

The New York Times

Arts & LEISURE

Sunday, July 24, 2005

Chris Jordan's "Container Yard No. 1, Seattle 2003," one of a series of photos about commercial culture.



Courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

A Great Big Beautiful Pile Of Junk

By PHILIP GEFTER

TUCKER, Ga. CHRIS JORDAN stood on a ladder, gazing down at 3,000 or so used cell-phones in a pile on the warehouse floor. His 8 x 10 view camera was perched even higher, on a tripod 12 feet above them. He had spent the morning figuring out how to include every one of the phones in a single photograph, eventually sweeping them into a neat, trapezoidal-shaped mound, the shorter side closer to the camera, or what would be the bottom of the picture frame.

Mr. Jordan had flown from Seattle,

Chris Jordan makes art out of what others throw away by the millions.

where he lives, to photograph at Collective-Good, an electronics recycling center in the Atlanta suburbs. "I want to give a concrete sense of our consumption, with the real quantities," Mr. Jordan said, from his perch on the ladder. Of course, for one image to represent the actual number of annually discarded cell-phones — 130 million, according to Collective-Good — he would have to reproduce the picture he was now getting ready to take about 43,000 times, creating a panorama that would stretch 61 miles if the photos were laid side by side.

The millions of consumers who buy new cellphones each year give no thought to the ones they are discarding, Mr. Jordan suggested. "If they're only thinking about the environmental consequences of their own actions," he said, "they have to change their lifestyles."

Mr. Jordan has certainly changed his. In 2002, at 38, he abandoned a 10-year career as a corporate lawyer. The job had merely been supporting his photography habit: for a long time, he didn't even have a car, and had spent his money on photography equipment, sheet film and processing. When he finally left his job, he went to the trouble of resigning from the bar, intentionally dismantling the safety net that his legal experience would provide should photography not be an adequate liveli-

Continued on Page 19

ART



Photographs above, center and bottom, courtesy of Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Chris Jordan's Great Big Beautiful Piles of Junk

Photographs that criticize the excesses of consumerism by capturing it in minute detail.

Continued From Page 1

hood.

"As a lawyer, I represented industry," he said. "I felt I could no longer reconcile representing some of the companies, based on what they were doing."

Mr. Jordan's free fall from law to photography is about to pay off. He is currently preparing for an exhibition of his series of photographs of industrial refuse — his first solo show in New York, in September, at the Yossi Milo Gallery in Chelsea.

Most of his subjects — huge piles of crushed cars, mounds of discarded cellphones, bales of recycled cans and mountains of sawdust — were photographed as he found them at industrial sites. Now, at a cellphone warehouse, he was beginning for the first time to rearrange the objects into a swirling pattern based on drawings he had been making throughout the day, adding an interpretive layer to his formal documentary approach. He wasn't sure if the experiment would yield a successful visual metaphor; it might be too obvious or corny. The shape signified to him the enormity of a galaxy of electronic refuse and also the idea of a whirlpool, as if the cellphones were swirling down a drain.

"Walk on them," he said playfully, urging an observer to follow him as he stepped on the pile. Cellphones crunched under his feet as if he were treading on plastic cockroaches.

By Mr. Jordan's standards, the cellphone recycling center here is a highly controlled and thus luxurious situation in which to photograph: the proprietors are hospitable, the interior environment is air-conditioned and well lit, and the subject matter is malleable. In contrast, most of the photographs in his series were taken at active industrial sites, where a photographer and his tripod can seem particularly vulnerable.

His image of crushed cars was made at a metal recycling plant in Tacoma, Wash., after he saw a barge float by with cars piled several stories high on their way to the shredder. He drove to the building and obtained permission to photograph there in exchange for pictures to be used on the plant's Web site or in its annual report. He signed a release and was escorted through a menacing industrial maze in which huge cranes hoisted crushed cars above him, and dump trucks unloaded them all around him. He returned to Tacoma five times to get the picture he wanted.

Most facilities, though, were not so accommodating. "Container Yard No. 1, Seattle 2003," was shot at the Port of Seattle. He had seen the containers from an overpass, and when he drove up to ask if he could photograph on the site, he was given a long list of reasons why he couldn't: homeland security issues, OSHA regulations, accident liability considerations. So he returned to shoot the containers on a Sunday when the yard was empty.

"It was unbelievably scary and stressful to be there with my 8 x 10 camera," Mr. Jordan said, adding that the picture of containers was

among the first in the series, and one of the few to address the infrastructure of mass production, as opposed to the resulting detritus.

Another early image is called "Recycling Yard No. 1, Seattle 2003," a print 50 inches wide, which he hung on the wall of his studio. Visitors would approach the picture, stare, and say, "Look, Altoids." Also identifiable are Campbell's Soup cans, Slim-Fast containers, Libby's pumpkin pie mix, Hunt's tomato sauce, Rosarita refried beans: a kind of "Where's Waldo?" of consumer refuse.

As Mr. Jordan crawled around on the mound of cellphones, he heard a distinct ring beneath him. Seth Heine, the founder of CollectiveGood, later said that it's not uncommon for people to throw out cellphones that are still active. Then he offered another statistic: If all the cellphones thrown out annually were recycled, they would yield 202,000 ounces of gold (worth about \$84.8 million), and keep 65,000 tons of toxic materials — battery components and elements like cadmium — from landfills and incinerators.

The process of making the picture of cellphones at CollectiveGood was more laborious than Mr. Jordan would have liked. The old-fashioned 8 x 10 view camera requires individual film holders; each sheet of film has to be slipped into the holder in total darkness, with the emulsion side set to face the lens. On his first night at the Red Roof Inn, he turned his hotel room into a darkroom, hanging sheets and blankets over the windows, placing towels under the door to block the light from the hallway, and taping a magazine over the light switch itself, which glowed like a night light.

"I hate the technical aspect of photography," Mr. Jordan said. "I don't want to stop to think methodically and make calculations, like



adjusting the light meter, setting the f-stop, the exposure, remembering to close the lens, seating the film holder properly. I crave to be able to photograph the way a painter paints — in a loose, expressive way. With the view camera, I have to stop and think like an accountant.”

Still, when the images are as large as some in his forthcoming show— one picture of small electronic wires called diodes is eight feet long — every step is crucial, from exposure to development to scanning to printing. To make sure that his images are scanned for optimal size, color fidelity and accuracy of detail, he spent six months researching film-scanning operators. exposure, remembering to close the lens, seating the film holder properly. I crave to be able to photograph the way a painter paints — in a loose, expressive way. With the view camera, I have to stop and think like an accountant.”

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The resulting precision of detail gives Mr. Jordan’s large-format photographs a truer-than-life clarity. “What I aspire to is to have the viewer look directly at the subject, as if they’re looking through a window at the real thing,” he said.

Mr. Jordan said he had been greatly influenced by Andreas Gursky, whose eye-zapping images depict, among other things, our commodity-patterned world. Even the enormous scale of Mr. Gursky’s prints is meant to reflect the globalization of capitalist sprawl.

“Gursky’s work proved to me that representational photographic art can be cutting-edge relevant, as well as complex and beautiful,” Mr. Jordan said. But he added that Mr. Gursky took “the point of view of detached observer, which I started with in my consumerism work and am finding myself no longer comfortable with.”

Instead, Mr. Jordan is an openly passionate advocate — or maybe a protester. While he is aiming for visually resolved images as an artist, the point is to heighten awareness about our collective environmental disregard. But art and advocacy can be at odds, the goals of one often canceling out the other. “My goal,” he said, “is to try to face the complexity of the issue and honor it.”

Mr. Jordan needed one more day at CollectiveGood to get just the exposures he wanted of the cellphones. Once back in Seattle, he sent an e-mail message describing the moment when, after all the planning, the traveling, the setting up of his equipment and the arranging of the cellphones, he felt “something like joy and recognition and excitement, plus some instant anxiety,” because he had to get it on film safely or it would be lost forever. He did get it on film, had the film scanned, and spent several days working in Photoshop to blend two different exposures into the single panoramic swirl, “Cellphone No. 2, Atlanta 2005,” 7.5 feet long, above. The image shifts between documentary evidence (real cellphones in mass quantity) and metaphor: a vortex evoking the endless flow of consumer detritus.



Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times

The photographer Chris Jordan, arranging a pile of about 3,000 discarded cellphones for his 7.5-foot-long image “Cellphones No. 2, Atlanta 2005,” left. His other portraits of industrial waste and consumer castoffs include “Sawdust, Tacoma 2004,” top, and “Recycling Yard No. 1, Seattle 2003,” far left.