

CHROMA

John DIVOLA

Chromatic Operators: Color, Procedure, and the Weird in John Divola's "Chroma"

by Joseph Staley

Color photography usually runs a soft synthesizer under the whole scene. It pulls surfaces, depth cues, air, flash of weather, and the petty drama of incident light into a single coherent "there", and smooths the seams until recognition takes over. Green lands as grass. Blue lands as sky. Pink lands as skin. Color does that quiet work of naming what things look like, and disappears into its own success; the image feels "natural" precisely because the chromatic layer stops feeling like a layer at all. That vanishing act also explains why critics keep treating color as either too obvious to theorize or too shallow to matter, an aesthetic garnish that behaves like a guilty pleasure. The suspicion has pedigree. David Batchelor tracks a long Western habit of subordinating color to line, form, and structure, treating chroma as cosmetic, feminine, primitive, irrational — a dangerous supplement hovering beside the "real work" of drawing and design.[\[1\]](#)

Charles Blanc says the quiet part out loud in the nineteenth century, casting color as the feminine principle in art that requires the masculine discipline of *disegno* to keep painting from falling into ruin.[\[2\]](#)

Architects and critics keep replaying the hierarchy with new costumes: Le Corbusier's white surfaces perform purity while color waits behind the wall like a suppressed appetite; Walker Evans dismisses color photography as vulgar, as though taste itself depended on grayscale restraint.[\[3\]](#)



A shared conviction keeps pulsing underneath the differences: color comes second. It adorns, seduces, embellishes; it rarely thinks, rarely acts, rarely structures. Even color's entry into the fine-art photography canon in the 1970s arrives on those terms. Director of MoMA (1964-91) John Szarkowski's defense of photographer William Eggleston depends on chromatic equivalence — sky and blue collapse into synonymy, color welded to descriptive content so tightly it stops reading as addition.[\[4\]](#)

That liberal permission slip says: color may enter the museum because the world already contains it; it completes description without introducing trouble. Barthes writes the conservative version a few years later, and the mood turns funeral: color registers as coating, cosmetic, a layer applied over the “truth” of black-and-white, like makeup on a corpse.[\[5\]](#)

Szarkowski gives color transparency; Barthes gives color obstruction. Both keep color in a service role: either a faithful clerk of description or a suspicious mask. Neither grants color agency.



John Divola's *Chroma* breaks the contract by refusing color's job description. The series, made between 1980 and 1985 and published by Skinnerboox in 2020, moves through nocturnal interiors, coastal edges, and suburban margins around Los Angeles. Divola plants constructed objects into these sites — cones, geometric cutouts, flat discs, angular sculptures, occasional animals or figures — then fires flash units fitted with colored gels, flooding the scene with intense artificial chroma: red, blue, magenta, green. He prints via Cibachrome, the industrial dye-destruction process that pushes saturation and contrast past the point where "naturalism" keeps any authority. Divola describes the period as one that valorized Walker Evans and prized a kind of disciplined reference to the world, while critics treated color as vulgar frosting on essential content.[\[6\]](#)



Chroma pushes against that orthodoxy, though not by pleading for color's descriptive legitimacy. Divola does something colder and more mischievous: **he treats color as a rule imposed before the shutter opens.**



A minimal, testable definition keeps the argument honest: an operator names a rule imposed before exposure that remains visible in the result. Under that definition, the gelled flash behaves like an operator with blunt clarity. In ordinary color photography, chroma feels like a property objects carry, and share with film through light: grass reads green because grass reflects certain wavelengths, and the emulsion records the encounter. In *Chroma*, causality flips. Vegetation reads red because red light hits it; the film records the imposition. Color stops arriving as discovery and starts arriving as condition. The photograph stops delivering what

the scene “looked like” and starts delivering what happened when a chromatic rule acted on matter.



Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen argue that photographs always arrive as characterizations rather than duplications — the camera generates images through choices of lens, viewpoint, focus, framing, and a chain of decisions that never leave photography neutral.[\[7\]](#) The medium survives, though, by hiding those decisions behind transparency; viewers look through the photograph toward the scene and forget the apparatus, the stock, the lighting design. *Chroma* refuses that forgetting.

The gels force the characterizing choice onto the surface. Looking through color toward “the scene” becomes impossible without also seeing color as an imposed condition.

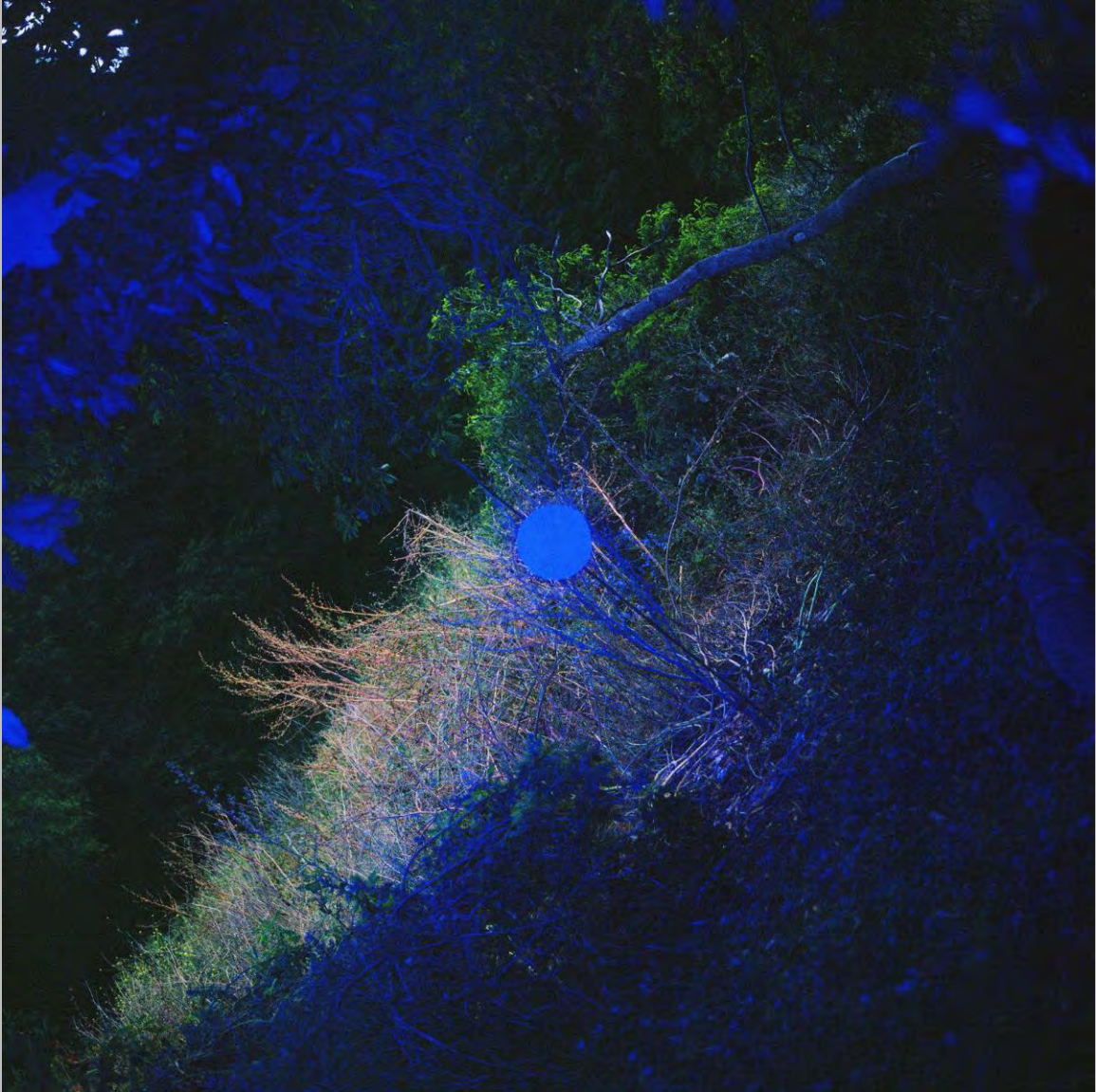
Snyder and Allen describe photography’s constructedness as constitutive yet concealed; Divola turns that concealed structure into subject matter. Yet the scene keeps its grip. Trees, ground, walls, coastline, and props persist across the series. Texture keeps breathing. Depth keeps holding. Each image still reads as a photograph of somewhere. The chromatic operator disrupts default integration without shattering coherence; it reallocates coherence. Color stops behaving like descriptive illumination and starts behaving like a governing parameter. Place tethers the image so abstraction never fully wins, while procedure rebuilds legibility on different terms — less around natural light and narrative plausibility, more around inference. Visibility arrives as reading rather than depiction. That double legibility — place and operation co-present, neither collapsing into the other — gives *Chroma* its peculiar tension and supplies the series’ central claim.



Beneath the red warmth above, green suffuses the background foliage, creating a third zone that refuses both of the first two. The cone sits at the intersection, taking different colors on different facets, a simple geometric object forced to negotiate an environment that refuses chromatic harmony.

The operator leaves evidence you can point to without metaphor. At the boundaries where gel coverages meet, color spills across edges: red bleeds into blue territory, blue contaminates green. Shadows carry hue rather than black, and that saturation proves directionality — light behaves as an active vector rather than a neutral

medium. Reflective bounce on the cone mixes incident colors into intermediate hues that no single gel could generate. These effects name observable behaviors of light striking surfaces under controlled chromatic conditions. They also require the cone. Colored light passing through empty air leaves no trace until it meets something solid; the cone offers a registration surface, a place where the operator can write. Still, procedural description alone misses what looking actually feels like. The red branches across the upper frame refuse a tidy explanation in terms of coverage zones; they read as arterial, organic in an inverted way, as though the trees turn inside out to expose a circulatory system that should have stayed hidden. The cone, violet at its apex and blue at its base, refuses the posture of an experimental instrument and drifts toward the posture of an offering — something grown, buried, placed with ritual intent. The green haze behind everything stops acting like a third data point and starts acting like atmosphere with a fever, a space that obeys physiological rather than geological laws. Spatial continuity remains intact — one place, one exposure, no compositing — while chromatic continuity fractures into three incompatible zones colliding inside one unbroken frame. Montage arrives through lighting rather than editing: chromatic montage inside a continuous indexical exposure.



Mark Fisher's distinction between the weird and the eerie gives precise language for what this image does to the viewer's trust. The weird, for Fisher, gathers around the presence of something that refuses belonging — an intrusion, a wrongness, a forced conjunction that violates the categories of the natural order. Its primary formal mechanism involves montage: incompatible elements sharing a single frame.^[8] The cone image hits weird with immediacy. Under any natural lighting condition, those three chromatic zones refuse coexistence; their simultaneous presence produces wrongness that the body registers before analysis catches up.



The trees should not glow red. The ground should not pool blue. The background should not haze green. Yet the photograph insists: all of this took place.

That insistence matters because the medium keeps its indexical authority. Freud's uncanny turns on the return of the repressed — the familiar made strange from within, the eruption of interiority.[\[9\]](#)

Chroma routes strangeness differently. An external procedure arrives and forces itself onto the scene from outside the scene's own logic, and the image records the act. Fisher's weird, rather than Freud's uncanny, names that condition more cleanly.



Rosalind Krauss sharpens the point by clarifying why chromatic wrongness in a photograph lands differently from chromatic wrongness in painting. Krauss frames the photograph's evidential power through the index: a trace produced via physical connection, like a footprint to a foot.[\[10\]](#)

Photography persuades not through resemblance but through contact. In *Chroma*, the light that makes the trace is engineered — gels impose a chromatic condition before exposure — so the index records the scene as acted upon by the operator

rather than the scene under “natural” appearance. Viewers trust that these colors really struck these surfaces because the photograph still behaves as trace. That trust makes the chromatic montage feel unbearable: impossibility carried out in real time, in real space, then fixed as evidence.



The seam between place and procedure — so crisp in the cone image’s violence — starts wobbling. Brush, branches, and shallow depth remain visible, yet separation between operator trace and scene material becomes harder to hold. The intervention dissolves into its own effect. Fisher’s eerie helps here, because the eerie organizes itself around agency: something seems to have acted, yet the agent withdraws or refuses legibility. The eerie turns on failures of presence and absence

— presence where nothing should register, absence where something should stand.[\[11\]](#)



Its central provocation asks: what kind of agency worked here, and where did it go? The disc image produces eeriness in exactly that register. The setting — scrubby hillside vegetation, dry branches, nocturnal marginality — ordinarily sits beneath human purpose. The disc and the red field introduce evidence of intention into that indifferent space, yet no apparatus appears, no hand enters, no explanation lives inside the frame. What remains feels like the residue of an operation whose

operator withdrew. The disc becomes a trace of withdrawal — a sign that something arrived, did this, left. Because red saturation permeates the whole field, eeriness spreads beyond the disc; it infects the landscape itself. The hillside becomes evidence of an act it cannot explain. Where the cone image assaults the eye with wrongness through incompatible conjunction, the disc image erodes the seam between rule and world until viewers lose confidence about where the operator ends and the landscape begins.



The figure reads as a human-shaped absence refusing chromatic content. Form appears; personhood evaporates. This forces a refinement: the chromatic procedure in *Chroma* operates through addition and through voiding. The silhouette marks the site where color withdraws from the element that most photographic traditions treat as anchor of meaning — the human subject, the narrative node, the promised interior. What remains: outline filled with nothing.

Barthes grounds his phenomenology of photography in the medium's power to preserve the irreducible particular — the “that-has-been,” the attestation that a specific body existed at a specific moment, the sense that the photographed subject reaches the viewer through its own rays.[\[12\]](#)

The silhouette image keeps the testimonial field intact — coastline, light, horizon, weather, exposure — while wounding the center. Indexical connection persists; the subject arrives as absence. Evidence remains, yet evidence carries a hole. The frame produces what we might call evidentiary damage: testimony without the promised body. The silhouette also sits on the hinge between weird and eerie. The blank human form reads as presence that refuses naturalistic logic, a white void standing against a plausible seascape; that charge pulls toward the weird. Yet the deeper disturbance leans eerie, because the void takes the shape of the human. Fisher describes the eerie as an encounter with the effects of an agency that withdraws or turns unknowable.[\[13\]](#)

Here the human figure becomes that sign: it looks like a person, occupies a person's place, holds a posture that implies volition — yet personhood fails to arrive. The disc never promised a subject. The silhouette promises one and reneges.



An Operator That Keeps Changing Its Verb

Across these three images, the operator refuses a single operation. It imposes (the cone: multiple gels forcing chromatic montage). It embeds (the disc: a single gel dissolving intervention into environment). It subtracts (the silhouette: color withdrawn from the figure). That variability gives *Chroma* its range — weird collision, eerie permeation, vertigo at the human outline — and keeps the series from collapsing into a one-note conceptual exercise. A system that performs one operation everywhere would read as system and little else. Divola's operator keeps

changing what it does to the scene, so the viewer cannot stabilize a reading protocol. Each image teaches an interpretive habit; the next image scrambles it. The variability also clarifies what the operator makes visible — and what it costs. The narrowest defensible version of the proxy-instrument claim stays modest: the procedure makes light-as-action legible. Not gravity, not magnetism, not radiation — light behaving as vector, diffusion, bounce, limit, override. The cone's saturated shadows demonstrate directionality.

The cone's surface bounce demonstrates interaction with matter. Zone boundaries demonstrate limits. The disc's red field demonstrates override, the way a single imposed condition can colonize every surface it touches. These effects remain observable, nameable, and pointable-to, keeping the operator claim from drifting into decorative metaphor. Divola has described the series as an attempt to photograph phenomena that resist direct photographic capture — gravity, magnetism, phosphenes produced by pressing palms against closed eyes — and he describes needing constructed proxies, visual metaphors, objects placed in scenes to translate an unphotographable condition into visible deflection.[\[14\]](#)



That logic clarifies the props: they function as registration surfaces, enabling the operator to leave a readable mark. Yet what the operator reveals, it reveals by stripping away particularity. Under gelled light, an animal drifts toward emblem — goatness rather than this goat, here, with this texture and posture. A person can become a white void in human outline — the category of personhood without individual content. Trees become vascular networks. Surface detail drowns inside saturation. The operator purchases legibility of condition through estrangement of the particular. That reversal deserves blunt naming because it cuts against Barthes' central hope. Camera Lucida prizes the punctum, the irreducible this that pricks —

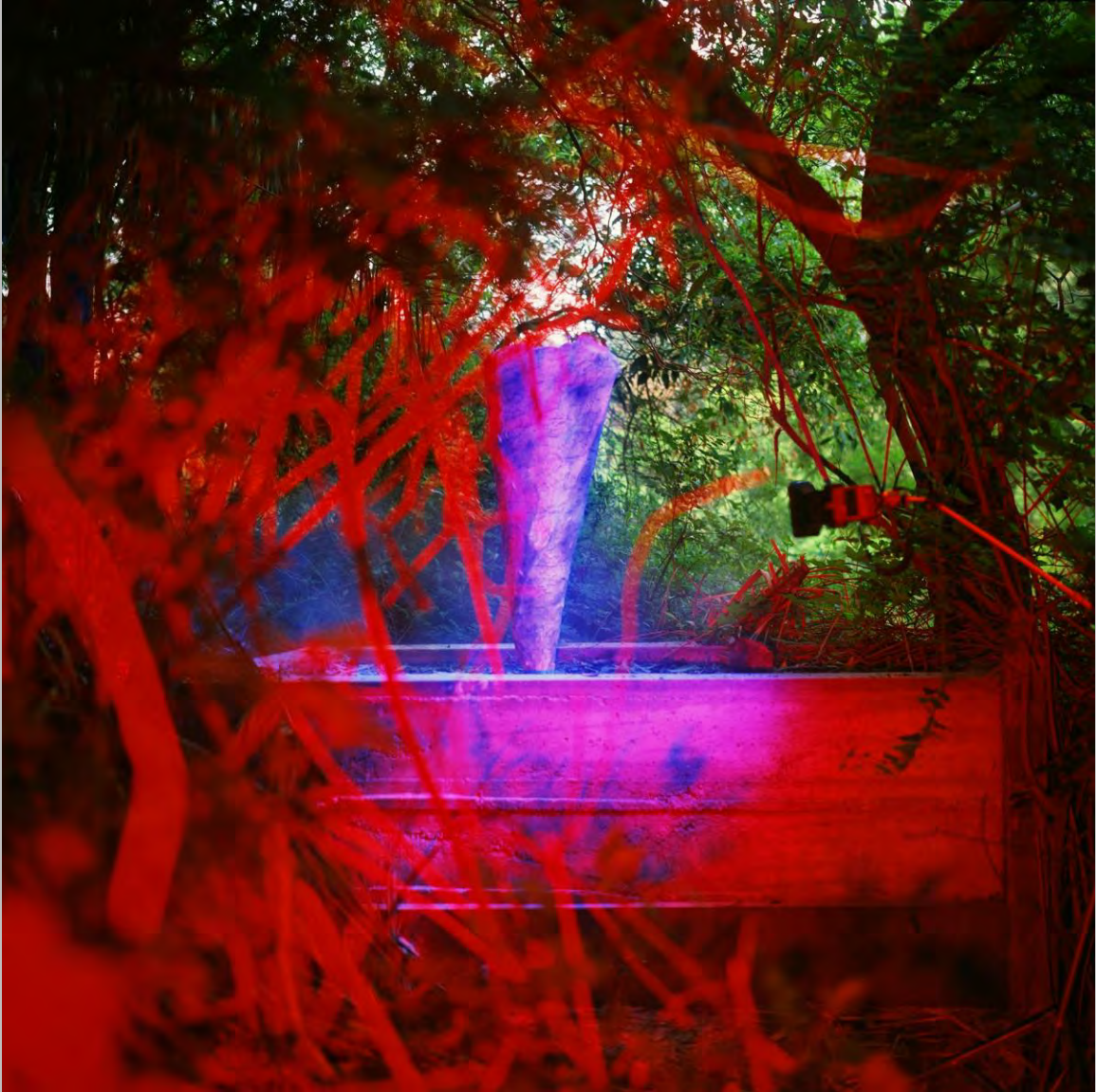
the detail that refuses generalization, the singular proof that a specific body existed once and only once.[\[15\]](#)



Chroma holds onto the indexical trace while redirecting what the trace delivers. Instead of “this body stood here”, the image delivers “this rule acted here”. The index survives; the indexed content shifts from particular to procedural. The images don’t mourn the shift, and they don’t celebrate it either. The work treats the loss as structural — the price of a different kind of seeing. The affective surplus that pervades *Chroma* — dread, biological wrongness, ritual charge clinging to crude

sculptures and animal portraits — doesn't read as lament. It leaks out when a procedure designed to behave systematically meets material that resists full systematization. Organic texture keeps asserting itself under chromatic override. Placed objects in nocturnal landscapes keep drifting toward offerings even when they function as instruments. The surplus comes from friction between operator and scene, and that friction prevents the work from resolving into pure abstraction or pure description.

Across the full series, the operator never stabilizes. At one extreme, Divola approaches something close to the parametric: a colored square on a wall, a disc on flat vegetation, diptychs where the same scene undergoes different chromatic rules so variation reads as a controlled variable. At the other extreme, ritual excess takes over: trees saturated past procedural justification, landscapes that feel bodily rather than earthly, theatrical voids where silhouettes stand like holes punched through testimony. Between the poles, the operator imposes, embeds, subtracts, dissolves, overwhelms, withdraws. Even within diptychs — where Divola holds scene, objects, and framing steady while shifting chromatic rule — outputs diverge in affect: a blue interior reads cold, analytic, withdrawn; a red interior reads urgent, pressurized, biological. One parameter shifts, and the whole atmosphere swings. The system reads as system, yet outputs exceed prediction. Cibachrome amplifies the instability. Its industrial saturation and deep contrast push color further from description and closer to command, intensifying the gel's imposition beyond what on-site experience of flash would deliver. Whether Cibachrome counts as a second operator layered onto the gels or as the gels' chemical extension remains a question the prints keep open. What feels certain: the printing process collaborates rather than merely records. Divola acknowledges as much when he describes Cibachrome as flawed for conventional images yet uniquely suited to pushing chroma past naturalistic plausibility.[\[16\]](#)



The delay between making and publication matters, though the work refuses easy morality tales about prophecy. *Chroma* comes from 1980–85 and enters book form in 2020, a gap of nearly four decades. In the early 1980s, the series pressed against a specific photographic orthodoxy: Walker Evans revival, suspicion of subjectivity, suspicion of chromatic excess. Color, to enter the museum, had to behave like transparent description. By 2020, parametric color manipulation saturates daily life — filters, grading, lookup tables — and imposed color reads as norm. Divola's imposition carries a different weight because it remains physical and indexical: gels in real space, flash striking real surfaces, chemistry saturating dyes in a print.

The series reads now less as prophecy than as counterhistory: a bodily ancestor to weightless algorithmic procedures, holding onto the one thing digital color forfeits — the guarantee of contact. Color in *Chroma* never settles into a stable system with predictable outputs. It remains a procedure capable of surprising itself — generating affects that outrun the rule, producing visibility at the cost of the particular, oscillating between weird collision and eerie aftermath without choosing a home. The operator's instability — its refusal to repeat one operation, its tendency to generate legibility and illegibility inside the same frame — becomes the series' real subject. Divola never resolves chromophobia's old contradiction — color as trivial frosting or dangerous corruption — because he builds a body of work that runs on the contradiction. Color acts on scenes, registers forces, estranges particulars, and refuses to settle into the role the artist assigns. The operator operates. The output exceeds intention. That excess — **wrongness, eeriness, evidentiary damage** — keeps the work alive.

























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Notes

[1] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 22-23

[2] Charles Blanc, cited in Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 23.

[3] Walker Evans, cited in Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 111.

[4] John Szarkowski, introduction to *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).

[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 81.

[6] John Divola, in David Company, "John Divola Speaks with David Company", in *Chroma* (Jesi, Italy: Skinnerboox, 2020).

[7] Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation", *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 143-69.

[8] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 10-11.

[9] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 219-52.

[10] Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 1", *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81.

[11] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11-12.

[12] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77-80.

[13] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11.

[14] John Divola, in Company, "John Divola Speaks with David Company".

[15] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-27, 77.

[16] John Divola, in Company, "John Divola Speaks with David Company".