

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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BIG DATA AND DIGITAL DESIGN



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beam already shaped by the glass-and-aluminum architecture. Throughout, the question indicated, and performed, was that of the relationship of man to nature, or to physics, or, more generally, to abstract systems, discovered or developed: geology, cosmology, and aesthetics. Mitigating natural phenomena with human constructions, Halpern nods to a post-Minimalist tradition, wherein the artists' interventions highlight their own frailty. An interesting "phasing" occurred, for example, between cosmological and gallery rhythms when, on November 3, daylight saving time expired and night began to fall an hour or more before the workday's end, leading the gallerists to light the gold leaf with fluorescents. Time thus took on a role similar to that of the gallery space itself—as an indifferent setting within which the exhibition was arranged.

Rather than demonstrating a sincere connection with nature, Halpern's installation mimicked the tendency of art to gain its gravity by association with transcendent forces. Framed as it was within extra-human parameters, the exhibition invoked some grand, even universal significance while revealing the hubris and inadequacy of such a gesture. The monofilament and acrylic hooks used to levitate the ceramics, for example, were obvious, just as the installation of each previous stage made concessions to the physical limits of the gallery and to the circulation of viewers' bodies. Halpern's show produced not illusions but effects: of cosmological alignment, of pleasing forms, of art. The rocks were less Smithsonian-like non-site than simply rocks on a concrete floor, pointing nowhere but to the immediate idea of "rock" or of "concrete." This understanding, at once elegant and contrived, extended to Halpern's literal, elemental use of time; the evocation of *shōka* suggested a spiritual order underlying the show's arrangements, but what exactly this might *mean* remained a mystery. Such echoes of the cosmic intimations of Land art provided the New Age-y texture against which Halpern's objects and phases were set. By part three, however, with the gallery full of comically "hovering" pots, any suggestion of metaphysics proved less interesting than the way the exhibition undermined its own mysticism. Rubble, gold flakes, and fired clay stood in for earth; tasteful decorations parodied the monumental excavations of the 1970s. Investigating such expansive concepts at the scale of ikebana, Halpern's glowing, shiny, floating show called on the timeless magic of art until even beginnings and endings read as human notions—not time, but temporal.

—Travis Diehl

John Divola

SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART/LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART/POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

It is only fitting that photographer John Divola's midcareer survey, "As Far as I Could Get," would be spread across three California museums in three different counties. Those who have managed to see it all surely didn't see it all in a day, and this insertion of ellipses into the viewer's experience seems apt for a body of work concerned with temporalities, the photographic suspension of movement and stasis, and the poetics of presence and absence.

The show's curators, Britt Salvesen, Karen Sinsheimer, and Kathleen Howe, eschewed chronology and threaded Divola's thematic interests throughout all three presentations. Several series in the exhibition, "Vandalism," 1973–75; "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone," 1975–76; and "Dark Star," 2008; as well as the *Theodore Street Project*, 2013 (all of which were installed at Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the lead institution in this collaborative effort), share a premise with Divola's best-known series, "Zuma," 1977–78 (which was on view at Pomona

College Museum of Art): the documentation of abandoned houses in their entropic, vandalized states. In decrepit rooms, the artist sometimes arranged detritus or dressed up decaying walls with spray-paint squiggles and dots, filling in a cast shadow or tracing the outlines of a chance arrangement. Other photographs catch tenuous stagings—the odd object tossed into the frame, captured midflight—thus assuming a hybrid of documentation, action, and tableau in which the authorship of elements in the scene is left ambiguous; Divola's derelict spaces bear the marks of unseen actors, the artist being only the most recent among a slew of past residents and vagrants.

If his practice has braided strands of documentary photography, Conceptualism, painting, and performance, Divola's concerns have diverged from those of his contemporaries who interrogated the operations of the image in the '70s and '80s, insofar as his work has remained faithfully *photographic*. He has sought to affirm, above all, what a photograph can do—and, in a sense, what it cannot. "In all my work there's this notion of the melancholic," he once observed, in a rather Barthesian mood. "You can make a photograph about the sublime, but you can't make the sublime itself."

Inverted, Divola's musing on the limits of representation suggest another, almost naive dimension to his practice: Even if you can't make the sublime itself, you *can* make a photograph about the sublime. And he has brought an attendant sense of wonder to many of his projects. A series of five 20 x 24" "Polaroids," 1987–89 (on view at LACMA), that show moodily lit, handcrafted constructions depicting the natural world—planets, a rabbit, a tangle of barren branches—are evocative of Odilon Redon or Georges Méliès and have a deliberately childlike affect. An untitled series of black-and-white abstractions from 1990 (shown in Santa Barbara), made by photographing flour as it was thrown against a dark monochrome painting, speak to a kind of backyard experimentalism that pervades Divola's work.

Amid these ad hoc stagings and playful experiments, a common setting surfaces as a principal subject—Southern California, its built and natural environments. A vast and shrubby wilderness envelops the artist in "As Far as I Could Get," 1996–2010 (which was shown at LACMA, and for which Divola famously set his camera on a ten-second timer and sprinted out into frame) and likewise surrounds the spectral canine figures in the aptly titled "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert," 1996–98 (which was on view at SBMA). Divola's houses, too, are quintessentially Southland; recalling noirish crime scenes and apocalyptic premonitions, they invite a host of LA clichés. But in his investigations of the actual fragility of that Southern California archetype, the single-family home, Divola's work opens onto the social and the political. These photos register the transformations in the political economy of the region over a period marked by rising real estate prices and class polarization. As anyone who has read Mike Davis knows, houses in Los Angeles function as a primary site of political energies and class antagonism. These images fulfill, perhaps more than intended, the documentary directive to record—not only physical deterioration but also diffuse violence—while the artist's performative decorations seem to reiterate the basic message of all graffiti: Divola was here.

—Eli Diner



John Divola, *Forced Entry, Site 29, Interior View A*, 1975, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16". From the series "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone," 1975–76.