

Embodiment and Visuality in John Divola's *Occupied Landscapes (Yosemite), 1989–1992*

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In 1989, Southern California–based photographer John Divola spent several weeks in the Yosemite Valley as an artist-in-residence at the Yosemite Museum. During this time, he produced the photographs that would become the first of four portfolios collected into a larger project called *Four Landscapes*.¹ Following in the footsteps of well-known nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors such as Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams, whose photographs are iconic, Divola spent about three weeks in a cabin by himself during the spring of 1989, with the idea of “trying to deal with Yosemite without trampling” their photographic models.² Whereas Adams and Watkins produced images of Yosemite Valley in which clarity of detail, intense depth of field, and tonal range (particularly in the case of Adams) were paramount, Divola did something different: he aimed for the “grainiest” photographic effect he could achieve, not with an eye to replicating the qualities of those predecessors—whose emphasis on materiality was an essential part of their works—but to digging into the materiality of photography in his own moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s.³ Using 1200 ASA 35mm high-speed recording film, and printing his images on matte paper to achieve maximum “opacity,” he aimed for a “manifestation of the material” using this nontraditional film stock.⁴

The effects are striking and readily apparent on even the most cursory look at *Occupied Landscape #1 (Yosemite)*; fig. 3.1). In this image, as in all the images of the portfolio, Divola turns his camera toward the Valley and depicts the interaction between a human being (or beings) and the landscape. As if to underscore the material presence of

that interaction, Divola notes that he devised a “rule” for the project at Yosemite, which he then continued across all four separate sections of *Four Landscapes*: he took a photograph every time a figure entered the middle of the frame.⁵ If we look at each of the images in the *Occupied Landscapes* portfolio, we can see the outcome of this systematic approach to picture-taking: in the landscape—whether tree-filled, rock-strewn, or river-beachy—we notice small human figures located at the center of each photograph. Whereas Watkins and Adams typically refrained from depicting human bodies in their images of Yosemite Valley, Divola accentuates that human presence, or “occupation,” of the land in this systemic, yet muted way. The figures do not overwhelm the landscape; they punctuate it. Their forms are tiny, distant, and dwarfed by the fluorescence of shimmering leaves (#1); a collection of barren, yet trunk-lit trees (#2; fig. 3.2); water spray and jumbled boulders at the base of a fall (#3; fig. 3.3); or white sand sinuously dancing with black water (#4 and #5; figs. 3.4 and 3.5).

Perhaps you notice that the landscape seems to engulf these small people. The centrality of their positioning and the typical ways we compose photographs seem to have been set off-kilter by the choice to photograph them from such a distance. They are nearly impossible to see, at least not with any clarity that could provide a viewer with a sense of their identity. This is the crux, it seems to me, of Divola’s achievement. He locates us as viewers within the long tradition of “Yosemite pictures” while bringing us face-to-face with our own distinctly late-twentieth-century modes of seeing—ones that draw on and

have grown out of the very predecessors he aims “not to trample on,” but to whose work he offers a subtle revision.

Divola engages us with grainy, nubbled, highly textured photographs that refute the smooth glass-plate, large-format renderings of a wet collodion Watkins print or a view camera image by Adams. With a 35mm camera and exceedingly high-speed recording film, Divola uses the materiality of the film’s own grain (a function of its sensitivity to light) and matte paper not to enhance “clarity” but to create a textured scrim that turns the photograph into a kind of visual “skin.” This effect is probably most pronounced in *Occupied Landscapes #1, #3*, and, to a certain extent, *#2*. Shimmering trees in *#1*, like a leafy, organic layer of “grain” layered onto the film and paper, are accentuated; rocks and water also appear embedded texturally on the paper’s gritty gray surface in *#2*; the light-flecked trunks, delicate web of bare branches, and the dusty soil of *#3* seem, too, to be activated by the grainy medium he’s using. This is the revelation, for me, of these photographs. Using his quasi-automatic system—click the shutter when a person enters the center of the viewfinder—and super-grainy film, Divola embodies the landscape as “textured vision,” a way of seeing that conjures the sense of touch and ocular tactility as a kind of embodied action.

But there is more. Divola’s photographs articulate a palpable distance from the bodies in the photographs and the viewer’s own embodied visuality. We see the wayward Valley visitors who happened to wander into his frame, or whom he captured sunbathing on a beach, looking asleep (or dead?), yet they are almost too far away from us to be seen. The grainy prints accentuate this distance,



3.1 – 3.5 John Divola, *Occupied Landscapes* #1–5, 1989–1992. Gelatin silver prints, 29¼ × 28½ in. Museum purchase, 2006.70.1–5.

helping obscure both the figures' identities and their presence from our field of vision. We want to see who they are, these visitors, but we can't, even as they are squarely placed in the center of our field of vision. Frustrating? Confusing? Yes, but something else. There is another element involved here that ties Divola's emphasis on medium, method, and his use of the grainy tactility of recording film to the history of representing "wilderness" in Yosemite Valley. His photographs' layers of material presence and spatial distance activate powerful metaphors. Our desire to "see" the Valley has turned into a desire to make the Valley "seen" as a place that engulfs or absorbs but cannot fully incorporate his tiny visitors. The subtle peephole effect of the choice of the square format with a minuscule body at the center, surrounded by trees, rocks, or water, suggests a kind of ocular vignette format we might associate with nineteenth-century images.

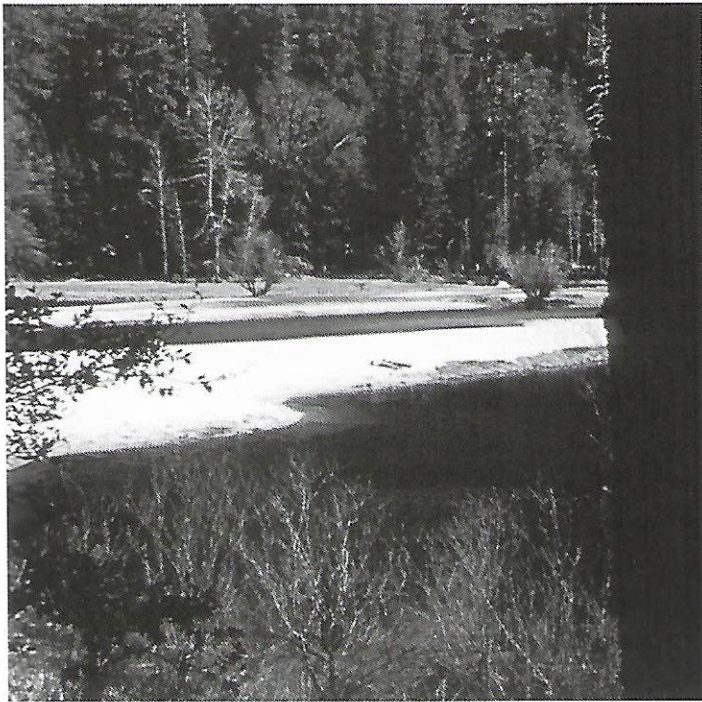
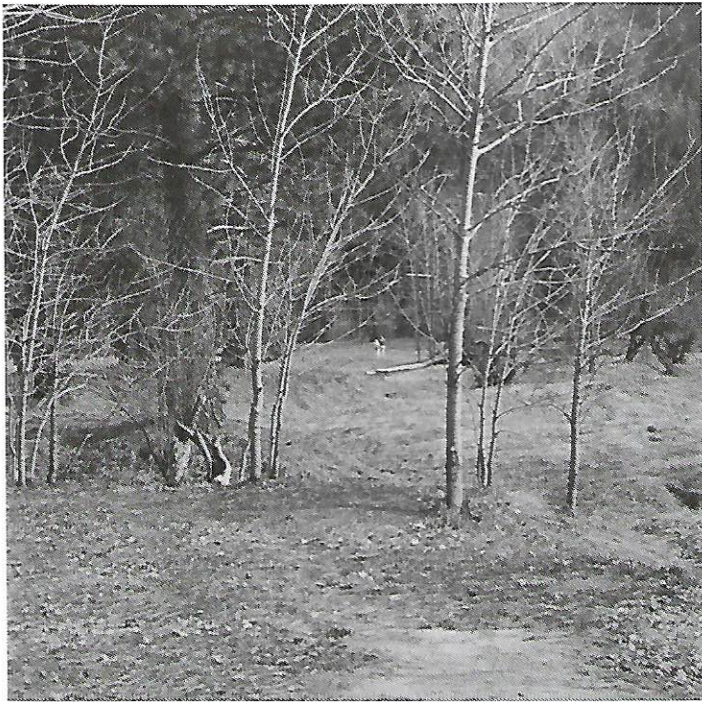
The distant bodies in all of these images are framed by nature but resist becoming fully visible to us. The tiny figures in the Yosemite landscapes echo the figures so often placed at the front edge of nineteenth-century landscape paintings

to indicate the monstrous scale of the mountains or valleys receding into the distance. Through grainy film and centralized yet highly distanced framing, Divola thwarts our ability to grasp their bodies visually in these *Occupied Landscapes*.

Surveillance of the visitor, within the context of a commodified Valley system of roads, hotels, maps, photo-op turnouts, and the like, is Divola's subject. Not surveillance in the sense of a voyeur, but rather as one visitor might experience another visitor "intruding" on her experience of what she imagines to be an "untouched wilderness"; intruding on the Yosemite Valley she's always seen in pictures.⁶ The high-speed film Divola uses, which is recommended for forensic or surveillance photography, undergirds this intrusiveness both conceptually and materially.⁷ His technical choice of film stock, coupled with his conceptual rule and system of capturing his human subjects in these *Occupied Landscapes*, embodies two ways of seeing. The first is tied to the grain of the film and the paper's matte texture. The print embodies our vision as a skin of the landscape. At the same time, we are subtly reminded that

the landscapes we wish to believe are still wild and unoccupied by "man" are in fact disembodied fictions of a time that never was—even back in the nineteenth century.

Martin Berger reminds us that Yosemite Valley has long been occupied by the Ahwahneechee Indians, and that the fantasy of an "uninhabited" landscape is just that: a fiction tied back to the occupation of western lands by a colonizing Euro-American culture that aimed to secure control through Manifest Destiny.⁸ Divola's project makes a compelling link to the nineteenth-century photographic tradition in which photographers "anthropomorphized the landscape, or likened geological formations to architectural structures . . . [such as] sentinels, brothers, and captains on the one hand, and cathedrals, spires, domes and columns on the other."⁹ Surveyors and explorers inscribed place-names and added captions to images in order to lay claim to the western landscape for Euro-American resource extraction and tourism. As Berger argues, such images made Yosemite visible as a place that appeared to be wilderness (humans were rarely visible in most nineteenth-century



photographs), even as names and captions marked those sites as the products of human (white) hands. Divola's *Occupied Landscapes* deform the imperial logic of this visual equation in powerful ways. In the idea of wilderness there is a tension between the cultural desire for pristine wilderness and the fantasy of human control of the land. What Divola offers in his powerful yet subtle photographs is an image of the

wilderness occupied by both the viewer and her double—another viewer who wishes to maintain the image of an untrammelled wilderness-landscape. The recognition of the landscape as already occupied emerges only through the sight of those tiny figures that pepper the center of Divola's photographs. Although we expect to see and know Yosemite Valley as untouched wilderness, we won't find that pristine space

here; instead, we find a landscape embodied as a visual field of our own making. High texture, grainy image, and matte surface join to create a traditional centralized frame in which an almost uninhabited landscape is interrupted, briefly, by minute figures.

We want our wilderness, don't we, and we take pictures of it for scrapbooks and photo streams. Watkins and Adams taught us to see the Yosemite Valley as a wide-open

and seemingly unmanipulated. Divola reminds us of our desire to maintain that fiction, even in our own time, when as anyone who has visited Yosemite today knows, the Valley's smog, cars, parking lots, and campgrounds attest to our own occupation

that holds us enthralled by our own visual senses and provides tiny clues that shatter our fictions; we see the grainy memories of trees, rocks, waterfalls, beaches, rivers, and a few unfortunate intrusions in the form of

that, if we like, we can pretend they are a figment of our imagination. Or perhaps they are us. Despite our hope not to be, we are the occupiers, a fact that we recognize when we look at Divola's grainy-textured black-and-white photographs.

Notes

1. *Occupied Landscapes (Yosemite)* was created between 1989 and 1992. It grew into a larger project that Divola titled *Four Landscapes*, which comprised four distinct portfolios of five images each (the individual images were sized at 19 × 19 inches). The other three portfolios were titled *Isolated Houses*, *Stray Dogs*, and *Boats at Sea*. Divola indicates that the *Occupied Landscapes* were the first that he completed in the series during a short residency he held at the museum, and that in the wake of the residency he began to think about this larger project on different landscapes of California: mountain, desert, city, sea. For photo documentation of the *Four Landscapes* project, see John Divola's website: <http://www.divola.com>.
2. Divola recounted the residency at Yosemite and his ideas about the *Occupied Landscapes* project to me in a telephone conversation on January 6, 2016.
3. For two essential texts about Yosemite's photographic history and the relationship of nineteenth-century images to those made in the twentieth century, see Gary F. Kurutz, "Yosemite on Glass," on the nineteenth-century images, and Jennifer A. Watts, "Photography's Workshop," on the links to the twentieth century, both in *Yosemite: Art of an American Icon*, ed. Amy Scott (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press and Autry National Center, 2006), 54–87 and 129–30 respectively.
4. John Divola, telephone call with author, January 6, 2016.
5. *Occupied Landscapes* wasn't the only portfolio with a "rule." Divola indicates that "each section" had a "rule about the center of the frame," but that each portfolio ended up "being a description of a place." Thus, mountains, desert, city, sea. John Divola, telephone call with author, January 6, 2016.
6. On the notion of wilderness and the idea of nature as a human creation, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 7–28.
7. In searching the Internet for information about Kodak recording film, I discovered a PDF document detailing the characteristics of Kodak Recording Film 2475: "This is a very high-speed, coarse-grain panchromatic film with extended red sensitivity for use in 35 mm cameras. It is intended for photography in low levels of existing light or when very fast shutter speeds coupled with small apertures must be used. This film is especially useful for indoor sports photography, available-light press photography, surveillance photography, and in other situations where you cannot use flash." <http://125px.com/docs/film/kodak/2475.pdf>, accessed February 23, 2017.
8. Martin Berger's work on nineteenth-century landscape photography and whiteness in Yosemite Valley photographs is crucial to my thinking here, particularly in terms of his articulation of the competing narratives and histories of the Valley's "occupation" by Native Americans and then, with the arrival of the survey teams of the later nineteenth century, Euro-American "explorers." Martin A. Berger, "Landscape Photography and the White Gaze," in *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 43–79.
9. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

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The following image appears uncaptioned on the page noted:

Page ii: John Sonsini, *Christian and Francisco* (detail), 2013. See figure i.11, page 10.