

# Wallpaper\*

## **Vandal supreme: John Divola puts an artistic spin on structural interventions**

**Art / 19 Apr 2016 / By Michael Slenske**

Having reached the limits of the social landscape photography he'd been making in the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley – think men, women and children watering their lawns; studies of garage doors; mothers strolling supermarket aisles in their sunglasses – John Divola set out on a quest in the latter part of 1973 to find a space he could truly interact with through his camera.

'I got very interested in process... in the fact that I'd be moving through an environment and I'd come back with a set of imprints. I was frustrated by the fact that the reading of the [San Fernando Valley works] never allowed for any consideration of the process, and it was more interpreted as commentary on the subjects. It's not about the process of doing,' says Divola, who became motivated to find a space he could paint silver because he liked the way it registered in black and white photographs. 'I was looking for a way to interact, but [because] I didn't have a studio at the time and these houses were available, I got more interested in them because they were already imprinted with a history, so I could interact with this index of prior actions.'

What emerged from these adventures was Divola's breakthrough Vandalism series, which featured painted silver ovals, circles and dots that represented 'the last thing you'd want to photograph if you were an art photographer photographing a painting because you'd want super flat lighting that would show what is going on in the painting,' explains the LA-born, Riverside-based photographer.

'I'm interested in the opposite, I'm interested in the eccentricities of the room, the unevenness of the light, so I use a lot of black and silver paint because they're the two things that pick up the ambient circumstances.'

The resulting images function as photographic paintings that merge landscape, graffiti, conceptual art, performance and social anthropology – along with the sculptural, gestural, and colour abstractions of crumbling infrastructures and architectures that retain indexical marks of erosion and destruction – and led to Divola's seminal Zuma series, a breathtaking full-colour study of sunsets framed through the windows of bombed-out beachside shacks in Malibu.

'Ultimately, I just came to a point of diminishing returns with it,' admits the artist, who took a break from intervening on spaces between the late 1970s and early 00s to shoot numerous other vandal-free series, such as the four landscapes of Southern California, stereo negatives of song birds, and time-lapsed photos of himself running away from the camera (As Far As I Can Get, one of which will be on display at SF MoMA for the grand re-opening later this month).

In the process of re-scanning those old works for a 2006 Aperture monograph, Divola discovered how much the technology had changed in terms of detail, colour, nuance and scale. 'The technology evolved to the point where new possibilities opened up and that was the initial impetus to go back to that way of working,' says Divola. 'But I'm going about it in a slightly different way.'

As such, he started documenting homes that he vandalised in Moreno Valley, California with an 8 x 10 viewfinder camera. Over the next few years he created the Dark Star series, which feature painted black circles on derelict houses while his Interventions captured various other markings he made on similar spaces.

'I had done several of those at a house on Theodore Street and I started experimenting with a gigapan camera doing these large temporal digital scans that take about 20 minutes. I'm always interested that there can be some kind of event in those 20 minutes,' says Divola, who is showing works from all three series for his solo show, 'Theodore Street Project', at New York's Maccarone gallery until 23 April.

From an external shot of the outside of the house during a full solar eclipse, to images of the interior rooms with Divola's academic graffiti overlaid with racist slurs from local vandals, to a shot out the back door (Landscape For Antonioni) that features the artist playing dead in the bushes, they all give import to the artist's presence and his want to 'haunt the space in my own practice.'

In addition to the New York exhibition, Divola is showing works from his Dents and Abrasions series at Santa Monica's Gallery Luisotti (which will also be creating a solo booth from his early Vandalism work at Frieze New York next month) that showcase interventions of a subtler nature. Think an empty closet adorned with two paintings of rabbits made by his daughter when she was seven years old, or a spray-painted black and silver grid that explore Divola's interest in failed optical illusions.

'I can make a terrible painting,' he jokes. 'But I can also take an interesting photograph of a terrible painting.'