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TAKE YOUR COURAGE INTO YOUR OWN HANDS!
TAKE A RISK!

How does one
change one's life?



Cell phones #2, Atlanta 2005

CHRIS JORDAN WAS A SUCCESSFUL LAWYER. THEN HE DECIDED TO RESIGN FROM THE BAR. TODAY, HE IS A THRIVING ARTIST AND IS MUCH MORE CONTENT WITH HIS LIFE AND WORK - BUT NOT NECESSARILY WITH THE WORLD.

pending: Had January 17, 2003 been different, we would not be talking today.
Chris Jordan: Oh dear, you've already caught me by surprise. What happened on January 17, 2003?

Legend has it, that that was the day you gave back your licence to practice law.
Oh, of course! I should have that date tattooed on my arm. In this whole process of changing my life, I think that was the one really brave thing I have done. It was a very strange experience actually, quite anticlimactic. During the process of leaving my job as attorney, people kept saying to me "If the art thing doesn't work out, you can always go back to being a lawyer." This made me nervous, because I have a self-sabotaging side that finds a way of making my plans fail. I knew that if I had this

safety net still in place, I would find a way to use it. So I had to cut away the safety net.

And what steps were required to do that?
I walked into the Bar Association and told them I wanted to resign from the bar. No one had ever done that before, so the woman at the desk didn't even know how to do it. She shuffled around in a file cabinet for some time and then pulled out a form, which I signed. I then walked out of there feeling as light as I have ever felt. From that day on, I have though lived with a new kind of fear. But it's the right



Cigarette butts, 2005

kind of fear - the fear that anyone feels who is taking a risk. A friend of mine calls that kind of fear "excitement without the breathing".

What about your health insurance?

That runs out in a couple of weeks actually. Here we have a law that requires employers to keep covering their employees for a couple of years after they leave a job. My insurance covered my wife and me for a while, then we switched over to hers. Then my wife left her job a couple of years ago, too, to pursue her poetry work. At the end of March our health insurance finally expires. Luckily, we're both in good health - at least for now.

Do you remember your last case in court before you quit?

It was a tragic case involving the explosion of a gasoline pipeline in a public park. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of gasoline spilled into a pristine mountain creek and caught fire, sending a fireball 30,000 feet into the sky. Three young boys died in the fire. My firm represented the pipeline company in a criminal prosecution brought by the Federal Government. It was a tremendously complex case involving hundreds of millions of dollars.

Who won?

I learned over the years that in our legal system, no one wins or loses - the outcome is always just a business transaction, from which

the lawyers get an enormous cut. In this case, the families of the two boys were paid \$75 million, of which \$40 million went to their lawyers. And then the families got into another lawsuit about dividing up the remainder.

You really do like your former profession, don't you?

The legal profession is very safe, which is one of the reasons I think I went into it. You can cruise along for decades making plenty of money without ever taking any significant risk. My spirit was dying inside, and I knew it, but I was afraid to make the leap into photography full-time because of the possibility of failing. So I stayed put. The thing that finally got me going was a new kind of fear that crept up behind me over a period of several years: it was the fear of not living my life. This fear was motivating - it kind of pushed me forward. I also had the support of a few key people in my life, most importantly my wife. She sat down with me one day and said she didn't care if we lived in a cruddy apartment, or had to sell our car - she supported me taking this risk and would stick with me no matter what.

The secret seems to be having the right partner ...

It turned out that she really had to live up to that commitment, because before we finally started making a living from my photography, we ended up spending every cent we had.



Wall of drums, Seattle 2003 (homage to Christo)

First we cashed in my retirement fund and lived from that; then that ran out, and we cashed in her retirement fund. Then that ran out, and we lived for a while on credit cards. That got pretty scary, but during this time my work starting taking off. There was a short period when we had a negative net worth. Not a path for the faint of heart!

You recently took a series of photographs of New Orleans after Katrina. Beautiful documents of devastation.

Visiting New Orleans late in 2005 was one of the most profound experiences of my life. I felt overwhelmed on many levels. Everywhere I went I found strange scenarios and bizarre subjects - cars upside down on roofs, boats sticking out of people's living rooms, whole neighbourhoods ripped apart as if they had been bombed, with clothes and toilets and beds and dishes thrown around in ironic and poignant juxtapositions. I could have done a whole body of work just about the evidence of the incredible forces that had come to bear. But I went there with the intention of connecting with something other than the obvious devastation. It took some discipline to stay connected with myself, and to focus my work on the more subtle evidence of human tragedy. I felt a deep sense of grief and loss when I was there; not sympathy for the losses the victims had suffered, but a sense of my own loss, the loss that we all suffer when

a catastrophe of this magnitude happens to the people of our own country. The US has lost something sacred over a period of many years, and Katrina represents visible and tangible evidence of this loss. It has to do with our community, compassion, and connectedness, which have been sacrificed in favour of our material society. As an individual I am willing to face up to this loss, and so, through my work, maybe I can inspire others to do the same.

How do people react when they see these images? Do they get the message?

In the art world, I am frequently annoyed by the attention that is focused on the "art" aspect of my work. People want to talk all about me, and about colour and composition and other more academic issues, instead of centring on the message that is encoded in my work. But then, that message is not easy to face. The effects of our consumerism, and the changes that we will have to make, are issues that the US is only just beginning to face up to. Many people, including some at the top of the art world, just aren't ready to go there yet. I also find that when I exhibit my work and talk about our rampant consumerism, no one ever seems to think I am talking about them. So I get very little anger or defensiveness from people; they almost always take my side and speak zealously about consumer issues, even if they drive a huge SUV and

work two thousand hours a year to pay for their three homes. This illustrates for me the complexity of the issue; it is like talking to someone with an alcohol problem, where no amount of preaching will break through the defensiveness. Self-reflection is something that can only happen internally. But it can be inspired from the outside, especially by art; I have experienced that myself.

Sorry, but what kind of car do you drive?

My wife and I have two cars, both of which have more than 130,000 miles on them. I drive a Mazda Miata and we also have an old Subaru for hauling the whole family around in. We do lots of other things to try to lessen our environmental footprint, such as buy all of our clothes and household goods at thrift stores. But that does not let us off the hook; we still participate in the American consumer culture, and benefit from it every day. It is a challenging issue to face. I think too many Americans are doing some bare-minimum thing (such as recycling their paper) and trying to convince themselves that this is enough. People use canvas

bags in the supermarket to save on paper, but then they drive home in their 5000-pound Lexus that is exempt from mileage requirements because it is classified as a "truck". My work is trying to say that we can go deeper, and try harder. It is strange that my work is receiving far more exposure in Europe than it is in the US. I think Europeans are more open to this message.

But isn't the American mainstream moving towards clearer, sometimes strong ethical, social, and political statements, at a time when subjects like gay cowboys, corrupt multinationals and ethnic problems can lead to winning an Oscar?

Yes, we seem to be moving in that direction. It is encouraging to see these messages coming from so many different sources now. I hope that it will reach a critical mass, where it becomes mainstream instead of on the fringe. Maybe in the future this movement will have enough force to elect leaders who are more enlightened. My hope with my own work is just to contribute to this critical mass. It feels like I am swimming up-



Remains of a home, Ninth Ward neighborhood, New Orleans 2005

stream, but then sometimes I get hopeful - it looks like the breakthrough might be just around the next corner. One thing we have done very little talking about so far is the idea of personal accountability in our unchecked consumer culture. Right now there is nothing regulating our ability to use resources, except our own wealth. As more events like Katrina occur, the cumulative effects of our consumerism are becoming more visible. Katrina has illuminated our interconnectedness, and has made our individual responsibility as members of a conscious society ever more difficult to deny.

What would be a courageous act in this context? Something you personally would not have the courage to do?

This is a fascinating question that I have been thinking about for some time myself. I think of someone like Martin Luther King, who had the courage and bigness of Self to hold an inspiration for an entire nation, and I wonder how he summoned the strength. I don't know what it would look like for someone to hold our society's shame, or our greed, or wheth-

er it even could be done. Something like going on a hunger strike would be too obvious and simplistic. My artwork attempts to point in the right direction, but I believe I can go deeper with it. I don't know yet what that will be, or if I will even stick with photography; for now, all I can do is hold the intention. I do believe that one person can change the world, but I don't know if I am such a person or how I would do it. Maybe it would take more courage than I possess. It's an open question for me.

The thing that finally got me going was a new kind of fear that crept up behind me over a period of several years: it was the fear of not living my life.



In July 2004 the New York Times ran a long article about the artist. Since then, his life has gone wild and as an artist he has firmly landed on his feet. **CHRIS JORDAN** (41) lives with his wife Victoria, a poet, and his son Emerson, a baseball and chess-player, in Seattle, Washington. Website: www.chrisjordan.com. He has participated in numerous solo and group shows in the US and Europe. His work will be shown at the *Photo España Festival* in Madrid 2006. In August, Chris Jordan will release a book titled *In Katrina's Wake*, published by Princeton Architectural Press in New York. It will feature 50 of Chris' photographs along with essays on the causes and consequences of the Katrina disaster. Gallery: Paul Kopeikin Gallery, Los Angeles; www.paulkopeikinalgallery.com.