

10 ABSURDIST PHOTOGRAPHS DEPICTING “AMERICA’S MOST UNUSUAL LAWS

By Meg Miller, August 11, 2017



In the state of Michigan, it is illegal to paint a sparrow with the intention of selling it as a parakeet. Which means, unfortunately, that if you are skilled enough to catch a white-and-brown sparrow, hold it still for long enough to paint it green, blue and yellow, then pawn it off on to some poor schmuck as a parakeet, your deceitful artistry would be considered a criminal act. In some states, you would be tried as a con artist; in Michigan, crafty birder, there is a law just for you.

At least that’s according to Olivia Locher’s photo book *I Fought The Law*, which warns readers in the introduction to take its proclamations with a grain of salt. An offshoot of Locher’s 2013 photo series of the same name, the book’s colorful and satirical images illustrate “America’s most unusual laws.” Some remain on the statute books, while others have since been removed, or were merely myths to begin with. All of them make supremely fun and surreal photographs in Locher’s hands.

For example, Alabamans will be relieved to hear that it is in fact not illegal to carry an ice cream cone in your back pocket. You can do that freely there. But in the 1800s, that act was against the law in Kentucky and Georgia, where thieves would lure horses away from their owners with sugary-sweet ice-cream in their back pocket. If caught, the thieves could say that they didn’t steal, the horse merely followed—which, incidentally, does seem pretty unlawful.

In the book, the law is said to be in Alabama, which is the state it was mistakenly attributed to when Locher first heard of the law from a friend. Locher is less concerned with accuracy as she is fascinated with how these laws get made or mythologized, and remembered by people today. “I became fascinated by how often bold statements could be appropriated, lost in translation, easily believed, and taken as fact,” she writes in the introduction to *I Fought The Law*. “I was never the kind of person who cared much for random facts, but all of a sudden I became completely enthralled by unusual laws and couldn’t stop searching for more.”

Locher found that online and in conversations with people, there were all kinds of rumors and facts about completely bizarre laws in every state. Most of them were so surreal-sounding that they conjured up a very distinct image in Locher’s mind. From 2013 to 2016, she shot 50 photos—of myths, past laws or actual laws—one for each state. In the book, each

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spread features an absurd law on the left and an absurdist photograph, popping with color, on the right. Some of the photos are literal translation (see: In Kentucky, it is illegal to lick a toad). Others take a more interpretive approach. The photo for a Sesame Street ban in Mississippi, for example, also takes a stab at why—it features Burt and Ernie kissing. All of them are playfully rebellious: The woman in Ohio's photo doesn't seem to care that it's illegal to disrobe in front of a portrait of a man. At the very least, these unusual laws gave Locher stellar prompts for creating unusual photos—which happen to be her specialty. If you want to know which laws are real and still in place, you'll have to look it up yourself. But for the time being, put down your parakeet paint brush. This is no country for disingenuous bird-sellers.