

John Divola

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ALEX MOSHAKIS

In 1977, three years after first gaining art world recognition for his black-and-white series *Vandalism*, John Divola began to destroy the interior of an abandoned Zuma beachfront property. He marked the walls with spray paint, moved things around and attacked others, all the while documenting the property in its various states of decline. The resulting series, *Zuma*, is a boldly-coloured depiction of gradual destruction. Although Divola never recorded his own actions exclusively, instead reacting to the possibilities those marks presented, the fact that he was in part responsible for the degeneration he documented allowed him to assume the unique position of both narrator and protagonist. In short, he was both writing the story, *and* reading it to us.

This positional dichotomy is common throughout Divola’s work. We often see him in the images he produces, even if we don’t *actually* see him. His presence is felt, even if he isn’t *actually* present. In the essay that accompanied the series *Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert*, Divola wrote that although the desert is not

empty: “It is vacant enough to bestow a certain weight to whatever is present.” In these pictures, both absence and presence are revealed in the reactions of the dogs – strange half-domesticated, half-wild creatures. Their behaviour is so extreme it suggests both a lack of previous stimuli (absence) as well as an all-consuming reaction to the now (presence).

But Divola is also saying something else: “Here we have two vectors and velocities, that of a dog and that of a car and, seeing that a camera will never capture reality and that a dog will never catch a car, evidence of devotion to a hopeless enterprise.”

“Hopeless enterprise” is also present in *As Far As I Could Get*. Divola created the images by pushing the self-timer button on his camera and running as far away as possible in ten seconds. It’s a simple and very funny idea, but it’s also one that provokes questions: Will he ever out-run the camera’s capture? Will he ever *beat* it? *As Far As I Could Get* emphasises Divola’s use of a kind of considered spontaneity. He set these images up with strict parameters – the ten second timeframe, the one direction in which he could run – but in a way the results are ultimately unexpected. He never *really* knew how far he was going to get – it’s a sort of structured randomness.

A life-long inhabitant of Los Angeles, California, Divola has worked primarily with photography and digital imaging during a career spanning 40 years. He experiments with intervention and plays with the relationship between the natural and the artificial. His work contains forlorn structures, inhospitable environments, sand.

Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert was produced while Divola worked on another project, *Isolated Houses*, a series of high-colour images that deal directly with the fringes, both geographically – LA’s sprawling metropolis turns quickly at its edges to sparsely populated, unrelenting desert – and culturally. The images simultaneously document liberation and isolation. There is a sense that the owners of these small houses have fled the city – have realised the dream of freedom – but have in fact landed in a place so rugged and desolate it immediately reignites the desire to escape. Again Divola is asking if we can ever really win, and the answer seems to be that we can’t.

As Far As I Could Get (10 seconds) R02F07, 1996/97





As Far As I Could Get (10 seconds) R02F11, 1996/97



As Far As I Could Get (10 seconds) R01F09, 1996/97



Zuma #41, 1977



Zuma #70, 1977



Zuma #9, 1978



Zuma #23, 1978



Zuma #14, 1977

Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert, (D07-F12), 1996-2001



Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert, (D10F08), 1996-2001



Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert, (D23F29), 1996-2001



Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert, (D25F02), 1996-2001



Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert, (D29F33), 1996-2001



Isolated Houses, N34°11.115'W116°08.399', 1995-98



Top: Isolated Houses, N34°10.466'W115°54.878' #2
Above: Isolated Houses, Untitled (blank house), 1995-98



Below: Isolated Houses, N34°09.974'W115°48.890', 1995-98
Bottom: Isolated Houses, N34°14.383'W116°14.758', 1995-98