

John Divola: Frederick Sommer @Heroes Gallery

By [Loring Knoblach](https://collectordaily.com/author/loring-knoblach/) (<https://collectordaily.com/author/loring-knoblach/>) / In [Galleries](https://collectordaily.com/category/galleries/) (<https://collectordaily.com/category/galleries/>) / February 15, 2022

JTF (just the facts): A paired show featuring the works of John Divola and Frederick Sommer, hung against white walls in the single room gallery space.

The following works are included in the show (by artist):

- John Divola: a total of 12 gelatin silver prints, framed in white and matted. The works were made between 2015 and 2020, and come from the larger series *George Air Force Base, Daybreak*. Each of the prints is sized 8×10 inches, and is available in an edition of 5.
- Frederick Sommer: a total of 4 gelatin silver prints mounted to board, framed in silver and matted. The works were made in c1940, 1947, and 1948 and are vintage prints. Physical sizes are roughly 8×10 (or the reverse) or 11×10 inches, and no edition information was provided.

(Installation shots below.)



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Comments/Context: The recently opened Heroes Gallery on the Lower East Side of New York city has a novel organizing premise. The central idea behind the gallery's program is that the links between present and past matter, and that the connections between an artist and his or her predecessors and influences are worth considering more deeply. The artists being shown take an active hand in selecting who they'll be shown with, so this isn't an arms-length curatorial assessment of linkage, but a more intimate acknowledgement of respect. At a time when so many contemporary artists in the digital realm seem convinced that the past is irrelevant, the gallery has embraced a unifying framework that feels almost contrarian, in the best possible way.

The gallery's first foray into photography features recent work by John Divola, which has been paired with a handful of 1940s-era prints by Frederick Sommer. It's not an obvious photographic pairing by any measure, but one that feels altogether plausible and intriguing, especially when the prints are intermingled, making the aesthetic pivot points much more visible.

Divola's images circle back to themes he has explored before, almost like an artistic consolidation step. His setting this time is an Air Force housing complex in the desert outside Los Angeles that was abandoned in 1992. In the years since, the buildings have been scavenged, vandalized, and left to rot, leaving behind empty rooms that have become the venue for Divola's various interventions.

If this setup sounds familiar, it should – Divola has been making artistic intrusions in decaying buildings since the 1970s. His two major projects from the mid-1970s – *Vandalism* (in black and white) and *Zuma* (in seething color) – put Divola on the artistic map, both using abandoned buildings as his venue for explorations of form and framing. Decades later, he returned to similarly decrepit spaces to hang student paintings he found in a dumpster (in *Abandoned Paintings*, from 2008) and to paint ominously hovering black orbs (in *Dark Star*, from 2008). So his continued interest in the possibilities to be found in these kinds of spaces isn't entirely unexpected – he's just digging ever deeper into a subject he's already wrestled with successfully.

All of the photographs in this series were taken at daybreak, so the light is pure but muted and gentle, filtering into the rooms through windows and holes in the ceiling. Divola has chosen to work in black-and-white, so the early morning light delivers opportunities for light and dark contrast, as well as a kind of glowing diffusion that creeps into the dark rooms and vaguely illuminates portions of walls.

The sense of refrain that permeates this show comes from Divola re-using motifs he has used before, applying strategies and tools from his artistic toolbox to the new set of constraints imposed by these particular rooms and this particular light. Two of the strongest works in the show use the dappled light from a broken ceiling as an active drawing mechanism, the latticework of two-by-fours above casting patterns of bright white spots onto the walls, almost as if Divola had painted them himself. In one image, the white spots are joined by small painted black circles and cryptic measurements, arrows, and latitude and longitude coordinates, creating a map of sorts that locates the moment in time and space. In another, Divola matches the white spots with black ones of his own, the patterns echoing and overlapping like the call and response of a conversation in Morse code or Braille.

In general, the morning light tends to create more hollows and pockets of light than in Divola's previous interventions. This gradual lifting of thicker interior darkness makes a framed view out a window more stark and sharply contrasty (like a view through a porthole), and gives a gestural graffiti starburst in black and silver a feeling of magical discovery. Several images document walls splattered with what looks like smashed water balloons filled with paint, the black splashes then dripping down toward the floor; while the walls appear pockmarked (and therefore even more decayed and aged), the presence of just a tiny bit of light adds a feeling of faint recognition or of growing clarity. When Divola then introduces dark black circles (another familiar motif), they seem to hover in the almost darkness, dissolving and emerging as approximations, rather than as definite forms.

On a few walls, or perhaps just the same wall seen at many different times, Divola experiments with flowing sheets of cut paper, which have been layered into a tactile wall covering. The dense layering of the paper seems to build up and tunnel inward, like the nestled petals of a flower. Eventually, a dark orb takes over in the center (drawing the viewer into its void), with the fluttering papers catching highlights from the diffuse light. Seen as a progression or as iterations on the same theme, the paper interventions seem to carry more time and weight than just painting the walls, that rich thickness recalling Jay DeFeo's concrete rose.

The connections between these Divola compositions and Frederick Sommer's work becomes clear when the images are sequenced into pairs and sets. That the conceptual Divola would find inspiration in the surreal Sommer seems abundantly obvious when looking at Sommer's "Medallion", which features a scarred plastic doll head set against the flaking surface of weathered wood boards. Sommer's print is astonishingly detailed and tactile, but if you squint away that precision, the balance of Divola's centrally placed circles emerges. His orbs and Sommer's head have a similar kind of primal power that pulls energy and attention into the middle of the composition. Sommer's print also seems to revel in decay and disintegration, seeing the unexpected beauty in its tiniest details; Divola channels this idea with many of his intervention techniques, turning empty ruins into hand-crafted spatial sculpture at the edge of breaking down.

Sommer's "Flower and Frog" continues the exploration of the possibilities of withering leftovers. This particular photo-object collage, Sommer crafts two elusive figures from cut paper origami, a tin figurine, and what looks like a dried frog, setting them against a cracked wooden surface. A switch back to Divola's pictures shows that the parallels between the two in terms of the attention to arrangement and texture are many – it's just that Sommer is doing it on a tabletop and Divola is doing it in wider three dimensional space. Two other works by Sommer (one an oil on paper abstraction, the other a shadowy rock view) seem to teach Divola lessons about the management of darkness and about figure/ground contrasts. When we then return to a Divola composition with cut paper on the wall and a dark triangle in the middle, the aesthetic logic and framework for thinking about weight and balance seems very similar.

What's unexpected here is that most photographers who find inspiration in Sommer tend to be enthralled by his craft – by the sublime precision of his prints (almost unmatched across the entire history of the medium) and his intricate juxtaposition of textures. And while Divola may have internalized those famous things, he seems to have borrowed other attributes and ideas from Sommer, and then adapted them to his own artistic circumstances. Without Divola acknowledging his debts to Sommer, we'd never guess at the connection – Divola's synthesis and re-imagining of the ideas is so complete that the origins are obscured. But now that Divola has allowed us to follow the chain of logic, his pictures seem to have different range and resonance than we understood before.

What many photographers fail to recognize is that making influences and borrowings known isn't a sign of weakness or a lack of originality – when the connections are as thoughtful and robust as they are here, the connections signal intelligence and depth of engagement. Successful artists are always seeing, learning, and absorbing from the life that swirls around them, and picking and choosing key lessons from past masters and then finding ways to incorporate those learnings into the evolution of your own art is a mature, sophisticated path forward. Divola isn't afraid of Sommer or trying to copy him, he's actively engaging with some of the ideas that made Sommer's art great. Being able to watch that tentative link materialize in Divola's recent works is fascinating, offering a promising photographic start for this young gallery.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show are priced as follows. The Divola prints are \$6000 each (plus framing), while the Sommer prints range between \$33000 and \$49000 each. Divola's work has only been intermittently available at auction in recent years, with prices generally ranging between \$1000 and \$22000. And Sommer's photographs are similarly scarce in the secondary markets, with recent prices ranging

between roughly \$5000 and \$85000.

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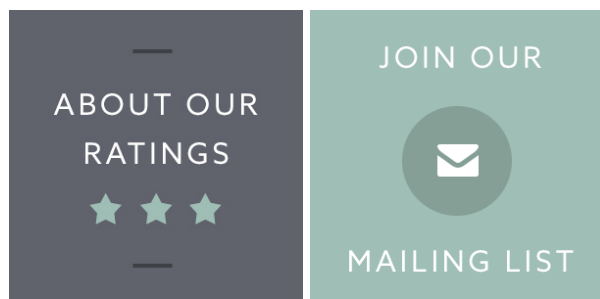


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