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ART

A Photographic Style in Development

For years, John Divola manipulated his work. But, as a new series of desert images shows, he now plays it straight.

July 26, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

In photograph after photograph, the desolate desert horizon is illuminated by incomparable pink and celestial blue light and dotted with small, cubic houses. For the past three years, artist John Divola has been devoting his weekends to driving around the east end of the Marongo Valley Basin, Wonder Valley and the area around Twentynine Palms to document unassuming buildings set against the grandeur of nature.

Currently on view at the Patricia Faure Gallery in Santa Monica, his work also will be shown later this summer, along with film director Wim Wenders' photographs of the Australian Outback, in an exhibition at the Museo de Arte Carillo Gil in Mexico City.

Divola's current work seems a return to a series he did in 1977-78, titled "Zuma," which first signaled the artist's promise. And Divola, 49, admits, "In one sense, it's a return because it's straight photography."

"For the longest time, I manipulated what I photographed, and now I'm not," he says. "I mean, you're talking about 20 years, so it's a protracted description of how one gets from one set of photographs to another. I feel like it's a relatively comfortable evolution from one point to another."

Divola hesitates before discussing the current work. "It's not a social commentary like, 'Gee, isn't the desert marvelous. We should save it.' I'm interested in a kind of desire. You drive 100 miles and never leave the city until you reach this edge of raw desert. People are at that edge for a variety of reasons. For financial reasons, since it's the cheapest place in the L.A. megalopolis. Or they can't cope. Or they just want to get away. All these things have driven people to this edge. People want to be beyond the culture in some way. I'm interested in emblems of that kind of desire. My driving interest is more metaphysical than social.

I'm interested visually in these little cubes on this infinite plane of the desert, this amazing light and the houses painted in Home Depot colors, looking incongruous in isolation. But what brought me to it was the idea of man in nature."

In his "Zuma" series, Divola made color photographs of the Pacific Ocean as seen from inside abandoned houses in Malibu. Glittering water was seen through windows and gaps in walls he had spray-painted with patterns. These pictures followed his 1974 black-and-white series "Vandalism," for which he spray-painted and then photographed the insides of condemned buildings. Artweek critic Mark Johnstone observed, "As Divola interacted with the house it became the fabricated image (a created metaphor) while the outside remains a 'real' image."

Divola says, "I didn't see any original paintings or sculpture until I was in my 20s. I saw magazines or books with photographs of paintings or sculpture. My

reception of art was through representation, which led me into spray-painting the insides of abandoned houses and photographing that as a way of working that would integrate painting, sculpture and performance, where it was all original."

"That was a really interesting time, where the document was all that was meant to be received by the public," he explains. "Someone might go out to the desert and dig a hole in the ground, but all you would see would be the photograph of the hole. Or a performance, where most people would see it through photographs and text.

"I was thinking that the real arena of discourse in the visual arts wasn't as some sort of authentic transaction between an individual and an object made by an artist," he adds. "The substantial arena of discourse was a secondary kind of experience of criticism, text, or second-generation images that had gotten disseminated into this other representational form. It was more significant than the original in some kind of way.

"I used to be fairly arrogant about it and tell painters that they were fabricating things to be photographed," he says. "Their painting was significant only to the degree that it was photographed and disseminated."

The "Zuma" series dovetailed into a movement of photographers called "Fabricated to Be Photographed." "It got a lot of attention," admits Divola. Throughout the '80s, Divola devoted his attention to fabrication and manipulation, throwing colored light on objects and figures in diptychs; building generic Modernist sculptures out of cardboard and photographing them in saturated hues, examining the power of cliché through coded subject matter like cyclones and wolves. Meanwhile, he taught full time for a decade at California Institute of the Arts and found his work was increasingly influenced by the exposure to "continental theory."

"My early work was coming out of my own Modernist logic. I got interested in the iconography of transcendence and the melancholy of the idea that as an artist you have an aspiration to transcend convention, to find a new intersection of previous ways of reading something or communicating something. But even if you succeed, it immediately becomes just one more convention. It's hopeless. There is something melancholy and heroic simultaneously in this desire for transcendence," he admits. "I decided I would make a body of work that is about the literal desire for transcendence."

In 1993, he completed a portfolio of black-and-white photographs called "Four Landscapes" presently on view in the smaller room of the Faure Gallery. "Each group is somebody or something trying to get out of culture--people wandering in Yosemite, a group of isolated houses in the desert, a group of stray dogs in the city, the group of little boats out to sea. It's the ecology of Southern California and this unattainable desire."

Divola, who lives in Venice, is not only from Southern California, he is a second-generation Venetian. His father, from Venice, was an aeronautical engineer who worked for Douglas Aircraft; his mother was a housewife. He grew up in the western San Fernando Valley. "Being an artist wasn't a vocational option. I don't think the notion existed that there were people making art now, certainly not people you would ever run into or see. The general attitude about artists was that they were crazy people who lopped off their ears."

Nonetheless, Divola came to embrace art as part of the alternative culture in the late '60s at Cal State Northridge. "Some level of alienation is required to push people into art generally. In college, during the Vietnam War, when they were trying to draft me, all the things I thought that I ought to be seemed absurd. I started taking philosophy and art classes. It made me reevaluate all these scripts I had."

After Divola graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1971, he enrolled in the art department of UCLA, earning his master's degree in 1973 and his master of

fine arts in 1974.

"It was the era of photo-printmaking. People would do gum prints or blue prints. Nobody talked about technical stuff. When I started to teach, I had to learn.

"There was never a notion that photography was a viable vocational option. I managed my parents' apartment house in the Valley, and after graduate school, I was able to segue into teaching." After a decade at Cal Arts, he went to UC Riverside, where he's taught for 10 years.

Divola is about to get a break from teaching, having just become one of the first visual artists to be awarded a grant of \$25,000 from the Pasadena-based Flintridge Foundation. "It was a nice surprise," he says. "The university will let me take a year off and pay the difference between my grant and my salary. I have to teach 10 weeks between now and the next millennium."

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"JOHN DIVOLA," Patricia Paure Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B-7, Santa Monica. Dates: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Phone: (310) 449-1479.