



Art in America

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REVIEWS DEC. 10, 2014



John Divola

NEW YORK,
at Wallpaper

by Courtney Fiske

John Divola: *Untitled*
1990 90UB, 1990,
silver gelatin print, 60
by 48 inches; at
Wallpace.



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Studying in Los Angeles in the early 1970s under Robert Heinecken, John Divola encountered Abstract Expressionism as a photographic phenomenon. The object quality of the painted canvas, made virtual through its representation in magazines and catalogues, seemed something ancillary and assimilable to the image. Photography was a cannibalistic medium, not so much documenting other acts of art-making as subsuming them into siteless, scaleless facsimiles. Fixed by the camera's frame, the artwork reproduced became an artwork designed for reproducibility, as Walter Benjamin famously phrased it.

Divola's latest show centered on eight selections from an untitled series of silver gelatin prints made in 1990. Each was composed by flinging a handful of flour at photographic backdrop paper coated with thick, sloppy strokes of black tempera. Desultorily applied, the paint shimmies down the paper in a rehearsal of New York modernism's most over-determined mark: the AbEx drip. Still wet when the shutter is clicked, the paint attracts particles of flour that congeal in caked, crystalline formations. Partly settled on the surface, partly suspended before it, the flour complicates the spatiality of each photograph. The forms that it assumes vary from cumulous to miasmic, conjuring a range of associations: numinous landscapes, nuclear fallout and Rothko's moody rectangles. Slightly unfocused, the images are soft and sumptuous. The pull between materiality and metaphor—the bluntness of paint and flour, the profusion of meanings that they inspire—structures the photographs on view.

Divola's mobilization of pictorial clichés (sublimity, expression) is deliberate, if doubly distanced, both by his act of quotation and by

the mediation of the camera's lens. Coming some four decades after Pollock's own, Divola's brushstrokes register the exhaustion of AbEx strategies. Enacted by Divola, the drip becomes yet another tool in the artist's repertoire of gestures: a vehicle for slapdash formal experimentation. Clumsy and counterfeit, his drips perform neither anguish nor catharsis. If anything, they're a bit pathetic. "I could rationalize that no matter what kind of mark I made, it was okay; I could still make an interesting photograph about a naive mark," he has said in an interview. Painting becomes the instrument of photography, and the photograph is made deliberately painterly, matte in finish and keyed to the size of the human body, like the canvases it cites.

The series suggests a further parallel between the brushstroke's status as an index of the artist's hand and analog photography's constitutive indexicality. (Recall that 1990 remained a predominately pre-digital moment.) Divola's photographs both withdraw from and insist on their own making, contrasting the automatism of the camera's operation of point-and-shoot to the throwing of flour, whose contours in the composition attest to a human presence now absent. It's a tension fundamental to both the AbEx drip, at once materialologically determined and subjectively composed, and the index that absents the artist, declaring its status as a mechanical transfer, only to reassert the self through its implication of an originary presence.

Divola's body of work traffics in these remnants and traces of a spectral self. Early series such as "Vandalism" (1973-75) and "Zuma" (1977-78) document the interiors of abandoned homes inscribed with spray-painted testimonies ("I was here" and so forth). So it is fitting that the show's title, "Clive Wearing's Dilemma," refers to a neuropsychology patient afflicted with chronic amnesia, unable to form new memories or recall old ones. If the series' mood is melancholy, it is because it yearns for an impossible, because always anterior, presence.

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