

Taryn Simon: *The Innocents*

Questions for Looking and Discussion

The images in Taryn Simon's series *The Innocents* are environmental portraits—portraits made in locations that help to define or describe their subjects. To create these images, Simon “photographed each innocent person at a site that came to assume particular significance following his wrongful conviction: the scene of misidentification, the scene of arrest, the alibi location, or the scene of the crime.”



1. Examine the image:

HECTOR GONZALEZ

At home, Brooklyn, New York The week of his homecoming
Served 6.5 years of a 15-to-Life sentence for Murder
2002

- What is the first thing that your eyes go to when you look at this image?
Where does your eye go next?
- What other details do you notice in this space?
- What do we learn about Gonzales by looking at this photograph?
- What moods or feelings are conveyed in this image? How?
- If you were to be photographed in a location or place that is significant in your life or that would help others learn about you, where would you choose?
Why?



2 Examine the image:

TIM DURHAM

Skeet shooting, Tulsa, Oklahoma

11 alibi witnesses placed Durham at a skeet- shooting competition at the time of the crime. Served 3.5 years of a 3,220 year sentence for Rape and Robbery

2002

- What do you notice when you look at this image?
- What is Simon's vantage point—where did she position her camera in relation to Durham when she made this photograph?
How does that affect how Durham looks in this photograph?
- What do you not see in this image?
- What moods or feelings are conveyed in this image convey? How?



3. Examine the image:

CHARLES IRVIN FAIN

Scene of the crime, the Snake River, Melba, Idaho

Served 18 years of a Death sentence for Murder, Rape and Kidnapping
2002

- What do you see when you look at this image?
- What did Simon choose to use as her light source? Why do you think she made that choice?
- Why do you think that she made this picture at night?
- How does Fain look in this image?
- What moods or feelings are conveyed in this image convey? How?

4. Identifying Style. What do the images in this series have in common? Are there certain formal choices such as lighting, camera angle, color palate, composition, and scale that Simon may have used repeatedly? Are there similarities among the settings of the images or among her subjects' facial expressions, clothing or body language? Describe.

Activity: Create an Environmental Portrait

- Choose an environment that is meaningful to you or one that contains visual details that would help others get to know you.
- Work with a friend or classmate to construct portraits of each other in the environments you have selected, alternating the role of photographer and sitter.
- What do you want people to learn about you through your portrait?
How could you make those qualities show in a photograph?
Consider how body language, facial expression, clothing and personal belongings can convey meaning.
- Look through the camera's viewfinder and compose your image.
Try to include only those elements that add to—not detract from your composition. Your choice of vantage point--where you position your camera in relation to your subject--can dramatically change the composition of your image. Look at your subject from several different vantage points such as from above, from below and from the side and choose the one that best represents your subject and concept.
- Consider choices of lighting--hard and high contrast light can give an aggressive look to an image. Soft or diffused light can create a soft or romantic mood to an image.
- Finish your portraits, print your images and share them with your classmates or friends. Judging by their comments, did your portraits communicate what you intended? If you were to do this project again, what changes would you make?