

RIVERSIDE: UCR photography professor enjoying plenty of exposure



JOHN DIVOLA/CONTRIBUTED IMAGE

Detail from "On the Occasion of My 60th Birthday," a gigaprint from John Divola's series "Notes on the Observer."

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PM

John Divola doesn't hang out in abandoned buildings much these days. But the photos he created nearly 40 years ago while crawling through the wreckage of human living armed with a can of spray paint are still drawing attention.

His new work is finding an audience as well. In fact, the UC Riverside photography professor is getting plenty of exposure.

Divola made a name for himself with his "Zuma" series. The photos, taken in the late 1970s, offer a view of the California coast through dilapidated interior window frames on walls with spray-painted designs. That project – pieces of which are part of a current exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art – clearly grew out of an earlier body of work that is being shown at the LAX Art gallery in Los Angeles.

Those earlier photos are black-and-white images of the altered interiors of vacant homes. Divola created the series in the early 1970s as part of his master of fine arts thesis while studying at UCLA. The project, he said, was the first step in a lifelong body of work tied together by the concept of the artist as participant in his own work.

“I was looking for something where the activity of doing was revealed in the photo,” Divola said.

In his most recent work, some included in a one-man show opening Saturday at Santa Monica’s Gallery Luisotti, Divola has been creating panoramic photographs in which he appears (sometimes barely visible) looking back at the camera through binoculars.

“It has to do with the meaning you project into interpreting the subject,” Divola said, explaining the idea of the photographer using his own created image to look back at the viewer. “Observing and being observed.”

Between his early and recent work, Divola has produced a number of landscaped-based series, many set in the desert environment. One self-explanatory project was named “Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert.” Another, “Isolated Houses,” was a study of lone, usually abandoned, dwellings in the midst of a vast desert expanse.

He came to UCR as an instructor in 1989 largely because of the strong photography focus of the art department, a focus bolstered by the history of the school’s photo collections and it’s California Museum of Photography. He still maintains an apartment in Venice, but moved to Riverside in 1999.

UCR/Artsblock Executive Director Jonathan Green said Divola has carved a niche in the area of modern landscape photography.

“He’s made a distinguished name for himself out of material that is, I would say, a wildly romantic view of the desert,” Green said.

Modern landscape photographers such as the late Joe Deal, also a UCR professor, often pushed back against the romanticism displayed by earlier artists such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, by deconstructing the mythical and romantic elements associated with such work. They largely focused on the impact of man on the world around them, often showing the landscape as altered and scarred.

Divola’s work, which has appeared in shows at the UCR/California Museum of Photography, includes the human element and impact, but also captures the grandeur of the surrounding space, Green said.

“The landscape remains that romantic, heroic view,” he said.

Divola’s most recent photos provide an opportunity to examine that heroic view in painstaking detail. Using technology developed for the Mars rovers, called Gigapan, Divola is creating super high-resolution landscapes that, due to the process, can reveal the passage of time. In taking a Gigapan, he said, the photographer sets the outside frame parameters for the camera, which then scans the defined area over a period of time. Minutes or hours may pass during the creation of the image, which means shadows and light move. Wind may affect one part of the photograph and not another. Time becomes part of the image, an aspect that intrigues Divola. But he’s been intrigued for a long time.

"I'm a sucker for the whole idea of photography," he said. "I never get over the fascination ... that you can make this physical imprint of the world."

Divola on exhibit

"Vandalism Series, 1973-1975," through Jan. 21, LAX Art, 2640 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles. Information: 310-559-0166 or

"Under the Big Black Sun," group show through Feb. 13, Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles. Information: 213-626-6222 or

"Notes on the Observer," Saturday through March 10, Gallery Luisotti, 2525 Michigan Ave., Building A2, Santa Monica. Information: 310-453-0043 or