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Review: It takes real drive to see 3-part John Divola retrospective

John Divola's photographs are challenging and astute. It's great to know so many are on view, but with series of work in L.A., Santa Barbara and Claremont, it's hard to see everything.

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John Divola's Zuma No. 25, 1977; pigment print on rag paper. (1996-98 AccuSoft Inc. / Pomona College Museum of Art / May 23, 2013)

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By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
October 31, 2013 | 9:30 a.m.

Are photographers vandals?

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Does the mere presence of a camera at an ordinary place or extraordinary event inevitably damage the experience of it, as vandalism does? Is photography a powerful creative tool for the willful destruction of established art, all in the service of making new possibilities and unexpected ways of seeing?

These questions, provocative and surprising, began to be posed in 1974 by artist John Divola, then 25 and just out of school.

Born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, an area whose wholesale transformation from rural to suburban shifted into overdrive after World War II, during his youth, Divola studied first at Cal State Northridge and then UCLA. "John Divola: As Far as I Could Get," the much-anticipated retrospective exhibition of his photographs, opens with 30 prints from his initial "Vandalism" series; they set the tone for the extraordinary body of work he would produce over the next four decades.

PHOTOS: Arts and culture in pictures by The Times

Simple and simply strange, the "Vandalism" pictures record the interior of an anonymous, abandoned house. They show battered walls that someone — presumably the artist — sprayed with dots, lines, circles, arrows and squiggles of paint in light-absorbent black or reflective silver. These gelatin silver prints, which today might be erroneously called "ruin porn," are startlingly elegant.

The photographs are neither melodramatic nor journalistic. Rather, an implicit conversation between painting and photography, one as old as the camera's invention in 1839 but here embodied in a new way, is established within the images.

As photographer, Divola positioned his camera at a distance from the subject that approximates looking at paintings — even though, as photographs, the pictures require a viewer to come in close. Spatial tension arises, and the photograph is objectified.

An angled polygon of silver paint cascading from the corner of a window sill suddenly mimics a shaft of sunlight, albeit in wholly artificial terms. Nested circles in a corner where two walls meet the ceiling echo shooting targets, as well as paintings as dissimilar as those by Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland. Like Land art by Robert Smithson or his photographic tour of the ruined landscape in and around Passaic, N.J., Divola's choice of subject courts the systemic inevitability of entropy and decay.

An almost tender poignancy hovers within the "Vandalism" photographs. They were made during the deep and debilitating economic recession that gripped America



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between 1973 and 1975, signaling the end of the postwar boom.

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That quietly emotional undercurrent is one element that distinguishes Divola's art from contemporaneous work of such photographers as Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal, who also charted the human transformation of the modern industrial and suburban landscape. Photographically, California had long been characterized by the epic work of Ansel Adams, pictorial poet of Yosemite. These and other artists pulled the plug on that.

At UCLA, Divola studied with Robert Heinecken, who radically enlarged the artistic possibilities for irreverent photography. Perhaps because he lived in L.A., capital of a world fully fabricated by Hollywood cameras, Heinecken understood photographs as themselves a new kind of landscape — one in which we all reside. An artist's job was to intervene in that unnatural landscape, as surely as he had stepped into the natural one.

Video

Divola followed "Vandalism" with a series of photographs of unaltered interiors in houses emptied of occupants after having been seized through eminent domain for an expansion of Los Angeles International Airport. One sequence shows a single subject — a curve of broken glass in a wrecked sliding door — five different ways, indoors and out, starkly altering the point of view each time. It's like trying to enter a scene in order to fully know it, with the busted glass as a metaphor for a lens.

But the camera, itself part window and part mirror, just like the sliding door, keeps pushing us out.

Divola's work emerges as a complex merger — or perhaps collision — of photography and painting, as well as performance art, Conceptual art and Land art. While centered on the ubiquitous camera, it's as unconcerned with the purity of the artistic medium as anything by Robert Rauschenberg.

CRITICS' PICKS: What to watch, where to go, what to eat

The remarkable investigation reaches a crescendo in 1977-78 with the widely acclaimed "Zuma" series.

Photographed in saturated color inside an abandoned house on a Malibu beach, the images juxtapose a tumultuous domestic scene of natural and man-made decay, emphatic human alteration and nature's implacable horizon between sea and sky. In a few, a magazine tossed in the air, its photo-laden pages riffling like an airborne tumbleweed, pays sly homage to his mentor Heinecken, whose best-known work superimposed advertising and feature photographs found in large-circulation magazines.

"Zuma" brings to a close an ambitious five-year period of concentrated effort. Collectively it ranks as an exceptional artistic achievement.

In the retrospective, however, the accomplishment is blunted. That's because the show, principally organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, is a collaborative endeavor with the Pomona College Museum of Art in Claremont and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Its 118 photographs are divided among the three institutions — selections from six series at SBMA, four at LACMA and one at Pomona. As an exhibition strategy, the collaboration undercuts itself.

What one wants from a retrospective is an opportunity to examine the unfolding trajectory of an artist's work. It's a rare chance to move back and forth between individual pictures or entire series, picking up threads and engaging with them. But looking at "Vandalism" and the LAX photographs at Santa Barbara, it's frustrating to realize that the "Zuma" pictures are all the way in Claremont.

ART: Can you guess the high price?

At LACMA, images from the exhibition's title series, "As Far as I Could Get," show the artist disappearing into the landscape, running away from a camera whose automatic timer is set to click the shutter after 10 quick seconds. The deeper into the scene that the artist penetrates, the more he's swallowed up and the more oddly bereft a viewer feels, ignominiously left behind. It's a frankly cinematic moment — Shane! Come back! — yet disconcertingly devoid of the emotional manipulation of a Hollywood movie.

I wanted to go back from these conceptually terse pictures of frustrated perception to see the series "Dogs Chasing My Car in the Desert," which Divola began at the same time (1996). But those pictures hang in Santa Barbara, not L.A.

These witty, weird and touching dog photographs have an ancestry in Eadweard Muybridge's famous 19th century studies of animal locomotion, also produced with a mechanized camera. The blurred and scampering dogs are an essay on determination approaching desperation. The animals, who will never succeed in corralling the cars that they chase out of a deep herding instinct, stand in for the artist: However ingrained the human image-making impulse, he is likewise thwarted from seizing the world beyond the camera's lens.

Because of the trifurcation, few will see the entire Divola show. (I drove 268 miles to accomplish it.) And those who do will be deprived of some fundamental benefits of a museum retrospective. That's a shame.

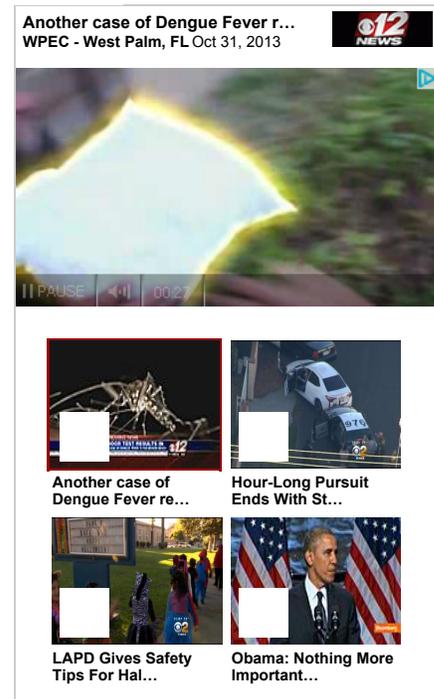
Still, a scattered show is better than no show. (The catalog reproduces everything.) The good news is that, even seen in disordered chunks, Divola's photographs can provide immensely satisfying rewards.

So get in your car if you can. His work is among the most challenging and astute of the last 40 years.

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Banksy is "not an artist"? Um, yes he is; maybe bad, maybe not, but an artist either way. Does he need a license? n.pr/17zVYU9
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State Dept picks Morphosis over Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam for new U.S. Embassy in Beirut: architectmagazine.com/architecture/
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PHOTOS: Hollywood stars on stage



CHEAT SHEET: Fall Arts Preview



PHOTOS: Arts and culture in pictures

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