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OLIVIA LOCHER IS YOUR FAVORITE ARTIST, YOU JUST DIDN'T KNOW HER NAME

By Wendy Syfret, August 24, 2016



You probably don't know Olivia Locher, but if you're a fan of pretty things online you might well know her work. You could even have reposted, shared or saved one of her photos as your phone background. That's because the New York based, Pennsylvania born, photographer has an almost preternatural ability to know what the internet will like. Her surreal, funny and thoughtful shots are the stuff Instagram dreams are made of.

But being a provider of moreish digital delights can sometimes be a thankless job. Olivia's success has been typical of what much artistic achievement looks like in a post internet world — that being, it comes with a million shares and very little credit. Luckily though this story has a happy ending, or at least a book deal — her series I Fought The Law will be published next year.

We chatted to Olivia about an artistic life online, and taking credit when it's due.

Your work is surreal and dreamlike, but usually concerned with pretty real world ideas. Tell us about presenting reality through fantasy images?

As a child I was a daydreamer to a pretty extreme level. I had no real separation between fantasy and real life. Luckily for me my parents never stopped or discouraged this

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behaviour. I outgrew that way of thinking in my teenage years, but surrealist themes stayed buried somewhere in my consciousness.

When I first started making photographs I was super into portraying fantasy and dreams. Early in my third year of art school I shot an image in the studio of marshmallows stuffed into a pair of white nylons on a model. My professor loved it and pushed me to follow this style. I became fascinated with the stupidity of ready-made objects, and obsessed with everyday rituals people do.

That marshmallows photo really did the rounds online. In fact, you're one of those artists you know before you "know", your images are posted and reposted all over the internet. What does it feel like when a picture takes off and become an, often uncredited, hit?

The average person who publishes an image most likely doesn't care about its source; it's a side effect of living in a culture where images are so accessible. The thing I get the obsessed with is coming across remakes of my images by other creators. I've found about eight exact copies of an image I made of an ice cream cone in a girl's back pocket.

For the most part I'm amused, however it's unfortunate when someone makes a large monetary profit off one of your concepts. I found an exact replica of that image on someone's album cover, another knockoff was used for a major Berlin film festival and remakes have also appeared for fashion brands. My image hasn't equated to any financial gain so it's disheartening to see someone profiting from the idea. These issues are a constant battle. You can't copyright an idea but you'd hope someone would have enough respect not to blatantly steal it.

That ice cream picture was from your series I Fought The War about strange American laws, which totally exploded online. I'm always interested in what it's like to witness a piece of your own work get caught in the internet's current.

What's interesting is I have no idea how it happened. I posted the ice cream cone image and somehow it skyrocketed to 20,000+ notes on Tumblr. Writers started reaching out to me about covering the series. I only had eight photographs and the work was very premature but it took off! It's funny, I later replaced four of those original images with something stronger. The work that went viral was a pre thought to the actual series.

Your success has been in part helped by the internet, but do you feel you'd be a different artist without it?

I don't think I'd be a different artist because my images come from somewhere within. I'm certain I'd have a different career. When editors approach me for commissions I find most of them discovered my work on Instagram. These digital platforms have completely replaced my printed portfolio. I haven't updated my physical book since 2013; no one

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wants to look at it. I think Instagram is so powerful and enjoyable because it gives you insight into someone's personal life and practice.

Let's talk about the work itself. Your images often tease ideas around wellness, fashion and beauty; is that exploration loving or critical?

I've shot backstage at New York fashion week for the past few years and I always get very inspired by the beauty happening at each show. I find myself at home trying to recreate what I've seen. Without question I always fail and come up with something kind of close, yet still very off. But I enjoy these wonky mis-achievements and a lot of the time I end up working more dramatised versions of them into my images. I'd like to believe my images are a mixture of celebration and criticism of these issues.

You were home-schooled right?

I was! I went to public school until high school. There was a new form of online schooling that developed where basically you went to class in a chat room, it was pretty lawless and certainly in its beta stages, I begged my family to allow me to do it. I went from spending eight hours in school each day to less than three. I started making photographs right around the time I left behind traditional schooling.

Did that experience influence the work you make now?

It allowed me to become totally obsessed and focused on photography. I was subscribing to a ton of fashion magazine and trying to recreate what I saw within them with my friends as models. I didn't have any knowledge of the photography world beyond fashion. I was totally obsessed with Juergen Teller's collaborations with Marc Jacobs.

Your home was obviously a pretty creative space as your brother also became an artist. Do you feed off each other?

Absolutely! We share a small NYC apartment that also doubles as our studio. We are always in each other's heads. We are starting to do this bizarre thing where we accidentally talk in unison. It really freaks people out.