



EILEEN

C O W I N

JOHN

D I V O L A



r e c e n t w o r k , n o f a n c y t i t l e s

F O R E W O R D

The exhibition, *Eileen Cowin and John Divola: Recent Work, No Fancy Titles*, presents two important California artists who extend the medium of photography into the mainstream of consciousness and expression of the art of the '80's. Their work demonstrates that today photography shares in dialogue with other media where humanistic themes are expressed through the use of the figure, realities are ascertained to be perceptual, and theatricality is the mode. These are contemporary issues expressed in art throughout the world.

At the same time, the work of John Divola and Eileen Cowin represents other dimensions that have their roots in California. The history of photography itself is part of California history where early landscape photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston found inspiration and developed their techniques. As the media capital of the world, Los Angeles has imparted to its children an intense relationship with visual communication in many forms.

The film industry is master of the art of artifice, a theme so apparent in the work of both of these artists. References to the cinema seem inescapable as Divola saturates his world with intense color and one can almost sense the cameras reeling in the poignant, film-clip scenarios of Cowin. The youth, vitality and uniqueness of vision of these artists mark the spirit that is California.

Mark Pally, whose name has long been associated with the arts in Los Angeles, was responsible for the definition and original development this exhibition. It is because of his initial professional efforts that its realization has been possible. Mark Johnstone, selected as curator of the exhibition, offered to many aspects of its evolution his wealth of experience in the world of photography. The artists themselves, who continued to produce new work almost to the deadline, have contributed much freshness to the exhibition selections. It is with great satisfaction that we can present to audiences in this country and abroad the work of these fine California artists.

THE

M A G I C O F I D E A S

Mark Johnstone C u r a t o r

For me, geometry has always
functioned as some sort of vague
reference to consciousness.

John Divola

Today Western man inhabits a fast-paced, visual world filled with advertising messages, information and entertainment. The most familiar images are photographic—visions that sell us clothes and style, dramatic reports of human achievement and catastrophe, and informative illustrations of life around us. Photography plays a strong role in radically altering all areas of human experience, yet the image culture is so encompassing that we rarely stop to consider its effects.

A mere century and a half ago, the written word was our primary form of communication and expression. Less than fifty years ago, the most accepted forms of art were still very traditional such as dance, music, painting, poetry and sculpture. It is only in the past twenty years that photographic work has been given serious consideration as an art form although much wondrous work has been created since the time of Daguerre's first public announcement of the medium in 1839.

Eileen Cowin and John Divola are two American artists creating some of the most exciting images today. Their photographs embody all of the elements that mark the best modern work—they are visually sensual, strategically cunning, and deeply thought-provoking. While many people often are mystified by contemporary photography, much of the work can be better understood by examining it in the context of the artist's career.

Eileen Cowin painted and drew from an early age and her earliest resolved photographic work displayed a non-traditional approach to the medium. She utilized transparent overlays that visually bound together separate identities of several photographic images. Family members and friends appeared in these box-like constructions in scenes that were only "fictions" through the act of her construction.

Throughout the 1970's Cowin continued to explore the veracity of the photographic image. Her color "Kwik-Proof" prints were sensuous collages that separated out many elements of the transparent overlays. A later series of

polaroids and word definitions played with visual and verbal puns, often with sexual references. The "One Night Stand" series (1977–80) adroitly plays off the double-entendre of the slang phrase. The images suggest the location of an illicit rendezvous, and are based explicitly on what the title identifies—bedside tables. This interest in the evocative possibilities of photography and language continues in her most recent work which explores the resonant meaning of human existence today.

Since 1980 Cowin has made photographs which she calls "docu-dramas." The term "docu-drama" refers to the dramatized recreation of real-life events and is most commonly applied to movie and television productions. Fact is literally embellished with fiction and the consequent blend is virtually indistinguishable from a documentary report. Cowin's "docu-dramas" are staged tableaux about age-old relationships in a modern world. Her scenes are fictive constructs, not unlike still photographs from a movie or television soap opera, which probe the events and relationships of everyday life. This work is not designed to represent reality. The circumstances which appear exist entirely within the realm of the photograph much as does the myth in symbolic painting. Cowin likes to illustrate this point with a true story about showing her work to a gallery director:

He: Photographs are supposed to be believable; these look set up.

Me: They are set up.

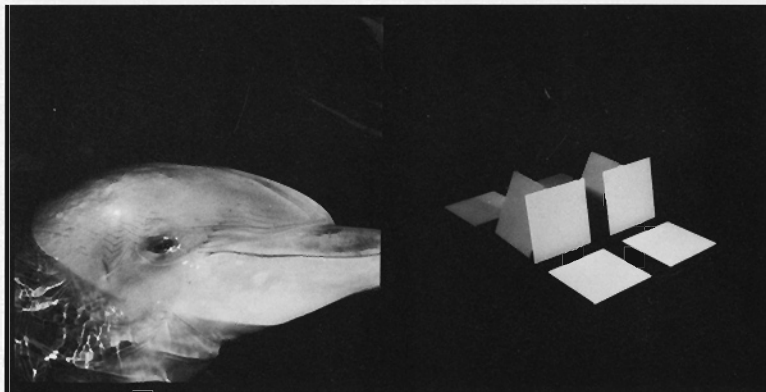
He: But they look set up.

Me: They are set up to look set up.

Like actors and actresses in the theater, the characters who appear in Cowin's photographs are utilized for their performances, not their specific personal identities. An entire cast of characters has appeared in her images including the photographer herself. What Cowin accomplishes is a simultaneous acknowledgement of the artifice of the medium and a skillful study of appearance and emotion.

A diptych is generally approached as holding some special significance: What do these images have in common, and why are they together? How are they different, how do they inform one another?

John Divola



top: Untitled, 1982, 12" x 23 1/2", Cibachrome
bottom: Untitled, 1982, 12" x 23 1/2", Cibachrome

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achieves an intimacy by her style of shooting, which might be called, in cinematic terms, the "confrontive close-up" or "medium range" shot.

The surprise and challenge that exist in Cowin's photography are also present in John Divola's. His fascination with photographs, however, is more firmly rooted in pure photographic practice. Early in his career he recognized that the photograph was used as a secondary form of information about other artwork. Commonly one is familiar with a painting, performance or earthwork through its photographic interpretation in an art publication. Divola realized that the photograph itself could become the primary pivot point for the activities he would choose to picture. Divola's "Vandalism" series, begun in 1974, documented spray paint markings that he made on the interiors of abandoned houses. These black and white photographs both recorded his activities and "vandalized" a tradition of straight photography by having the photographer change the landscape that was being photographed. When photographically rendered, the primary reality of the impromptu marks define their own ambiguous space and structure distinct from the physical site of the photograph. Their secondary reality is multi-layered: the activity of gestural marking, the alteration of photographic space and structure, reference to the anti-social behavior of graffiti, and a relationship to other artistic activities such as painting, performance and sculpture.

While the "Vandalism" photographs revealed a raw physical activity Divola's next series amplified this particular aspect even further—but now without the artist's own participation. "Forced Entry" (1975–1976) documented the break-ins that occurred in a neighborhood of condemned and abandoned houses in Los Angeles. These photographs incorporate an interplay of what is outside and around the site of the break-in. The role of the viewer, different in the "Vandalism" series, is shifted from that of passive witness to one which is more active. One feels as if he has passed into these spaces and is transversing violated, if not illegal, grounds.

We somehow accept photographs
as facsimiles of perception, al-
though they are extraordinarily
remote from any way in which
we genuinely perceive the world.

John Divola



left: Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome
right: Untitled, 1985, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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As a pseudo-anthropologist I use
an introspective method of inves-
tigation, which just means get-
ting in the thick of it, telling
what it is like, as opposed to col-
lecting hard facts.

Eileen Cowin

The development of the psychological component in Divola's work is dramatically realized in a stunning visual fashion in his next body of work, the "Zuma" series (1977-78). These photographs, executed in color, document the disintegration of a beach house against the natural beauty of its surrounding exterior. The strongest aspects of his earlier work are all present here: a translation of space combined with mark-making as in the "Vandalism" series, and the incorporation of atmosphere and uncontrolled physical alteration as in the "Forced Entry" series. Divola returns to painting activity again in the "Zuma" photographs. Here bold, almost garish painting, a primitive affirmation of man's presence, is counterpointed with opulent sunrises and sunsets. The inexplicable material deterioration of the house becomes a metaphor for the existence of man in relation to the constant and evolving existence of nature. As the series progresses the photographs grow more fantastic, building toward a crescendo that almost painfully expresses man's futility.

The conceptual aspect of Divola's work can be characterized by the laying of photographic logic against the unreality of his constructions. The determination of his role or the selection of objects emanates from a visceral involvement rather than from intellectual considerations. He describes his creative process as being essentially a visual one which, Divola succinctly states, consists of the following considerations:

1. myself, my personality and my disposition at that particular place and time
2. the nature of the medium and the way it translates information
3. the nature of the place and the nature of the situation

The factuality of photographic information is an accepted component in Divola's work which is then challenged by the circumstances of what is pictured. Thus his photographs appear startling, extremely sensual and enigmatic, as a fulcrum between this reality and an unleashed imagination. Geometrical objects, colored lighting and combinations of images populate his recent work. These mute devices make reference to a vocabulary of representation but are not intended to

be a window or mirror to any actual event. A cardboard cutout of a figure bathed in a colored light assumes a generic role. Certain colors connote emotional responses, objects can be identified in terms of function, and places can serve as a foil to those that are known through out experience. Through these ploys Divola is intentionally provoking the question of what a viewer projects into an image in a manner that is unabashedly intertwined with esthetics of beauty.

Aspects of psychology, communication theory and expressive forms of modern art reveal modes of thought parallel to Divola's explorations. Such references, however, do not necessarily illuminate his work which is a selfdefined and unique artistic vision. The painful inadequacy of words is brought into focus when attempting to explicate his photographic interpretations of the world.

Divola's newest photographs vivify his fascination with the natural landscape. The backdrops are varied and different, from the wild tangle of chaparral overgrowth to the serene expanse of a desert landscape. While prior works integrated activities such as mark-making or the addition of objects to a chosen site, the present works manipulate the conditions of juxtaposition to a much greater degree. What actually is achieved is a recontextualization of both the sites and the objects he has placed in them.

Where the strategies in Divola's work abrogate the presence of objects or individuals and utilize color to recall emotion and mood, those of Cowin symbolically repatriate the complexities of human nature with "Anyman's" visage almost entirely through the vocabulary of black and white. Her varied processes, ranging from large scale polaroid to black and white, do not assume a dominant role in the creation of her work but are a factor in expressing a very consistant vision.

Both artists, of the generation that came to age in post-war America, were basically introduced to much of the world through the visual imagery of advertising, television, magazine illustrations and cinema. In an age of visual

Color can allow you to make ref-
erence to particular ephemeral
or atmospheric characteristics
that are difficult to convey in
black and white.

John Divola



left: Untitled, 1985, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome
right: Untitled, 1983, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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information, intelligent artistic statements are predicated on a sophisticated and educated use of this information. Both Divola's and Cowin's photographs are images of the mind and reflect the personal and creative interpretation of these influences.

Although the works of these two artists reveal corollaries with other disciplines, the issues they deal with are photographic. Traditions and myths associated with film, television, painting and literature are part of Cowin's vocabulary. Likewise, modernist issues of perception, self-referentiality and photographic representation may be applied to Divola's photographs. A novel is not only the way that words are organized on pieces of paper but is also the cumulative effect of the whole. A writer is able to express thoughts, emotions and ideas through a skillful organization of those words. But, of course, the novel is precisely the way the words are organized—that organization is simply the means by which the greater effect is achieved. So it is with the photographs of these two artists—the appearance of their works signals stylistic innovations that are exceptional and noteworthy. At the same time the photographs harbor meanings that resonate far beyond the immediacy of individual images. One can speak to the photographs, but the photographs tell us much more by themselves.



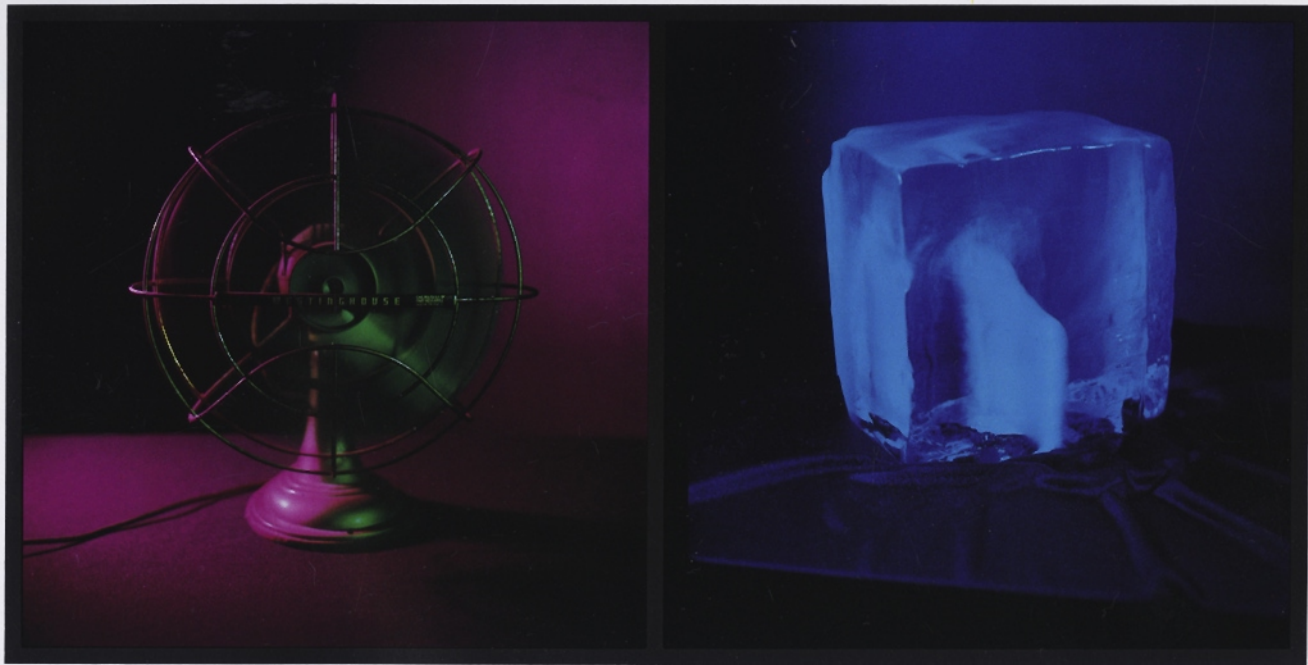
Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 39 1/2", Cibachrome

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Untitled, 1982, 12" x 23 1/2", Cibachrome

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Untitled, 1985, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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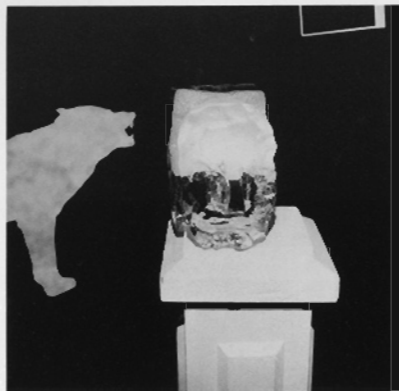
Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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top left: Untitled, 1983, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome
top right: Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome
bottom: Untitled, 1984, 19 1/2" x 19 1/2", Cibachrome

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*top left: Untitled, 1985, 19¹/₂" x 19¹/₂", Cibachrome
top right: Untitled, 1983, 19¹/₂" x 19¹/₂", Cibachrome
bottom: Untitled, 1985, 19¹/₂" x 19¹/₂", Cibachrome*

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*top: Untitled triptych, 1983, 19 1/2" x 59", Cibachrome
bottom: Untitled diptych, 1984, 19 1/2" x 39 1/2", Cibachrome*

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