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UNITED STATES



(/)

## John Divola's Artistic Vandalism Is Still Fresh After 40 Years

June 22, 2016

Photos by JONATHAN BLAUSTEIN



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*From Zuma Series, Zuma #68, 1977*

Back in the early 1970s, the artist John Divola began wandering into abandoned houses in his native LA, doing abstract, graphic graffiti, then photographing the results. That was the beginning of a long career that saw his work appear inside the most important art institutions in the world, including MoMA, LACMA, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

At the moment, his photographs are included in both *About Time: Photography in a Moment of Change* and *California and the West*, at the newly re-opened SFMOMA in San Francisco—such is his legacy and impact on the California photography scene over the last 40 years.

Divola's edgy, discomfiting style dates back to the 70s, when he was a graduate student at UCLA. His type of conceptual, inter-disciplinary practice was totally of the moment, as UCLA and CalArts were famous for encouraging nontraditional work. Radical performance art was also hot—artists shot themselves, or masturbated under the floorboards of galleries, and in most cases such works became famous after the fact through documentary photographs.

Just up the road, on the west side of LA, the Z-Boys were revolutionizing skateboarding by appropriating surf techniques and demonstrating little regard for private property as they rampaged across the empty swimming pools of Santa Monica and Venice. SoCal was a center of rebellious art of all sorts, from the streets to galleries.

But Divola pointedly did not make these pictures out of a desire for destructions, but rather out of a rigorous, intellectual desire to create photographs that would be the nexus of several

"Why differentiate between sculpture, painting, and performance when it's all going to end up as a photograph anyway?" Divola told VICE.



*From Vandalism, 74V17, 1974*

The black-and-white photographs in his *Vandalism* series, which he made in those abandoned homes, still feel transgressive today; they also work as pure imagery. Circles emanate out concentrically, dots resolve into patterns, or pyramids. Some of the pictures almost seem to vibrate, like optical illusions. They speak to the history of painting, to street art, to photography. But despite the title of the series, looking back Divola doesn't see a link between what he did and traditional graffiti.

"There's nothing particularly rebellious about painting in a completely abandoned house," Divola said. "These are places that people have given up. It's not the same as painting on the side of somebody's business, or genuinely being destructive."

He followed up *Vandalism* with the visceral, anti-aesthetic masterpiece *Zuma*, in which he turned an empty and partially destroyed beach shack into a canvas. The designs he sprayed onto the walls feel trippy and shamanistic. The contrast between the mess inside and the serene ocean out the broken windows give the photos a peaceful yet postapocalyptic feeling.

Divola himself doesn't like to have his photos reduced to a series of symbols, the transience of humanity versus the eternity of nature. "The ocean out the window is evocative of regenerative cycles. The interior is evocative of entropy. I'm interested in all that, but the photographs themselves aren't emblems for simple reductive metaphoric intentionality," he said.





*From Zuma Series, Zuma #25, 1978*

His extensive oeuvre also explores the absurd, as he did in his 90s project "*Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*," which is exactly what it sounds like. In *As Far as I Could Get*, also from the 90s, Divola put his camera on a timer, then runs away as fast as he can. The image is therefore a record of how much ground he could cover. Taken at face value, it's silly and whimsical, yet the symbolism—the desire to race away from one's problems and head towards the sunset—is impossible to miss.

It's hard to discuss Divola's work without acknowledging just how incredibly prolific the man is. He's been making projects seemingly continuously since the early 70s, and it's all available for viewing, nicely indexed, on his website. (Which is rare for an artist of his stature.)

But it makes sense, in context, as he never made his work for the market, but rather out of deep love of making cool stuff. LA is one of the hottest art scenes in the world right now, but when Divola began his career, it was a relatively backwater.

"You talk about Southern California, but there was no market here for art, for the longest time," he said. "I was only making work for other artists and friends. I wasn't worried about selling work. That's not why I was making it. I supported myself through teaching and academia."

Now nearing 70, Divola is still investigating and improving on spaces that have been left behind. For the past year and a half, he's been visiting the George Air Force Base in Victorville, California, which was abandoned in the early 90s.

"It's almost like it was built for me," he says. "It's also a Superfund site, because the ground water was contaminated from jet fuel. At some point, meth tweakers went in and pulled out all the copper wiring."

I spoke to him on a day when he woke up at 4 AM to go out to the base again. So what was so important?

"I did these big, black forms at the end of hallways," he said. "There's something really amazing about the perspective of a narrow hallway. The lighting coming in from the side doors. The sun is rising."

"That's the thing about what I do," he concluded. "I have no way to know whether it's actually going to be any good. I just have to do it, and look at it, and then maybe I go back and modify it, or drop that inquiry."

*See more of Divola's work below:*



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2016





Form Vandalism Series, 74V34, 1974



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2016



Form Vandalism Series, 74V02, 1974

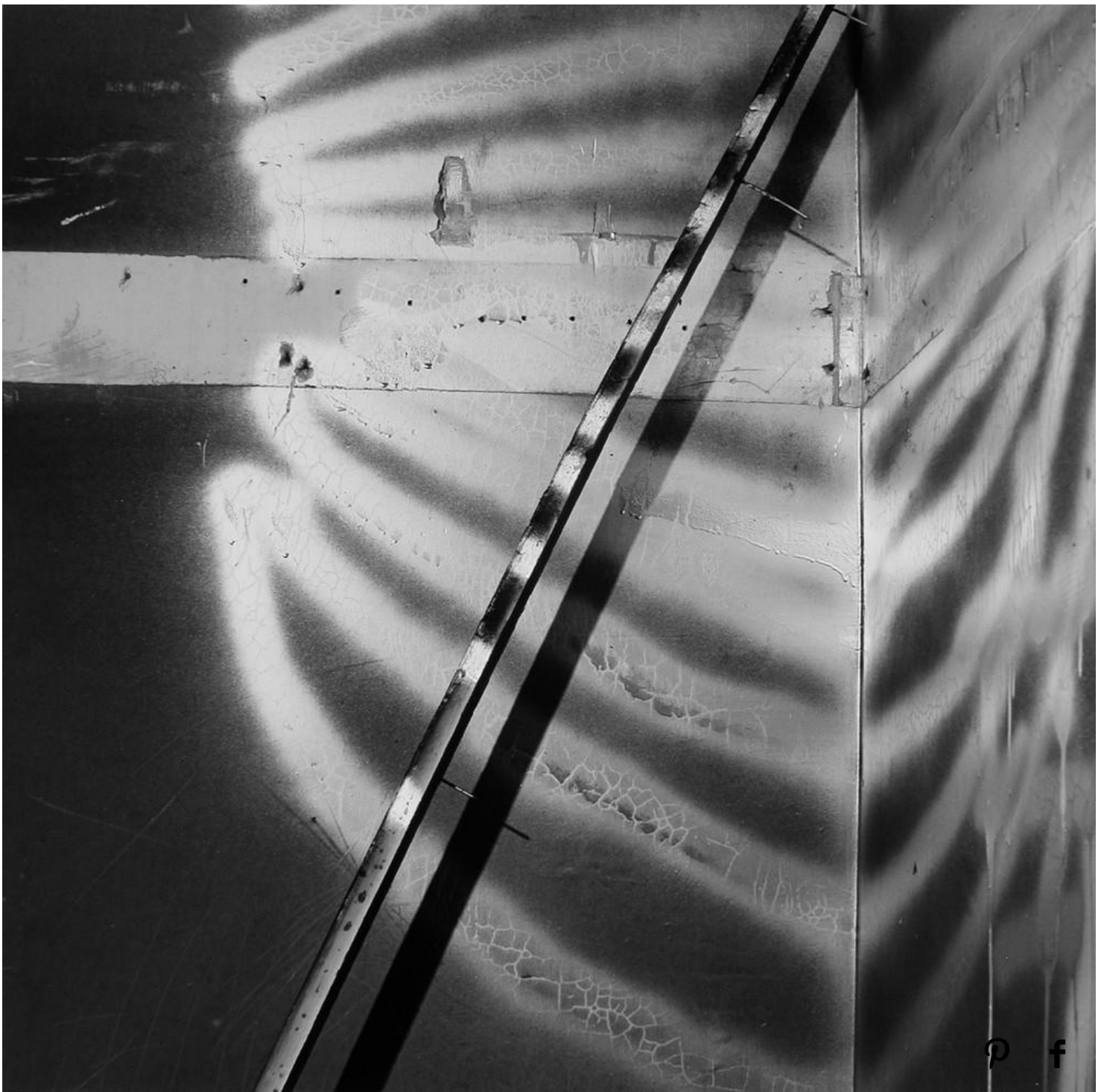


Abandoned Painting A, 2007



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2016





Form Vandalism Series, 74V03, 1974



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2016



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2015

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Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2015





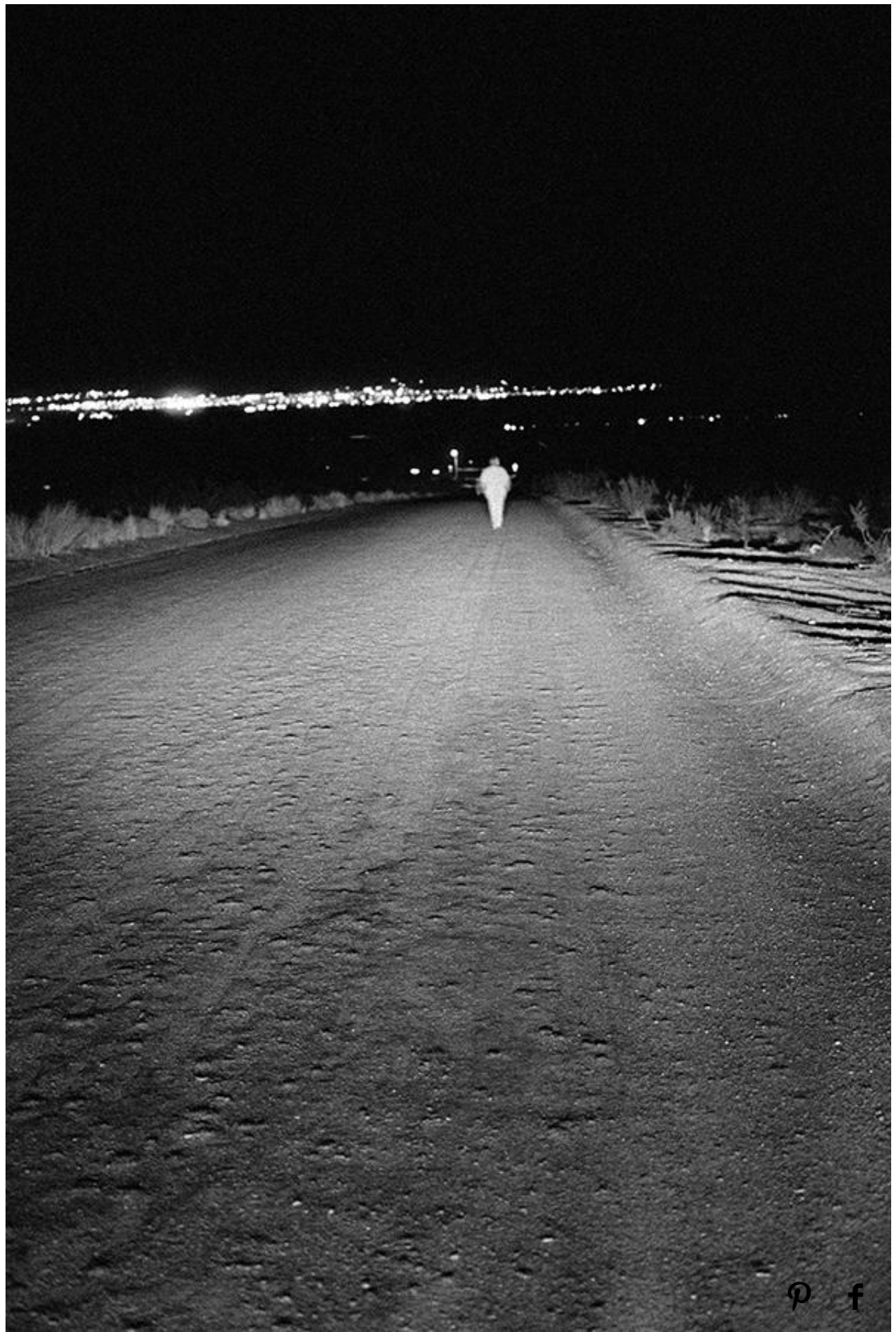
As Far As I Could Get (10 seconds), R02F06, 1996/97



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2015



From Zuma Series, Zuma #04, 1978





As Far As I Could Get (10 seconds), R02F09, 1996/97



Work in Progress George Air Base, Untitled, 2015

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