

This is Tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

John Divola

Laura Bartlett Gallery

Review by Guido Santandrea

'You can say that again, this work is from L.A.' I often heard this sentence from a friend of mine who lived in Los Angeles for many years and it sprung to mind again as soon as I came across the photographs of John Divola. The image conjured up of the city of angels is moulded in the echoes of the landscape, with its light and highways that run for miles in the desert; sunglasses, palms and billboards that blur into fading presences, which seem to form a peculiar and expanded conception of space.

We find this landscape captured in John Divola's work (born 1949 in Los Angeles). Through his photos he investigates the liminal space where human signs become ruins, conquered anew by nature. His photographs are shot outside the city, in a no man's lands under dispute between order and disorder: the setting of the relentless march of entropy that underlies contemporary society. The suburbs and the desert with their hushed inhabitants, with the shape of ruins and abandoned buildings, are the main characters of Divola's work from the '70s.

In his first solo show in London at Laura Bartlett Gallery, there are two series of photographs that retrace his practice as frozen traces of an 'anterior present'. 'Dark star' (2006-8) is a recent development of series like 'Vandalism' (1973-75) or 'Zuma' (1977-78) where the artist would break into abandoned and isolated dwellings, marking their interiors with spray paint and capturing their ambiguity and the desolation of wreckages. Downstairs in the gallery, three photographs are placed in succession showing a dot of different sizes made with black spray paint on the walls of an empty dwelling. These painted interventions underline the ephemeral character of his practice, where the photographic medium documents a form of contemporary archaeology.

The second series in the exhibition is titled 'Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert' (1996-8) and is the mark of fleeting encounters with nomadic and wild presences that face their loneliness and solitude far away from any kind of human and regulated behaviour. Divola seems to participate in their primitive astonishment through a visceral involvement in his unpolished and rough photographs. The pictures are taken from a car driven in the wilderness, the movements of which define a kinetic dance or a playful race, creating a moment of contact between animal and human. The images compare two separate rhythms and natures, emphasising their affinities as ephemeral cohabitants. In these photographs the dogs are blurred and blend with the landscape.

Divola's photographs are remnants of a process that questions the notion of utopia in our contemporary society. His images represent the recovery of urban dereliction and the analysis of material culture and environmental data left behind with the collapse of the capitalist economy and of the political nation-state sovereignty in the era of globalisation. At the same time his painterly interventions allow Divola to explore the artist's gestures, the result of which is almost impossible to distinguish from the setting of 'post-rave' destruction. His acts seem to be part of the natural process of evolution and change that tends from order to disorder.

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