

dogs my car

chasing in the desert



Photographs and essay by John Divola

The desert is not empty. However, it is vacant enough to bestow a certain weight to whatever is present. This is an extraordinary place, the unobstructed view to the horizon, the quality of the light, and that smell after it rains. Add this to a heightened awareness of your own presence and the desert can take on an existential quality.

Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert

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And it's quiet. Once, having climbed to the top of a very large hill to photograph, I was startled by the sound of the wind moving under the wings of a bird as it flew by. Hundreds of feet below and half a mile away a dog spotted me and started barking like it had just caught me climbing the back fence. No one sneaks up on a dog in the desert. A dog can hear your car coming for several miles and will see you coming almost as far away. By the time you arrive he has developed a level of anticipation.

From 1995 to 1998, I was working on a series of photographs of isolated houses in the desert at the east-end of the Morongo Valley in Southern



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➤ California. As I meandered through the desert, a dog would occasionally chase my car. Sometime in 1996, I began to bring along a 35mm camera equipped with a motor drive and loaded with a fast and grainy black-and-white film. The process was simple; when I saw a dog coming toward the car I would pre-focus the camera and set the exposure. With one hand on the steering wheel, I would hold the camera out the window and expose anywhere from a few frames to a complete roll of film. I'll admit that I was not above turning around and taking a second pass in front of a house with an enthusiastic dog.

Contemplating a dog chasing a car invites any number of metaphors and juxtapositions: culture and nature, the domestic and the wild, love and hate, joy and fear, the heroic and the idiotic. It could be viewed as a visceral and kinetic dance. Here we have two vectors and velocities, that of a dog and that of a car and, seeing that a camera will never capture reality and that a dog will never catch a car, evidence of devotion to a hopeless enterprise. <HDI>

