

BROOKLYN RAIL

John Divola: *Swimming Drunk*

Zach Ritter | May 10, 2022



For over fifty years John Divola has made photographs which live in the conventional boundary separating the photograph's function as a document of fact and a producer of fictions. In countless series, the majority of them site-specific, Divola intervenes into the found conditions of his environment, adding both text and graphic elements which provide subtle accents and, in some cases, completely transform the atmosphere of a space. The theatricality inherent to his approach can often disguise the observational and incidental quality of the images themselves—passages where artifice and intention give way to description of the world as we feel it to be. The tension between these visual registers structures *Swimming Drunk*, an exhibition that brings together two bodies of work created forty years apart, and which shows both the consistency of Divola's focus and the intensification of its effect across that time.

The nine prints that hang in the first and largest room of the exhibition are drawn from the “Zuma Series” (1977–78), still the most vivid and indelible expression of Divola's style and the ideas that motivate it. Working in an abandoned house on Zuma Beach in Malibu, California, Divola treated the space much like a studio, if only because he couldn't afford a conventional one and here he could experiment freely. At the same time, the house was being used by the local fire department for training and instruction, and also being visited by others who, perhaps like Divola, wanted to leave marks of their own. Set against this backdrop of practical necessity and progressive destruction, Divola painted marks and symbolically evocative signs throughout, photographing the house from within while looking through blown-out windows onto lapping waves and sweeping sunsets.

There is a restlessness to the “Zuma” images that stems from Divola's flash and mark-making: they suggest we have stumbled upon something cryptic and beyond our comprehension. In *Zuma #21* (1977) and *Zuma #71* (1978) his flash sets the red paint pulsing off the walls and windows, while the silver seems nearly burned white by it. The blues in *Zuma #33* (1977) seem to glow and radiate as surely no blue ever has before, a sensation made almost plausible by way of comparison with the burnt wreckage covering the floor. Even where Divola seems to have left color as he found it, as in *Zuma #3* (1977), it is exaggerated by his flash, made strange and oddly resonant. In *Zuma #75* (1977) we see the way the house regularly

frames the cyclical presence of the ocean and sky behind it, shuttling us back and forth, always offering to carry us away from the dramatic action in front of us.

These images show us Divola approaching photography with a dual purpose, using it to produce what he calls “artifacts of an experience” on the one hand, and to capture the expressive potential of light on the other, whether out there in the world or transformed by his materials. The camera is merely one instrument in a performance full of them, and in “Zuma” those component parts are as much the focus of the images as is the unity into which they are brought through composition and light. This push and pull, the feeling that these images may come apart from within, is exhilarating. When we move to “Daybreak” (2015–20), however, we can see that inner tension smoothed out completely, encountering what seems to be the fullest realization of Divola’s art.

Made in an abandoned housing complex at the decommissioned George Air Force Base in Victorville, California, “Daybreak” reveals a dramatic expansion of Divola’s methods for intervening in space. Whereas in “Zuma” we see a kind of staccato mark-making that interacts largely with the camera flash, in “Daybreak” we see walls painted with crude figures, numbers, and location coordinates; photographic papers fixed to the wall and then slashed, life-size black circles seeming to emerge from some bottomless source; and phrases suggesting a prior consciousness (“Sleep Without Dreams”). All of this is captured with the soft glow of natural light filtering into the houses via broken windows and blown out roofs, openings which, in contrast to the house in “Zuma,” do not lead us beyond the building and off into some evocative distance. If we are transported elsewhere by these images, then it is by way of Divola’s manipulation of space within the frames themselves, and how the light contained therein seems an event unto itself.

It is difficult to convey the beauty of these thirteen gelatin silver contact prints if one hasn’t already seen them in person — they possess a depth and nuance of tone that is, in their own way, as jarring as the color in “Zuma.” Divola printed them on a special paper called Lodima that is designed for contact printing (a prior iteration, named Azo, was a favorite of modern masters like Edward Weston), and employed a developer that was commonly used with it, called Amidol, which he mixed himself. These materials allowed him to expand the tonal range in these prints to a dramatic extent, resulting in creamy whites and richly textured blacks, silvers which seem to sit on top of the paper entirely — in short, prints which seem to contain light as much as they register it.

What is remarkable in moving from “Zuma” to “Daybreak” is seeing how, as the prints become dramatically smaller and noticeably quieter on the wall (the “Zuma” prints are roughly 44 by 54 inches whereas the “Daybreak” ones are a comparatively modest 8 by 10), the aesthetic effect of the work seems to intensify. “Daybreak” asks us to stand close and look closer, to wonder what measureless depth is contained in the carved black triangle that hangs from the wall in George Air Force Base, Daybreak, 4_2019B_15A (2019). Divola’s interventions do not merely accent the expressive qualities of these spaces, they generate metaphor on their own.