

camera



DIVOLA

John Divola writes as follows about these pictures taken on Zuma Beach, California, in 1977 and 1978:

Every time I would return to this house I would notice that it had changed. Often it was a minor change, some rearranged papers and a few empty beer cans in the corner. The change was at times more substantial, like arriving to find the house full of large tree branches that had recently been set on fire and extinguished, water still dripping from the ceiling. On another occasion there might be a strong wind blowing through the windows. Once I arrived to find the house gone.

On initially arriving I would move through the house looking for areas or situations to photograph. If nothing seemed to interest me I would move things around or do some spray painting. The painting was done in much the same way that one might doodle on a piece of paper. At that point I would return to the camera and explore whatever new potentials existed.

These photographs are not meant to be documents of painting or sculpture or even of environmental works. When photographing the space, I saw my painting as only a aspect of what was there. The painting did allow me to explore my own gestures. However, it cannot be isolated from the broken glass on the floor or a curtain being blown by the wind. No element is of greatest importance. I am most satisfied when the line between evidence of my actions and what was already there is not distinct. These photographs are the product of my involvement with an evolving situation. The house evolving in a primarily linear? was toward its ultimate disintegration, the ocean and light evolving and changing in a cyclical and regenerative manner. My acts, my painting, my photographing, my considering, are part of, not separate from, this process of evolution and change. These photographs are not so much about this process as they are remnants of it. My participation was not so much one of intellectual consideration as one of visceral involvement.

And Mark Johnson provides appraisal of the Zuma series: This work embodies characteristics of Divola's previous work, yet introduces new elements sufficient to carry this imagery to a point far beyond that of the others. The Zuma photographs are in colour, as are his spray paintings, and characteristically employ a wider view, achieved through either stepping back or using a lens accepting a wider view. A second distinction is that all the photographs are made within the arena of the same place, an

abandoned beach house previously used by lifeguards. Third, a direct focus of the images is the interplay between the interior view and that afforded of the exterior, either through the windows, or doorways, or the destruction of a wall.

Initially what is of attention is the naive, primitive freshness of the colour. Colour is used as a carefully added overlay in a bold, garish manner. Divola has become, for a moment, an action painter manipulating the space of the image through the colours he uses. He might coyly stripe a wall, or boldly colour in the sunbeam of light thrown by a broken window on the wall. The fire department utilized the building as a practice site for training exercises. Thus the building was sporadically burned and returned over a prolonged period of time. In its successive stages of being fired the charred wood and walls provide a rich chiaroscuro for counterpoint. The burning provides the existence of an indiscriminate irregular erasing so as to allow for a change in the markings as the space is physically altered. The development of the burning over a period of weeks serves as a means whereby we are moved towards a visual climax which never occurs, that of the total disappearance of the house.

Divola becomes the coordinator of coloured forms in a constantly shifting field of visual data. There is always a danger that manipulations of the sort that he engaged in many become trite. However, Divola maintains the integrity of his attitudes, through not allowing an image to exist entirely in subservience to any one aspect, such as colour. The photographs are not about the repetitive patterns he paints and images. Rather they are about the temporal patterns which may surface out of working with a subject, or place, or attitude, over a period of time. In this way the coloration and markings and shifting spaces become about the continuum of Divola's perception of, and involvement with, this house on Zuma beach.

As a spatial experience we find new aspects in the ontology of the imagery. Developmentally we are provided with a sense of the change that takes place in the opening up of the building through fire, its near disintegration providing us with a sense of movement here before absent in the prior series. Simultaneously is the introduction of the ocean as an active element in the photographs. Lush coloured clouds move across the sky at water's edge, or waves roll toward the beach. Suffice it to be pointed out that this departs from his previous ways of working within either the completely enclosed confines of a given kind of space, or a way of photographing. The early black-and-white vandalism developed classical notions of working within the qualities of a confined finite space, and a given rectangle. One's conclusions proceeded from seeing the relationships as a manipulation of physical characteristics

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and medium limitations (perspective, format, tonal rendition, imaged field). The Zuma images are opened up through the inclusion of what is past the confines of the interior walls, and the introduction of colour variation. Suddenly we find ourselves gazing at a kind of 'infinite', indeterminate space framed by the camera's rectangle and limited only by the walls of the building. Surfaces and spatial depth are strangely intertwined. The inclusion of what goes on and exists outside the house is the means by which the house is placed in perspective as to what it exists within, and in contrast to.

The two rhythms which seek a visual reconciliation in the photographs exist in several states. First there is the house. It exists as a haven, a shelter on the edge of the ocean, a space in and of itself. Simultaneously it exists as a man-made space within a world space, separate from and counter to that world space. As the images become wild, magical colorations which may angle in a crazy, confusing fashion, the ocean outside becomes a shelter simply as something most people comfortably know, know of, or know about, and in this sense is ordered. We 'know' what to expect visually from the ocean.

Consideration of the beach house, the building itself, inevitably may involve an examination of the metaphorical content of the images. The subtle aspect which elusively points a critical finger at how the images differ has much root in the 'feel' of the images.

'And what is more, the imagination, by virtue of its freshness and its own peculiar activity, can make what is familiar into what is strange. With a single poetic detail, the imagination confronts us with a new world. From then on, the detail takes precedence over the panorama, and a simple image, if it is new, will open up an entire world.'

'Such images as these must be taken, at the least, in their existence as a reality of expression. For they owe their entire being to poetic expression, and this being would be diminished if we tried to refer them to a reality, even to a psychological reality.' Gaston Bachelard

The house, a rigid form, a secretive box whose inner activities we are witness to, is an interface of corners and complex markings. We imagine the house, an inflexible shell, to grow and become a picturesque showcase which then rapidly deteriorates. The immense ocean somberly pulses under a flowing sky, together they are always there, always a little bit different. The spray painting could exist as a kind of adjective to the noun of the rooms, the coloration a value which almost becomes imaginary in its ultra-beauty.

A colouring which almost obscures any opportunity to

meditate upon certain images, yet in others recedes into the blackness of a dark, deep space. We are offered to see what we may be unable to see, we become guests to our own imaginations. We are magically offered different realities in the same place, encountering opportunities to see, to perceive, and to discover. A tension occurs which is both imagined and real between the two realities, that of the house and that of the space outside it, simultaneously being reconciled as complimentary and contradictory. These 'facts of the imagination' exist in a 'magic mode of identification' (Bachelard). As viewers, either our cursory or extensive knowledge of imagery functions to transcribe the continuum of the experience into something magical or mystical. Inextricably bound in the imagery is the mechanics and the imaginative powers of the interactive experience.

John Divola took these pictures with a Pentax 6 × 7 camera with a 75-mm lens on Kodak VPS film. The shutter speeds and apertures varied, and an old Honeywell flash was used for interior images. The exposure meter was a Luna Pro, and the prints were made with an Omega d2V enlarger with a Chromega colour head.

Biographical

John Divola was born in Santa Monica, California, in 1949. He received a B.A. at California State University at Northridge, in 1971, an M. A. at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1973, and an M. F. A. at the same University in 1974. The following list presents a selection of his professional experience, exhibitions, etc.:

Professional experience:

Teaching Assistant, Photography, University of California at Los Angeles, 1972-74.

Instructor, Photography, University of Calif. Extension, 1974-78.

Instructor, Photography, Immaculate Heart College, 1975-79.

Instructor, Photography, Loyola Marymount University, 1976-79.

Instructor, Photography, UCLA, summer 1977.

Instructor, Colour Photography, California Institute of the Arts, 1978-79.

Public collections:

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The New Orleans Museum of Art

The international Museum of Photography at George Eastman House

The University of California at Los Angeles Grumwald Center, Los Angeles

The Fogg Museum of Art

Joseph E. Seagram Collection, New York and others. Δ