

## John Divola's Photography

By Charles Donelan



**RUN, FOREST:** The image above, John Divola's photograph "As Far As I Could Get, 10 Seconds, 2\_15\_2010, 3:29 PM to 3:42 PM PST, 34.166301,-116.033714," is a massive pigment print from 2010, and a kind of self-portrait.

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Three-Part Show Examines California Artist's Career

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At 50 inches high by 119 inches wide, the color photograph "As Far as I Could Get, 10 Seconds, 12\_15\_2010, 3:29 PM to 3:42 PM PST" is big and even more packed with detail than its full title, which goes on to include geographical coordinates for the site where it was taken in Twentynine Palms. The silvery green leaves of a colossal stand of tamarisk trees spread abundantly from its center toward the edges of the frame, a riot of vegetation captured in stunning high resolution. Yet the title inevitably steers one's attention away from the trees and toward the small figure of a man running at what appears to be full speed through a small opening between them.

This is John Divola, and he's right where he said he would be — 10 seconds of sprinting away from his own camera lens. "As Far as I Could Get" has to be one of the strangest and most memorable selfies ever taken. For John Divola, the length of a Myspace arm was clearly not far enough. This self-portrait of a man scrambling hard to get out of his own space — and not making it — is emblematic of a career dedicated to the proposition that "the beauty of photography is distance."

It's appropriate, then, that "As Far as I Could Get" is also the title of a big new multi-museum show of Divola's work concurrently on view at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Pomona College Museum of Art. Divola is one of L.A.'s most underrated artists, and the only obstacle to this trio of shows being considered a major retrospective is the 64-year-old artist's discomfort with the term retrospective. Active in photography since the early 1970s, Divola has certainly earned the right to put off career closure by creating some of his most powerful works, including "As Far As I Could Get," in this decade.

If this haunting image of the artist in flight were all Divola had ever done, he would still deserve a place alongside both the Conceptualists who were his Los Angeles contemporaries in the 1970s and the nature photographers who are his precursors in the longer tradition of California photography. But Divola is as far as he can get from being a

one-hit wonder, and as anyone who visits any of these three shows will discover, that running man in the middle distance has done much more with the camera than try to get away from it. By looking at his whole career up to now, as these three exhibitions and an excellent publication supervised by SBMA's curator of photography Karen Sinsheimer invite us to do, we are in a great position to reevaluate not only his place in the pantheon of California artists, but also the emergent phenomenon of "Pacific Rim existentialism" of which Divola is uniquely representative.

The Divola trail begins in the '70s with two powerful series of photos in black and white, "Vandalism" and "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone." These stark images depict the chaotic state of some abandoned houses in Southern California, and in "Vandalism," Divola adds something crucial to the documentation of urban decay by introducing marks made on the interior by the artist prior to taking the picture. Armed with a camera, a flash, and spray paint, Divola succeeded in lending to these anonymous spaces a visual interest that's half formalist and half punk rock. His empty corners dotted with paint evoke the twinned misery and excitement of playing somewhere you're not supposed to be. By incorporating the artist's hand in such a deliberately unpolished way within an image that's also clearly a document of a specific time and place, Divola initiated his lifelong project of bringing abjection and anarchy within the perimeter of fine art.

In other series, Divola demonstrates his fascination and his facility with the forms of unreality from different perspectives. In *Artificial Nature*, from 2002, he photographs Hollywood sets in such a way as to magnify their narrative implications. Something's happening here, one senses, but what? In an untitled series from 1990, clouds of powder command the foreground, leaving only tantalizing glimpses of the landscapes beyond them. Divola may not be throwing dust in our eyes with these images, but he's thinking about it.



This image is "Zuma #25" from his 1977 series depicting ocean views from abandoned Malibu properties. (Both images are courtesy of the artist.)

Perhaps the most successful, and unquestionably the most dramatic, images Divola has captured were taken in some abandoned houses in Malibu circa 1977-1978. The project dubbed *Zuma* brings all the advantages of color to bear on the subject matter of the previous series but adds in the crucial element of water, specifically views of the ocean at sunset as seen through the mostly broken windows of the structures. Employing flash to raise these

decrepit interiors to equal status with the conventionally gorgeous views they command, Divola reinvents the Romantic trope of the open window. Carefully balanced, the *Zuma* pictures are full of nuance and as lyrical and picturesque in their way as any color photos taken in America at the time. The radiant colors of Pacific Ocean sunsets must compete with or complement the streaming spray-paint signatures that say, "Divola was here."

Surprisingly, the magnificent *Zuma* pictures are not the only climaxes in Divola's long love affair with wasted spaces. Two recent series, *Dark Star* from 2008 and *Theodore Street Project* from 2013, find the artist again exploring abandoned buildings with both camera and paint in hand. It can be hard to suppress the thought that he shouldn't be able to get away with it. How does someone sustain such a simple premise so effectively? In other words, what allows John Divola to keep shooting abandoned buildings for four decades without losing his edge? Yet upon entering the large gallery at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art where the *Theodore Street* images are hung, there's a familiar and undeniable rush of excitement. These stunning odes to decay and impermanence nevertheless satisfy one's deepest cravings for color and form in a way that is unmistakable and seemingly eternal. Like the running man in his elliptical self-portraits, or the wonderful running dogs of his series *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*, John Divola's photographs go all out, and the distance they cover is beautiful.

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*John Divola: As Far As I Could Get* is on view at the Pomona College Museum of Art through December 22; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art through January 12, 2014; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through February 2, 2014. For more information, visit [sbmuseart.org](http://sbmuseart.org).

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