

ART

The Mysterious House That Inspired an L.A. Artist's New Show

By JULIE BAUMGARDNER MARCH 14, 2016

“If you were to look up ‘superficial’ in the dictionary, it should say ‘like a photograph,’” offers the artist John Divola, who’s something of an expert on the subject. Divola, born in 1949, began his photography career in the Los Angeles area in the early ’70s, when the actual usage of a camera was deemed passé by the academy and artists alike, including his UCLA professor Robert Heinecken, who stitched together ready-printed cultural iconography. But Divola didn’t care so much about conceptual trends — and frankly still doesn’t. “My work is still very indexical,” he says. “My work is still about: time, place, and circumstance. I make these literal imprints of what’s in front of me, and then I bring them back and they’re my artifacts of my actual engagement with the world.”

On Saturday, Divola unveiled his “Theodore Street” series, which he shot between 2008 and 2013, for his first show at Maccarone Gallery (previously, in New York, he’d been represented by the now-shuttered Wallspace gallery). While he’s introduced a new technology, the GigaPan, to aid his photographic progress,

this body of work “returns to a certain degree to procedures I used early on,” he says. Divola became known in the 1970s for documenting derelict spaces, discarded mementos of other people’s realities; this project hinges on a house on Theodore Street (from which the series draws its name), in Moreno Valley, California, which lured Divola in with its complicated, conflicting visual identity. In the anterior of the house are graffitied slogans of anti-white racism, while the posterior rooms are littered with icons of white supremacism.

“Theodore Street is very charged,” Divola says. “I have no way to know what is the literal history. One of the reasons why I go to abandoned houses is because I can do whatever I want there; the other is, it’s already imprinted with a history.” In fact, the artist, who is “not big on metaphor,” delves into his subjects time and again, not to discover some hidden secret but rather to index their artful qualities.

Divola has become synonymous with his home turf of Southern California, the explanation for which he explains is more practical than philosophical. “Right now it’s sexy to be an artist from Los Angeles, but back then it was kind of a kiss of death,” he says of his early days. “I’m not one of those photographers where I can get on an airplane, fly somewhere and make artwork. That’s the content of my work, whether I intend it or not. It’s quite literally what it is.”

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