

# John Divola at Galeria Pedro Alfacinha

On John Divola's exhibition *Despite Intentions* at Galeria Pedro Alfacinha, Lisbon, and its connections to the New Museum's recent Sarah Charlesworth survey *Doubleworld*.

By William J. Simmons

Comprised of nine largely unseen diptychs produced from 1983 to 1984, John Divola's inaugural exhibition at Galeria Pedro Alfacinha in Lisbon is a unique opportunity to view his deft synthesis of minimalism, expressionism, and photo-conceptualism. As cibachrome prints—now an obsolete medium—the photographs announce their age while retaining a fleshy, immediate sheen, offset by the humble domesticity of the gallery space. Though the images recall the heyday of the cibachrome in the 1980s, pioneered by artists like Laurie Simmons, Jimmy DeSana, and Sarah Charlesworth, there is nevertheless a prescient force in this work that prefigures contemporary questions of beauty, identity, and the medium. *Despite Intentions*, which is on view through November 21, highlights Divola's wide-ranging interests that move seamlessly from the origins of postmodernism in the visual arts into today's debates.

The diptychs juxtapose darkly sardonic scenes that Divola lights dramatically with colors evoking a disco sunset. These saturated pigments have since been attributed to the neo-noir Americana aesthetic of David Lynch, and pushed even further by contemporary imagery surrounding Lana Del Rey and *True Detective*, but there is an unassuming intellectual presence that sets Divola apart. Akin to the deadpan conceptualism of John Baldessari, these photographs cause one to chuckle at their combinations: theatrical portraits of a woman and a goat, or a close-up of a lavender

dolphin beside a flamboyant cousin of Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* (1969). A pairing of a paint-splattered studio with a blockish sculpture on the floor—the kind one would see in canonical images of macho modernists—with a lime-green brick inching toward the edge of a table, signals that something deeply serious is also taking place.

This deliberate precariousness places *Despite Intentions* in conversation with Sarah Charlesworth's recent retrospective *Doubleworld*, which was presented by the New Museum in New York. Her series *Modern History* (1977–79) and *Stills* (1980), examples of her simultaneous occupation of analytical conceptualism and proto-“Pictures Generation” appropriation strategies, were highly lauded. *Objects of Desire* (1983–88)—contemporaneous with Divola's project—as well as Charlesworth's final series, *Available Light* (2012), were conversely characterized as, at best, purely one-dimensional and self-referential commentaries on commodity culture, and, at worst, overly decorative and feminine.

A female artist who makes anything that could be called “pretty” often finds herself placed in the traditionally undervalued arenas of decoration, applied art, luxury goods, or crass commercialism. This is especially true for female members of the Pictures Generation, for whom hyper-intellectual criticality is a prerequisite for inclusion in the canon. Charlesworth, like Divola, does indeed underline the photograph's capacity to become a lush and beautiful object, especially in her use of cibachrome in *Objects of Desire*; she even matched her lacquered wood frames to the prints, creating what is, at times, an uninterrupted chromatic unison. Similarly, Divola's simple wood frames have their own craft-like connotations. It is exactly in this excess, however, that Divola's and Charlesworth's foundational contribution becomes apparent, inasmuch as they require us to reconfigure our expectations about what kinds of artworks are deemed avant-garde.

Viewing Divola's images in this context clarifies the importance of gendered discourses and value judgments surrounding photo-conceptualism. What

would happen, for instance, were we to read Charlesworth's *Buddha of Immeasurable Light* (1987) like we would one of Divola's equally engrossing diptychs? Would we see it not as some simplistic consummation of the slickness of the photograph with the shallowness of late capitalism, but rather as a questioning of the masculinist, quasi-religious aspirations of minimalism? Or even, perhaps paradoxically, the mystical interweaving of abstraction and figuration in Jackson Pollock's *Cut-Outs* (c. 1948–50)? Both Divola and Charlesworth could be seen as discussing the possibility of reabsorption into the capitalist regime and examining discursive inequities regarding what counts as a "critical" body of work. Revisiting Divola's earlier work at this moment is a deeply important exercise in rethinking not only his career, but also the presumptions surrounding an entire group of artists who sought to posit a new kind of engagement with identity and history, using the camera as an inquisitive tool.

*Despite Intensions was on view at Galeria Pedro Alfacinha from September 24 to November 21.*