

M U S É E

VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

TARYN SIMON

american, female, b 1975, black hair.

by nora landes

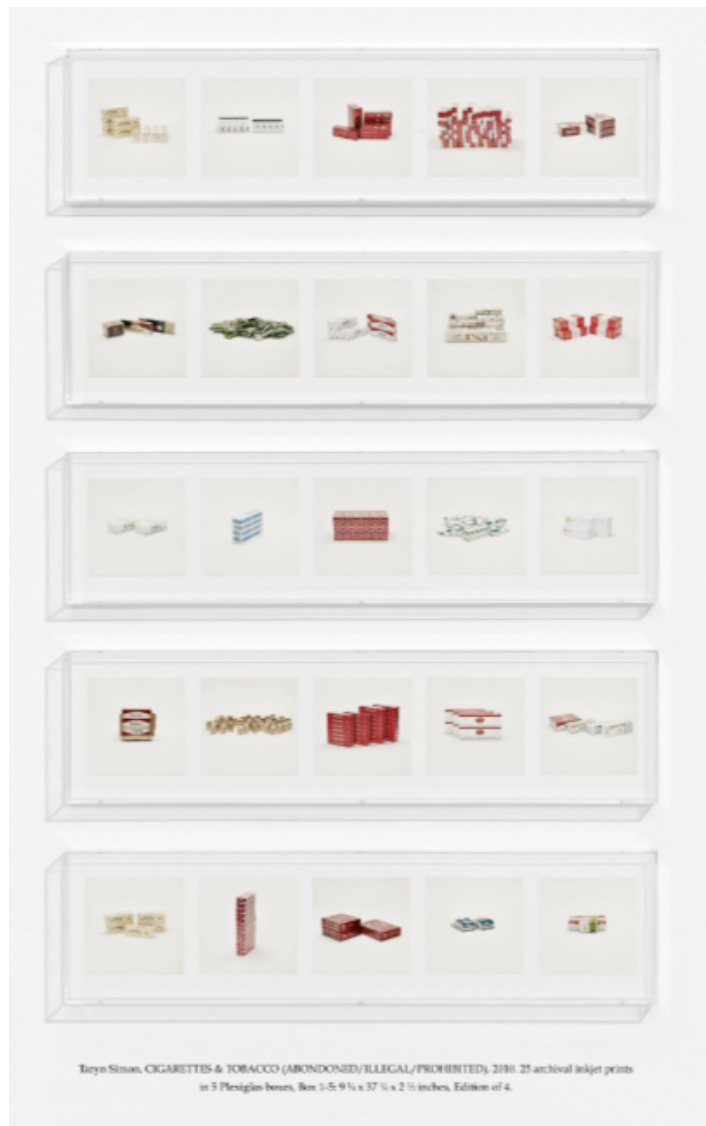
Taryn Simon's labor-intensive artistic process begins long before she even picks up her camera. She delves into research, absorbing all the minute, gritty details of a project before finally presenting a set of images carefully sectioned into categorized grids, paired with straightforward, descriptive text. Combining photographic and textual elements, her semiotic method forces the viewer to see what she sees and to understand the particular meaning she has ascribed to her work.

Simon's series *Contraband* allows the viewer only the information the artists explicitly puts forth. Goods confiscated by the U.S. customs officials at John F. Kennedy airport in New York are photographed against bland, dull gray backgrounds, that mirror the limbo in which these refugees are trapped. This is all we see. No back-story. No identified perpetrator. No connection to a larger economic picture. The fact that these things do exist but are left unseen is as much a vital component of the work as anything else. Though Simon leaves the greater contextual meaning of the work unseen, she leads the viewer, although presented with the illusion of interpretation, arrives at the same conclusion as the artist.

Drugs, contaminated meat, animal corpses, fake designer handbags, and pirated movies were all brought into the United States with a purpose. Whether this purpose is to satisfy the consumerist desires of Americans, for a foreigner to bring with them into the U.S. a little piece of home, it always has roots in the need for material; the greatest gratification lies in possession. The huge stockpiles of confiscated items at JFK only prove the continued importance of physical products in this digital age. The desire of Americans to have their needs met, even by illegal copies of products that oftentimes can already be found in the United States, drives an ongoing international system of production and sale of contraband. It is a system perpetuated by the acceptance and distribution of copies as well as the false notion that demand necessitates supply and justifies importation. Even if a product exists that fills a need or niche, there is a perceived necessity for more until the market is saturated by the same, tired, idea. Counterfeit Viagra only exists because there is someone in the U.S. who will buy it. Just knowing that pirated DVDs of *Lost* season four are out there fuels the desire both for the DVDs themselves and to continue the process of illegal production.

Simon's pieces are not exclusively meant to highlight the items seized by customs officials depicted in her images and text. Rather, it is what is not seen or stated that she is interested in; that is, what lies in the conceptual space between the photographs and the texts. These illegal, prohibited, unlicensed, and undeclared goods occupy a non-space and a state of limbo. They stand at the threshold of America and all it represents, yet are denied entry. What does this imply about the nature of contraband and those who participate in their production and distribution? Is it just an item's foreign origin that classifies it as a threat to our national security, or is there a clear and present danger that calls for its detention and condemnation? Who judges and who can be judged, who makes the laws and who must abide by them? *Contraband* the series, like contraband itself, can be understood as a metaphor for the highly complex, international economic and social systems that continue to stimulate the desire for these goods.

Like the customs officers themselves, Simon is in control of what we can have. *Contraband* as a body of work functions similarly to the TSA or to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. She controls the message; what images we see and how we classify and comprehend them is entirely at her discretion. We have no choice but to obey, all the while being tantalized by that which we cannot have.



Trey Siman, CIGARETTES & TOBACCO (ABANDONED/ILLEGAL/PROMIBITED), 2010. 25 archival inkjet prints
in 5 Perspex boxes, Box 1-5: 9 1/2 x 37 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches, Edition of 4.