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## 'I FOUGHT THE LAW': A CANDY-COLORED BLEND OF FACT, FICTION AND PHOTOGRAPHY

By Agatha French, September 20, 2017



True or false: In Alaska, it is illegal for an intoxicated person to be in an establishment that serves alcohol.

It sounds paradoxical, but it's actually true. In "I Fought the Law: Photographs by Olivia Locher of the Strangest Laws from Each of the 50 States" (Chronicle Books; \$16.95), Locher illustrates puzzling, outdated and in some cases merely legendary laws from across America, a clever and often humorous look at legal history and "the letter of the law."

"Some remain on the statute books, the majority of them were at one point removed, others never became laws ... and a few of them are complete myths," writes Locher, who "decided to withhold whether a law is fact or myth."

Locher uses these quirky laws (or fabrications) as captions for her work. Like laws, photographs have traditionally been thought of as irrefutably truthful, but these are staged, highly stylized shots, which further complicates the boundary between fact and fiction.

If you complain about winter to anyone not living in SoCal, you're sure to be met with eye rolls and the world's tiniest violin. But you're among friends here, so we'll share a little secret.

It seems plausible that in Nebraska, for example, it's illegal for parents to perm their child's hair without a state license, less likely that in Michigan painting sparrows with the intention of selling them as parakeets is against the law. But at a glance, who knows? Guessing (or googling) which laws are fact and which are fiction is either an exercise in frustration or half the fun.

That's the central tension in this collection of mostly conceptual still-life photography: the interaction between the photos and text keeps you on your toes.

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While conducting research for the collection, “there was no shortage of people claiming certain actions were illegal in different states,” writes Locher, “and that once any of these got out they seemed to spread like wildfire across the Internet.” Locher uses the laws — some real, some hearsay — as a visual constraint, but the photographs seem to be asking: If we can’t trust Wikipedia, (or Facebook, or “alternative facts”) who can we trust? The law?

“Locher’s purposeful appropriation of misinformation — laws that might not actually be laws at all — is an act of political critique,” writes poet Kenneth Goldsmith, another appropriator, in his introduction.

With its blend of fact and fiction, Locher’s concept feels of-the-moment, and her aesthetics do too. Bright, color-blocked backgrounds and one or two well-chosen props are easy visual reads even when reproduced in miniature, like on, say, an iPhone. Some of the most compelling photographs rely less on the quiriness of their state’s law than on Locher’s literal interpretation of it: There’s a physical dynamic to many of the portraits — the visceral tug of a little girl’s hair being pulled around curlers — or the instantly off-putting green butter on bread.

Is it really illegal for children in Texas to have unusual haircuts? Maybe not, but one gets the sense from the startled expression of the kid in Locher’s photograph that it all too easily could be. In other words, “law is as slippery as art,” writes Goldsmith, “but won’t admit it.”