

# GIVING UP THE GHOST



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From the series  
"San Fernando Valley #3", 1971-73  
Courtesy: the artist and  
Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

With images that bespeak photography's ghostly aspect, frozen in a sort of "anterior present," Californian artist **JOHN DIVOLA** portrays the inexorable march of entropy—in a vain attempt at delineating the contours of a system in a continual state of flux.

words by **CHRIS WILEY**

## HIGHLIGHTS: JOHN DIVOLA

When I look at John Divola's photographs, I am reminded of an uncanny sensation that I sometimes have while exploring abandoned buildings. Alone, as I meander and kick my way through the accumulated strata of detritus that somehow migrates onto the floors of all such disused spaces (cans and bottles, miscellaneous fragments of objects, the inevitable water-logged pages of pornography), I occasionally begin to feel that I am only half there. Perhaps this is because abandoned spaces are always infected with their pasts, with a sense that they exist only as palimpsests of their former selves, steadily fading into the future until they are erased for good. Or perhaps it is due to some inner uncertainty activated by this type of isolation: like the proverbial tree that falls in the forest without anyone to hear it, spaces that exist unobserved in a forgotten corner of the world can be metaphysically destabilizing. Most likely, the sensation is an admixture of both exterior and interior circumstance. I become a spectral presence haunting a spectral space.

Since the mid-1970s, Divola has been just such a specter, haunting the liminal spaces of California's vast, sunny territory, and sending back photographic communiqués that are



### ARTIST'S BIO

JOHN DIVOLA (b. 1949) lives and works in Los Angeles. He is a Professor of Art at the University of California, Riverside. His work recently appeared in a two-person exhibition with Cyprien Gaillard at Laura Bartlett, London, and was included in group exhibitions at MoMA, New York; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; LACMA, Los Angeles; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; SFMoMA, San Francisco; and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He has published four books: *Continuity*, *Isolated Houses*, *Dogs Chasing My Car In The Desert*, and *Three Acts*.

influenced as much by painting, sculpture, and conceptualism as they are by vandalism, entropy, and isolation. However, unlike close contemporaries who shared similar approaches and concerns, such as Robert Smithson and Ed Ruscha, Divola's works have gained only slight recognition outside of the world of photography. In my view, this is partially due to the fact that, despite his works' promiscuous approach, Divola has always been primarily concerned with the nature of photography itself. Whether consciously or not, Divola produced images that speak about photography's ghostly aspect: its paradoxical ability to render the past as the present, to simultaneously arrest decay and emphasize its inevitability, to bring back the dead in the form of an image, but never in the flesh.

Two of Divola's early series, *Vandalism* (1973–75) and *LAX NAZ* (1975–76), set the tone for much of his later work. Departing from his earlier photographs of suburban banality in the San Fernando Valley, which share a kinship with the photographs of fellow Californians Bill Owens and Henry Wessel, with the *Vandalism* series Divola began to venture off into the suburban fringes, bringing with him cans of spray paint to mark up the derelict



From "Zuma Series (folder one)", 1977  
 Courtesy: the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

spaces he found there. The resultant images fall somewhere between photography and painting; Divola's frenetic graffiti is flattened by the act of picture making, sometimes seeming to float on the surface of the image like a second skin. By dint of its nature as a document of actions just recently past, the *Vandalism* series also shares the strange temporal register of the buildings in which Divola made it: looking at the photographs, we have the sense of always arriving just after the fact, of the curtain having opened after the actors have left the stage.

A similar temporal register—which could be described as the “anterior present,” or perhaps “ghost time”—can be found in *LAX NAZ*, a series of photographs made in and around the empty houses of a suburban neighborhood next to the Los Angeles International Airport that was purchased by the state of California and slated for demolition in order to create a Noise Abatement Zone (NAZ) around the airport's new runways. Many of these houses, which Divola photographed with a sculptor's eye for spatial relationships and minimalist forms that recalls another of his photographic contemporaries, Lewis Baltz, fell victim to break-ins. Divola assiduously documented the details of these forced entries: boards wrenched off windows, glass panes shattered, walls sullied by teenagers' graffiti extolling the virtues of marijuana and Pink Floyd (presumably in combination). But, like the vandalism Divola perpetrated in his previous series, these acts of violence and destructive effort exist in Divola's photographs only as traces—evidence of the act, but not the act itself. Of course, in addition to these traces of the past, the houses Divola photographed for *LAX NAZ* were also indelibly inscribed with their future destruction, which renders their ghostly aspect somewhat Janus-faced: hollowed out remainders of their past incarnations, the houses have also already vanished.

This same double-sided vanishing act is characteristic of the derelict beach house that Divola took as the subject of his most well-known series, *Zuma* (1977). Initially discovered while he and a friend were jogging on the titular beach in Malibu, California, Divola spent a year documenting the house as it suffered the vicissitudes of neglect (teenagers' parties,

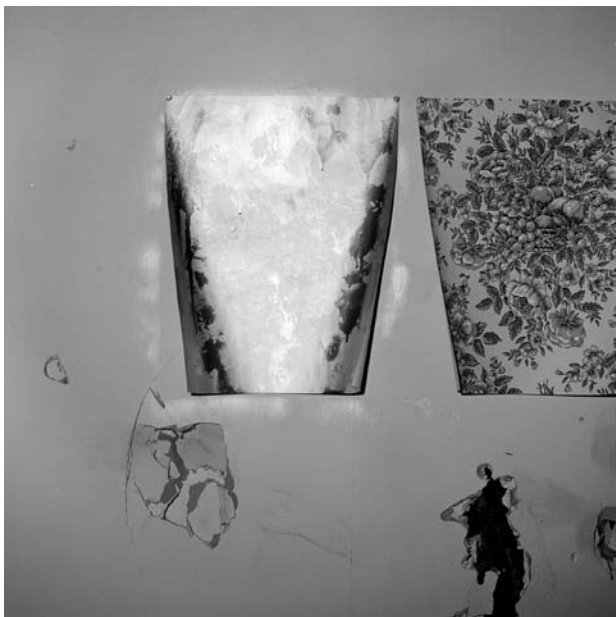
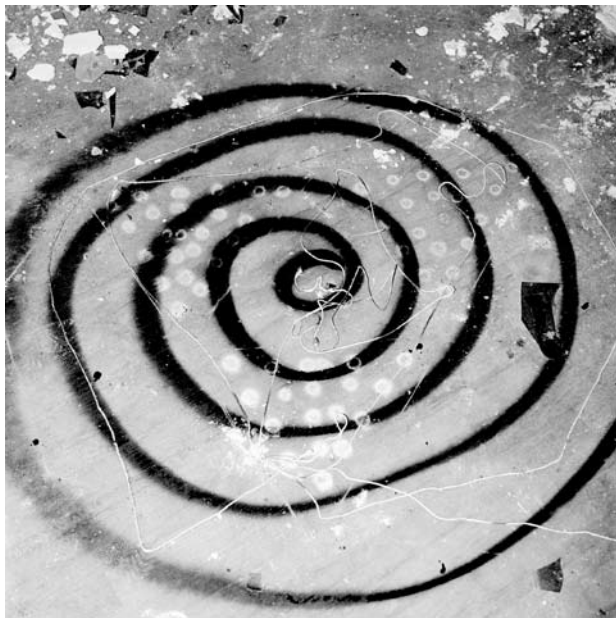
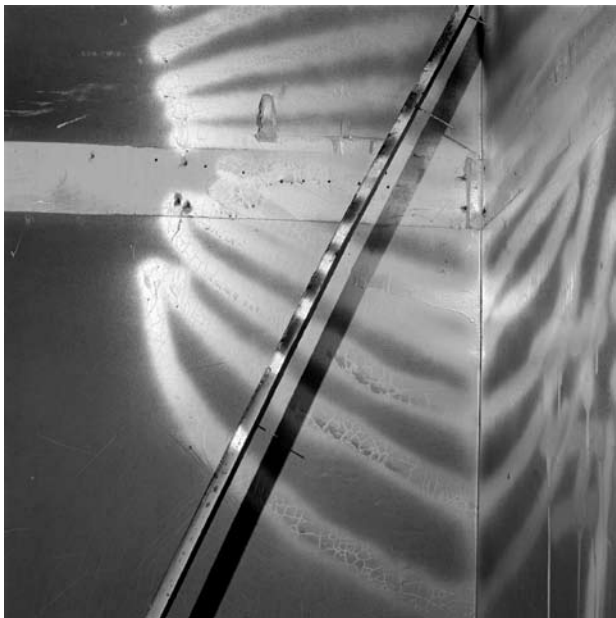
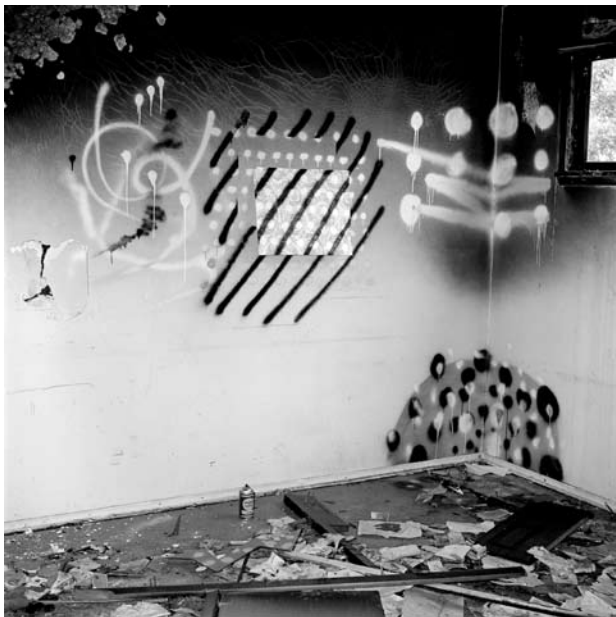
**CURRENT & FORTHCOMING**

JOHN DIVOLA's exhibition "Present Tense" will be on view at the Riverside Art Museum, in Riverside, California, until April 2, 2011.

**AUTHOR**

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HIGHLIGHTS: JOHN DIVOLA

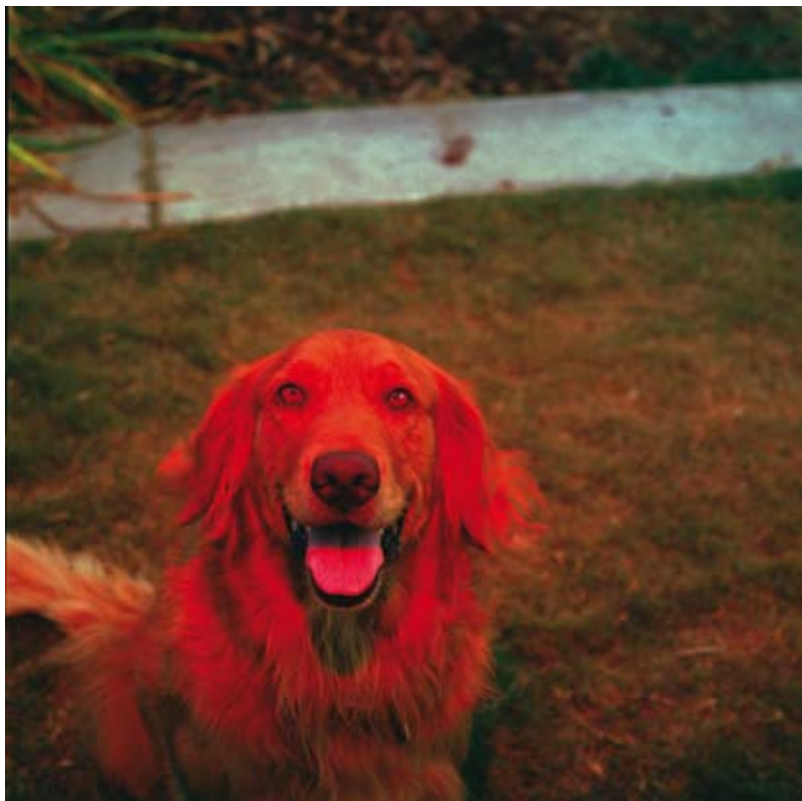


conventions of the homeless and destitute, acts of petty vandalism, and at least one indoor bonfire that got slightly out of hand), and simultaneously intervened with his own spray-painted embellishments, until the house was wiped away in a fire. In some ways, these photographs could be seen as a synthesis of Divola's two previous series, the painterly acts of *Vandalism* comingling with the inexorable march of entropy on view in *LAX NAZ*. But in *Zuma* the marriage of Divola's previous strategies actually results in something that is greater than the sum of its parts. First of all, by expanding his interventions into the realm of time and allowing himself to become enmeshed with the fate of the space as it decays, Divola renders his presence even more specter-like. His photographs becoming snapshots of the process of his own acts of haunting—a state of affairs that Divola occasionally literalizes through the flash-frozen intrusions of books and magazines that appear to float in midair as if of their own accord, levitating in the space like mysterious, mangy birds. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly in terms of the series' relationship to Divola's conception of photography, in *Zuma* the act of photographing becomes an attempt to delineate the contours of a system in a continual state of flux. Of course, it is somewhat vain to undertake this project using photography—as fragments of the past that have been wrenched from the flow of time, the photographs can provide only the past's semblance, its ghost.

This sense of the photograph as the past's deficient twin—something that is of the past, but which falls short of fully representing it—is something that undoubtedly drew Divola to another prominent facet of his practice: the appropriation and recontextualization of continuity photographs from Hollywood films. Divola acquires and organizes these images, which are made during film productions in order to maintain the visual continuity of a scene (the placement of a vase, the angle of an overturned chair) in the event that it needs to be returned to or reshot, into broad, typological categories that flatly describe their content: *Hallways*, *Mirrors*, *Incidental Subjects* (all 1995). All of these images share the feeling of eerie abandonment, the sense that something has just taken place (or is about to), which gives them an aesthetic kinship to Divola's early works. The series *Evidence of Aggression* (1995), for example, could pass as a collection of outtakes from *LAX NAZ*, were it not for the jarring presence, in many of the images, of the film production clapboard announcing the film title or scene description. However, these images make explicit



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From "Vandalism Series", 1973-75  
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something that, as I have said, remains only implicit in series such as *Zuma*: they are the utilitarian embodiments of the broader desire of the project of photography—the desire to return to the past *as it really was*. The irony, of course, is that only in the realm of cinema can this chimerical hope be realized. Elsewhere in the realms of images, the past remains not just a foreign continent, a place where they do things differently, but a spirit world trapped in an imperfect mirror.

Maybe the most disquieting occurrences of what I have been referring to as the ghostly aspect of Divola's work comes in the form of a pair of his series that was taken in the California high desert outside of the town of Twenty Nine Palms: *Isolated Houses* (1995–98) and *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert* (1996–2001). As the title implies, *Isolated Houses* is a compendium of images of the modest dwellings that exist in the remote desert regions, miles away from anything resembling civilization. Each house is documented in a straightforward, typological style and titled using the houses' precise geographic coordinates—*N34°07.319'W115°50.987'* is one example—as if Divola were engaged in the creation of an atlas of loneliness, or a guidebook to the desert's lost souls. *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert* has a similarly explicit title, and consists of a series of Muybridge-like motion studies taken of dogs running after Divola's car, as if it were a mirage or an apparition. Though both of these series share a feeling of deadpan levity, their initial appearance of lightness belies what I believe is their visceral, existential engagement with the unfathomably lonely space of death. As Roland Barthes observes in his still-indispensable final book *Camera Lucida*, this space is co-extensive with that of the image:

“For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image that produces Death while trying to produce life. (...) *Life/Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.”

Perhaps, ultimately, it is just this death-dealing click that Divola is running from in his wry conceptual series *As Far As I Could Get* (1996/97), a collection of images of the artist, often in the same lonely tracts of desert that are home to his wandering dogs and hermetic abodes, running away from his camera as far as the self-timer apparatus will allow him. Time and time again, we see Divola captured in mid-stride, attempting to escape the camera's gaze. But, time and time again, we see him fail—caught in the image's headlights, frozen into a ghostly version of himself. ♦



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*WHO CAN YOU TRUST*, 1983  
Courtesy: the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

