

# BULLETT

## Photographer Olivia Locher ‘Fought the Law’ with Images That Break America’s Wackiest Laws

By Adam Lehrer, September 26, 2017



Did you know that in Connecticut pickles must bounce to be considered pickles? Olivia Locher does. The photographer found her peculiar muse in a book published by Scholastic in the 1970s documenting (or making up) a range of American state laws that are both hilarious and mystifying. Some are goofy — “In Alabama it is illegal to have an ice cream cone in your back pocket at all times” — some lurid — “In Arizona you may not have more than two dildos in a house” — and some fairly obvious — “In North Carolina it’s a misdemeanor to urinate on someone else’s property.” Locher was so fascinated by these laws that she consulted with a fact-checker to verify the veracity of a slew of them. She found that some of them were true and still standing as law, while others had once been law, but have since been redacted. Others still were completely false. In the process, she located a rich concept that could mirror several prevalent American societal ills in a photo series that’s both cheeky and aesthetically masterful.

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An example: one of these laws (and this one was once true) is that in a certain area in Texas it was illegal for children to have unusual haircuts (imagined beautifully by Locher as a young girl made up to look like Bowie on the cover of Aladdin Sane). Goofy as it sounds, the law was indicative of the ingrained bigotries that have now come to dominate American discourse. The laws that were never real, on the other hand, reinforce the era of fake news. We find ourselves living in a country where people will believe anything so long as it affirms their preexisting view of the world.

Taken between 2013 to 2016, these photographs are now available as a covetable photo book entitled *I Fought the Law: Photographs by Olivia Locher of the Strangest Laws from Each of the 50 States* as well as a solo show at Steven Kasher Gallery (on view through October 21). Locher staged 50 vibrant, humorous and sharply satirical color photographs that enacted these various real and mythic laws: "In Delaware it's illegal to consume perfume" is shot as a woman drinking a bottle of Chanel no. 5, "In Indiana it's illegal for a man to be sexually aroused in public" depicts a slender man in pinstripe pajama pants with a massive erection, and "In Ohio it's illegal do disrobe in front of a man's portrait" finds a young woman taking her shirt off in front of a representational painting of an old white dude. Meanwhile, you've probably seen that photo of the ice cream dripping down a woman's back pocket on your Instagram feed at one time or another.

These images are easy and fun to look at but carry with them considerable conceptual and political weight. They depart from what we tend to associate with fine art photographic history in that they abandon that dark and poetic quality (think Diane Arbus, Peter Hujar, Man Ray) in favor of an aesthetic more in line with the characteristics of Pop Art. This is also where the images gain their strength and are indicative of Locher's cultural mindset. The artist grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which she describes as a lovely and idyllic community. It has also been the site of numerous floods that have destroyed the entire town three times over. This historical fact has been made scarier by her revelation that these flood waters became electric, causing the town to become awash in floating electrocuted bodies (in fact, the Red Cross was created due to the flooding of Johnstown). This has informed her artistic sensibility and goes to explain her intentions with *I Fought the Law*. "There was always this knowledge that any time a wave could wash over and destroy the whole town," she says. "That became my understanding of suburbia and America. I've always been interested in how things are so fucked up a little bit below the surface. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* always stuck with me, how there can be a field full of flowers but just below the surface is all this decay and darkness."

Olivia came to photography through an early fascination with Juergen Teller's campaigns for Marc Jacobs – she'd often try to stage pictures to look like them. She graduated from SVA with a BFA in photography in 2013 and has appeared in numerous group shows alongside contemporaries like Aneta Bartos and Shae Detar. She is a voracious consumer of art. Her Flatiron apartment that she shares with her brother and champion Brendan Locher, who often assists her with her work, is littered with walls and walls of books: a mash-up of Robert Mapplethorpe and Arthur Rimbaud's *Welcome to Hell*, a Roe Ethridge book, books by Warhol, and so many more. While she seems to be unpretentious about her own work, she radiates fierce intelligence and engagement with contemporary art and politics during discussion. *I Fought the Law*, with its sharp focus, encapsulates her desire to make people question the world they inhabit. "If you're making something that people truly hate, you're winning," she says. "All the American artists I like had trouble gaining early credibility. If it's an offense to people then it's working. I always felt like an image could slap someone in the face."

If you're detecting a strong political undercurrent to this project, you're right. Locher has always been as politically engaged as she was artistically inclined. This is an artist who dropped out of high school but still managed to educate herself thoroughly enough to wind up in one of the most prestigious BFA programs in the country. Locher tells me that she was the one protester giving Dick Cheney the middle finger when the much-disdained former Vice President visited her town. At a Bernie Sanders rally during the presidential campaign, Olivia and Brendan found themselves accosted by Fox News host Gavin McInnes (the mentally unstable co-founder of VICE), only to find he edited all of her and Brendan's

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intelligent arguments from the video to splice together their “ums” and “ahs” in efforts of portraying them as ditzzy millennials. But her political opinions are concise and informed, and they lend *I Fought the Law* a considerable heft.

Johnstown was one of those formerly blue counties that went overwhelmingly for Donald Trump last year, and Locher has had to come to terms with people she grew up with expressing opinions like, “Did you see that black boy riding his bicycle? This town is really changing.” Politics have occasionally taken precedence over her art, such as when her and Brendan decided to make 40 protest signs on the eve of Trump’s inauguration that she then posted all of them to Instagram as a way of reaching out to her hometown friends and get them to rethink their decision. “It’s crazy to realize that people you grew up with are full-blown racists,” she says.

While Locher is quick to note that her project engages far too much with surrealist imagery and cultural myths to be in the lineage of the fine art photojournalism of artists like Katy Grannan or Catherine Opie, many of the images in the project expound on societal ills on the grand scale that straight journalism usually isn’t capable of. The real laws depicted in the project reveal some cutting truths of the American mindset. “In South Carolina it’s illegal to go fishing with dynamite” is such an obviously terrible thing to do it’s astonishing that there would need to even be a law to reaffirm it. But that is the arrogance and laziness of the American mindset. People would rather get all the fish and win as opposed to exercising proper patience and employing sportsmanship in the art of fishing. “In New Hampshire it’s illegal to tap your foot to keep time to music” spoke to Locher in its mimicking of the infamous New York Cabaret Law enacted during prohibition that prohibits partygoers from dancing in large groups in any establishment that doesn’t hold a Cabaret license. These laws and laws like them have historically been used to target disenfranchised people, prominently gays and minorities, from coming together as communities and speak to the bigotry often enacted into law when unsavory people come into power ( NYC Council Member Rafael Espinal introduced a bill calling for a full repeal of the regulation this year). Even though this isn’t a journalistic project, it carries with it a lethal cultural critique. “The info is so loosey goosey that I don’t want people to take it literally,” she says. “I do think it’s cool if it inspires people to go down their own paths of research. If they find it valuable enough.”

And despite its political and cultural criticism, *I Fought the Law* is still a deeply personal art project. It provides a window into the thought processes of the artist and mirrors her internal world as art aesthetic. This notion gives it a multi-layered appeal and establishes it as a body of work worthy of critical dialog and academic analysis. Olivia’s brother Brendan sums up Olivia’s approach thoughtfully: “Olivia from a very young age Olivia lived in a day dream and created her own reality for herself,” he says. “And if you look at those images you see that world coming to life.”