

*California*  
Photography

*Remaking Make-Believe*

The  
Museum  
of  
Modern  
Art  
New York





John Divola's first mature work was an ongoing project entitled *Zuma* (1977-78) in which he documented the progressive decline, through vandalism and neglect, of an abandoned beach-front apartment building. Frequently made at dusk using a flash to light the interior, the pictures were noteworthy for their graphic description of devastation rendered in vibrant color. At some point in the project Divola began to contribute to the vandalism by spray-painting the walls and ceilings. The pictures made after his intervention describe the contrast between the man-made destruction of the interior space with the intense natural beauty of California sunsets. As it evolved the project became a document of Divola's participation in the event and, therefore, conceptual in nature. Divola has continued to arrange and alter his subject matter in other series.

The diptychs, which he began in 1983, are characterized by muteness. When an expressionless woman, the unreadable faces of animals, and the immutability of objects are juxtaposed, they provoke the viewer into a closer investigation, which reveals a complex group of interpretations. While we respond intellectually as we strive for meaning, the images are largely concerned with visual sensation and emotion.

The first consideration in examining these strange photographs is the juxtaposition of the selected objects. What does it mean if a picture of an attractive young woman is placed beside a picture of a perfectly ordinary goat? The simplest, and incorrect, interpretation of this arrangement is that there is a social relationship between the two. Is Divola comparing the woman and the goat, although they are not in the same picture, by placing them together? Is he saying that women have the same characteristics as goats? That they are equal? Or not equal? That beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Of course, no such meaning or interpretation exists, *a priori*. It is our natural reflex to impose intellectual order on seeming chaos, and Divola's work inspires us to do so. When responding to art, we often expect a meaning to be provided, and it is a play on this expectation or natural inclination that informs Divola's work. He implies that we insist on meaning because we must, and that this meaning derives from prior experiences and assumptions that have little or nothing to do with the issue at hand.

The "meaning" is further disrupted by the use of colored lights on the individual subjects. If the yellow face of the woman can mean sickness or cowardice, can the red face of the goat mean anger or passion? Does the goat or the woman's relationship to it make the girl sick? Is the goat angry with the girl? Again Divola fabricates meanings as he deflates our responses, emphasizing that the relationship between the subjects exists only in the work of art.



In a diptych of an electric fan and block of ice we respond to these ordinary objects with an understanding of their properties and functions. Both are used to cool; one is natural, the other man-made. Is one better or more effective than the other? The red color of the fan suggests it is less effective, and the blue, which connotes coolness, describes the function of ice. When we are unable to fabricate a convincing interpretation we are brought back to the surface of the picture, to a purely visual experience. The acid colors and reflective surface of the Cibachrome prints persuade us they are new, and that they deal with contemporary issues. These photographs attract us like bright lights, and seem to emanate an alluring mischievousness.





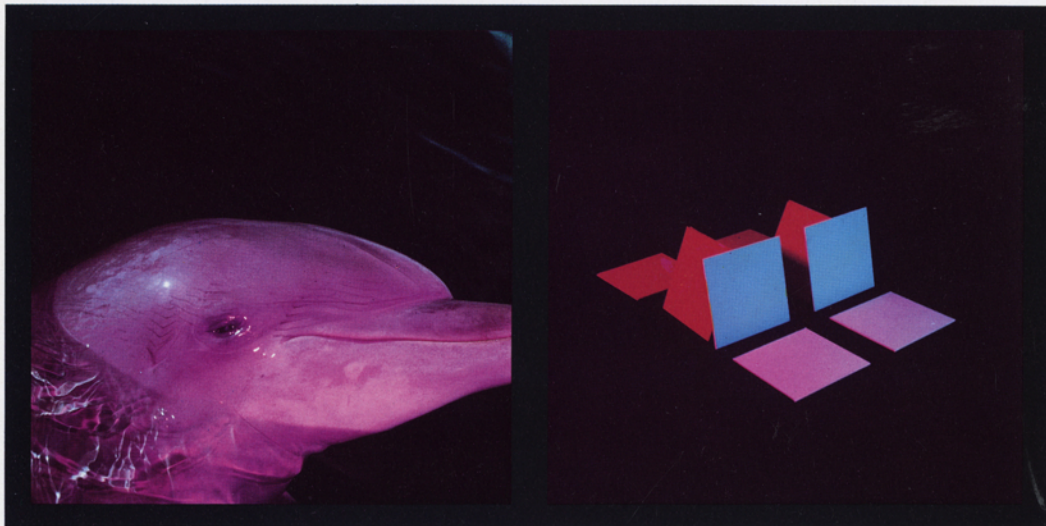
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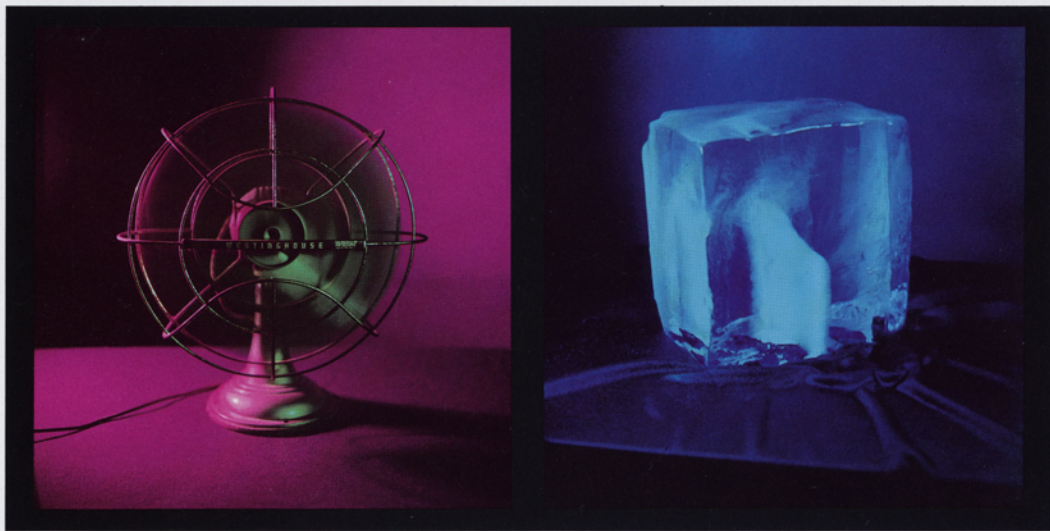
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