

## John Divola: As Far As I Could Get



Pomona College of Art, September 3 - December 22, 2013

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 6, 2013 - February 2, 2014

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, October 13, 2013 - January 12, 2014

*As Far As I Could Get* is John Divola's long overdue, first museum survey. With an unusual twist, the presentation splits four decades of Divola's practice across three Southern California institutions. The show runs concurrently at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and Pomona College Museum of Art.

While still a graduate student at UCLA, Divola began to visit abandoned houses, and these architectural husks of greater Los Angeles became his subject and provisional studio. The exhibition at SBMA devotes a room to "Vandalism" (1974-75), his earliest work in this vein. The prints are square, black and white, often lit by a burst of flash. We see just enough to orient ourselves, but never stand back to identify the former purpose of the space. Such a controlled focus anchored Divola's restless and experimental process. In keeping with the title, the photographer kept intervening in his scene with a vandal's spray paint. Twine is strung around pushpins and pulled tight to form an odd, angular drawing on a dirty floor. A spread-eagle phone book hovers in midair, popped by the flash against a wall of spray painted dots and squiggles. Each offhand arrangement strikes us as a momentary performance, echoing the murky niche in which it has sprung to life.

Exhibited across the hall, the prints from "LAX Noise Abatement Zone" (1975) are also square format, vintage gelatin silver prints, but with a story attached. In a mid-1970s effort to reduce the impact of aircraft noise near LAX, the Los Angeles Department of Airports acquired nearly three thousand houses. The occupants were relocated, their homes boarded up. Most of the exhibition's pictures from this

derelict tract of suburbs revolve around punctured doors and windows. A solitary brick, hand tool, or wooden post with the suspicious heft of a club rests as if discarded at a threshold. We're never told who made the forced entries—some or all may be the photographer's handiwork. In contrast to the playfulness of "Vandalism," "LAX" is a forensic study of aggressive acts. The prints are arranged in sequences, with the viewer invited to compare both exterior and interior views of the same scene. Flipping between living rooms and ruined front yards, charcoal and sun-drenched white, the pictures are almost negatives of each other.

The SBMA devotes a separate wing to work from the 1990s to the present. The best of the black and white images of "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert" (1996-98) feature a single dog, roughly parallel to the speeding car, photographed at a dead gallop. Whether resigned, frenzied or malicious, the dog's eyes seem to bore out of the picture. In the large-scale gelatin silver prints from "Untitled" (1990), a pale haze floats in front of a dark, painted backdrop, as if the subject had just been evacuated in a magician's puff of smoke.

Two recent series return to abandoned houses with new techniques. For each panoramic print from the "Theodore Street Project" (2013), hundreds of digital pictures have been stitched together to form a single, ultra high-resolution image. In a few cases, Divola cajoles eerie moments of color from his digital camera sensor—graffitied walls cast in dusty, aquatinted light, or a stone fireplace in ashen peach. Overall, the wide-angle and relentless detail of the panoramic format is at odds with the elegant discretion and narrowed focus of his best work. In each "Dark Star" (2008-13), a voluminous black circle occupies the center of the four-foot by five-foot color print. These are beautiful, brooding black eggs. Or voids. At times the black spray paint is so fresh it glints white—an effect of reflected light and the photographic process.

The exhibition at LACMA pulls together the least satisfying selection, and in the smallest space, with nearly fifty prints confined to one room. Both the press release and curatorial choices apply a dull line of rhetoric about "engagement with the natural environment", obscuring Divola's deeper currents. This is the show people are most likely to see, and it's a crying shame that no architectural hauntings have been included. "Artificial Nature" (2002) stands out, and as with many of Divola's series, the bluntness of the title belies the delicacy and actual locus of interest. Composed of thirty-six "continuity stills", these black and white prints have been repurposed from movie studio archives, framed and hung in a tight grid. Ranging in provenance from the 1930s to the 1960s, each picture documents a movie set dressed as a lush, natural landscape. A clapperboard sign planted in the foreground might identify the scene as "wooded hillside" or "the beach." At once romantic and businesslike, the series opens a delicious gap between intention and effect. To view these pictures only through the lens of nature vs. artifice would be reductive and superficial at best. Treat them instead as a peek into the cabinetry of early pop mechanics, or evidence of a peculiar temporality where worlds should be fixed with a sign because they so routinely congeal and vanish. The grainy, black and white self-portraits of *As Far As I Could Get* (1996-2010) also shine. In these tall, portrait-format prints, a blobb-ish figure advances toward the horizon of a nondescript, interstitial zone. Divola set the camera timer for ten seconds and ran.



John Divola. *Zuma #25*, 1978.

Go to Pomona College and stand in the Zuma room. Fifteen spectacular pigment prints on rag are on display in the main gallery. For “Zuma” (1977-78), Divola returned again and again to photograph inside one ill-fated house on Zuma Beach. The series begins—almost pleasantly, by Divola’s standards—in a recently sacked, off-white room with a view. To balance interior and exterior light, Divola photographed only at sunset or sunrise. The swathe of ocean framed by the windows, blurred because depth of field is so low, seems to float on the walls like a phantasmagoric poster. Over time, unseen participants pick the bones of the house clean. Spray-painted markings appear: bright red on jagged glass, a field of silvery hooks on a wall. The color is sensational. At some point, we’re told, the local fire department swings by for practice sessions. Burnt ruffles of ash creep up the doors, the ceiling darkens. It’s as if the house were the subject of repeated, botched cremations, and the crispier it gets in there, the more rich and florid the textures, the greater Divola’s license. The camera pulls back. Dots of blue and red draw our eye to the ceiling; lashings of silver counterpoint the sea. Here the act of painting is a form of attention, a weird, indefinable communication between the view and the room. From 1974’s “Vandalism” to today’s “Dark Star,” Divola has absorbed facets of any medium his magpie curiosity desires. Painting, drawing, sculpture, conceptual art, performance, and installation—it’s all fair game for his photographic practice. More than anything, he brings to this mash-up a unique and probing awareness of his chosen medium. As art historian David Campany has written of his work, and it bears repeating: “There is nothing quite like this in the history of photography.”