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John Divola scores a hit at FotoFocus

The photographer has work in two different FotoFocus shows: 'After Industry' at the Weston Art Gallery and 'The Sun Placed in the Abyss' at the Columbus Museum of Art.

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John Divola was an inspiring FotoFocus presence.

PHOTO: PROVIDED

Film and music festivals often have “sleeper hits” – someone or something relatively unheralded in advance that turns out to be enormously relevant and memorable.

My pick for a FotoFocus Biennial sleeper hit isn't an exhibition or even a solo lecturer. It's a photographer, John Divola, who has work in two different FotoFocus shows and was enormously, eloquently thought-provoking during two Oct. 8 panel discussions at 21c Museum Hotel based on those shows – *After Industry* at the Weston Art Gallery and *The Sun Placed in the Abyss* at the Columbus Museum of Art.

Without being pontifical, he affably expressed his insights into photography – in a way that resonated with wisdom learned first-hand rather than received. And also he spoke like he had just thought of it on the spur, rather than spending a lifetime shaping and honing his ideas. For instance, there was this comment about when images become clichés: “A cliché is an exhausted metaphor. You recognize it; you don't feel it.”

And there was this confession, really, about how he teaches photography to his University of California, Riverside students in an age when social media is steamrolling us with millions of images everyday – every minute, actually: “I show them a lot of art that I think is good. But that's really a problem for me, because the last thing I want to do is tell them to make more stuff like that.”

Divola, who is 67, is a life lesson in originality. Raised and educated in southern California, he was still pretty new when he made his 1977-78 color *Zuma* series – photos of a seemingly ravaged and abandoned lifeguard quarters along Malibu's Zuma beach. It presaged much of today's fascination with imagery of wrecked and ruined Americana that, in and of itself, has become a cliché. But Divola's motivation, he explained, was different. To him, the series was more conceptual than a “great American statement”: What the eye finds appealing can be as much about the photographer's choices as the subject matter.

Part of the process of the *Zuma* series — of which there are three examples in the Columbus exhibition — involved Divola searching for an abandoned building that he could paint and mark up with graffiti. He could then photograph how that looked from the inside, his messy but vibrant colors contrasting with the soot and ash from intentionally set fires, and with the sunsets seen through the window frames.

It was an approach he already had been exploring earlier, in 1974, and in black-and-white in his *Vandalism* series. Four of those gelatin silver prints are included in the Weston Art Gallery's *After Industry* exhibit, and they are extraordinary. I thought one, "Vandalism (74V01)," was hologramatic — small, dark circles seem to float in the air, like a Calder mobile turned into a dust devil, around the floor-level corner of a room.

"The license photography gives you is distance," Divola said about his work in general. "I could make a lot of awkward, stupid marks on a wall, but make a very interesting photograph of them."

Through it all, I thought Divola was expressing optimism about the need for risk and change in photography — although you can never be sure if it will be understood.

And while he didn't specifically refer to it, his comments had more impact on me because he spoke the day after the opening of *Roe Ethridge: Nearest Neighbor*, the retrospective of the photographer that FotoFocus artistic director Kevin Moore organized at the Contemporary Arts Center. It's the first U.S. solo museum show for Ethridge.

Ethridge has won acclaim — he's been in the Whitney Biennial — for the way he recombines and repositions his glossy commercial photographs to make them relevant as fine art. Some find them subversively post-modernist; others pretentious. I thought I saw compelling subtext in them, but also wondered whether I really was responding to the slick commercial imagery and then trying to find an art-respectable meaning.

So I had been doubting that show as I attended the Oct. 8 discussions. But after hearing Divola (who for all I know may not even like Ethridge's work), I'm keeping my eyes and mind open.

I'm also ready to see a retrospective of Divola's work, wherever it may be. It was good to get to hear him at FotoFocus 2016.

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