

Interview with Simon Baker, MDM Draft 1/30/13

BAKER: The “Dark Star” work, which precedes and intersects with the Theodore Street project we’re discussing, is really interesting to me because it appears that you are returning to a earlier way of working, but doing so in a much more determined or focused way—instead of gestural marks, there’s this solid mass invading the space. It doesn’t seem to have the same references towards art as some of the earlier interventions.

DIVOLA: Well, I don’t know if that’s true. There’s certainly a lot of people, from Malevich on, painting black circles. But yes, I intentionally wanted to get away from the calligraphy of the early work, and I wanted to be as reductive as I could in terms of an intervention or gesture.

BAKER: Given the scale of the work, you’re confronted with these marks, with this black presence in a way that’s slightly different from your earlier series; these prints have a physical human scale and are more theatrical in that sense.

DIVOLA: There’s some irony to that—early on I made an explicit disavowal of objectness, you know, I said everything was fabricated to be photographed. I actually remember saying in the seventies, “I’m interested in the image you could someday send over the telephone, where the essential essence of this thing would be intact, separate from its objectness.” And then I’m making the “Dark Star” series, where it’s totally about the object of the print. I got a drum scanner and an 8x10 view camera, and all of a sudden I could make things at a scale and with a presence that the “Zuma” work (pages TK-TK) couldn’t have.

You can go up and see every little crack, and there’s just something about the black paint, being wet black paint, reflecting the windows behind me or picking up the character of the light in the room in a funny way, which is something, were you to intentionally photograph a painting, you would want to avoid. But in my case I’m equally interested in the kind of ephemeral or incidental translation that happens by photographing in that instant – as opposed to some kind of timeless, fixed notion of what the painting is.

BAKER: The gestures in “Zuma” as well as the “Dark Star” series is like the oldest kind of documented mark-making, stating “I’m here.”

DIVOLA: “I’m here,” right. “Look at me.”

BAKER: Or “I was here.” That has a kind of existential function.

DIVOLA: I definitely see the work as existential. I’ve begun to see myself as an odd figure within my own practice. This is something that I have a very hard time talking

about—this feeling that I’m kind of haunting my past, as I go back and work with ways of painting in spaces, something that I’ve done for a very long time.

BAKER: So after each work, it’s harder to make the next one?

DIVOLA: Well, it’s just that it’s an echo. So I did the Zuma work something like thirty-five years ago; anything I do with a similar kind of procedure has all of the baggage, the reverberation of intentions from previous projects.

BAKER: So can you talk a bit about how the Dark Star series led into Theodore Street, and the deliberate inclusion of your presence in the photograph?

DIVOLA: In all my work, going all the way back, there’s this interest between the specific and the abstract. Theodore Street is a house that I started photographing about four or five years ago; I did three of the Dark Star photographs (pages TK-TK) in this location and I also did a couple more abstract 8x10 photographs. As I returned to it, I noticed that a lot of other people had started painting in the house in very charged ways—in the back room was all black, sometimes racist graffiti, “Kill Whitey,” you know, “Red Earth,” “Malcolm X.” In the front room is white racist graffiti with swastikas and KKK. . . . It was interesting to me in relation to the more academic, abstract enterprise that **in which I had been engaged**.

So I started doing these large, panoramic, 100-image seamed works using a Gigapan—a robotic camera base that was developed for the Mars Rover, at least as I understand, by people at **Carnegie Mellon University**. You tell it where the parameters of the upper left corner are, the bottom right corner, and with a high-end digital camera and a very long telephoto lens it incrementally scans, **in my case**, over a period of about twenty minutes. I felt that I desired an event, a kind of anchor, and so I placed myself within the frame so that somewhere within this twenty minutes I am present in relationship to this timed scan. For me there’s something existential about that, about your likeness or your being inscribed in **relation to a** temporal process.

BAKER: So there’s no sense in which they’re self-portraits, right? There’s no attempt to depict yourself in that way.

DIVOLA: It’s simply presence, presence in relation to the fact that the camera’s moving about and I’m there at that particular instant that the camera gets to that spot—an intersection of behavior and the logic of a mechanism in a certain way. I’m in front of the camera and I’m behind the camera.

BAKER: But this is a change for you.

DIVOLA: I’ve been going to abandoned houses now for almost 40 years, and there’s something about my being this guy that’s skulking about these houses. I have this

conflicted idea about it, and I just feel like it's being manifest in the image, the sense of my going back to a behavior in a certain way.

BAKER: You're caught in a couple of your earlier works.

DIVOLA: Well, in the LAX work (pages X) there's one **image** where I'm in shooting the camera into a broken mirror. And then there's a number of Vandalism ones (pages X) where my arm is, where I'm dropping things or something like that.

BAKER: You obviously have always been there, but in the Theodore Street images you're both intentionally present and hidden, you're turned away so you're there but the viewer's not getting that direct psychological engagement. Do you think it serves in a very basic way to remind the viewer that all of the things are in here—there is no agency?

DIVOLA: Oh, absolutely, that notion of agency is central. You know, sometimes it's a more physical agency of throwing something on the floor and breaking it, or seeing somebody kick a hole in the wall. But certainly in terms of the marking on the walls, it's my agency—and in terms of the other marking, it's the agency of others. That's exactly what fascinates me about this space, it is so inscribed and it problematizes my own formal distance, my more academicized, abstract desires in relation to these really heated, very emotional, sometimes hate-filled or sometimes just kind of free, expressive, "I'm here" marking.

BAKER: The Dark Stars become quite seductive, the marks that you made, and the way you photographed them as well. The marks relate in a more sympathetic way with the surroundings. You're just making a mark, so it's sort of deskilled as painting and not very effective as graffiti.

This seems like an awkward jump. I am not responding to the statement above in the response below. I really am interested in Simons statement about my deskilling painting at a time that others were deskilling photography (this is from the first interview and is also discussed at the end of the second interview). Could we drop that in here? I think my response below can go. Or, I could make up a response to insert here.

DIVOLA: No, most graffiti absolutely wants to make a statement, which interested me—seeing these abstract marks in the prints in relation to this really fundamental human desire to express content in some way.

BAKER: And then there's the performative side of painting. Some people have really gone to town with this space and other people have done very strangely competent airbrushed painting, or aerosol painting, I guess.

DIVOLA: Right, very sophisticated graffiti. It's almost like tattoo iconography in a way. Within this pumped up, emotive content of other people's painting, they also

really threw paint about in a way I hadn't. So there was a social as well as aesthetic component to what they'd done that was intriguing to me. Somebody does "Kill Whitey" and I do a black circle. It's either abstract iconography or symbolic iconography. But then there's always, in my case, this interest in the specificity of the circumstances.

This house is so perfect in terms of these competing iconographies of black races, white races, that I sometimes suspect that maybe somebody shot a film in there. I keep actually going back and if I see somebody there, I stop to see if I can find out what the history of the house is.

BAKER: You never came across any of the other people who were doing this graffiti?

DIVOLA: No, and I wanted to because I'm a little suspicious of it. It's just too perfect.

BAKER: I think you might be the only person who found this space perfect. [Chuckles]

DIVOLA: I mean, the idea that the black guys would like stay in the last back room and the white guys would stay in the front room. It just seemed constructed, even though they eventually kind of crossed out the swastika.

BAKER: This work has a strange play of layering and depth. There are some works in Vandalism where the sense of perspective is thrown by the painting, an indistinction of whether it's receding or coming forward in space. And here there's a similar kind of cutting of the space. There's something that strikes me, as well—it's really impossible to see the scale of time over which this has happened.

DIVOLA: Right.

BAKER: So one set of graffiti could predate the other by twenty or thirty years. You can't really get a sense of that, can you? You could imagine a change of local population, or it could be marking of a period of time. But all of that is contained in the interior so you don't see it— it is like stepping into somebody else's argument or domestic dispute, and seeing everything that's happened.

DIVOLA: Right. And there's also something in abandoned houses about the adolescent or about the Id. You know, it's really a location we're at—the people who are searching for a place where they can play out their impulses are basically adolescents; adults, in a certain sense, have their own homes. So there's something very raw and close to the surface in terms of the gestures.

BAKER: It's also a reverse of a particularly American landscape, where the idea of the road trip and the outside and freedom – from *Easy Rider* on – freedom is associated with getting out of the house, getting out of the domestic space.

DIVOLA: They are completely free spaces, as you said—a place where you can do whatever you want in a certain sense. And so there's always a slight sense of danger in that, but there's also this sense of opportunity.

Once I started in those spaces, I became interested in their preexisting content, they had a personality and sense of place and readable history of action, a history of who lived there and the kinds of things they left behind and the architectural vocabulary of it and then this sort of history of distress, how it's fallen apart or where you can see what it was and now what it is. You can almost rewind back and see the sculptural trajectory of those changes. That is **one** basis of my interest.

BAKER: This is a big reach in terms of reference, but there's a really great essay by Victor Hugo with drawings about dead houses, houses that have been abandoned. And he found them – this is in the romantic period so 1850s – he found them ideal places for poetic reflection, these houses that he calls “dead.” And I wondered if, not in a sentimental way, in a romantic way, there is a sense in which they become rather marvelous, haunted sites in that sense.

DIVOLA: So for me, these spaces are a ground for existential reflection, which gets to this idea of me being a presence in relation to them, both by the obvious implication that the photograph exists, that I was there, but I have this desire to be more literally there, in a sense. So there is an imprint and I'm kind of frozen in it and that thing exists in the present, and recedes in terms of its relationship to what I am in some way.

Someone said once, I think relatively pejoratively, that it appears that John Divola's operating principle is that one **thing** leads to another. And I thought about that and I thought, “well, you know what? That's probably fairly accurate. That's the nature of life, one thing leads to another.” And so this project is a case where one thing leads to another in terms of my practice and interest, but I think that I can collate that into some kind of larger construction of meaning.