



Wordplay
Wunderkind

The clever-minded **Olivia Locher** finds permanence for her crafty photo concepts.

BY LIBBY PETERSON

ALL PHOTOS © OLIVIA LOCHER

Back in 2013, Olivia Locher found herself photographing a naked man covered in permanent marker doodles as he sat on a gold-fringed chair. She was working on “How To,” her ongoing series that pairs instructional prompts with cheeky, child-like, inventive, highly literal photos. Having recently met this man at a party, she thought he’d be perfect for the photo she had pictured in her head for a while: “How To Party.”

All was well and good until the naked man told her something strange: “In Alabama, it’s illegal to have an ice cream cone in your back pocket.”

Olivia was blindsided. This ridiculous fact came out of nowhere. “It’s weird, I’ve never had a thought haunt me for a year,” she says with wide eyes. But sure enough, a year later, she finally looked up his claim, and what she uncovered was more than she bargained for, finding out that in Ohio, it’s illegal to disrobe in front of a man’s portrait; you can’t paint sparrows to sell them as parakeets in Michigan; don’t try to put an American flag on a bar of soap in Nevada; and you can just forget about walking the streets of Utah if you’re carrying a violin in a paper bag.

While some of these strange laws are hearsay, Locher found that others are (remarkably) true. Removing a law is not so straightforward, as it turns out, so some states have decided to keep the weird, mundane ones on paper that no one follows anyway because no one really notices—except for Olivia, who went on to create a good-humored visual log of each state’s weird laws in a series she completed last year called “I Fought the Law.” And because of that, places like *Vogue*, *WIRED* and the Internet at large have noticed, too.

IN HER WORLD

Large rolls of solid-colored paper line the walls in the 27-year-old’s second-floor, downtown Manhattan apartment, with foam cubes squished between each to help stand them up in a row. “A lot of people think they’re pool toys when they first see them,” says Brandon



WHY YOU SHOULD KNOW HER

A *PDN*’s 30 from 2013, Olivia Locher had her “I Fought the Law” photo series go viral before it was close to complete. Having finished it last year, the New York-based photographer released it this fall through Chronicle Books.

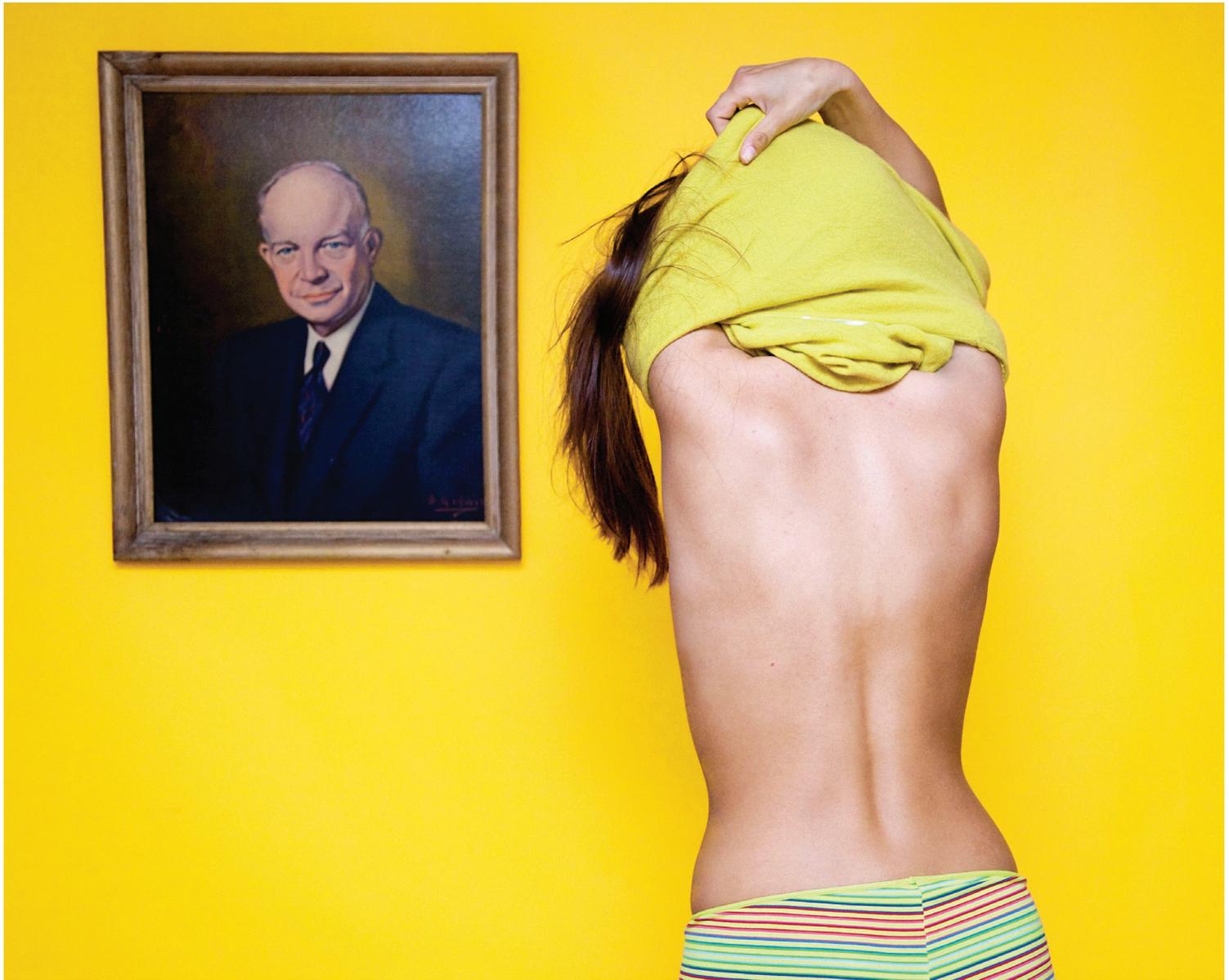
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Locher, the photographer’s artist-musician brother and roommate—and as her photo assistant too, he knows they’re used as seamless. Olivia shoots everything in this apartment. When it’s time, Brandon rolls out the colored paper backdrop and sets up an old, “half-busted” Calumet Genesis 400 light. “I have three of them so sometimes they get breaks,” says Olivia, who then “mostly always” shoots with a Canon 5D Mark II and 24-70mm f/2.8L II USM lens.

Growing up homeschooled in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Olivia watched Brandon put on pop-up art shows with his friends, even attracting the occasional photo person from New York City. Witnessing this DIY approach to art, she was inspired. Her early work referenced Juergen Teller’s fashion editorials in the photos she shot of friends, and this experimentation took her to New York’s School of Visual Arts where she hoped to achieve her dream of becoming a fashion photographer.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Photographed for “I Fought the Law”—in Florida, a person may not appear in public clothed in liquid latex. ABOVE: Olivia’s first “I Fought the Law” photo, shot at an ice cream stand in Pennsylvania.

ALL “I FOUGHT THE LAW” PHOTOS COME FROM I FOUGHT THE LAW: PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLIVIA LOCHER OF THE STRANGEST LAWS FROM EACH OF THE 50 STATES, PUBLISHED BY CHRONICLE BOOKS 2017.



"I was breaking into fashion shows while I was in school," Olivia confesses with a wince. "I was so interested in Fashion Week that I would just—" "Olivia would like, hide in a garbage can to get into Marc Jacobs," Brandon interjects. "Not really, not that intense," she clarifies quickly, "but I would hide in the Armory's bathroom for like 12 hours." (That's the Park Avenue Armory, the home of many fashion shows.) "And then I'd come out and be like, 'Here I am, at Marc Jacobs!' And they didn't know, at that point they were like, 'OK, this girl's inside.' Back then it was a lot more lax—in 2009, they really didn't care who got in."

Fashion Week's gotten stiffer about access since, Olivia adds with a wry smile, and while she doesn't condone her long-con stunts, they did lead her to real work. The photos she shot caught *W*'s eye, who then hired her to shoot about 30 different shows. She was just a year out of school.

During her time at SVA, Olivia discovered some new influences: the

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—Olivia Locher

offbeat, experimental photographer Lucas Samaras; the color-centric fine-art photographer David Benjamin Sherry, for whom she interned; and Jessica Craig-Martin, her photography instructor junior year who was instrumental in helping pinpoint her style. Olivia showed her a photo of a person wearing white tights stuffed with marshmallows. "That's it, that's your thing," Craig-Martin told her. "Focus on concepts and weird ideas that come into your head like that."

For her thesis project (the start of the "How To" series), Olivia had an advisory meeting with Kathy Ryan, the director of photography for *The New York Times Magazine*, who helped her hone one step further: removing excess elements. "I always thought photography had to be so overcomplicated," Olivia says, "when instead it could just be somebody acting

ABOVE: In Ohio, it is illegal to disrobe in front of a portrait of a man.



something out. And I guess that's around the time 'I Fought the Law' sort of came about."

After photographing her good friend in white shorts with a pink ice cream cone in her back pocket, she moved on to the other state laws. She participated in an all-woman group show at Steven Kasher Gallery where some of "I Fought the Law" was shown, and *Interview* talked to her afterward, quoting her wish that the series would someday become a book. Chronicle Books read the interview and contacted her through Kasher. And this past September, she brought it all full circle with a solo show of the completed "I Fought the Law" series at Steven Kasher Gallery, accompanied by her book, released by Chronicle.

A "FUNNY LITTLE LIFE FORCE"

Urban Outfitters, which has a tie with the publishing arm, got an advance on the book *I Fought the Law* and stocked it exclusively in their stores over the summer of 2017, prior to its official launch. It's the kind of pre-release that Olivia got accustomed to since the project's inception. After Feature Shoot posted her first set of "I Fought the Law" images back in 2013, they went viral.

"They started popping up everywhere, it got kind of out of control," Olivia recalls. Her ice cream cone image in particular took a

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—*Olivia Locher*



couple worldwide web tours—in fact *New York* magazine posted it to Instagram this past August. "Fully embracing the last days of summer before it melts away," the caption reads. It has nothing to do with Olivia or her series, but she was credited. That doesn't always happen.

"At this point, it almost feels like it's sort of everyone's property, where everyone feels fine sharing it," Olivia says contemplatively. "It's sort of this funny little life force that it took on." Often her friends will jump in and tag Olivia, adding a comment that clarifies what the project is. "A lot of the time it's weird celebrity socialite people who will share it, and then you'll read the comments and people will be like, 'Oh, this is illegal in Alabama.' And that's kind of cool." Copycats have replicated the image in homage as well, which Olivia has gleefully collected and reposted to her Instagram account. "I love that kind of thing," she says with a big smile.

Still, "it's hard when a company will reshoot it or repurpose it and you know somebody got paid a lot to do it," Olivia adds. "A lot of times smoothie companies or fashion companies will totally rip off the ice cream shot."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: From Olivia's "How To" series—"How To Grow Flowers"; in North Dakota, it is illegal to fall asleep with shoes on in bed; "How To Have Rosy Cheeks," commissioned by *W*.



Brandon, who was nodding quietly, pipes up. "It happens with a lot of other of Olivia's images, they just get re-appropriated. People's references are becoming more and more on the surface every day, especially with social media." Now with *I Fought the Law* the book, she's able to reclaim her work from where it's circulated so comfortably to a more permanent home in print.

HOW TO...SHOOT LIKE HER

Olivia premeditates her photos, quite literally; she has practiced Transcendental Meditation for about five years, piqued after hearing David Lynch's lectures about its positive influence on creativity. As soon as she wakes up, and again right before dinner, Olivia closes her eyes and focuses on her breath for 20 minutes, letting thoughts come and go as they please. It's helped spark some of her wildest concepts.

"I have this theory that if an idea pops up three times—I think Wolfgang Tillmans actually said this and it really relates to me—you should trust it," she says. An idea will marinate in her head for months, but because of her level of pre-visualization, Olivia can build and shoot a concept in about 15 minutes.

"With Olivia, it's always a studio day," Brandon says. "There's this attitude of always being in practice and using the space, even if it's just conceptualizing things or finding props or trying to move any process forward."

A running theme in her work is a play on words. "I like having a quote or a title that could go with the piece, but I'm also interested in

if that title gets lost, how the image lives in the world as just a stagnant image," she says. "If you see it in the world, I try to make it as interesting as possible for whoever's just viewing it in any situation."

Clients like that, too. *W* commissioned her to shoot a "How To" photo for them, "How To Have Rosy Cheeks," with a redheaded model holding roses next to her face. Others just know that Olivia is good at shooting quirky concepts on the fly. For one of *The New York Times Magazine's* Letter of Recommendation columns, Olivia took an evening to turn part of her apartment into a full-fledged "bee closet," she says, motioning to an inconspicuous corner of her living room.

"I really like working in this space," she says, looking around the colorful, light-filled room whose big, arched windows face Madison Avenue. "A lot of clients will offer to rent a studio, but I'd rather just have everybody over. Sometimes we have teams of 12 people in here and I really love it, it has really good energy and everybody winds up having a good time. I kind of like the comfort of catering to people."

"The work isn't about being technical," Brandon adds. "She'll shoot a portrait for someone, but it's generally like, they'll come to Olivia and she'll come up with a concept, or they kind of want Olivia to do—" he pauses for a second to think of the right word: "Olivia." **Rf**

FROM TOP LEFT: The shot that sparked Olivia's SVA instructor to encourage that she focus on quirky ideas such as these tights stuffed with marshmallows; in Illinois, a hatpin is considered a concealed weapon.