

Art in America

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JOHN DIVOLA

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KUNSTVEREIN FREIBURG
by mark prince

FREIBURG



Some 40 years ago, photography-and particularly color photography-was predominantly an amateur documentary tool, an artisanal underling to painting's full art status. In 1977, John Divola, a few years out of art school, stumbled upon an abandoned lifeguard quarters on Zuma Beach in Los Angeles and graffitied the walls with sweeps of spray paint that accumulated, like an Ab-Ex composition, into all-over patterns. Sometimes the strokes hardened into geo-metrical shapes resembling formalist abstraction. He would then photograph this defacement/decoration as a frame for the seaview through the broken windows, claiming the interior as an abstract art ground. The "Zuma" series (1977-78) extended photographic documentary into something between a subjective visual diary and a record of an art performance. Divola's interventions develop throughout the series in conjunction with the damage wrought by the local fire department when they adopted the structure as a training site. Spray paint is

scorched and reapplied in different configurations, the accretion describing a legible linear narrative that corresponds to the application and erasure of the paint. Kunstverein Freiburg showed a selection of 12 "Zuma" photographs (all 24 by 30 inches) along with three larger works from the "Dark Star" series (2006-08). The broken windows of *Zuma #8* (1977) give directly onto the Pacific. As yet, the walls are white. Divola photographed at dawn and sunset, so that daylight would not overpower his flash. A few remaining window shards are sprayed scarlet. A sprung suitcase on a litter-strewn carpet is an emblem of vagrancy, ominous as an open coffin. In *Zuma #12* (1977), a shower curtain is thrown into the air and captured as it hovers like an exotic bird. Intervention becomes performance; the photograph an acknowledgment of its medium's function as a surrogate for the act it preserves; the room a self-reflexive metaphor for the black box of the camera, the window its aperture. Alternatively, the seascape is cast as the non-art "real," the external world, the unassimilable other. And yet, conversely, the glittering sunsets are traditional art signs, clichés of Romantic yearning, and the images of the dilapidated interior a sociological record of urban dereliction, a familiar genre of photographic realism. Artifice and what lies beyond it—the documentary "real"—keep switching their grounds, only for the distinction to collapse in the photograph's flattening of space. Time is also rhetorically negated—these are timeless records of elapsing time, with no clues to date them, and no human presences except for a blurred horse rider on the beach, an archetypally atemporal image (*Zuma #73*, 1978). In the later pieces in this series, Divola re-graffitied the black-ened walls in a cyan that matches the sea's blue, cutting illusionistic breaches into the dark shell of the room. For a structuralist meditation, "Zuma" is remarkably surrealist, even occultist. Photographic space is pictured as a haunted realm populated by invisible forces both mischievously destructive and experimentally creative. The eponymous "dark star" of the more recent series is a spot of black paint of varying sizes sprayed onto a white wall within another derelict interior. It has been photographed from different distances, always appearing at the dead center of the images. Divola's intervention, three decades later, is more concise; but it effects the same transformation of the interior into formalist pictoriality, and of the past which the image depicts to its present materiality—color, surface and photographic aggregate. The black spot constitutes both a maximum exposure of the photographic paper and a lesion in the image, a hiatus in its illusion, which is filled by the viewer's reflection in the glossy print. Time present qualifies time past in a temporal palimpsest. *Photo: Zuma #4, 1978, pigment print, 24 by 30 inches; at Kunstverein Freiburg.*