



John Divola, *X-Files*, Patricia Faure Gallery

Early in his career John Divola gained public recognition with a suite of photographs titled *Zuma 1978-79*, a set of interior views of an old beachfront property with a single, central window opening onto the Pacific, like a picture within a picture. In a highly picturesque manner, Divola recorded the house's gradual destruction at the hands of local vandals, occasionally joining his own marks to theirs, thereby bringing into question the documentary status of the undertaking. In this project, all of the component parts of his practice were already in place: the mise-en-abyme structure, the tendency to skirt the borders of fiction and the real, and the simultaneously ironic and earnest suggestion of something beyond what is, and what can be, known..

If there's is something covertly cinematic about this early project - its black-box configuration,

the regressive pull of its "narrative," - Divola's recent exhibition of photographs of television and film sets brings these ideas out in the open. "Artificial Landscapes, 2002" is a tight grid of thirty-six black-and-white "continuity shots" (photos taken by studios to record the state of their sets from one day of filming to the next) depicting markedly hand-fabricated forest scenes. By framing them like fine art, and then combining them into a larger ensembles, Divola submits these "industry" photographs to an acutely reflexive meta-reading that is as much about what they essentially or materially consist of as about what they must, by necessity, leave out. Originally taken to aid the seamless flow of montage, the photographs are, in themselves, documents of its rupture. Even more paradoxically, perhaps, the photographic process, miniaturizing and crystallizing every detail of these man-made worlds, cuts to the quick of filmic fascination. Because the fakeness of these images is so sharply rendered, one enters each one as a densely tangled source, a mother lode, of the fantastic and the imaginary.

During the production of the final season of "The X-Files" (January to April, 2002), Divola gained access to the set and produced a series of pointedly forensic interiors of FBI offices, a 60's-style home, and several accompanying still-lives. In this work - this time Divola's own - a bright, bureaucratic sheen prevails; every line is straight and sharp, in marked contrast to the shadowy, primeval curlicues that fill out the forest scenes. But both photographed sites are made of the same illusory stuff. And besides, "the truth is out there" - meaning, it's not here. Perhaps "the truth" is in the enfolding darkness against which Mulder's and Dogget's offices can erect only the flimsiest hedge.

The Brechtian interplay between these two types of photographs would be enough to carry the show. The convulsive alternations of point of view (between an exterior made inside and an interior made outside, between a documentary photograph of an openly constructed fantasy and an openly constructed photograph of simulated regularity) are vertigo-inducing - but that's not all. More here than in any previous body of work, Divola deployed his photographic apparatus in a most orthodox manner - truly as if to conduct a search of the premises. The *X-Files* set becomes a kind of crime scene without ever ceasing to be essentially a pictorial construct. The clues that Divola uncovers are, accordingly, aesthetic ones. As an element within a composition, however, the trace of a hand brushed across a dusty lampshade or the arbitrary confluence of the blue blouse of a murder victim and the blue tape that holds up her image begin to thrum with an otherworldly energy. -