

Rickerby Hinds: Welcome to the Creator State, where we share stories of social innovation and entrepreneurship for movers, shakers, creators, and change makers. Each episode will celebrate success and failure, ingenuity, and the endless pursuit of knowledge, from education to implementation. Join us as we explore everything in between. The Creator State.

Rickerby Hinds: How hard is it take an ugly photo? Former corporate lawyer turned photographer Chris Jordan is certainly trying. For many years, he's been looking through his lens at the destructive power of our culture and global mass consumption. He's documented devastation following Hurricane Katrina, and visited Midway Island for photo and video projects about plastic pollution responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of seabirds.

Rickerby Hinds: Chris's TED talk, Turning Powerful Stats Into Art, has received more than 1.7 million views, and his documentary, Albatross, is currently available as free public artwork and screening all over the world. Chris's heartbreaking art inspires viewers to reflect on the consequences of convenience, and the effect of our collective consumption habits, elevating his work into environmental activism.

Rickerby Hinds: So exactly how hard is it to take an ugly photo? Chris says it can't be done. Even while photographing heaps of discarded electronics, Chris sees that beauty permeates everything in our world. Join us for a thought provoking conversation with Chris Jordan about how to find hope and beauty amidst despair, and learn more about his exhibition Intolerable Beauty on view at UCR's Barbara and Art Culver Center of the Arts in Downtown Riverside through January 2020. I'm your host, Rickerby Hinds, and welcome to the Creative State.

Rickerby Hinds: So Chris, I wanted to begin by asking you, when someone asks you, what do you do, what do you say to them?

Chris Jordan: Oh man, that's a hard question these days. Well, I mean, I guess I could call myself an artist. For a while there, I would have said filmmaker, but I've only made one film. And I don't know if I'm going to make another. What I'm interested in most of all lately is just the beauty of our world. And I'm turning back toward photography, so I guess I would call myself a photographer these days.

Rickerby Hinds: When you say the beauty of our world, what do you mean by that?

Chris Jordan: There was a really long period for maybe 15 years of my work where I was looking at the darkness, looking at all the bad news. And the particular corner of darkness that I was most interested in was the effect of mass consumption.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. Yes.

Chris Jordan: Global mass consumption. All of the plastic we're throwing away, and all the cars we're throwing away, and all the phones were throwing away. And I guess, I mean I call myself an environmentalist, but I hate that that's even a category. We should-

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: ... should all be environmentalists and care about these things. But I noticed that myself, and also I think maybe the whole environmental movement, is kind of in this paradigm of only looking at the bad news, and thinking that's the whole story. And that's what the Albatross project really, my work on Midway Island, really kind of represented for me is a midway point where I crossed over from only looking at the bad news to kind of holding more in balance that, yes, there's the bad news. We have to keep looking at it. But there's this other thing that is, it's so obvious, it's like the water we swim in is the magnificent beauty, the miracle that we're all a part of. The mystery of what is this gift of life that we've each been given. And to try to hold all of those things in more of a balanced way.

Rickerby Hinds: What has your journey been from the one to the other? Or has it been a journey? Is it a parallel space that you occupy?

Chris Jordan: Well, I mean I've always been really interested in beauty and its role in consciousness and in the world. And I remember when I was doing my photographic series that I call Intolerable Beauty, I was looking at horrible things like giant, incomprehensibly huge piles of garbage and piles of crushed cars. And however I photographed it, it was always beautiful.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. Wow.

Chris Jordan: And I even got annoyed after awhile, and I tried to take an ugly photograph. And that was the very beginning of my series that I called Running the Numbers. And what I did was I made a photograph of, it was 426,000 silver cell phones, with no color, with no pattern, with no arrangement. Just a noise pattern of the number of phones that we throw out every day. And I wanted it to be ugly.

Chris Jordan: And when I printed it, as a giant print, a five by ten foot print, just there's an exquisiteness in the fineness of the detail and in the randomness of that pattern. And I couldn't help but see that it's beautiful. And so those things permeate our world. There's no corner of the world where there isn't beauty. It's the envelope in which everything else is held in every moment.

Chris Jordan: And at the same time I found myself as an artist always turning toward the bad news, and just this sort of [inaudible 00:06:08] kind of energy, like [inaudible 00:06:10] bad news. It's getting worse and worse. And that's why I went to Midway Island, is with that kind of energy to photograph the birds whose bodies are filled with plastic.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And when we got there, I met the live birds. And just imagine the experience of walking out into a field of hundreds of thousands of birds. Albatrosses are as big as eagles. So imagine if you'd walk into a field of hundreds of thousands of eagles all standing on the ground.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And as you walk among them, not only do they not run away, or fly away, but they actually come toward us. And so if you sit down amongst them, pretty soon you're surrounded by them. And they have absolutely no fear of humans. And they're amazing, like spiritual beings. You can feel their sentience, and their intelligence, and their love for each other. And I realized that there was so much more to this story than just the tragedy of their bodies filled with plastic. And that felt like a symbol that sort of applied to my whole life and to the whole world.

Rickerby Hinds: Man. That is such a great visual for you to be able to describe it. I know a lot of times when we work in our own medium that we... as a playwright for me, words are the medium. And for you to be able to describe and evoke that moment is very compelling. Tell me a little bit about what's your creative process? What does that process for you? Clearly it will differ from project to project.

Chris Jordan: Well, it's for me, it's all about the subject. And what I mean by that is I get interested in a particular subject, and what I want to do is to fully encounter that thing. Whether it's a pile of broken glass, or birds on a remote island, or a dead elephant that's been killed for his tusks that I went and photographed in Kenya.

Chris Jordan: Whatever the subject is, I want to try to get past being an artist, making a composition, creating something because I don't have to create anything. The thing is already there.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: All I have to do to see it as deeply as I can, get past my preconceptions or my judgements, get past words, names and labels, and get to a place at least as far as possible within the limitations of our mind to seeing that thing, encountering that thing on its terms, and then simply offer a document that this is what I saw.

Rickerby Hinds: I want to hit on something that's close to that which is how do you know when a project is worth pursuing, like this is the next thing I want to do?

Chris Jordan: That's such a such an interesting question because I don't know. And it's always a scary place for me to end a project and to be asking myself that question. How

am I going to know what to focus my resources on? Because there's always a list, always new things are coming in. How am I going to know if that's the one.

Chris Jordan: But I do know, there've been two times when a project just reached out and grabbed me. And one time was soon after Hurricane Katrina, when I made the decision to go down and photograph in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. And the other time was when I first learned about the birds whose bodies are filled the plastic on Midway Island.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And those are those times. There was an experience that I'll never forget. And on Midway I can tell you the story exactly the moment that this happened. I had learned about ocean plastic pollution. It was 2008, and the Great Pacific garbage patch was just starting to be in the news, and people talking about it. And I got interested in it in trying to make some kind of artwork that would depict it.

Chris Jordan: And so I went to a meeting of a group of scientists and activists. It was basically everybody in the world who knew anything about the Pacific garbage patch. And it was a little room of about 15 people. And I learned that you can't photograph it. That the plastic is spread out over millions of square miles of ocean, and there's not a patch. And one of the scientists specifically looked at me and he said, "You can't take a photograph of the Pacific garbage patch."

Chris Jordan: And I remember I slapped my knee in frustration, and I said, "Damn, I'm a photographer. I want to take a photograph of the Pacific garbage patch." And a young woman named Anna Cummins turned to me, she was sitting right next to me and she said, "If you want to take a photograph of the Pacific garbage patch, go to Midway Island, and look inside the stomachs of dead baby albatrosses."

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And I remember that moment. It was like a shock. And I said, "Wait a second, Midway Island. You mean that tiny island that's in the very, very middle of the Pacific Ocean." And she said, "That's the place." And I heard a sound, it was like the sound of a bell in the very, very back of a huge temple, like in a cathedral.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: Just this [inaudible 00:11:46]. Just this sound. And it was like my internal compass just turned Midway Island, and I was just pulled there like a magnet.

Rickerby Hinds: So tell me when you got there, I know you've already put us in the middle of this space earlier, what was there that augmented this feeling that led you there, and what wasn't there that did the same?

Chris Jordan: Well, the first time I went to Midway, I was there at a time of year when all of the live birds are off the island. And so the first trip to Midway was, it was like a killing field. It was this dead island. Empty, smelled horrible because the ground was covered with tens of thousands of dead albatrosses-

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: ... whose bodies were filled with plastic.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And we were there for two weeks, and we walked around, and everywhere on the ground are dead birds. And at that time of year, they had already died a couple of months previously, and so their bodies were already decomposed, and eaten by various insects, and beetles, and stuff. And so what was left in the ground is their feathers and their bones, the skeletons of these birds in all kinds of just the saddest and most beautiful positions where their neck is like they're trying to sing, and they're dead on the ground. And where their stomach was is a pile of brightly colored bottle caps-

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: ... and cigarette lighters and toothbrushes, and just stupid plastic junk.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And so that trip, it was a sliver of a much bigger story. But I didn't know that at the time. I thought that's the experience of Midway Island. And I didn't even really think very much about the live birds at the time. So I did this photography project. And came back from that experience devastated by what I'd seen, and fell into a state of depression.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: Because when I published this work, I received messages from all over the world. It went much more viral than I was expecting, and more viral than anything else I had done. And the messages that I received from people around the world was the message of despair and hopelessness. And I couldn't think of what to say. I wanted to try to say something that would make that work feel hopeful, but there's nothing. It was horrible.

Chris Jordan: And it wasn't until I returned to the island the second time to try to experience more of that story that I met the live birds, and that's when the medicine began to appear. And the name of the island, being there is just such a poem. It's like being inside a poem.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: One of those aspects is the name. Of all of the names this Island could have, Midway, it's this whole philosophy of life in one word. And it challenged me to stand midway, to look at that horror, to fully witness that horror and feel everything, and to feel the symbolism of it. And always reminding me, stand midway, and at the same time hold the beauty, and experience the beauty, and be in that envelope of mystery and magnificence of these birds, and that island, and develop the capacity to try to contain it all.

Rickerby Hinds: I want to shift slightly and ask you directly, what led you to create Intolerable Beauty?

Chris Jordan: That was a really interesting long process. I had been photographing for maybe 15 years before that series. I studied with my dad who was a photographer and a photo collector. And what he was always interested in is the kind of photography that we call formalism, which is basically just beautiful photographs without much thought for what the subject is.

Rickerby Hinds: Got it.

Chris Jordan: And so as opposed to photography that that has an activist component, or a social social statement kind of component, formalism is just beautiful calla lilies with just the right light, or just the shape of gorgeous trees. And so that's what I was steeped in.

Chris Jordan: And yet the photographers whose work that I was most interested in, were doing work that had a kind of social component as well. You could analyze their work just for its beauty, for its formal gorgeousness, and their work was right on the cutting edge of something in a social way. And those photographers were people like Richard Misrach, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld. And my own work, for all of those years, I couldn't find the social piece.

Chris Jordan: So I was just out taking beautiful photographs of things that I found in the world. And I was living in Seattle at the time. And one thing that I really loved photographing was in the alleys of Downtown Seattle where old dripping drain pipes, a fern would be growing right there in the bricks because of drain pipe just dripped and dripped and dripped.

Rickerby Hinds: Nice.

Chris Jordan: But it always, it was sort of a study in beauty, but it always felt irrelevant to me. And I was like, how can I find relevance? How can I connect with the world through my work? And just by coincidence, I sort of ran out of the alleys. And the alleys, if you follow Seattle's alleys, they go all the way down to the port of Seattle. And so just trying to explore further and further down the alleys, I found myself in the port of Seattle. And I started taking photographs of giant piles of

garbage, and crushed cars, and huge stacks of shipping containers. And it wasn't till I'd been doing that for quite a while that it suddenly started to dawn on me that what I'm really looking at is the infrastructure of our mass consumption.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And it was kind of like seeing the scary oily machine behind the Disneyland ride. And I realized that there was a beauty to it, and there was also something terrifying about it. And that was the beginning of that series that I call Intolerable Beauty.

Rickerby Hinds: You mentioned your father and the type of photography he did. What role has education, and I'm broad stroking that word, played in your life, and what you do?

Chris Jordan: I went to school and studied literature. I did my undergraduate degree in American literature. And then went onto law school.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And spent many years, had a day job as a lawyer for a while, before I could muster the courage to do what I love full time. And I'm really glad I did my degree in literature because there's something about studying literature that really opened a door for me into the universe. And what I mean by that is reading literature, I had some really good teachers who would teach us all about the symbolism and the stories within a story that go on below the level of conscious awareness.

Chris Jordan: And I remember there's one teacher, we read Jane Eyre, and everyone in the class read Jane Eyre, and then the teacher handed out a series of essay assignments. She said, "You are going to read Jane Eyre again, and write an essay about all the times that roses appear in the book. And you're going to write an essay about the weather in Jane Eyre.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And you're going to write an essay about color, every time color is mentioned." And there were 30 people in the class, 30 different assignments, and everybody came back and gave a presentation of what they'd found. And it was mind blowing.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: That there was a thread of roses, every time somebody dies in Jane Eyre, roses appear. And you would never notice it. It's just a mention. And color, and weather, like every time something bad is about to happen, there's ominous

weather. And in literature, I think the way those guys must write is to have an outline of all of these themes that they're working with, that operate below the level of conscious awareness, and that make the story archetypal. And that gives it a kind of a symbolic depth that is more... there's this power to it that way. And I've been so interested in that ever since as an artist. How do we build layers of meaning, layers of symbolism into our offerings that can honor the complexity of our world.

Rickerby Hinds: And I think that's somewhat of a transcendent feature of work from artists or writers, what is beneath the words that the characters are saying to move us forward in the plot. There should always be something beneath that. You mentioned skid row, and you mentioned starting this project in the alleys of Seattle. How have, whether we call them mistakes, or erroneous meanderings, contributed to your work, and your success with what you do?

Chris Jordan: My approach to mistakes is... I play jazz piano. That's actually my first love in the world. Miles Davis said something really beautiful about mistakes. He says in jazz there are no mistakes.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And when you play a note that you didn't mean, here's something that, wait, that's not what I thought that note was going to be, then that becomes a new melody. Like, oh, you play that note again, and then you make a whole melody out of that note, and that might be the basis for your entire solo. It started out as a mistake, and I really loved that.

Chris Jordan: And as a photographer, some of my favorite images are ones that started as a mistake. Then I saw something in that image that I was like, wow, that's not what I would've thought of. And then you go back and make the same mistake intentionally. And so mistakes, they come from that same unconscious place that I think is where all of our genius lies.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: It's not in the conscious mind that figures stuff out. It's in the unconscious where things emerge. And I've always experienced, if I can be open to the unknowing in that's in that process, then that's really when the magic happens.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow. Wow. What have you learned about success from others?

Chris Jordan: Well, I think I would say the most I've learned about success is in a negative way. For me, if I think of what do I think of as a success, I don't care about having a nice place. I'm sleeping on a friend's couch kind of indefinitely right now. I don't care about having nice car. I don't want to get stuck in trying to be successful as having a career, or having a resume, or something like that.

Rickerby Hinds: Yeah. Yeah.

Chris Jordan: To me, what success is having the freedom to explore something that captures my heart.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And I just got back from two months in the American desert in Utah, in Nevada. And I didn't make any money. I don't know if I'm ever going to make any money from any of that work. I did a whole new photographic project out there. And it doesn't matter because my bank account doesn't have very much money in it right now, but in here in my heart, I feel like a billionaire.

Rickerby Hinds: Now let's get into the creator state of mind. In each episode we ask our guests to share what's been on their minds, something they can't stop thinking about, a new challenge they're facing, or what's inspired them into action recently. We call it the creator state of mind.

Chris Jordan: I've noticed lately we're living in a kind of soup of news about the coming environmental apocalypse.

Rickerby Hinds: Yeah. Yes.

Chris Jordan: And every day there's another article that talks about the apocalypse, the cataclysm, the disaster. And it's just from every angle is this apocalyptic, everything's getting worse and worse faster and faster. And so this is something that I experienced when I was out in the desert, that was just the most inspiring thing, is in Nevada. I'd never explored in Nevada before. And I just wanted to see what's there. There's this big empty map and it's really far apart. There's 50 miles of nothing. What is that?

Chris Jordan: And I got back in there. And it is these vast wilderness areas in a patchwork. So there's one huge wilderness area that's like 700,000 acres right next to a national wildlife refuge. And then a little strip of wilderness study area, and then a national park. It's this patchwork of an unbelievably vast area of protected wilderness.

Chris Jordan: And out in Nevada, there's almost no commercial agriculture going on. So there's no pesticides being used-

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: ... in that whole part of the world. And so the insect population is healthy, the whole ecosystem is healthy. So I was in this valley, it's called the Panamint Valley, which is this absolutely massive empty space. It only has a dirt road. There's no trails. There's no visitor center. It's just real wilderness, like in Alaska.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And there are these bushes there that are maybe four feet tall. And I made these photographs of the bushes up close, and then the valley just goes and goes and goes. And you see the bushes get smaller and smaller and smaller until they're so far away that they're just a dot. And then beyond that, it just turns into a green texture, like billions of these bushes. And every single one of those bushes, if you go up and touch the bush, 50 butterflies fly out.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: There are, I don't know how many hundreds of billions of butterflies in this empty protected space in our country.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: And it's healthy. And one morning it was dead still, there was not the tiniest breath of wind. Nearest other human is, I don't know how many tens or 20 miles away, and the butterflies are out flying. And I could hear a sound that was their wings beating. The beating wings of a billion butterflies. And I thought about all those articles that are talking about mass extinction, and apocalypse, and I'm like, that's overdone. There is healthy, huge, beautiful, mystical wilderness right here in our own country and really all over the world.

Chris Jordan: I think I just had this feeling of hope and inspiration. It's like I think we can soften our idea that everything's getting so bad, so fast, and maybe just take a breath, and take just enough time to fall back in love with the beauty of our world, and then go forward from there, instead of from this energy, this like [inaudible 00:28:36], everything is so bad.

Rickerby Hinds: The beating wings of a million butterflies. That's cool. It is always a valuable learning opportunity to take time to reflect. At the end of each interview, we like to ask our guests this. In hindsight, what is something you wish you would've known when you were starting out?

Chris Jordan: You know what? I think if someone had come to me when I was younger, and sort of giving me the lessons, or the whatever, the wisdom that I have learned, I don't think I would've listened.

Rickerby Hinds: Wow.

Chris Jordan: Yeah, I don't think there's anything that, if I had known then, that it have would really... I think we have to learn-

Rickerby Hinds: Of course.

Chris Jordan: ... as we go. And this is one thing that's really kind of a revelation to me is I was just talking with my 23 year old son, and he's in the process of growing up. And he doesn't like growing up. He's like, "I don't want to grow up."

Rickerby Hinds: Yes, yes. I have one of those.

Chris Jordan: Been resisting. And I remember I resisted growing up. I thought growing up was bad. It was gonna suck. Childhood is when you get to have all your fun, and then you become a grownup and life sucks. But to me, it just gets better and better. As a grownup, there's so much more freedom, and you have so much more power and resources available. And so I guess maybe that's one thing is life gets better all the time. That's one thing I wish I had known.

Rickerby Hinds: Tune into our next episode for a moving conversation with Regina Lousie, an author and UCR alumna whose memoirs of growing up in the foster care system inspired the Lifetime movie, I Am Somebody's Child.

Rickerby Hinds: Thanks for listening. Find more information about our guests at creatorstate.com. Do you know someone creating something great. Send us what you're creating for a chance to be featured in an upcoming episode. Write to us at creatorstate@ucr.edu.

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