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John Divola

Postcards from the Edge: Elizabeth Schambelan on John Divola's "Zuma," 1977-78

By Elizabeth Schambelan, Artforum, October 2011

CLOSE-UP

Postcards from the Edge

ELIZABETH SCHAMBELAN ON JOHN DIVOLA'S "ZUMA," 1977-78



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FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS in the late 1970s, John Divola made a habit of visiting an abandoned house on Malibu's Zuma Beach, toting a Pentax camera and a few cans of spray paint. On his arrival, he'd inspect the premises, seeing what had changed since the last time he'd been there, what ad hoc redecorations had occurred at the hands of vagrants or the wind. If nothing looked especially interesting, he'd move things around, do some spray-painting, and then begin taking pictures.

In the resulting series of some fifty color photographs, the house seems afflicted with the kind of slip-sliding kineticism one associates with a sinking ship. Shards of glass are everywhere. Objects—scrap wood and cinder blocks, a filthy white sofa—haphazardly rearrange themselves from one image to the next, while brownish curtains assume various permutations, as if communicating in slovenly semaphore. Sometimes Divola would toss a book or a magazine into the air and photograph it as it tumbled back to earth, pages flapping. The aura of maritime disaster is amplified by the fact that in virtually every image the blown-out windows frame a landless vista of sea and sky. Spray paint proliferates: an arterial streak, an occult-looking pictogram, fields of smeary dots and squiggles.

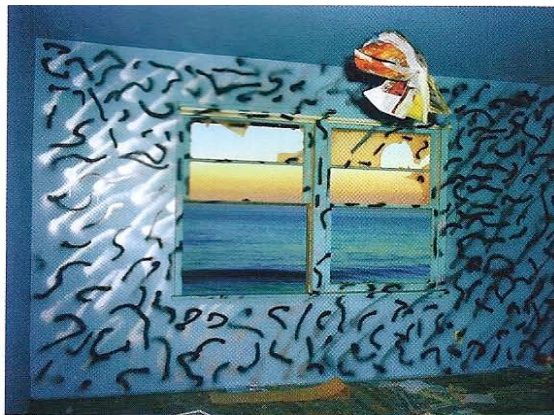
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES. THOSE EARLIER photographs had been taken in a number of vacant homes throughout LA, and in these houses, too, the artist had spray-painted and otherwise manipulated his environment. But the "Vandalism" images are black-and-white, shadowy and haunted. "Zuma" is different. Divola went to the beach house either very early or very late in the day, photographing with a flash to match the interior illumination to the light outside. As a result, the pictures have a crystalline, hyperreal quality. The cyan and salmon-pink ocean views often register as vertical planes, like theatrical scenery; contemporary viewers frequently assume they have been Photoshopped. And while the spray-painting in the "Vandalism" series evokes graffiti—it has the same cryptographic melancholy, the same

quantity of addressing the viewer as unreactable commentary on postindustrial decay—no such social valence can be detected in “Zuma.” The patterns in these images seem as obsessive and entoptic as Yayoi Kusama’s, and are sometimes as visually disorienting.

When discussing the series, Divola has emphasized the spontaneity of his approach and the experiential dimensions of his process. In 1980, he wrote, “My participation [in the making of the photographs] was not so much one of intellectual consideration as one of visceral involvement.” And yet, he pointedly notes in the same statement, the “Zuma” images “are not meant to be documents of painting, or sculpture, or even of environmental works.” The photograph is the art, and the painterly or sculptural effects of the artist’s actions are referred to the photographic surface. As he recalled in a 2005 interview with critic Jan Tumlir, he learned about art principally by looking at slides, books, and magazines. “So,” he said, “I came to the conclusion . . . that all painting and sculpture and performance was . . . made to be photographed, to be recontextualized and talked, or written, about.”

This ambivalence between visceral involvement and mediation makes itself visible in every “Zuma” image. The photographs clearly *are* documents of sited interventions. Yet their free-floating all-over patterns and drag-and-dropped seascapes establish a partial, unstable coterminousness with the picture plane, a formal flatness that comes and goes as one looks. In this sense they repeatedly enact a spatiotemporal pan-caking, an expulsion of the body and an evacuation of its indices, a collapse of the space of experience.

While Divola was taking his “Zuma” pictures, curator John Szarkowski was working on his canon-making 1978 exhibition of photographs, “Mirrors and Windows,” for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was Szarkowski’s contention that American photographers of the ’60s and ’70s could be divided into two camps, unflinching documentarians (“Windows,” e.g., Garry Winogrand) and expressive romantics (“Mirrors,” e.g., Robert Mapplethorpe). He would include one of Divola’s “Vandalism” pictures in the “Mirrors” category. But of course, from the standpoint of perception, mirrors and windows are not dichotomous—they are one and the same thing, apertures giving onto three-dimensional space. This is an essentially realist space, however abstract or phantasmagoric the incidents it may contain, because it purports to be a space where things can happen, where Newton’s laws remain in force and causality and agency obtain. But a few dozen blocks south of MOMA, and in other locales, a number of artists were working entirely outside this space and forever debunking it as the sole and proper matrix of photography. Their images operated within the



Top: John Divola, *Zuma* #70, 1977, color photograph. From the series “Zuma,” 1977–78.

Above: John Divola, *Zuma* #4, 1978, color photograph. From the series “Zuma,” 1977–78.

frozen zones of representation, where objects are irrevocably static, and causality and agency have been displaced beyond the frame.

Though Divola is by no means a Pictures artist, the ocean framed in the Zuma house’s windows is, optically and allegorically, a *picture*. The seascape is the presence that admits the ascendance of the commodity-sign, even as everything else in the photographs works to contain that presence, to achieve a remove from it and hold it at bay. It is the Pacific as airbrushed illustration, vulgar and beguiling: the fabled American terminus, a Potemkin facade luring Okies and aspiring actresses. It is the seascape as such, and thus also the end point of a telescoping history that entrains red-figure Argonauts and Turner’s *Slave Ship* and the oceanic monochromes of the New York School. It is the final stop of the road trip for Western pictoriality, which, at its watery westernmost point, ramifies endlessly, on postcards and T-shirts and the sides of custom vans, into an infinity of California sunsets. □

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