

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

What Comes After the End?

John Divola asks us: What am I looking at? Is it real? Where does that distinction now lie, given the technology required to make a photograph now?

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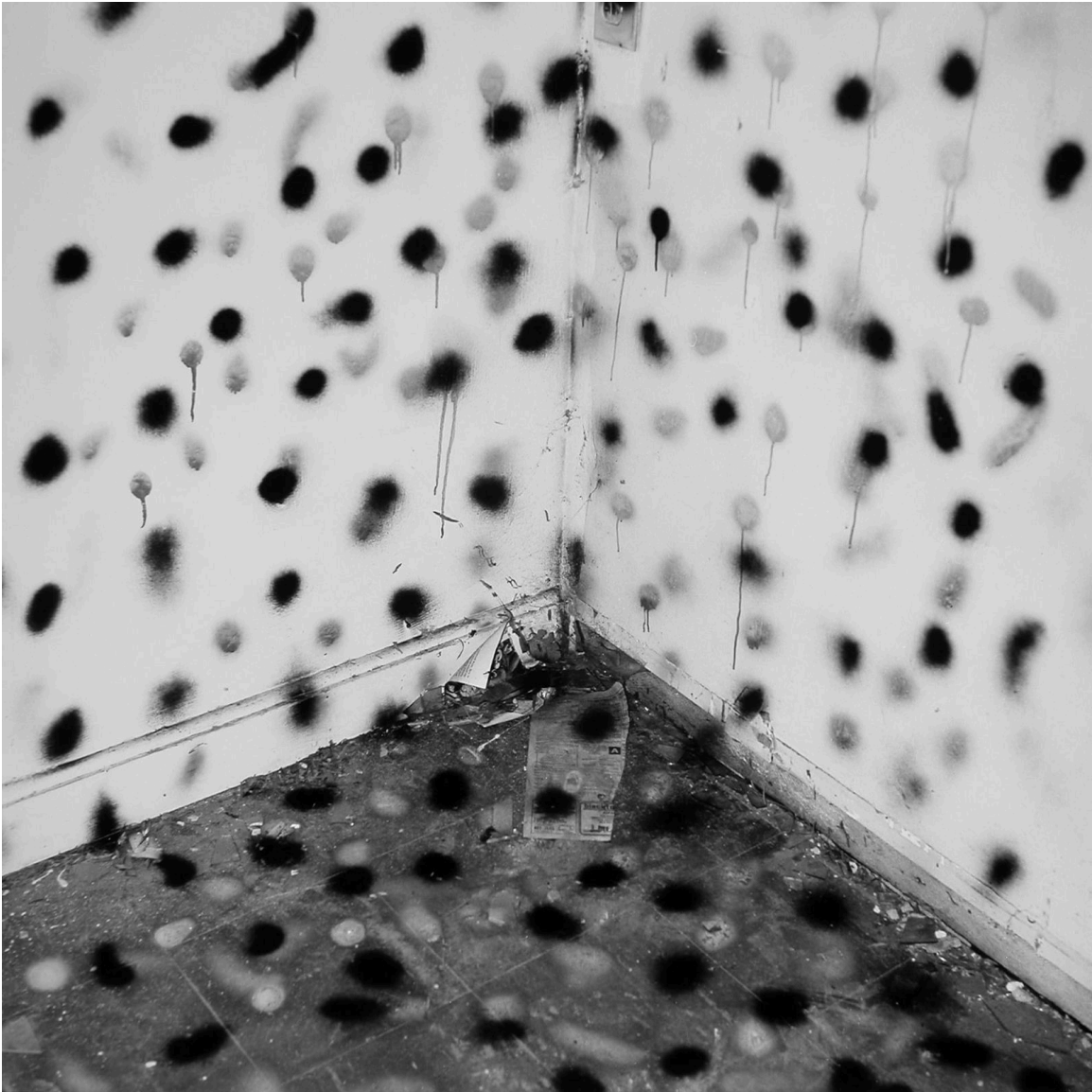


John Divola, "GAFB F2454 (3_16_2024)" (2019–24), from the series *Blue with Exceptions*, archival pigment print (all images courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery)

Images of destroyed homes are inescapable these days. Buildings lost to fires, floods, and bombs haunt our feeds, if not our lives. Amidst all this carnage, what does it mean for a photographer to frame abandoned homes as art?

John Divola's career-spanning exhibition *The Ghost in the Machine* opened at Yancey Richardson Gallery on January 9, as wildfires tore through Los Angeles. The show presents two bodies of work in Divola's now-iconic oeuvre: *Vandalism* (1973–75), in which the artist spray-painted and then photographed the interiors of abandoned Los Angeles homes, and *Blue With Exceptions* (2019–24), which rephotographs similarly dilapidated spaces at the abandoned George Air Force Base in Victorville, California. Marked and captured by the artist, these crumbling, peeling structures become canvases layered with ghosts. They are photographs, but also installations: Monuments to what comes after the end.

Works from *Blue With Exceptions* fill the gallery's main room. In person, these prints' subject matter — even their medium — cannot be apprehended at a glance. The vibrant, three-by-four-foot photographs are printed with such ultra-contemporary, high-resolution detail that they border on the surreal, rewarding a deeper look; while the prints aren't quite large enough to be rooms of their own, you feel like you might be able to poke your head into one. At the same time, the abandoned rooms are shot with such a wide depth of field that they are flattened to the edge of abstraction. Divola sometimes separates various rooms within a photograph with bright blue, pink, and orange lighting, heightening this abstracting effect by turning walls into planes of color. Holes in plaster lose their depth and appear instead as if collaged onto a flat surface. The *actual* collaging of paper, spray paint, and AI-generated images of idealized birds onto some of those same walls further obfuscates a sense of space. The total effect of these works is of a visual puzzle: What am I looking at? Is it real? And where does that distinction now lie, given the insane level of technology required to make a pigment print look like this?



John Divola, "Vandalism (74V01)" (1974), vintage gelatin silver print

The gallery does well to pair this series with *Vandalism*, Divola's earliest body of work in this vein. Though they share the same subject matter, the difference in technique is so profound that each provides relief from the other's intensity. The scale of these works is smaller, and the lens frames corners of individual rooms rather than an incomprehensible patchwork of space. After being pummeled by midtone contrast and cutting-edge printing of *Blue With Exceptions*, for instance, I was charmed to notice that the vintage gelatin silver prints are not perfectly square, in true old-school handmade fashion. In these earlier pieces,

the subject matter is more obvious, and more obviously arty. They are punk, raw, and deliciously analog in tonality. One feels that in this simpler world, destruction was more generative and less disorienting.

It's hard to resolve what this half-century-old work means in today's world. Is it a memento mori? Ruin porn? A lesson, or a warning? Can we still play in the burned-out, washed-out shells of old lives? At the very least, the relevance of these photographs is undeniable: The slow unfolding of a space that's hard to see even when right in front of us, which uncannily reveals itself to be disastrously familiar — well, *that's* worth considering.



John Divola, "GAFB F7418 (10_27_2023)" (2019–24), from the series *Blue with Exceptions*, archival pigment print



John Divola, "75V13" (1974), vintage gelatin silver print

John Divola: The Ghost in the Machine *continues at Yancey Richardson Gallery (525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 22. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*