



**THIS  
SIDE  
OF  
PARADISE**

**BODY AND LANDSCAPE IN  
LOS ANGELES PHOTOGRAPHS**



Fig. 10  
John Divola  
Untitled (Man Watering  
Lawn), 1971-73

the viewer steps backward from the ocean's edge through rippling surf, monochromatic sand, and sun-baked streets, past surfers, cyclists, duplexes, VWs and dune buggies, runners, sunbathers, crosswalks, and crazy sculpted trees. The total effect is mesmerizing and paradoxical, like Los Angeles itself, capturing movement and stasis, order and chaos, beauty and blight, all in ephemeral, split-second glimpses. A decade later, the ineluctable pull of driving puts Flick behind the wheel of his car for the *L.A. Documents* series. The orderly, even serene, effect of his earlier work is replaced by a jam-packed frenetic blur of color, texture, word, and image (fig. 11). Movement unfurls in fits and starts, the eye scanning the scene for recognizable bits to bring meaning to the whole.<sup>39</sup> "It's as if," writes David Ulin, "Flick is commenting on the impossibility of Los Angeles as a coherent structure, even as he offers us a different kind of coherence, albeit one from which you must step away to see."<sup>40</sup>

#### Standing still

If the view behind the windshield (or bus window) is the default position for seeing Los Angeles, and the autescape one of its primary visual metaphors, the sprawling natural landscape is certainly another. Devoted to the acceptance of photography as a legitimate fine art form, Los Angeles's early Pictorialists used hazy effects to soften the harsh light of progress and emphasize the romantic qualities of Southern California's sun and surf (see pp. 212, 213). These photographers tended to look at the city through a scrim of longing and desire, portraying Los Angeles as a place where life slowed down and became far less complex. It was a perspective that emphasized nature and rendered people as secondary subjects in and on the landscape. If the documentary photography of an earlier era responded to the need to depict nature corralled, controlled, and conquered, the Pictorialists were intent upon finding nature resurgent through their moody images of Southern California's landscape and environs.

The Pictorialists found a willing partner in *Touring Topics*, the Automobile Club of Southern California's important popular magazine.<sup>41</sup> *Touring Topics* debuted its "Rotagravure Section" in 1922, using photography to showcase idyllic spots accessible to the motorist. These were scenes observed not from a speeding car but from one parked by the side of the road in sun-dappled shade. Ernest Pratt's *Mulholland Highway* is not about dominion, speed, the triumph of engineering, all things the iconic highway embodied. Rather, it evokes the leisurely sensation of a Sunday drive, downplaying movement to favor sunshine glinting off rock and bush (see p. 110). The automobile merges seamlessly with the landscape as though it were a natural extension of the scene. The distant view minimizes the roadway itself, making little of the massive earth-moving effort that created it at great expense. In a panoramic photograph taken some seventy years later, Karen Halverson reverses the perspective, foregrounding the highway's infrastructure, using the





**John Divola**  
Untitled (Young Woman  
on Sidewalk), 1971-73

