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ART IN REVIEW

JOHN DIVOLA: 'Trees for the Forest'

By KAREN ROSENBERG Published: May 19, 2011

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This minisurvey of John Divola will remind New Yorkers that Los Angeles has long been a hotbed of conceptual photography, and that John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha aren't the only talents to flourish there.

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The earliest photographs on view, from 1971, show women watering the grass outside their homes in the San Fernando Valley. The subjects face the camera in short-shorts and teased hair, putting a Hollywood gloss on the American dream of a well-tended lawn.

That dream is shattered in two bodies of work from the mid-1970s, "Vandalism" and "Zuma," which show the interiors of crumbling and abandoned homes. Because Mr. Divola contributed to the damage — spray-painting patterns on the walls and rearranging bits of detritus — his images aren't merely documentary; they have an experimental Man Ray-meets-Gordon Matta-Clark aesthetic.

There's something Naumanesque, meanwhile, about "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert" (1996-2001): a series of streaky blurs photographed through the window of Mr. Divola's vehicle. And in "As Far as I Could Get," also from the 1990s, Mr. Divola is the figure in motion; after setting a camera with a 10-second timer, he takes off down the road. His fugitive gesture recalls Bas Jan Ader, Allen Ruppersberg, Jan Dibbets and other artists working along the Amsterdam-Los Angeles art route of the 1970s.

Aside from a predictable shift to large-format color photography, Mr. Divola's work has not evolved much over the last few decades. Some of his original concepts still have life in them, however. In "Dark Star," from 2008, he spray-paints black circles on the walls of abandoned homes — updating "Zuma" and "Vandalism" for our age of foreclosure.

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