

Taryn Simon

A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters

I – XVIII

A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters was produced over a four-year period (2008-11), during which the artist, Taryn Simon, travelled around the world researching and recording bloodlines and their related stories. In each of the eighteen ‘chapters’ that make up the work, the external forces of territory, power, circumstance or religion collide with the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance. The subjects Simon documents include victims of genocide in Bosnia, test rabbits infected with a lethal disease in Australia, the first woman to hijack an aircraft, and the living dead in India. Her collection is at once cohesive and arbitrary, mapping the relationships among chance, blood, and other components of fate.

Each work in A Living Man Declared Dead is comprised of three segments. On the left of each chapter are one or more large portrait panels systematically ordering a number of individuals directly related by blood. The sequence of portraits is structured to include the living ascendants and descendants of a single individual. The portraits are followed by a central text panel in which the artist constructs narratives and collects details. On the right are Simon’s “footnote images” representing fragmented pieces of the established narratives and providing photographic evidence.

The empty portraits represent living members of a bloodline who could not be photographed. The reasons for these absences are included in the text panels and include imprisonment, military service, dengue fever and women not granted permission to be photographed for religious and social reasons.

Simon’s presentation explores the struggle to determine codes and patterns embedded in the narratives she documents, making them recognizable as variations (versions, renderings, adaptations) of archetypal episodes from the present, past, and future. In contrast to the methodical ordering of a bloodline, the central elements of the stories – violence, resilience, corruption, and survival – disorient the highly structured appearance of the work. A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters highlights the space between text and image, absence and presence, and order and disorder.

Taryn Simon was born in 1975 in New York, where she lives and works. Her previous work included Contraband 2010, an archive of images of items that were detained or seized from passengers and mail entering the United States from abroad; An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar 2007, which reveals objects, sites, and spaces that are integral to America’s foundation, mythology, or daily functioning but remain inaccessible or unknown to a public audience; and The Innocents 2003, which documents cases of wrongful conviction in the United States, calling into question photography’s function as a credible witness and arbiter of justice.