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Review: John Divola at Gallery Luisotti

10:00 AM, January 22, 2009

John Divola has made inevitable decay a central theme of his photography for more than 30 years, beginning with the influential 1973 series titled "Vandalism," shot in abandoned Los Angeles houses. Five exceptional new works at Gallery Luisotti return to that imagery, marvelously complicating and confounding many assumptions about photography and art.



The setup is simple: A jet-black circle has been

spray-painted on several white walls in an empty house, then photographed. The five pictures demonstrate five different spatial arrangements for the painted mark: a flat wall; a recessed alcove; a wall with space behind it; a wall beneath a window that is actually a mirror, reflecting space in front of it; and, finally, a wall between an interior space and an exterior space, which opens in the distance onto the landscape outdoors.

Divola's brisk and stabilizing conceptual logic, however, quickly begins to wobble and fall apart. The effect is bracing.

The scale of the black circles can only be determined if enough architectural context is visible within the picture's frame. The photographs themselves are large-format (44 by 54 inches), endowing them with a painting's bodily size. The inky blackness of the paint can dissolve into pure white — a total contradiction — if enough photographer's lights have been used to flood the scene. And, oddly, these are black-and-white rooms photographed in color.



Speaking of paint, the window-mirror evokes the old argument about whether painting reflects the world or opens another view onto it. The black spot, meanwhile, sweeps that disputation away: The circle recalls Kazimir Malevich's pure abstractions from 1915, landmark Russian Suprematist paintings that announced the puzzling dawn of a new world.

First, Malevich painted a black square on a square white canvas. Next, he painted a black circle on a square white canvas; visually, that

circle could be read as a black square in simultaneous full-rotation and full-revolution in space. Malevich's Suprematist art exudes a profoundly secular yet deeply spiritual dimension, recording a personal vision of Creation.

In Divola's photographs of Suprematist-style black circles in abandoned white buildings, creation and destruction are held in delicate equilibrium. The all-white rooms, redolent of the iconic galleries in which Modern art is conventionally displayed, are tattered and derelict, as if the inhabitants have long since moved on and only squatters (and artists) might remain. "Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence," said artist Robert Smithson, entropy's first poet, a generation ago.

But here the black spot lingers, seemingly ineradicable, like the bloody stain on Lady Macbeth's hands. "Hell is murky," she wailed in her hand-wringing midnight sleepwalks, unable to shake the psychological torment her actions had wrought. Divola's series is titled "Dark Star," a point of light in the universe too faint for direct observation. His domestic ruins suggest social collapse, but these quietly alarming photographs also resonate within our cold cosmos of hidden black sites and secret renditions. They suggest something sinister as well as sad, brilliantly illuminating our conflicted recent history.

In addition to the magnificent "Dark Star," six vintage photographs from the earlier "Vandalism" series are also on view.

-- Christopher Knight

Gallery Luisotti, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-0043, through March 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Top: John Divola's "DSE" (2008), archival pigment on rag; bottom: Divola's "DSA" (2008), archival pigment on rag. Credit: Gallery Luisotti