

From a Distance

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Photographer and UCR art professor John Divola has had his lens trained on the cultural element in nature landscapes since the 1970s, and ever since his much-hailed "Zuma" series from that decade, in which he vandalized vacant homes at Zuma Beach and photographed the ocean horizon from within them, Divola has pushed the boundaries of seeing man and man-made structures within nature—especially from a distance.

In "John Divola: Present Tense" at the Riverside Art Museum, which includes several of Divola's series, the largest and most prominent image is *Collapsed Structure J*, a color photograph of a forgotten desert home that seems more as if it plummeted from the sky than slowly decomposed from arid elements. The fragmented building—as well as the one behind it—is framed by miles of brush, sand and crisp blue sky, evoking the inevitable questions: who lived there and why? Peeking out from the piles of boards and white siding tiles scattered like teeth is a small, pink sand bucket—the only remaining artifact from tenants long since departed.

Divola also dedicates his camera to five more desert structures in a segment of his "From Four Landscapes" series, titled *Isolated Houses*. In these prints, he shoots the homes from far off vantage points—so far off, in fact, that the minute people boxes often blend in with the brush, Joshua Trees and rocky range. Again, the images ignite a fluid stream of mental curiosities about why anyone would live so removed from all cultural conveniences, and what that life must have been like. The other three components to the "Landscapes" series continue the same distant point of view. In *Occupied Landscapes*, we witness grand mountains, thundering waterfalls, frozen riverbanks and twiggy forests—and at first glance, that is all that we see. On closer inspection, however, we find a stray figure or two; lone figures who are exploring the majesty and serenity of the wilderness and who are reduced to minute incidentals in the face of such awesomeness. *Boats*, another collection of five images from "Landscapes," transports us to the sea, and each image is composed of half ocean and half sky. Again, we find something far off on the horizon, this time a craft of some type such as a sailboat, ship or kayaker that is making its way across what appears to be an endless watery world. Departing slightly from the long distance visage, *Urban Stray Dogs* plants us within lower income neighborhoods where we find the wild mutts who are allowed to roam dangerously unattended. Again, our minds, and this time, our hearts, surge with questions when we see a black dog scrounging in an alley, a perky-eared dodger deciding whether to cross the street or not and one poor shaggy pooch looking quite lost and frightened while standing on a driveway behind a graffiti-ed apartment building.

Breaking out of realism, Divola's series "Artificial Nature," the third component to this exhibit, takes us directly to the movie sets of yesteryear. Created from found movie studio stills of landscape scenery built for films, it's a fascinating look at man's imitation of nature. The 36 prints in this series cover a range of environments: icy caves filled with stalactites and stalagmites, snow-covered cozy cabins, misty prehistoric jungles with giant scary spider webs, ominous cliffs waiting for scaling and palm tree-laden beaches waiting for bikinis—all fake and all just about as believable as the real thing. An added hoot is that most of the images have the film's clapper board in frame, so we're often able to see the name of the film and the director. Vincent Sherman's *Ice Palace* from 1960 makes several appearances, as do sets from Alfred Green's 1934 *As the Earth Turns*, and it's no surprise that the beach scenes come from Norman Taurog, best known for his Elvis Presley flicks. And while the imagery in this exhibit may be culled from diverse subject matter, the cohesiveness is clear: Distance usually makes us feel removed from nature and each another, yet, by focusing on specifics within that distance, Divola manages to create connection—and it's a connection that is at once both comforting and intimidating.

"John Divola: Present Tense" at the Riverside Art Museum, 3425 Mission Inn Ave., Riverside, (951) 684-7111; www.riversideartmuseum.org. Open Mon-Sat, 10AM-4PM. \$2-\$5. Thru April 2.