

# Art in America

The artwork is a complex, layered composition. It features large, stylized letters 'B', 'L', and 'A' that are the central focus. The 'B' is rendered in a vibrant cyan color with a rough, painterly texture. The 'L' is a deep, saturated red, also with a textured surface. The 'A' is a bright, almost white color with a mottled, organic texture. These letters are set against a background of dark, swirling colors, primarily black and dark blue, with streaks of red and white. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and visual complexity, characteristic of Bochner's work.

811 MARCH 2014 COVER BY MEL BOCHNER

# DEPICTING DISLOCATION

**Over the course of four decades, John Divola has photographed haunting traces of residential displacement and social anomie in the Los Angeles region.**

**by Colin Westerbeck**

DURING THE FALL of 2013, John Divola received an extraordinary amount of attention in Southern California, where exhibitions were held simultaneously at three venues—the Pomona College Museum of Art in Claremont, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Divola rejects the term “retrospective” when speaking about these exhibitions, and, as will become clear a bit later, I think he’s right to do so.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the single title for all three exhibitions, “John Divola: As Far As I Could Get,” indicated that the organizers intended their efforts as a collaborative overview of Divola’s whole career. Santa Barbara provided the impetus for the project when it planned its own ambitious show and then joined forces with LACMA and Pomona.<sup>2</sup> Santa Barbara’s installation ranged from Divola’s early series “Vandalism” (1973-75) to the most recent, “Theodore Street” (2013-ongoing), and therefore came closest to a comprehensive survey of his career. But the four projects chosen for LACMA—“20 x 24 Polaroids” (1987-89), “Seven Songbirds

and a Rabbit” (1995), “As Far As I Could Get” (1996-2013) and “Artificial Nature” (2002)—also formed a coherent group; and while Pomona had only a single series, “Zuma” (1977-78), it was an essential one.

Ironically, this SoCal homage to the artist wanted to make the point that his photography is not just of regional significance. Born in 1949, Divola grew up in the greater Los Angeles area, studied photography and has spent his own teaching career there, and has done almost all of his creative work in the region. Indeed, various aspects of the landscape and culture of Southern California have been his primary subject matter. But to say that appreciation of his work is therefore limited to Southern California would be a bit like claiming that William Faulkner’s fiction would be of interest only to people living in certain counties in Mississippi. Like other photographers prominent today in Southern California—James Welling is the example that immediately comes to mind—Divola’s reach is international. His work is idiosyncratic in a way that doesn’t have boundaries.

John Divola:  
74V91, from the  
“Vandalism”  
series, 1974,  
gelatin silver print,  
7 inches square.

All images this  
article courtesy  
the artist.

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
“John Divola: As Far  
As I Could Get,”  
at the Los Angeles  
County Museum of  
Art, through July 6.

COLIN  
WESTERBECK  
is a curator and  
writer living in  
Los Angeles.







*Forced Entry Site 29,  
Interior View A,  
from the "LAX/  
Noise Abatement  
Zone" series,  
1975/1982, gelatin  
silver print, 14  
inches square.*

The early 1970s, when he was earning his MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles, were a challenging time because of the impact that postmodernist theory was having on photographic studies. The UCLA program's founding director, Robert Heineken (under whom Divola studied), was a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, for he made his work mostly out of images lifted from magazines and used a camera so seldom that he called himself a "photographist" instead of a photographer.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Divola has noted, "Nobody working with photography in the UCLA art department seemed particularly interested in using a camera."<sup>4</sup>

Divola was interested, though, as was apparent from the project he did while still a graduate student, photographing everyday scenes in the San Fernando Valley, such as people watering their

lawns. The next project he initiated, toward the end of his graduate studies, demonstrated his independence from contemporary trends more decisively still. This was also done in the San Fernando Valley, but with a very different focus. At the time, abandoned houses were easy to find there because of a severe recession, so he used them as temporary, makeshift studios for the series he called "Vandalism." He had photographed some propane tanks and been struck by the way their silvery surface looked in a gelatin silver (i.e., black-and-white) print. This made him eager to experiment with silver spray paint, and the interiors of the derelict houses were the only place he could think of where there would be no one to object.<sup>5</sup> He sprayed the silver paint in combination with other colors onto walls and, frequently, into corners.



Because his abstract graffiti was never intended to be art in its own right, Divola was encouraged by the thought that once the city got around to demolishing the houses he'd entered only the photographic record of his intervention would exist. Another gesture he made in a few of the "Vandalism" images was to reach into the frame in order either to drop or hold up a prop (bowl, book, piece of cardboard, etc.) that he'd brought along. With his paint splotches, sometimes crudely fashioned props and extended hand in the picture, Divola seemed to be making a statement that he intended to go hands-on in his photography, to make his mark with the medium in a direct (which is to say, an un-postmodern) way.

His next series, "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone" (1975-76), shot in densely populated west L.A., was also set in untenanted houses—modest ones that had been condemned to create a sound buffer around the Los Angeles International Airport.

Divola backed off a bit in this work by neither marking his subject nor, with one exception, being present in the photograph. But in the series after that, "Zuma," the marking of the space returned, with a vengeance. The derelict house he'd found this time was on Zuma Beach, a perennial favorite of surfers located off the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. The dual advantage of this house was that it had a picture window that looked out on the ocean and was the property of the local fire department, which practiced there by progressively burning the place down. Divola went to color film this time in order to make the most not only of the beauty of the sunsets seen through the window but also of the horror of the ever more charred interior bearing his increasingly garish, aggressive graffiti.

By the late '70s, Divola had unquestionably established himself as a major talent. Before the "Zuma" series was

*Zuma #25, 1978, pigment print, 21 by 26 inches. Pomona College Collection.*





completed, work from "Vandalism" had been included in the exhibition "Mirrors and Windows" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Since then, the artist has been in three more anthology shows at MoMA as well as surveys at such important venues as the the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; LACMA; and the Centre Pompidou, Paris.<sup>6</sup> The continuing interest in his career has resulted from the consistency of his vision even as the range of his projects grows.

What began with "Vandalism" and took fire (literally) in "Zuma" continues today in "Theodore Street," the ongoing project with which the Santa Barbara exhibition ended. Since 1988 when Divola began teaching at the University of California, Riverside, his focus has shifted from the density of Los Angeles seen in "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone" to sparsely settled regions of the desert in the Inland Empire.

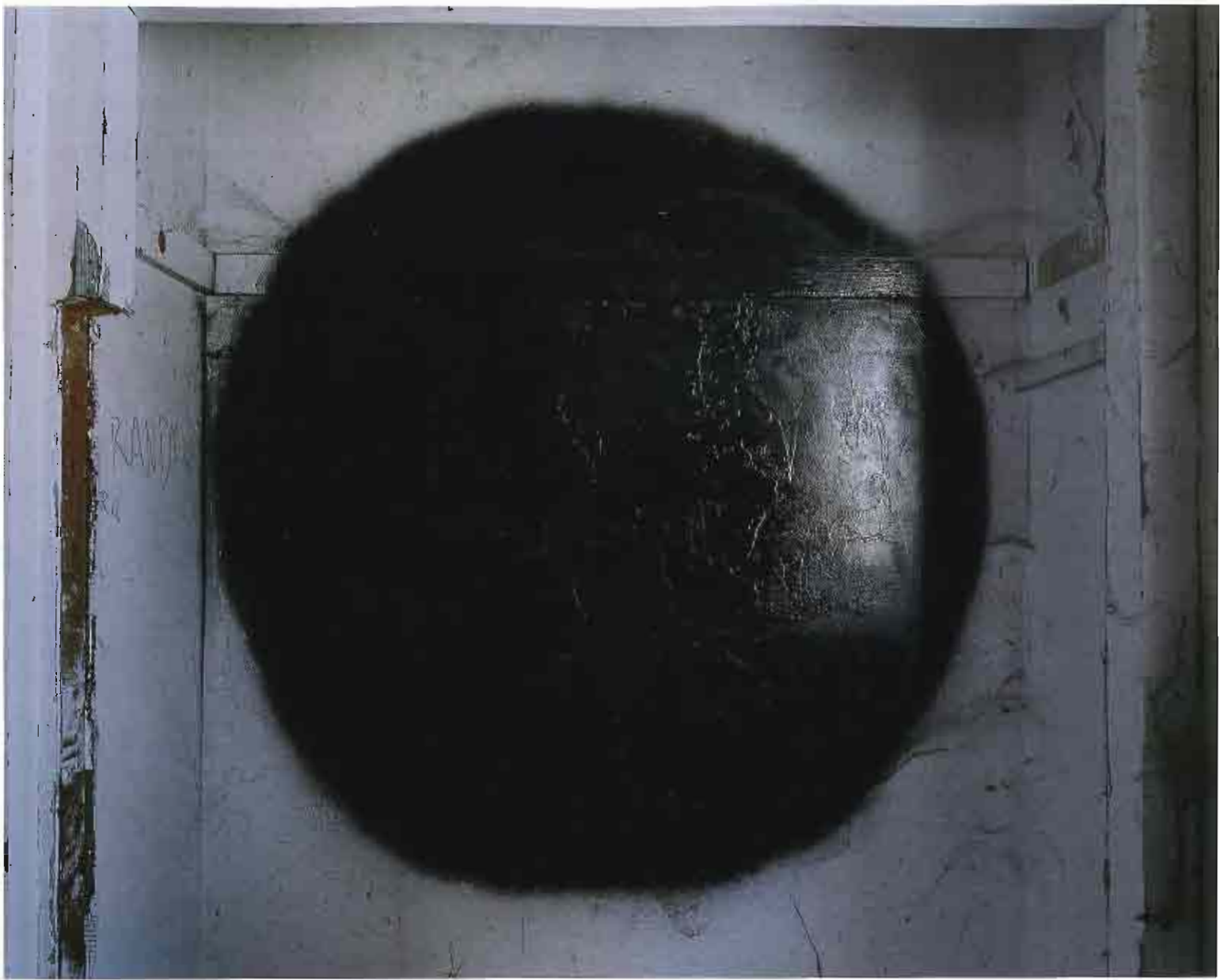
The subject of the newest project appears to be the only house on Theodore Street, though no street is visible in front

of this abandoned hulk. The situation here is, Divola says, unique in his experience; he can't even be sure whether racist graffiti he found inside the house is authentic or the result of set dressing done by a film crew he suspects of having adapted the interior for location shooting. Divola has created his own graffiti there in the form of "Dark Star" (2008), a unique sequence of large, black, spray-painted circles. These he photographed while they were still wet, so that wherever light from a broken-out window fell on a circle, a silvery trace of the "Vandalism" graffiti of almost 40 years ago seems to linger there on the edge of extinction.

OVER THE YEARS, as the three exhibitions made apparent, Divola's vision has darkened in various ways. The catalogue seems to acknowledge this in the plate section devoted to the "Zuma" series. Reproduced out of the order in which they were made, the photographs are sequenced so that the light on the seascape outside waxes and wanes until, in the last

*Theodore Street,*  
33.94522,-  
117.138789,  
1/27/2012,  
3:31PM-3:45PM,  
2013, pigment  
print, 40 by 54  
inches.





view, it seems as if night is about to fall. How dark Divola's vision of L.A. had become was apparent from an untitled 1990 series—one I'd not seen before—that was on view at Santa Barbara. These are photographs of flats that he'd painted black and at which he had then thrown a handful of flour. Though these images seem abstract at first, they turn into landscapes once you've looked at them for a while, partly because each has what appears to be a horizon line near the top. This makes them look like views of the Santa Monica or San Gabriel Mountains seen at night or through a dense bank of smog (evoked by the flour) backed up against the slopes.

The locations in which he has photographed are almost all dislocations—sites of dispossession ranging from the derelict houses of the "Vandalism" series to the condemned houses in "LAX/Noise Abatement Zone" to the abandoned one in "Theodore Street." Not only has the dislocation of Angelenos from

their homes by eminent domain or abandonment created the locales where Divola has felt compelled to photograph, but the pattern in his art suggests that he himself has always felt as if he were somehow out of place in L.A.—rootless, alienated—despite having lived there all his life. In a 2005 interview, he said:

I've always thought about the houses as a reference to a certain kind of absence. . . . [It] had to do with the absence of the people that once lived in those houses. Initially, I was thinking about melancholia in relation to an absent subject, but then I became attuned to something in the medium that was inherently melancholic. . . . Being simply silver on paper, or dye on paper, in itself . . . is an index of loss, a lost present that cannot be retrieved. And then there is another level of absence—my own.<sup>7</sup>

*Dark Star B*, 2008, pigment print, 40 by 50 inches.





*Untitled F*, 1990,  
gelatin silver print,  
60 by 48 inches.

*R02F33*, from the  
“As Far As I Could  
Get” series, 1996,  
pigment print, 60  
by 40 inches.

This last remark refers to the fact that Divola has hardly been seen in his photographs since the earliest projects. The obvious exception is the slight series “As Far As I Could Get.” For these photographs, he set a timer on the camera for 10 seconds and then, according to a LACMA wall text, “ran straight into the frame.” It might be more accurate, though, to say he was running away from the camera, as far as he could get. It’s as if, having intervened in his pictures for years with his own handiwork, he now wants to downplay his presence. The most recent example of this series was made with the Gigapan, a digital panoramic camera that made his figure in the frame smaller than ever.

A number of the “Theodore Street” pictures were also made with the Gigapan. In this series, as noted earlier, Divola does take on a presence less ambiguous than in “As Far As I Could Get.” Yet even here he’s partially hidden in nooks and crannies. Is he still as self-effacing and melancholic as he sounded in the 2005 interview? It’s hard to tell. Given the three-venue, four-decade span of these joint exhibitions, it may seem picayune of me to complain that the selection wasn’t generous enough. But I do have some objections. While three of the four series shown at LACMA seem to me minor ones, for instance,

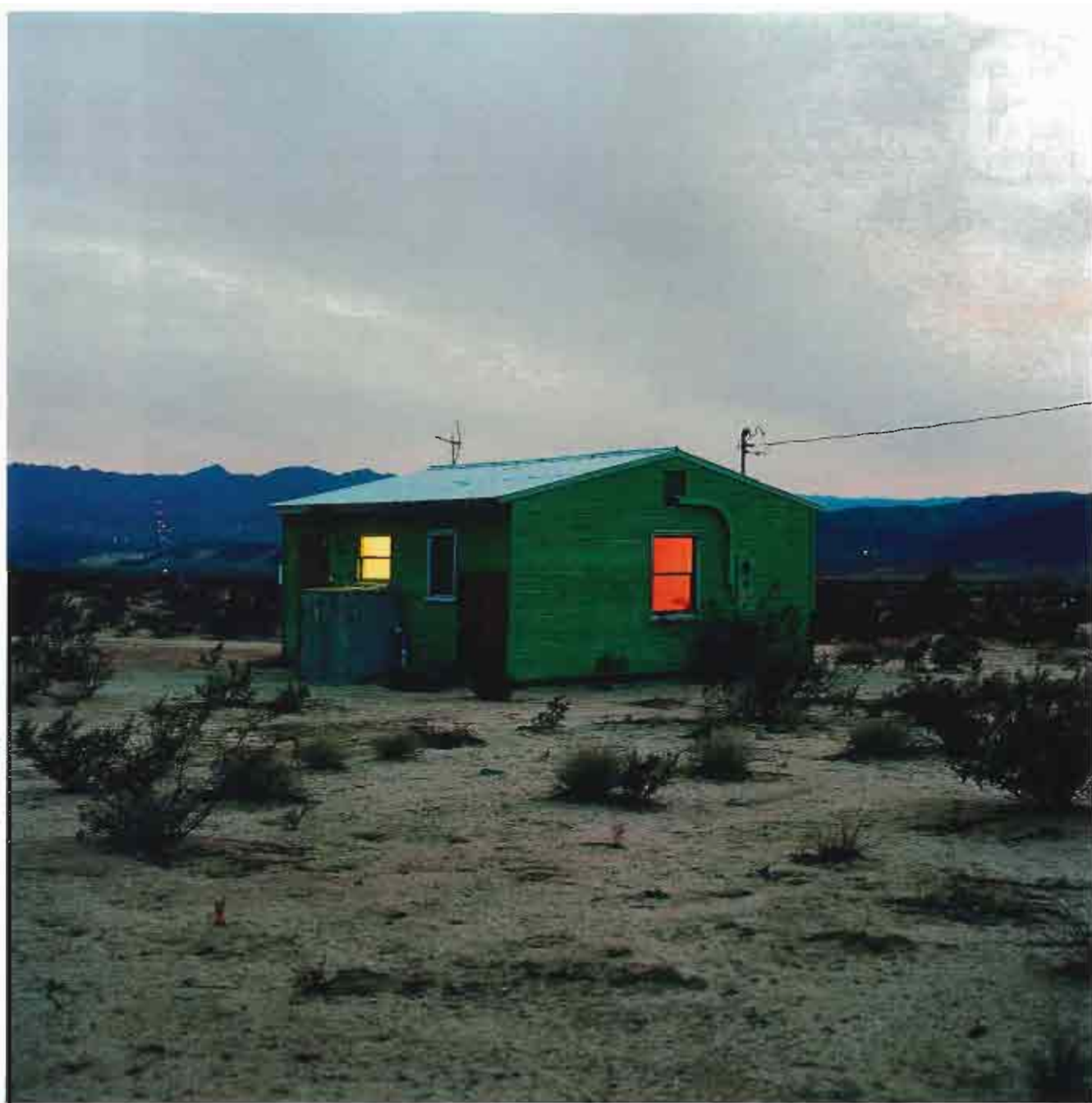
none of the exhibitions included “Isolated Houses” (1995-98), which I consider a major project whose omission was a significant drawback.

These pictures are a crucial link between “Zuma” and “Theodore Street,” for the mostly tiny, pastel-painted houses in them are set against the pastels of afternoon or dusk in the desert. Thus do they extend to the desert the dialogue between the built environment and nature begun at the ocean in “Zuma.” Pretty as these photographs are, they too have the sinister quality of the gutted environment pitched against seascapes in “Zuma.” Divola did a brief follow-up to “Isolated Houses” titled “Collapsed Structures” (2006-08)—also absent from the exhibitions—in which we see some of the same houses in the previous series now fallen in on themselves. In like manner, yet another series unseen in this survey is “House Removals” (1976), a sequel to “LAX/Noise Abatement Zone” in which exterior views of the condemned bungalows are matched, after demolition, with shots of the empty concrete pads on which they had sat.

Divola is right to have avoided the term “retrospective” in connection with the three California exhibitions. The omissions weren’t oversights but, rather, the result of the hard choices with which the curators were faced when dealing with a career as rich and complex as this one. They clearly decided to stress the variety in the artist’s oeuvre over the continuity that the projects dealing with abandon-







*N34°11.115'W116°-08.399'*, from the "Isolated Houses" series, 1995-98, pigment print, 30 inches square.

ment and eviction have created. Nonetheless, my feeling is that the continuity is what will ultimately make Divola's career significant from the perspective of photographic history. ○

1. Conversation with the author at Pomona College Museum of Art, Sept. 26, 2013.
2. The Santa Barbara Museum also originated the catalogue, *John Divola: As Far As I Could Get*, New York, DelMonico/Prestel, 2013.
3. For an account of Heineken's insistence on this term, see Arthur C. Dauto, "Photographism," *The Nation*, Mar. 29, 1993, p. 424.
4. "Interview with Jan Tumlir, May 2005," in *John Divola: Three Acts*, New York, Aperture, 2006, pp. 134-35.

5. How "Vandalism" came about was explained in Divola's own words on a wall text in the gallery devoted to that series at the Santa Barbara Museum.
6. Museum of Modern Art, New York: "Mirrors and Windows," 1978; "Multiple Images: Photographs since 1965 from the Collection," 1993; "Architecture Hot and Cold," 2000; and "Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the West," 2009. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: Whitney Biennial, 1981. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles: "William Eggleston and the Color Tradition," 1999. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900-2000," 2000. Centre Pompidou, Paris, "Los Angeles, 1955-1985," 2006.
7. Tumlir, p. 139.

The multipart exhibition "John Divola: As Far As I Could Get" appeared at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Oct., 13, 2013-Jan. 12, 2014, and the Pomona College Museum of Art, Sept. 3-Dec. 22, 2013. A third segment opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Oct. 6, 2013, and remains on view to July 6, 2014.