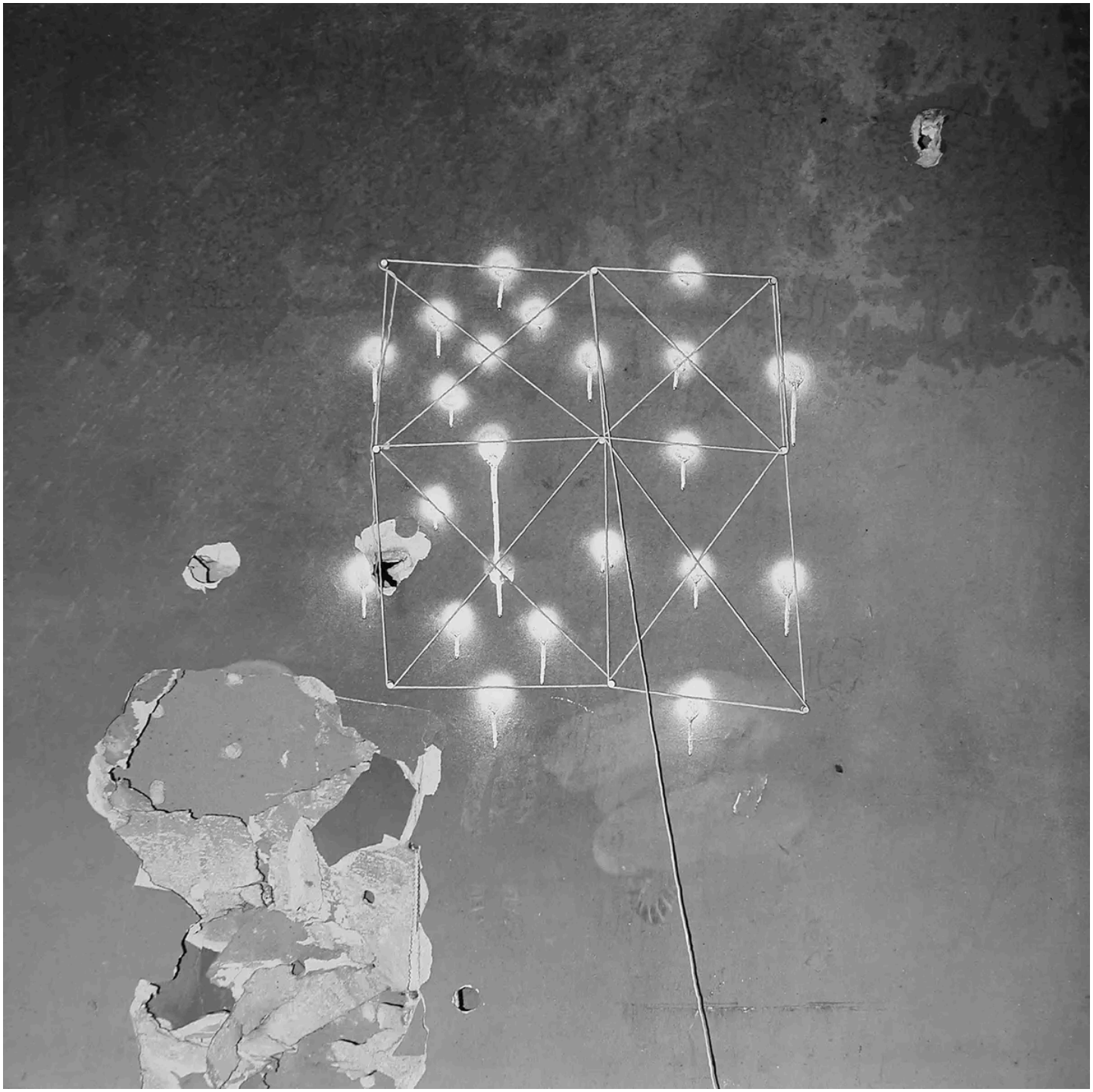
ARTSEEN | FEBRUARY 2025

John Divola: *The Ghost In The Machine*

By James Welling



John Divola, *Vandalism (74V18)*, 1974. Vintage gelatin silver print, paper: 14 x 11 inches, frame: 18 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

In his third show at Yancey Richardson, the California photographer John Divola presents two bodies of work separated by almost fifty years: "Vandalism" (1973–75) and "Blue with Exceptions" (2019–24). In 1978, one of the photographs on display at Richardson, *Vandalism* (*74V18)*

The Ghost In The Machine
Yancey Richardson
January 9–

February 22, 2025
New York

(1974), was included in the seminal MoMA exhibition *Mirrors and Windows*. The show was curator John Szarkowski's attempt to make sense of the previous decade and a half of photographic activity, and Szarkowski's pithy title staked out his hunch that all photographs could be read as mirror—a self-portrait, or window—an exploration of the outside world. What *74V18* and the rest of the images now on view at Richardson show us is that Divola's work is a kind of quantum photography, always oscillating between "window" and "mirror."



John Divola, *Vandalism (74V09)*, 1974. Vintage gelatin silver print, paper: 14 x 11 inches, frame: 18 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

After undergraduate work at California State University, Northridge, Divola studied with the legendary artist and educator Robert Heinecken at UCLA. Heinecken was a chain-smoking former jet pilot who made his program at UCLA ground zero for innovative photography by encouraging and provoking material and conceptual experimentation. Divola took this ethos seriously and began his

"Vandalism" series while still enrolled. To make these works, Divola trespassed in abandoned houses and spray-painted configurations of dots and squiggles on the walls, floor, and ceiling. Divola then photographed these "paintings" with a square format camera and flash that rendered his grubby interiors in exceptionally sharp, crisp detail. Divola told me that, as his film was monochromatic, he started the series with black-and-white spray paint, but after looking at early prints he added metallic silver to his palette. In "Vandalism" the highlight sheen of the reflective silver paint echoes the glossy surface of the gelatin silver print.

Because Divola worked in houses without electricity, he used a flash for illumination. Flash exposures are infinitesimally brief, and the "Vandalism" photographs are essentially still lifes lit by a sudden blast of light. The mischievous Divola quite literally threw an unknown variable into this scenario: in two of the "Vandalism" photographs in the current exhibition, careful viewers may detect the flying objects Divola hurled into his tableaux just as he triggered the flash. In *Vandalism (74V09)* (1974) a notebook, possibly found on-site, hovers in the upper portion of the image, while in *Vandalism* (*74V02)* (1974) a piece of patterned fabric, easy to overlook, lingers suspended mid-image. (It seems plausible that Divola might have seen Philippe Halsman's iconic, often reproduced *Dali Atomicus*, a 1948 photograph of Salvador Dali floating among a column of water and three freaked out cats, the scene frozen by Halsman's powerful flash.)



John Divola, *Vandalism (74V02)*, 1974. Vintage gelatin silver print, paper: 14 x 11 inches, frame: 18 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

"Vandalism" began Divola's fascination with abandoned sites. Two years after finishing the series Divola began what would become his magnum opus, the "Zuma Series" (1977–78), a large suite of chromogenic prints photographed inside a derelict beach house on the California coast. (Yancey Richardson exhibited inkjets of "Zuma" a few years ago.) In this decomposing house, a

refuge for surfers and drug users, Divola painted the interiors with spray paint that he then photographed with a long exposure *and* with a flash. The bounce back from the flash created exceptionally crisp definition on the walls and the long exposure recorded the ambient light in and around the house. Where "Vandalism" zeroes in on the X, Y, Z vectors of walls, floor, and ceiling, "Zuma" incorporates wider views that include whole walls and the Pacific Ocean. Still, in at least five of the "Zuma" photographs Divola couldn't resist throwing a brightly colored magazine, Halsman-style, into his set, leaving their distended pages to dangle down from the top of the photograph.



John Divola, *GAFB B16576 (12_16_2020)*, 2019–2024, from the series *Blue with Exceptions*. Archival pigment print, 36 1/2 x 48 3/4 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

Richardson's front gallery is occupied by the much later, multi-year project "Blue with Exceptions," which takes several cues from "Zuma" and other earlier series. The new photographs super-size the ambition of "Zuma" by working in scores of tract house interiors that Divola painted and otherwise vandalized. The same year Divola began "Blue with Exceptions," I started to follow him on Instagram, where the artist posts a continuous stream of old and new work. Almost immediately, I encountered posts from his disturbing 2007–08 series "Dark Star." In this earlier body of work Divola painted ominous black circles and ovals on derelict interior walls. In "Blue with Exceptions" Divola painted similarly shaped black and colored blobs on the walls and warren-like passageways of scores of identical houses on the decommissioned George Air Force Base (GAFB). The mind-numbing repetitiveness of the interiors and Divola's sinister black shapes is offset by a remarkable nocturne palette of ultramarine blue, shiny black, and alizarin crimson.

To make "Blue with Exceptions" I imagine that Divola opened the shutter of his tripod-mounted digital camera for a multi-second exposure. While the lens was open, he moved quickly in front of the camera to selectively add bits of blue light by exposing "multiple pops" with a small handheld flash unit that he covered with a blue gel. Because the room was dark and Divola probably wore black, he remained invisible as long as he kept moving. This way of surreptitiously adding light to a scene is known as "painting with light," and is the inverse of "dodging," a well-known darkroom technique where a technician withholds light from parts of a print as it is being exposed. Because most viewers think of a photograph (or a print) as an instantaneous event, you could say that painting with light is an invisible, insider technique. Yet not all photographers hide their durational exposures. Francesca Woodman, for example, famously incorporated her blurred body in long exposures as a creative element.

ADVERTISEMENT

MASS MoCA JEFFREY GIBSON: POWER FULL BECAUSE WE'RE DIFFERENT
On view through September 7, 2026



John Divola, *GAFB F0066 (3_6_2023)*, 2019–2024, from the series *Blue with Exceptions*. Archival pigment print, 48 3/4 x 36 1/2 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

In one photograph from "Blue with Exceptions" Divola stapled a sheet of seamless red backdrop paper to a wall and cut it with a utility knife to suggest large rose petals. (Red may be the "exception" in "Blue with Exceptions.") Like *4_2020_4* (2020), a small black-and-white print exhibited in Divola's last show in New York where the artist cut milky sheet plastic into petals, this photograph recalls the 1970s cut paper works made by Arizona photographer Fredrick Sommer (1905–99). I don't know whether Divola met Sommer when the older photographer visited Heinecken's class at UCLA, but even if not I like to imagine the older aesthete and desert rat standing in the same room as Divola, the young anarchist rebel.

The fillip in Divola's current show is his decision to create three AI-assisted photographs of songbirds and then re-photograph them in his interiors at GAFB. Divola has made work with photographs of birds before and, because of the title of the exhibition, I imagine that some people might have read the birds as representing "the canary in the coal mine" as culture spins toward a world dominated by AI. I, however, see Divola's AI birds as arbitrary "larks," nothing more. In one photograph, a print of a blue bird lit by a blue flash exposure hangs on top of swirls of white and silver spray paint. Near the AI print a rough hole allows us to see into a passageway beyond. A second AI print of a blue and orange bird covered in orange and blue specks of light is nailed to a wall on which real, dappled sunlight shines. Finally, a square photograph of a red bird tacked over a spray-painted red circle disconcertingly reads as a physical cut in the wall, leading the viewer to imagine the bird behind, rather than in front of, the red circle.



John Divola, *GAFB F5985 (10_30_2024)*, 2019–2024, from the series *Blue with Exceptions*. Archival pigment print, 36 1/2 x 48 3/4 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

On the front wall of the gallery Divola hung a single photograph, *GAFB B16576 (12_16_2020)* (2019–24). The work depicts an ovular black shape painted on a wall that must have been subsequently smashed (during the five-year gap in the work's date?), creating an opening large enough to see clear outside. Unlike the illusion of depth in the photograph of the red bird, this beckoning real space seems to indicate that our gaze, at last, can escape the pictorial prisons Divola has created. This visual relief is short-lived, however. Like the paranoid narrator in Franz Kafka's short story "The Burrow," I was made anxious by this glimpse of an exterior world outside our "burrow." I felt happier to stay in the claustrophobic precincts of Divola's photographs than to venture into the physical outside space of smog and sunlight.



John Divola, *GAFB F7418 (10_27_2023)*, 2019–2024, from the series *Blue with Exceptions*. Archival pigment print, 36 1/2 x 48 3/4 inches. © John Divola. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York.

The Saturday after the opening of *The Ghost in the Machine*, John and I had a public conversation about the work in the gallery. I arrived early, encountering a photography class leaving the project room and walking into the main gallery. The instructor was having trouble summarizing Divola's work and in his haste to reach the exit he waved his hand at the new photographs and shouted, "And in this room, we can see Divola doing his thing."

John Divola's thing has been a lifelong immersion in the mechanics and metaphysics of photography. Twenty years ago, when photographers were making the transition from analog film to digital capture and inkjet printing, Divola always seemed to know the proper processing protocols and what inkjet

papers were best. (I always want to know what inkjet paper Divola is using.) For half a century he has tinkered with the print, camera, exposure, light, space, color. Throughout his career, this grandmaster has willfully and gleefully messed with photographic action and intention to create his precise, frequently disturbing, always beautiful body of photographs.

James Welling is a photographer who lives in New York. He is a lecturer at Princeton University.

PREVIOUS
Critics Page
The Return of the Goddess

NEXT
Critics Page
Goddess Time

© Copyright 2000-2024 The Brooklyn Rail