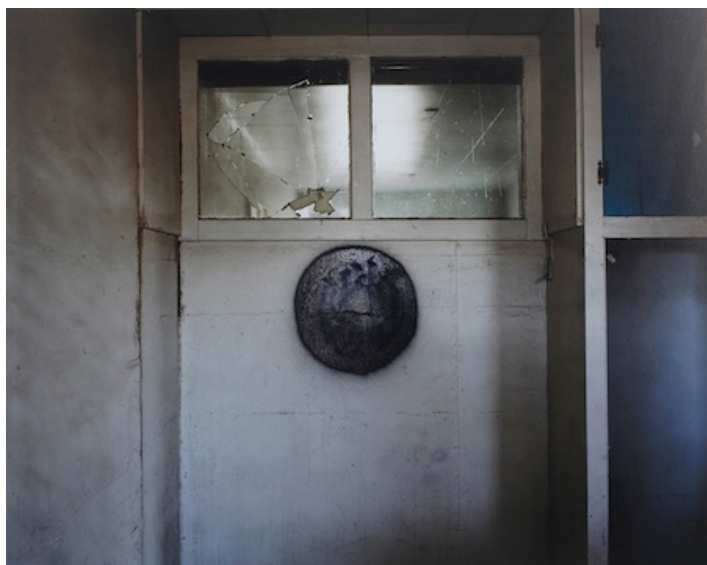


Issue 153 March 2013 

John Divola

LAURA BARTLETT GALLERY, LONDON, UK



Dark Star, 2006–08, archival digital pigment print on rag paper, 1.4 x 1.1 m

There's been a welcome revival of interest in the work of John Divola, following the Los Angeles artist's inclusion in 'Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974–81' (2011–12), LA MOCA's contribution to the 'Pacific Standard Time' initiative. He showed at Laura Bartlett Gallery two years ago, one half of a two-person show with Cyprien Gaillard, which connected the pair's interest in ruins of modern architecture. In both exhibitions, Divola was represented by what remains his best-known series, 'Zuma' (1977–8), created not long after he completed his MFA, in which he spray-painted the interiors of various derelict beach huts, documenting the changes by taking pictures of the interiors at sunset with a bright flash, catching the sea and bright streaky skies through the broken windows. These are not simply an early experiment in creating scenes that exist only for the camera (as with the work of Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Anne Hardy et al.), but also incredibly beautiful, seductive images: trash pictured in scenes of lysergic ecstasy. To contemporary eyes, too, they somehow seem to pre-empt digital manipulation – as though Divola was using Paint or Photoshop programmes on life itself.

Some less well known works were included in this small solo

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show, surprisingly the artist's first in the UK, which comprised two series made in the Californian desert at different points in his career. The desert is a different kind of wasteland from the beach: it is 'vacant enough', as Divola puts it, 'to bestow a certain weight to whatever is present.' So it seems in 'Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert' (1996–98), black and white photographs of galloping dogs, clearly taken from the side window of a moving vehicle, in which blurry, hairy shapes dissolve into stripes of energy and movement. It's a counterpoint of sorts to Eadweard Muybridge's famous 1870s photographs of a horse, supposedly made to win a gentleman's bet that all four of the animal's legs come off the ground when it is galloping. But where Muybridge's experiments in serial photography sent the technology of image-making off on its own breakneck race, towards the emergence of film and the moving image, Divola's see photography dragged back from this drive towards total vision and observation, emphasizing, as they do, the humane qualities of the 'poor' image. In the twinned attempts – of camera and dog – to catch their quarry, the artist sees 'evidence of devotion to a hopeless enterprise'.

'Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert' emphasizes the hopeful qualities of Divola's work: his subtle limning of the longing and desire intrinsic to the photographic act. Underpinned by an undoubted Romanticism, the series suggests that Divola has much more in common with other West Coast artists of his generation, such as Bas Jan Ader or Jack Goldstein at the beginning of his career, than might be assumed. For here we are seeing the moment where an object fails to meet its target. We see this desiring gap – between chaser and chased – as an imaginative space of projection, a space of potential as much as potential failure.

Downstairs were three works from a 2008 series titled 'Dark Star', which sees the artist in a way revisiting earlier series such as 'Zuma' or 'Vandalism' (1973–5). In these works, Divola sprayed single black spots of paint inside an abandoned desert building before photographing it at the centre of the frame. Various these spots resemble a full stop, or a black hole. Rather than the flaming oranges and reds of Zuma's beach imagery, these are paler, more solid interiors with a muted, functional atmosphere, walls painted in metallic whites and pale pinks that crackle with mould. In one, the spot is painted below what first appears to be a window – though the way it has cracked forces the realization that it is a mirror, which creepily throws our gaze back to the space behind the photographer, tripping our sense of space. The title refers to those areas of the universe that are too faint to observe, and there is a sinister, forensic atmosphere to these images of utter abandonment, as though the marks change the status of the building itself, rendering them doomed, silent, hidden.

That such a transformation to an unloved, unseen, unnoticed structure, might somehow be possible with a single mark of paint is indicative of something that is particularly important about Divola's work: the artist's improvisational modus operandi in the marginal rundown spaces that he photographs. He seems able to collapse the space between photography and the world that it documents by accentuating his own impact on the space, however small. In the 'Dark Star' pictures, the artist's isolation is evident; the weight of his actions – presumably the first interventions made on these interiors in some time – take on greater significance. It seems that even a single spot of paint is heavier in the desert.