

HEROES GALLERY

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John Divola: Frederick Sommer

January 6th – February 19th, 2022
Opening Thursday, Jan. 6th, 5–8pm



Heroes Gallery is pleased to present previously unexhibited work by contemporary photographer John Divola in conversation with the work of 1940s surrealist photographer Frederick Sommer (1905-1999). Divola considers Sommer to be a fore-bearer due to his eclectic approach to image making, the materiality of his prints and the painterly abstraction in his 8x10 photographs of debris, animal carcasses and lonely, horizonless landscapes.

Both Divola and Sommer create photographs that embody their physical, intellectual, technological, and experiential engagement with the world, becoming artifacts of a particular time and place. Sommer was prolific during the turbulent 1940s but rather than commenting directly on the aftershock of the Great Depression and WWII, he produced stunning images of detritus and the desolate scenery of the Southwest. These compositions engaged the frenetic “allover” paintings of Abstract Expressionism and the uncanny dream-like compositions of Surrealism. Three of the works featured in this exhibition were previously owned by friend and painter Max Ernst who inspired Sommer’s interest in Surrealism and abstraction as a formal response to the horrors of war.

Divola similarly engages with the conceptual underpinnings of abstraction by subtly manipulating abandoned buildings and photographing the results. Highlighted in this exhibition are twelve 8x10 silver chloride contact prints from Divola’s “George Air Force Base, Daybreak” series, each taken on an abandoned air force housing complex in Victorville, California and are exposed at, or shortly after, sunrise, once the artist had performed some manner of intervention in the space. Other series, or “archives” as the artist calls them, within the George Air Force Base project include *Dead Mirrors*, *Survey*, *Blue with Exceptions*, *Enso: 36 Right-Handed Circumference Gestures*, *Terminus*, *Voyager* and a yet to be titled collection of Gigapan photographs.

Divola came across the high desert military complex in 2015. Declared a Superfund Site in 1990 and abandoned in 1992, the buildings have been gutted for recyclable copper piping, vandalized by teenagers and co-opted for paintball war games. Each of these interventions layer onto the building’s surfaces and add texture to Divola’s formal compositions. His own modifications are yet another layer, a meditative response to the shapes and tones of the abandoned spaces.

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Not all of these layers are strictly formal though, there is of course the cultural envelope surrounding the military industrial machine, the environmental disaster of the site, California's ever-evolving identity and the evidence of past aggression seen in the hacked open walls and paint splattered surfaces. But like Sommer, Divola chooses not to comment directly on these underlying issues of unease, instead he subtly brings together charged cultural signifiers with layers of soft morning light, the baroque curl of cut paper, and the weight of his spray-painted orbs. Each photograph documents Divola's skillful orchestration of these formal layers and the psychic echoes of the air force base into a single image.

Both Sommer and Divola are loners, working during two very different times and in two very different locations that contain compelling social histories. The thing that brings them together is their unique ability to photograph material history rather than directly critique the social and political turmoil of their time. Through these observations, they each create provocative images that manifest complicated emotions of fear, isolation, and beauty.

John Divola received a BA from California State University, Northridge in 1971 and completed his MFA from University of California, Los Angeles in 1974. His career spans four decades and emphasizes the separation of image and reality. His work has been the subject of international exhibitions, most recently at Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Kunstverein Freiburg. His photographs are part of collections including but not limited to the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Fotomuseum Winterthur; and Victoria and Albert Museum, London. He is represented by Office Baroque in Brussels, Gallery Luisotti in Santa Monica and Yancey Richardson in New York.

Image: John Divola, *George Air Force Base, Daybreak, 4_2020_10*, 2020, gelatin silver print, 14 1/4 x 17 1/4 inches (framed), edition 4 of 5.