Kori Newkirk keeps a box in his studio full of newspaper clippings—quick stories, no pictures, a couple hundred words, “little tragic things.” These blotters tell the worst news. A man has sexual intercourse with a corpse. Two lost hikers commit murder-suicide rather than die of thirst. A woman in Costa Mesa drove around for weeks with a mummified body in her car. She was giving a ride to a transient and they just died, and she didn’t know what to do, so she just kept driving.

Another box is labeled SINGLES; in it are hundreds of newspaper photos of people who are alone. Another is labeled TWO PEOPLE. Like headlines, Newkirk’s taxonomy tells most of the story. MEDICAL TECHNOLOGY / FIRE / ANIMALS / LANDSCAPE / NATURE / MIGRANTS—HOMELESS / WAR / RIOTS / BLACK PEOPLE / SPACE. This litany serves as a summary of the 21st century so far. It proves that these things still happen and that our newspapers still run photos of them. They happen so much, in fact, that these images lose their specificity; they become as generic as the headline on their plastic bin, which fuzzes out in Benday—how many dead?—the individual catastrophes depicted. The pictures have no captions. These clippings are roundly topical, political in a Greek sense, maybe, but edge away from the precipice of politicality. They describe actions without actors.

Newkirk picks up a newspaper wherever he goes. His clippings are mostly from the Los Angeles Times—the hometown rag of the city in which he has lived and worked since 1995. When you live in L.A., the national news is the local news, too. Our car chases and wildfires flash across the country from Washington to Florida at 5, 6, and 11. To keep tabs on the Times in this way is to siphon off the flow from the wellhead, collecting your share of lives and deaths from the
scaremongers and click chasers. It’s exhausting to pay such close attention. It’s a form of masochism, disguised as a duty. You wind up staggering around the city punch drunk.

Another L.A. takes shape beneath the headlines. From a pale pink warehouse in the Fashion District, Newkirk surveys the fringe of a rapidly gentrifying central business district. He watches the ebb and flow of who he calls the cart-pushers. A few years back, Newkirk pushed a shopping cart from his studio to a museum on the other side of downtown. He sees in the cart an inbuilt irony: consumerist cornucopia and apocalypse-mobile, both. Newkirk doesn’t drive; he makes a point of walking. The other L.A. is better seen on foot. You become a different kind of anthropologist, drawn to curious trash in the gutters and on the sidewalks, the soft, creamy cardboard and candy-colored plastic that seems to fade in a gradient from the dismal streets up to the import wholesale shops that sell it. One day he saw a fat-tired bicycle chained up with old chipped CD-ROMs folded in the spokes. He made a series of sculptures of bicycle rims speared together on long axels like the parallel blades of an urban harvester. This, too, is a textural kind of literacy. Newkirk reads the city through its discards, picking up and amplifying the shiniest motifs.

Today Newkirk has noticed horse shoes. They are a humble munition and, like the shopping cart, they are a Western innovation. Some say you should hang them open-end up, so that they can collect the luck; others, open-end down, so that the luck can pour out on people as they pass. For Newkirk, the horseshoe is a talisman and a cypher—a shape to read the world through. There is no box labeled POLITICS, only a collection of current events given a kind of narrative as they are nailed to Newkirk’s symbology—everything from Games to Luck, Manifest Destiny to the Crusades. Contemporary issues arc back to a prelapsarian age of innocence and belief; back before Los Angeles was a Spanish pueblo twenty miles inland from the beaches where hide traders tanned and packed their wares, when the wild horses roamed Spain barefoot. And so you might take up the debate: do you hang a horseshoe up or down; as if it’s more than a formal question; as if either way is magic.
Today the news is full of artists who have gotten carried away with their own stories. Some of them have forgotten about the world. Kelley Walker smears Trident toothpaste on the covers of black men’s magazines. Dana Schutz cops the portrait of Emmitt Till in his coffin for a painting at the Whitney. A handful of New York and L.A. galleries set up shop on the fringes of Boyle Heights and soon the neighborhood is ground zero for developers. What was it we cared about, again? ART, wasn’t it? Certain things being off limits to certain people? This collection of issues starts to blend together, lose its definition. This fatigue affects more than our vision, so that we don’t have the words to name it.

America remains a land of contrasts. Short of conclusions, we can only rely on the fragmented dispatches that chase the wires back from the frontiers. Newkirk’s images arrive lightly polished, like icons on a package, like photos without captions. Such is history: an iron boomerang that won’t come back.