

# Interview: John Divola

By Alexander Shulan



The Californian photographer's portraits of vandalized homes are artifacts of his engagement with time, place and circumstance.

**Alexander Shulan** I thought we might begin by discussing your recent show “Theodore Street Project” at Maccarone in New York. Could you talk a bit about the structure on Theodore Street—how you came across it, and what drew you to start photographing it?

**John Divola** I was working on a couple of bodies of work simultaneously, where I would find abandoned buildings and go in and do some painting and take photographs. One body of work was called “Dark Star,” where I would simply paint large black circles in the space, and then there was another body of work just called “Interventions” that consisted of other kinds of interventions in the space. One of the houses where I’d made a number of these “Dark Star” images was on Theodore Street, which is in Moreno Valley, not that far from where I live. I started experimenting with a device called a Gigapan, which is a robotic camera base that directs the camera to scan the scene in front of it, shooting multiple overlapping images that are later seen together in the computer. As I began doing a body of work that consisted of mainly exteriors, I took that device and I started looking around, thinking I would experiment in some of these abandoned houses. Eventually, I revisited the house on Theodore Street.

When I first shot there, I was really the only one who had ever marked in the space. It was pretty much untouched, so my painting of the black circles and other kinds of interventions were the only thing in there. But by the time I went back, a lot of other people had started painting in the space. In the back room was a lot of black racist graffiti, and in the front room was a lot of white racist graffiti, and then also, people had just been throwing paint around in interesting ways. So I started taking Gigapans inside of that space, mapping out the entire space. There’s a photograph of the exterior of the front, which I actually shot during a full solar eclipse. And I took images of the front room, middle room, back room, and then a shot out the back door, which is called *Landscape for Antonioni*.

Because the Gigapan device takes somewhere around 15-20 minutes to make the scan of the scene, I like there to be some kind of event captured within that temporal range. In this case, the event is just my presence somewhere in the scene, like through a hole in the wall. I’m just marginally present in some of them.

The “Theodore Street” exhibition is of all photographs in that same house, made over about a five-year span of time, starting with these kind of 8×10 photographs from “Dark Star” and “Interventions,” and then ending up with a sequence of the Gigapans that were shot in the space.



**AS** With the “Dark Star” images, are you emptying a whole can of black spray paint into a circle?

**JD** Probably close to a can of black spray paint.

**AS** How did you come to use the paint in that way?

**JD** I had done a lot of interventions in buildings with painting back in the 1970s, but then I really dropped that way of working all through the ‘80s and ‘90s. It was only because I did a book with Aperture called 3X, which caused me to go back and re-scan all those negatives from the ‘70s for the publication, that I became interested in it again. But in that interim, the technology changed. At the university, we have a drum scanner, and now, if I take an 8×10 negative, I can do things in terms of controlling color and scale that I never could have done back in the ‘70s. So I got interested in that procedure again, but I was less interested in the kind of calligraphy or gestural kind of fussiness that might have been in the early work. I wanted to do something that was more reductive. I got really interested the way the painting picks up light. Like, if you want to photograph an artwork, a painting on a wall, what you really want is really flat, even lighting. But when you’re in an abandoned house and it’s illuminated randomly by windows, you have a very uneven kind of lighting, a very ephemeral specificity to the light. If you paint a big black circle of wet paint, it’s kind of oxymoronic, in that the wet paint picks up the light of the windows behind you. So I was interested in something that was reductive enough that it would begin to pick up the kind of ambiance and specificity of the lighting in the room.

**AS** Has technology changed the way you make images?

**JD** With the Gigapan, you’re generating an extremely high-resolution file that is more panoramic in terms of the output. So as you approach the image, it doesn’t give you the same kind of gestalt of a single image. The print is very large and very high resolution, so you can move up, look closely at specific details, and then move back. Your relationship to viewing the image is entirely different. It opens up an entirely different set of possibilities. It is also very difficult for me to pre-visualize the image. There’s a great deal of surprise when I finally render the images, although that’s always the case in photography to some degree.

With these prints, if there’s broken glass on the floor, you can go up to it and see every little bit of grime on the floor. I’ve always been interested in the sculptural material references [that appear]: maybe somebody kicks a hole in the wall, or there’s a 2×4 lying on the floor. The Gigapan has the capacity of such heightened fidelity, particularly in terms of those kinds of references, that I find the resulting images really interesting.





**AS** As you re-adopt and evolve a process that you began with in the '70s, do you find that you have a different relationship to the sites that you're inhabiting? As you walk through these spaces, have your gestures changed fundamentally?

**JD** I'm very conscious of the fact that when you get older, you become, to some degree, kind of a caricature of what you were. Over time, certain things become exaggerated in a way. So actually, that's one of the things I was thinking about with "Theodore Street," because I'm haunting my own practice. I like to think of myself as this physical specter that's present in the background of some of these images. It's somehow metaphoric for the kind revisiting and haunting of a kind of procedure that I'm doing.

I've been shooting actually for over a year in an abandoned housing precinct at an air force base. I'm very interested in that space as a kind of Cold War artifact. I go there at dawn and I move through it. I have this weird relationship to it; it becomes like an archaeological and personal site for me in an interesting way.

My relationship to it is more extended than my relationship to the individual houses that I've visited in the past. But at base, it's very similar to what I was doing early on, which is working as an artist but instead of in a studio, working with a space that's already inscribed with a kind of personality and specificity.

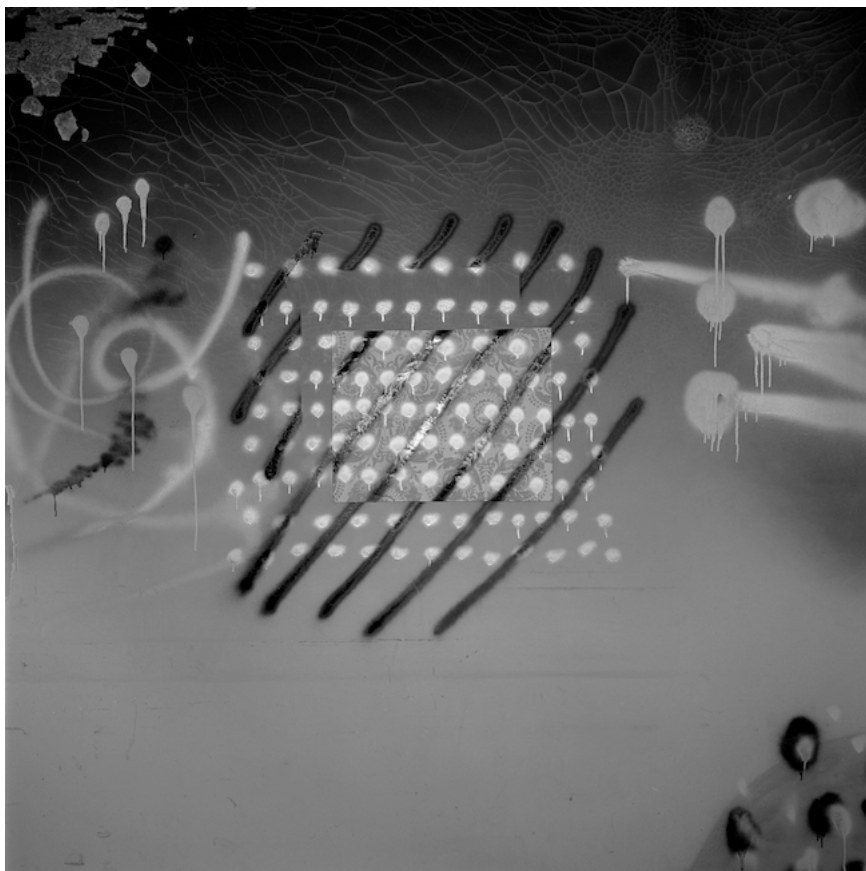
**AS** Do you feel that your relationship to the photographic image has a different kind of currency for you now compared to when you first started working in photography?

**JD** No, I'm still deeply interested in indexicality, which is actually not a particularly contemporary position in relation to photography. I'm still interested in going out into the world, using this machine to make these impressions, whether I've acted in a space or not, and bringing back these artifacts—literal, physical artifacts of the engagement that are about the specificity of time, place and circumstance. They are byproducts or artifacts of a process.

So I don't think my position has changed, although my procedure and the technology certainly has. I think most people now are kind of seeing photographic images as broken loose from their anchors and specificity: free floating signifiers in this blizzard of imagery that surrounds us.

**AS** When you're going into these spaces, do you think of yourself as a documentarian or a participant?

**JD** I see myself more as a participant than a documentarian. I'm not going in to document the acts of others—I'm going in to engage with the acts of others. Although, I must say, in the recent work I've been doing up at George Air Force Base, I have shot a lot general photographs of the location where I don't kind of act or intervene. So there is a documentary function, but that's always a part of a photograph. Time, place and circumstance are always inscribed into the work as meaningful components. So in some sense, it's always documentary, even though it's not motivated by some desire to describe the condition of abandoned homes in Southern California in the year 2016.



**AS** In revisiting these places, have you found that any specific connections occur in the work in respect with your presence there? Do you feel in control of the environment?

**JD** I don't want to control the environment—I want to engage it. The whole idea of going into a place that's already inscribed with the specificity and character of its own is not that I want to control it, but rather that I want to interact with it. I want to experiment and investigate the potential of gestures within the specifics of that context.

I'm really interested when it's not entirely clear where the edge lies between what I've done and what exists there already. I often will paint something, but in the photograph, I'm much more interested in something like the broken glass on the floor than I am my painted gesture in terms of how that image might work.

**AS** Returning to these same places so many times over such a long period, do you find that you learn anything?

**JD** With the place I'm working now, the George Air Force Base, I have a fondness for it that's developed over time. A familiarity with it, too; the longer I work there, the more my prior actions become a part of the place itself. I become part of its history, in a way—but whether that counts as learning anything, I don't know.

John Divola (American, b. 1949) is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. He is represented by Laura Bartlett, London; Maccarone, New York/Los Angeles; Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica; and Pedro Alfacinha, Lisbon.

Alexander Shulan is a writer and independent curator based in New York, where he is the founder of LOMEX. He is Associate Editor of KALEIDOSCOPE.

Images in order of appearance: "Vandalism Portfolio", 1974/1992; "Zuma #25", 1978/2006; "Vandalism Portfolio", 1974/1992. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London