

notes on looking Contemporary Art in Los Angeles



by Emi Kuriyama | Aug 16, 2015

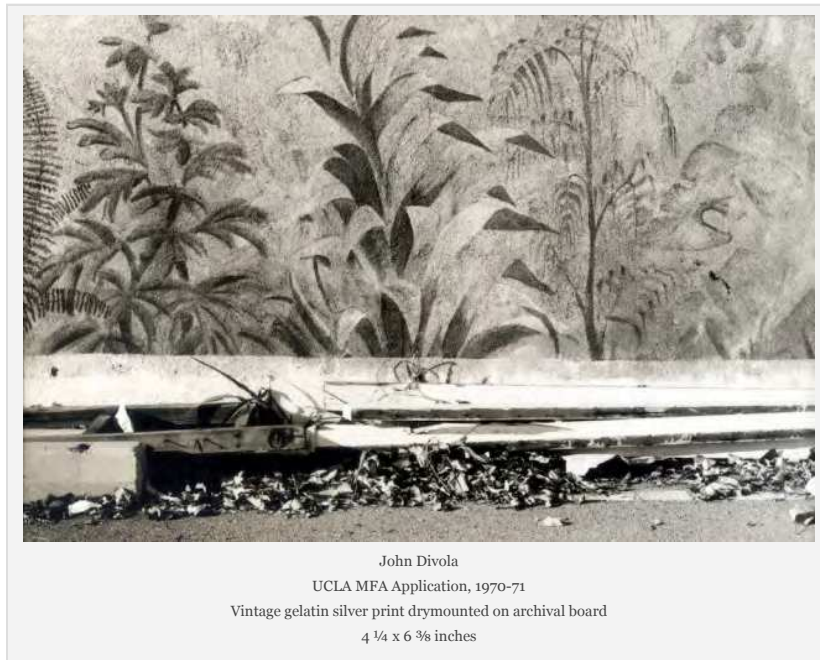


When we were young is a group exhibition of early work by five mid-to-late career artists at Gallery Luisotti. There's John Divola's UCLA MFA application from 1970-71, when he was still an undergraduate at CSUN; spoiler alert—he was accepted to UCLA and has taught at UCR since the late-1980s. And images Christina Fernandez hasn't shown since a fiery (read: traumatic-sounding)

Ruwedel's Evans Street Portfolio (1983) and Catherine Wagner's California Landscapes (1972-79), a glimpse at two budding artists already in tune with themes they'll pursue for years to come.



It's sweet without becoming saccharine, like suddenly happening upon charming pictures of a lover's awkward adolescence and delighting in all the newfound difference and recognizable similarities between their past and present. Pencil marks ghost the matting of Divola's MFA application—little indexes of a young artist measuring out his own framing. The images themselves are tightly cropped, flat and formal pictures of what looks like manicured gardens against the backdrop of suburban homes in the San Fernando Valley—so unlike the playful wildness of *Zuma* (1977), only six years ahead in some imagined linearity of John Divola's career.



When I'm in a deliberate environment with clean white walls and perfect lighting for a collector's eye, it can be hard to remember just how messy making can be, but *When we were young* focuses

Christina Fernandez's *A Selection of 50 Untitled Images* (1994) from the series *Untitled (Farmworker and Sharecropper Injuries and Deaths)* is a grid of 5 x 7 inch prints that sits in a vitrine in the middle of gallery. Fernandez's current work is mostly documentary in form, focused on issues of labor, migration, and her own Mexican identity as an Angeleno. Those same themes present themselves in *Untitled (Farmworker and Sharecropper Injuries and Deaths)*, but as a repetition of data—names and corresponding ailments, injuries, and causes of death—printed on cards, held by the artist's hand in a layer of dirt against a blue backdrop, and photographed. A few surnames appear twice, next to each other, and it becomes impossible not to imagine whole families maimed and suffering under the systematic denial of basic human rights and protections to the most vulnerable workers in this country. Two of the cards read:

Alfonso Sanchez

Became sterile due to

Exposure to DBCP.

Carlos Sanchez

Developed cancer.

Pesticides and nitrates

Were found in drinking water.

I found the piece powerful, only to find out that Fernandez got an incredibly negative critique from classmates who couldn't empathize and seems to have focused on making other kinds of carriers for this story since then.



Christina Fernandez
Untitled (Zoila Martínez), 1994
Agfa color photograph
5 x 7 inches



Installation View of Christina Fernandez's *Untitled (Combined Negatives)*, 1988

On a lighter note, I'd like to think every photographer since Man Ray has taken the time to experience the pleasure of making a solarized print, disrupting the developing process with a single playfully placed flick of a switch, and it brought me a lot of happiness to think of Divola experimenting in the darkroom to make a grid of solarized silver gelatin prints, named *Man with Lawnmower* (1971). Divola and Fernandez have both hung work from their years in the education system, which I am inevitably drawn to, as I'm about to enter into another round of schooling myself. Context—whether it be school, the gallery system, museums, or sweet stolen moments between sleep and a day-job—necessarily changes one's work, and so does one's age and status. *When we were young* is a peek at unsure moments in a young artist's career and, as a whole, a celebration of hindsight.



Ron Jude

Ken and Kelly at Firebird Raceway, 1983
Archival pigment print on Dibond aluminum
17 1/4 x 24 inches

When we were young was on view at Gallery Luisotti from June 20-August 8, 2015.