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Chris Jordan

(table of contents and chapter introductions, © 2003–2007)

See “About the Artist” on the next page.

Bigstock Photo

Linda Armstrong *(landfill, page 1-6)*

Clarence Alford *(e-waste, page 3-4)*

Nina Kaiser *(cardborad, page 4-7)*

iStock Photo

(cover and section dividers)

Danny Warren *(hiking Mt. Rainier)*

Hirlesteanu Constantin-Ciprian *(girl jumping)*

Roger Milley *(large landfill)*

Cascade Recycling Center

(sorting recyclables, page 1-8)

Little Hanaford Farms

(composting yard debris, page 4-8)

Rabanco, Inc.

(landfill, page 4-8; train, 4-10)

Thurston County

(drop-off site, page 9-3)

About the Artist



CHRIS JORDAN

Photographic Arts

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Running the Numbers

An American Self-Portrait

This series looks at contemporary American culture through the austere lens of statistics. Each image portrays a specific quantity of something: fifteen million sheets of office paper (five minutes of paper use); 106,000 aluminum cans (thirty seconds of can consumption) and so on. My hope is that images representing these quantities might have a different effect than the raw numbers alone, such as we find daily in articles and books. Statistics can feel abstract and anesthetizing, making it difficult to connect with and make meaning of 3.6 million SUV sales in one year, for example, or 2.3 million Americans in prison, or 426,000 cell phones retired every day. This project visually examines these vast and bizarre measures of our society, in large intricately detailed prints assembled from thousands of smaller photographs.

My only caveat about this series is that the prints must be seen in person to be experienced the way they are intended. As with any large artwork, their scale carries a vital part of their substance which is lost in these little images. Hopefully the photos displayed here might be enough to arouse your curiosity to attend an exhibition, or to arrange one if you are in a position to do so. The series is still in its early stages, and new images will be posted to the web site as they are completed, so please stay tuned.

—Chris Jordan
January 2007

The images in the table of contents and at the beginning of every chapter are the work of Northwest artist Chris Jordan.

Intolerable Beauty

Portraits of American Mass Consumption

Exploring around our country's shipping ports and industrial yards, where the accumulated detritus of our consumption is exposed to view like eroded layers in the Grand Canyon, I find evidence of a slow-motion apocalypse in progress. I am appalled by these scenes, and yet also drawn into them with awe and fascination. The immense scale of our consumption can appear desolate, macabre, oddly comical and ironic, and even darkly beautiful; for me its consistent feature is a staggering complexity.

The pervasiveness of our consumerism holds a seductive kind of mob mentality. Collectively we are committing a vast and unsustainable act of taking, but we each are anonymous and no one is in charge or accountable for the consequences. I fear that in this process we are doing irreparable harm to our planet and to our individual spirits.

As an American consumer myself, I am in no position to finger wag; but I do know that when we reflect on a difficult question in the absence of an answer, our attention can turn inward, and in that space may exist the possibility of some evolution of thought or action. So my hope is that these photographs can serve as portals to a kind of cultural self-inquiry. It may not be the most comfortable terrain, but I have heard it said that in risking self-awareness, at least we know that we are awake.

—Chris Jordan