

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

John Divola

Through May 21. Yancey Richardson, 525 West 22nd Street, Manhattan



By Roberta Smith

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Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start in Manhattan with John Divola's haunting photographs in Chelsea.

The photographs of John Divola's 1977-78 "Zuma" series are on their way to becoming classics of their kind. At least they always provide a visual thrill; and their complexity remains undiminished — in fact, it has increased with time.

A native Californian, Divola came across an abandoned two-story beach house overlooking the Pacific Ocean on Zuma Beach. He entered it and photographed its interior and the ocean views framed by its various deteriorating picture windows. He paid repeat visits, sometimes bringing cans of spray paint, adding color and pattern (think graffiti wallpaper). In between his visits, others made their presences felt, most notably the local fire department, which used the structure for training. And throughout the series, the magnificence of the changing light and ocean underscore the sense of passing time and nature's ultimate victory.

“Zuma” dates from a time when the photograph was infiltrating and becoming equal in stature to art mediums that had previously been deemed superior. But Divola flipped the script, demonstrating how photography could effortlessly absorb the competition — painting, sculpture, installation art, architecture and performance — while touching with insuperable joy and lightness on a clutch of traditional, fairly weighty themes including beauty, waste, loneliness, nature, impermanence, death. Divola’s photographs tease, charm and sadden. They provide much to think about and to feel, and they’ve not been seen in New York in such numbers in a decade. ROBERTA SMITH