

UNCANNY BEAUTY

John Chiara: Los Angeles

Rose Gallery

Santa Monica, CA

March 23–May 11, 2013

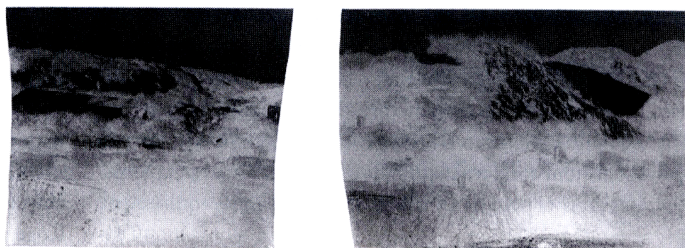
As fires recently raged out of control in Southern California, the image that came to mind was John Chiara's *Sierra at Route 14* (2012), a large-scale image of the California landscape in which the sky and hillside are depicted in fiery red and yellow hues. Chiara makes his images *in situ* using a large pinhole camera that he transports from place to place on a flatbed trailer. His process recalls the methods used by many nineteenth-century photographers who lugged their heavy equipment into mountain and desert landscapes. Chiara's photographs, however, are the antithesis of the grand views and precise images captured by Carleton Watkins or Timothy O'Sullivan. Blurry and ambiguous, his large-scale color images filled with tape marks and scratches are documents of banal settings found in urban and natural landscapes.

Chiara manipulates his long exposures by using his hands to burn and dodge from within his camera. The choice of various types of often outdated photographic paper, and the length of exposure, dictate the color and saturation of his unique images. Often, as in *Sierra at Route 14*, Chiara presents a negative rather than a positive image, which accentuates the yellow, orange, and red hues and gives the image an other-worldliness. Chiara does not hide his mistakes. His paper is never evenly cut, and often the works have scissor and tape marks as a result of attaching the paper in total darkness to a surface inside his camera. The insistence on a non-digital and, in many ways, very physical process is what sets his work apart, as for Chiara, "The photographs suggest the activity of their creation."¹ Yet his uneven edges, unnatural colors, and allowance of mistakes connect him to contemporary image makers like Walead Beshty, Carter Mull, and Sterling Ruby, whose works often toy with the photographic surface while pushing the boundaries of the medium. Beauty—how it is manifested in nature and how it can be embedded in the uncanny—is a concern for all of these artists.

Chiara's works are impassioned. Although he often photographs banal subjects—a hillside, a receding road, a lone tree—he infuses them with uniqueness. The body of work that focuses on Los Angeles features snippets of the city's architecture and images taken in the natural landscape, illustrating the more subtle aspects of the city. Chiara is not drawn to the stereotypical depictions of Los Angeles and avoids cliché. While many of his images feel as though they could have been made anywhere, visual cues, like the appearance of palm trees, define the specificity of this locale.

Vereda de la Montura at Camino (2012) is a vertical diptych depicting a huge ragged palm tree nestled at the end of a nondescript road. The tree towers above the other plant matter, its palms fluttering against the blue sky. The tones of the image are neither bright nor bombastic, and the drastic division that splits the tree in two suggests dualities—land vs. sky, city vs. nature, analog vs. digital—and the often disjointed fissures of these divides.

Nogales at Comina (Variation A) (2012) and *Palos Verdes at Catalina* (2012) are typical of Chiara's urban images depicting large flat building facades with patterned architecture against a strip of deep blue sky. These straightforward shots are casually cropped and do not celebrate the intricacies of the architecture nor their location in the city, although they are titled after specific intersections. Like many of Chiara's other works, they suggest what lies beyond. The flares of light, vignetting, double exposures, and stray marks that interrupt the images imbue them with a sense of nostalgia, as if these contemporary places were shot in a bygone era.



The seductive qualities in the works come, in part, from the way Chiara displays his images. Framed in white, they are not behind glass, which allows their surfaces to glow. The works are large yet delicate. This fragility speaks directly to Chiara's process and subject matter. By using an antiquated technique, he is able to depict the vulnerability of the landscape and direct viewers' attention to the relationship that exists between the natural and the industrialized. His images point toward the potential for disaster: the dried brush in *Will Rogers at Westside* (2012) that could ignite, the reflection of power lines in *Sepulveda at Mississippi (Variation B)* (2012), and the view of an expansive ocean that includes a concrete barricade in *Holyoke at Pacific Coast (Far Right)* (2012). How man encroaches upon nature is a dominant theme.

Like the constant temperature that makes Los Angeles seem seasonless, most of Chiara's pinhole images of Los Angeles are devoid of spectacle. The inclusion of images that shout "look at me," and depict the landscape in saturated, hyperreal colors suggest that Los Angeles is on the verge of destruction. The fires that rage in the hills echo that sentiment.

JODY ZELLEN is an artist and writer from Los Angeles.

NOTE 1. Cited in "Overview," Crown Point Press Newsletter, November 2006, 1.

Above

Sierra at Route 14 (2012) by John Chiara; courtesy the artist, Von Lintel Gallery, New York, and Rose Gallery, Santa Monica