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IN PHOTOS: THE MOST RIDICULOUS LAWS IN AMERICA

By Doug Bierend, July 28, 2014



We trust our lawmakers to pass legislation that will keep us safe and serve the greater public good. In every state's books, though, there are laws outlandish and weird enough to make you question those lawmakers' sanity. Try as you might, it's hard to imagine why anyone would take the time to make it illegal to have an ice cream cone in your pocket.

"A few states still have that one in their books, which is strange," says photographer Olivia Locher, who's lampooning the silliest of these statutes in her ongoing photo series, *I Fought the Law*. After hearing about the ice cream law she got curious and started looking into more examples, soon realizing it would make a good series. "After doing that I just found out there were so many," she says.

It's not hard to satirize statutes that ban people from picnicking in a graveyard or tickling a woman's chin with a feather duster. Many of the things that legislators have seen fit to legislate read like something straight out of Monty Python. And some of them make a crime of things we all do daily, like tapping our feet to the beat of a great tune. Locher portrays them in irreverent photos inspired heavily by the bold colors and aesthetics of pop art.

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She also looks into the background of the laws, but doesn't include that information as part of the series. Even the silliest examples are often tied to the history and culture of the regions where they were raised. Hawaii's law against keeping coins in your ears stems in part from the region's complex history surrounding currency. According to Locher's research, placing coins in your ears is also a sign of being a drug dealer in Hawaii. If you know anything about Wisconsin, you could believe the state once required serving cheese with every slice of apple pie—something of an urban myth inspired by a short-lived law requiring cheese and butter be served with every meal. Some of the laws are totally reasonable anyway; you really shouldn't fish with dynamite, and Rhode Island's statute against transparent clothing is pretty clearly for the common good.

Nonetheless, there are some downright daffy decrees out there.

"I feel that not being able to have teacups with wine in them is really strange—I personally do that all the time," says Lochner. "And I mean, undressing in front of a man's portrait, I don't see how that conversation would've ever come up."

Locher hears about these from a variety of sources, so she does her best to confirm they actually exist, or once did. She reviews law books and public records and even talks to locals when she can. The points she satirizes are sometimes buried in the bureaucratic language of state code. For example, Georgia's law against graveyard picnics might not jump out if you weren't looking for it:

Sec. 9-7. Injury to property, trees, etc.—Picnicking; firearms. No person in the city cemeteries shall pick flowers of any kind, break branches from shrubs or trees, or climb fences to the cemeteries or trees located therein. Picnicking, lunching, lounging, shooting or loud and boisterous or disorderly conduct are forbidden in the cemeteries. No person with firearms shall be permitted to enter the cemetery grounds. (Code 1914, § 585; Ord. of 10-14-24, § 33; Ord. of 5-17-49, § 23)

Once she's got a handful of seemingly legit laws, Locher starts shooting. Staged shots typically are made in her Manhattan studio, but sometimes she'll shoot in the field. Her riff on Pennsylvania's dictum against fishing with dynamite, for example, was shot at a lake near her hometown of Johnstown, PA.

"It's just deciding on what needs to be included in the picture to tell a cool story," she says. "Sometimes the subject matter could be kept really simple, but then other times you need more of an environment. Whatever the laws are saying, that's how I come up

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with how much information I need to show. Some of them I feel require a little bit more than just a simple studio shot.”

These laws aren’t likely to ruin anyone’s day—you’re more likely to be cited for jaywalking than selling a pickle that didn’t bounce. Locher’s project isn’t about addressing a broken legal system. It’s more an indulgence in the absurdities that inevitably arise when people are left to set the rules for themselves. Regardless of all that, she likes having fun with it and making the photos look as silly as the laws sound.

“I’m always interested in trying to get across a sense of humor,” she says. “I like an overall kind of lightheartedness, maybe something being slightly wrong that maybe kind of makes you stop and look a little bit longer than you would.”