



John Divola

SANTA BARBARA MUSEUM OF ART, POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART & LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

If you are looking for an artist whose lifetime of work coalesces neatly, John Divola is not your man. The Southern California photographer, now 63, has been working across some blend of documentary photography, conceptual practice, performance and installation for the past four decades. In all that time, I don't think he has ever made anything that looks fashionable. A selection of Divola's work is on view in three distinct but concurrent exhibitions (none of them, by the artist's request, is a retrospective) at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Pomona College Museum of Art. It's an interesting, unfamiliar conceit: each show has its own set of unique works and curatorial strategy. Taken together, they affirm Divola as an artist for whom intellectual constraints and categories will never take hold.

The shared exhibition title is taken from one of Divola's best-known and most profound bodies of work, 'As Far as I Could Get' (1996–7), four images of which are in the LACMA instalment, curated by Britt Salvesen. To make this series of black and white photographs, Divola fixed his camera to a tripod, set the self-timer for ten seconds and, while staying in frame, ran as far and as fast as he could from it. The resulting images – of the artist sprinting away from his own apparatus – are clumsy and poignant, ultimately speaking to the uncertain stakes of failure and validation that persist throughout his oeuvre. In one of the 12 photographs that makes up the series 'As Far as I Could Get/RO2F06' (1996–7), Divola tears through the desert, toward a vast, California openness; the shutter clicked just as his head appeared to be severed from his body by a distant horizon line. How many times did he run until he got that shot? The image, along with three others at LACMA, is printed large, at 64 × 44 inches. It's a picture of two different pictures, below and above; it's a picture of a ghost; it's a picture of arrested mortality.

Besides this series, the LACMA exhibition features three other bodies of work. These include a series of 20 × 24 inch Polaroids from the late 1980s; 'Seven Songbirds and a Rabbit' (1995), eight gelatin silver linen prints sourced from stereographic negatives found in a 19th-century archive; and his more recent 'Artificial Landscapes/Artificial Nature' (2002), a series of 36 found images of Hollywood sound stages. In total there are 53 photographs in a single, modestly sized room, making this show determined but overhung. One of Divola's great strengths as an artist is the variation among his bodies of work; to crowd it is to diminish that charge.

The Pomona College Museum of Art avoids this problem by featuring only one body of work – the 'Zuma' series, Divola's most psychedelic – and, as a result, this exhibition curated by Kathleen Stewart, Howe is more formidable. To make these photographs, 15 of which hang in a single room, the then 28-year-old Divola broke into a long-abandoned, dilapidated oceanside house in Zuma Beach, Malibu, that the Los Angeles Fire Department had once used as a training site. Over the course of this four-year project (although the images in this show are all from 1977), Divola did not simply photograph the decay, he actively helped cultivate its ruin by rearranging, spray-painting and charring the surrounding walls, floors and ceilings. In the strangest and most successful images of the series, Divola asserted his presence further by throwing telephone directories in the air while photographing. With this decision to intervene – to tamper with the evidence – he achieved something relatively unprecedented for his time. With his willingness to tangle with the standards of neutrality in documentary practice and with his bold use of colour in an era that still deemed black and white the more serious art form 'Zuma' marked Divola's departure from the status quo. These images introduced the formal and conceptual preoccupations that would characterize his work for the next three decades: anti-narrative,

the sublime, primary experience, arrested motion and the photographer as agent.

All of the 'Zuma' images on display at Pomona are relatively large format, sized between 24 × 30 and 44 × 54 inches. The photographs certainly work at this scale, and even this close together, though I am not sure that they need to be. (I've always liked seeing them printed in books, their mania contained by the tidy form.) Viewing them in person and at these dimensions does do a few important things though: the dissonance between the outside and inside becomes more stark and, with it, Divola's choice to shoot only at twilight. The sea and sky in these prints appear even more electric, and the interior throw of the flash is both brighter and colder. Seeing these photographs together in one room also underscores Divola's choice to shoot out of the house, and never down from it. As a result, the horizon is visible but never the shoreline. The effect is disorienting, suggesting the feeling that the house is, in fact, a ship long ago set out to sea.

The exhibition at Santa Barbara Museum of Art is the flagship of the three. Their curator of photography, Karen Sinsheimer, conceived the shows, and her grouping of work affords Divola the most continuity and space. It's a worthy investment; his photographs benefit from the breathing room. There are two fantastic projects in this show: 'Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert' (1996–2001) and 'Vandalism' (1974–5). Each pictures the very thing it describes (this kind of productive bluntness, let's remember, doesn't begin or end with Divola but has a long-standing history among his West Coast contemporaries such as Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari). Divola's grainy photographs of dark, feral dogs charging through a blanched desert are wild and uncomplicated studies in grace, motion and anxiety. Standing in front of these images, which are shown alone and in sequences, I am reminded of Divola's own furious runs through the desert, taken in the same year and likely not far away. 'Dogs ...' is often qualified in relation to Eadweard Muybridge's studies of animal

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Theodore Street, 33.94522, -117.138789,
5/6/2012, 3:00PM-3:13PM,
2012, pigment print, 1.4 x 3.04 m

2
Zuma #25, 1977, pigment print on
rag paper, 61 x 76 cm

3
As Far as I Could Get, 10 Seconds, R02F33,
1996, pigment print, 1.6 x 1.1 m

locomotion, but that seems like a reach. If anything, the muscular photographs work because they reference, as does much of Divola's work, an eager dance caught somewhere between choreography and improvisation, confinement and transcendence.

The 'Vandalism' series – 14 x 11 inch images taken inside of homes in disrepair, and further defaced by the artist – predate the 'Zuma' work by about five years. At that point, Divola was just beginning to experiment with spray-painting and, in nearly every black and white photograph, the harsh flash bounces off the marks as if they were polished metal. Taken altogether, the 'Vandalism' pictures are less extravagant and more abstracted than the work they evolved into, each a tight study of presence and absence. There are 30 silver gelatin prints spread across two rooms, and they feel more contemporary than ever.

Of the three very different shows, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art has taken the most considered approach to Divola's work. The size of the exhibition as well as the resonances among the eight bodies of work in show – which reach across 38 years and include a total of more than 80 images – leads me to wonder about the strategy to subdivide the work in the first place. Three concurrent exhibitions is an ambitious idea. Large retrospectives can be alternatively claustrophobic or clipped, which I imagine Divola was trying to avoid. But I'm not convinced it's the right move for his work. One of Divola's signal achievements as an artist is the contrast among his various projects. He has always taken chances, never adhering to the latest vogue. For this reason, I can't help but wonder what a Divola retrospective would have looked like, what risks it might have taken, how a curator would and could have contended with the work of an artist who has, quite boldly, never walked a straight line.

The works I've mentioned could be considered Divola's most successful, and they consistently outshine the others. His recent 'Dark Star' images (2008) – in which he photographed black, spray-painted circles on interior walls – on view in Santa Barbara, are well made but feel recycled. The large Polaroids of constructed objects and found imagery at LACMA are consistent with Divola's interest in photographing the constructed, but otherwise do not offer the urgency implicit in some of his other images. The work in all three exhibitions makes it clear that Divola is at his best when the shadow of his own body appears in the work, even if entirely out of frame.

For a generation eager to embrace constructed, often digitally manipulated photographs that expose the glitches of the apparatus and the possibilities of post-production, Divola should and must be viewed as a forefather. I've heard Divola describe himself in lectures as an old-school practitioner, intent on photographing the real and contending with primary experience. Yet, I can't help but feel he cut to the heart of what is a very contemporary concern 30 years before the fact: by producing photographs that contend with their maker's imprint, by utilizing clumsiness as subject, by picturing controlled mania, and by manufacturing his own environment, Divola paved the way for this current school of makers. I just wish more of them knew it.

CARMEN WINANT



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