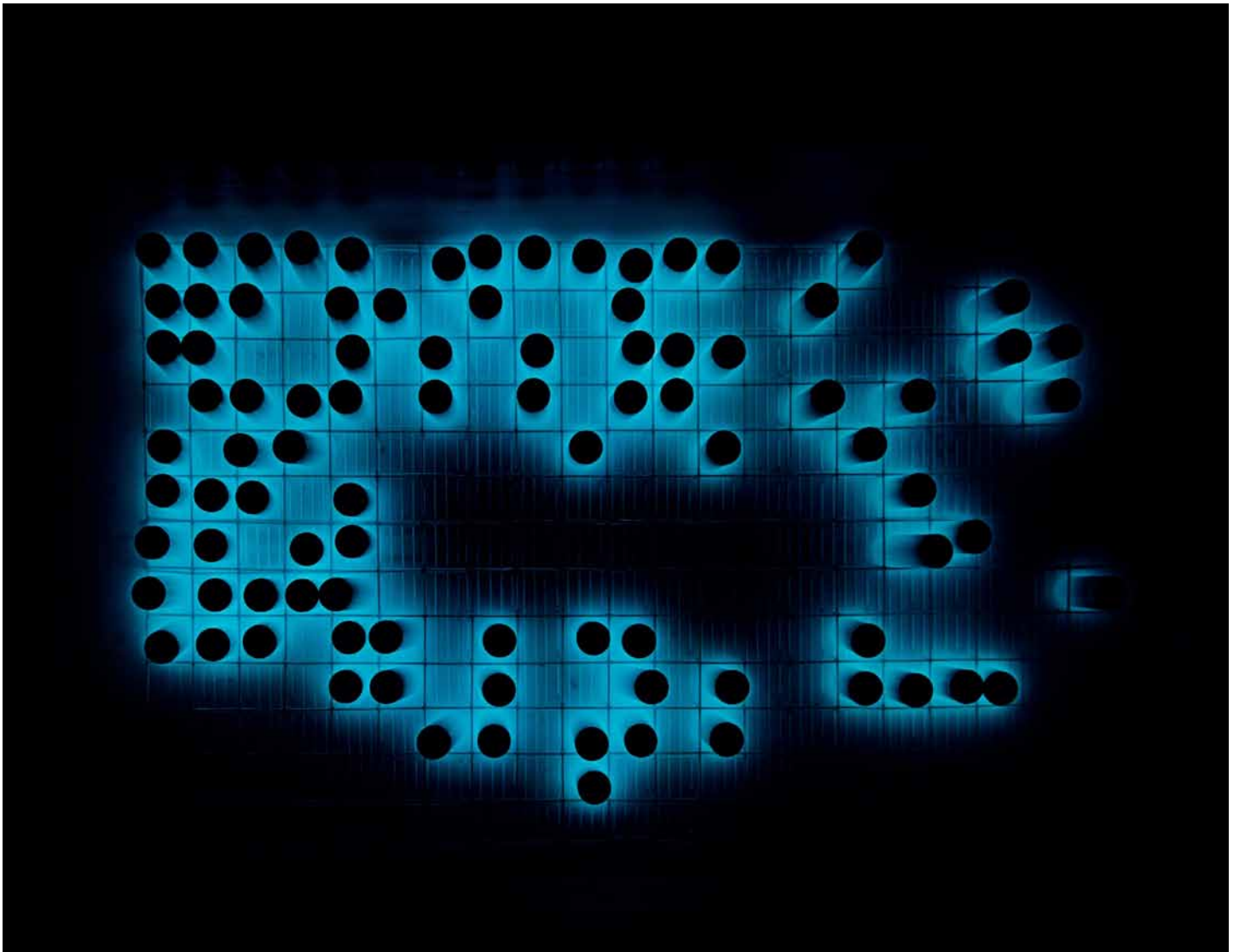
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### The Visual Arts

*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* offers a range of learning opportunities for middle and upper secondary Visual Arts students.

#### EXPLORING AND RESPONDING TO ARTWORK

1. Use Taryn Simon's photographs and text as a starting point to consider the ways she explores US national identity. Discuss the contexts within which photographs were made. Explore the meanings and ideas communicated within artworks. Examine the media and techniques used to produce the artworks.
2. Salman Rushdie describes Taryn Simon as "*a woman who's aesthetic is one of stretching the limits of what we are allowed to see and to know*". What do you think are the most physically dangerous and intellectually challenging sites depicted within this body of work?
3. Research the subject matter of historical photographs made by earlier US photographers who sought to define American national identity through images of things that were a common part of the vernacular. Taryn Simon chooses to symbolise contemporary American identity through things that are uncommon and largely unknown. In an essay, compare and contrast these historical and contemporary approaches to representing US identity.
4. Research the aesthetic realism of American photographers Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Robert Frank. What similarities and differences exist between this historical documentary work and the work of Taryn Simon?
5. Select any image from the exhibition. Brainstorm and discuss the multiple truths and ideas this image represents to different people. For example, use the image *Great White Shark in Captivity* to explore how the following people may respond to the image:
  - Surfer
  - Member of the fishing industry
  - Environmentalist
  - Animal Rights Campaigner
6. Reflect on what you have newly discovered about US culture through viewing this body of work? Has anything surprised you? Why? Why not? What do you think influenced Taryn Simon to create this series of photographs?
7. What do you think is the overall effect of this exhibition on audiences? How did you respond to the exhibition? Do you think Australian audiences would experience the exhibition differently from US audiences?



*Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility*  
Cherenkov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. 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 over 120 million curies of radioactivity. It is estimated to be the most curies under one roof in the United States. The blue glow is created by the Cherenkov Effect which describes the electromagnetic radiation emitted when a charged particle, giving off energy, moves faster than light through a transparent medium. The temperatures of the capsules are as high as 330 degrees Fahrenheit. The pool of water serves as a shield against radiation; a human standing one foot from an unshielded capsule would receive a lethal dose of radiation in less than 10 seconds. Hanford is among the most contaminated sites in the United States.

Chromogenic print, 94.6 × 113 cm framed, edition of 7

## CURRICULUM LINKS TO OTHER STUDY AREAS

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This exhibition provides further learning opportunities for secondary students across several other study areas including English, Science and Civics.

### Science and Technology

Taryn Simon's *Index* challenges the limits of public understanding of science and medicine. Do you think an art gallery is a relevant context to address issues of science and technology? Choose a range of photographs depicting scientific subject matter as a starting point to discuss some contemporary scientific issues including:

- FORENSICS: *Forensic Anthropology Research Facility, Decomposing Corpse*
- NUCLEAR POWER: *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility*
- ASTRONOMY: *NASA Beach-house, NGC281 The Pacman Nebula; Lucasfilm Archives, Death Star II*
- MEDICAL ISSUES: *The Standardized Patient; Research Marijuana Crop Grow Room, Death With Dignity Act; Live HIV; Infectious Medical Waste Treatment Center; Hymenoplasty*
- CRYOGENICS: *Cryopreservation Unit*
- GENETICS: *White Tiger Selective Inbreeding*
- BIODIVERSITY: *Avian Quarantine; Hibernating Black Bear and Cubs; The Hoh Rainforest; Plum Island Animal Disease Centre; Great White Shark in Captivity*
- PHYSICS: *Dynamo III; Avalanche Control*
- MILITARY APPLICATIONS: *Exploding Warhead*
- METEOROLOGY: *Field Burning; Weather Modification*

## English

A picture is worth a thousand words and yet text forms an integral part of Simon's work.

1. Examine the interdependency of text and image within this exhibition and discuss the way both forms of communication work together to make meaning.
2. Imagine you are Taryn Simon. Where would you like to have access to take a photograph of something hidden and unfamiliar in Melbourne? Write a persuasive letter to the organisation/institution explaining your artistic intention and requesting access to a specific site.
3. Some images in the series such as *Playboy*, *Braille Edition* border on black humour and the absurd. Can you find any other examples of humour in the exhibition? Discuss other notions of humour such as farce, irony and sarcasm.

## Civics and Citizenship / Views and Values

Simon uncovers all manner of hidden and secret sites throughout the USA, offering an alternative guide to the country and its mindset. In doing so she raises consciousness of America's implicit values and power structures.

1. Use Taryn Simon's work as a starting point to identify and discuss some of the complex and contradictory values that have evolved within the US legal system such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, border protection, capital punishment and human rights. Identify images within the exhibition that address such US values and laws. Where do we as Australians stand in relation to these issues?
2. Remarkably Disneyland executives denied Taryn Simon access for this art project. Why do you think that Taryn Simon's photographic practice threatened the values of Disneyland?
3. What do you think is the overall effect of this exhibition on audiences? How did you respond to the exhibition? Do you think Australian audiences would experience the exhibition differently from US?



*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. Robert, author of *The Prospect of Immortality* and *Man into Superman* is still alive.

The Cryonics Institute offers cryostasis (freezing) services for individuals and pets upon death. Cryostasis is practiced with the hope that lives will ultimately be extended through future developments in science, technology, and medicine. When, and if, these developments occur, Institute members hope to awake to an extended life in good health, free from disease or the aging process. Cryostasis must begin immediately upon legal death. A person or pet is infused with ice-preventive substances and quickly cooled to a temperature where physical decay virtually stops. The Cryonics Institute charges \$28,000 for cryostasis if it is planned well in advance of legal death and \$35,000 on shorter notice.

Chromogenic print, 94.6 × 113 cm framed, edition of 7

## TARYN SIMON SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

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Born in New York in 1975, Taryn Simon is an art photographer who also works on assignment for *The New York Times*. Her photography and writing have featured in numerous publications. Simon's work is held in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. In 2001 she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography. Taryn Simon is represented by the prestigious Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Taryn Simon is a graduate of Brown University and a Guggenheim Fellow. She has been a visiting artist at Yale University, Bard College, Harvard University and Columbia University. Her photography and writing have been featured in numerous publications and broadcasts including *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Ted.com*, CNN, BBC and *Frontline*.

Simon is currently working on a global project that will be exhibited and published in Spring, 2011 at the Tate Modern, London and the Neue Nationale Galerie, Berlin. Simon will also be exhibiting a new work at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LINKS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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