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John Divola's SoCal Moment

by Maxwell Williams

It could not be more fitting that John Divola's long overdue debut museum solo is a collaboration between the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Pomona College Museum of Art. Divola is an Angeleno through and through, a native who never left, a valiant supporter of the city's photographic arts and a teacher at the University of California-Riverside, in the city where he resides. A staffer at LACMA recently classified the frequent phenomenon of running into someone who has worked with the artist or been taught by him as "six degrees of John Divola." The Pomona show runs through Dec. 22, while LACMA's show is open through July 6, 2014, and at SBMA, where curator Karen Sinsheimer conceived of the show, it runs Oct. 13, 2013-Jan. 12, 2014.

Divola is a photographer who works in distinct conceptual series that span and stretch the reaches of photography as art. For instance, at LACMA, the works include a series called "As Far As I Could Get" (1996-2010), where Divola sets a 10-second timer and sprints as far from the camera as he can. It's performative, simple, amusing and alienating—a tiny body in full physical exertion, far off in the landscape. Across the gallery is a series of found photographs, "Artificial Nature" (2002), made up of continuity stills (the photographs taken on film sets to make ensure uniformity from scene to scene) from mid-century films. The photographs show fabricated landscapes created in studio backlots. The images zero in on the

John Divola: *As Far As I Could Get*, 10 seconds, 12_15_2010, 3:29 PM to 3:42 PM PST, 34.166301-11.033714, 2010, pigment print, 50 by 119 inches. Copyright John Divola.





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notion of photographic truth—the idea that when you look at a photograph, what you're seeing is an accurate representation of the world—by presenting a false natural landscape. Without outside knowledge, upon first glance, the photographs look like ordinary landscapes.

Divola first drew attention with his 1977 series "Zuma," an excruciatingly beautiful set of shots taken from inside run-down Malibu beach houses, which Divola made even more chaotic by spray painting erratically upon the interiors. The unmolested natural world that comes through the window—California sunsets and coastal horizons—becomes jarringly perfect juxtaposed with the man-altered structures. "Zuma" will be shown in Pomona, while a similar series, "Vandalism," will appear at SBMA, alongside newer works and *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert* (1996-2001), a work that achieves the simple momentary perfection of Hans-Peter Feldmann's *Pictures of Car Radios Taken While Good Music Was Playing*.

There's a black comedy to all this, a sense that Divola's images have a breeziness in their modestly shrewd gestures. But isolation creeps in as the artist examines his desert locale. Britt Salvesen, LACMA photography curator, who contributed to the show's accompanying catalogue (published by Prestel), shares that response, sensing a duality in Divola's work. "He's the rare artist who embraces the existential crisis," she told *A.i.A.* during a preview of the show. "Even when it's humorous and lighthearted, there's also the willingness to look into the void. He goes to places that are really ominous, but then he inhabits them with a creativity that takes the edge off."

Divola, for his part, doesn't quite see it that way. In an email interview with *A.i.A.*, the photographer, when asked about the duality of alienation and humor in the photographs, discussed the removal of intention. "I never go about making work with a 'feeling' in mind," he said. "What I do is a solitary activity, which takes place at a specific time and specific place. Perhaps that time, place, and my disposition are as you describe but I do not set out to illustrate anything. I go about an activity, which I think has potential to generate imprints that I find engaging."

These divergent series of acts make for a compelling sequence of shows that connect the dots of an important career in Southern California, from desert dogs to dilapidated beach houses.

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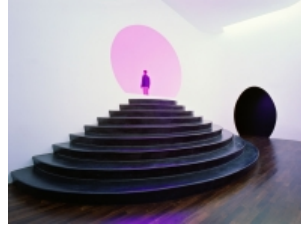


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