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[Amir Zaki at James Harris and Katya Marritz at Zeitgeist Cafe](#)

With the advent of the digital age, deception in photography has never been easier, and Amir Zaki makes the best possible case for its artistic benefits. His brilliant and compelling portraits of retro-chic lifeguard towers in Southern California are the product of nearly as much image manipulation as actual documentation, and the result is that we see them with entirely fresh eyes.

Many photographers of the manmade landscape play it fairly straight, using careful composition, lighting, and large-format printing to lend drama to their matter-of-fact subject matter. Bernd and Hilda Becher, the German couple whose deadpan pictures of early industrial architecture gave rise to an entire school of photography, are entirely literal in their depictions, allowing their gritty subject matter to speak for itself without technical intervention. More recently, some of their followers have embraced various types of editorial alterations, choosing subtle techniques that are not always obvious in the final result.

Zaki, on the other hand, is much more upfront about using any and all available tools to bring to life his much more stylized version of reality. An earlier series put individual LA houses on a diet, distorting entire structures into impossibly skinny slivers, which were then printed in an extreme vertical format. In another set of images, Zaki replaced all the existing signage on older or abandoned commercial structures with an invented symbol system of highly suggestive, but completely mysterious pedigree – Mayan or Martian, perhaps. What was surprising was how weird such a simple substitution made his ordinary structures seem – are our cities really that odd?

The lifeguard towers in Zaki's current exhibition aren't so much odd as they are atmospheric: back-to-the-future cockpits for cultural time travel. They're also virile and sexy in a very streamlined sixties way; seen from below like statues or monuments, they stand out against perfect California skies like symbols of progress achieved through order and vigilance, like the tractors and tanks in Soviet propaganda posters.

The show is much more impressive in person than online, with the high-focus clarity and elegance of the imagery greatly heightened by the huge scale of several of the prints. Two of the very best tower pictures in the exhibition have been printed in this large format, and they demonstrate what's so striking about the series. [Untitled \(tower 30\)](#) is a portrait of a sky-blue guard tower against a sky-blue sky, the dominant monochrome only interrupted by the silvery sheen of the truncated safety rail on the tower's deck. Unoccupied, shuttered, stripped of all identifying detail, the structure shares with the others in the show no visible connection to place – it could be anywhere. In its perfect, digitally amped-up color and smooth lines, it is control made seductive - unthreatening, coolly mechanical. [Untitled \(tower 42\)](#) is a skinnier, mustard-yellow version, with the sleek lines and dramatic angles of mid-century ocean liners, transcontinental trains, and pin-up girls.

It's fascinating to compare pictures found online of actual California beach towers to the Zaki versions. Besides removing signage, fasteners, and any other interrupting blemishes, Zaki has also eliminated the access stairs, nearly all of the guard rails, and most of the supporting structure. Most crucially, his upward view exaggerates the size and height of the towers, which in reality are only ten feet or so above the beach. Zaki's imposing viewpoint and monumental treatment also heightens the subliminal connection between the boxy, heavy-browed structures and a gigantic, robotic head; we imagine a race of protective (or oppressive) sentinels, rugged, implacable, and all-powerful.

Katya Marritz is also contributing to an ongoing artistic conversation, with her Zeitgeist

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- [Elizabeth Bryant \(3\)](#)
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café exhibition of altered books. The regional awareness of this art form has been heightened since last year's BAM exhibition featuring several dozen artists who, like Marritz, use books as raw materials for sculptural works. Some of the interventions on display at BAM were radical indeed, like the centerpiece replica of the Grand Canyon carved out of 80 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica, one of many artists on view who freely sliced, diced, and otherwise eviscerated their various tomes.

Marritz uses far less invasive techniques. Following an older craft tradition, her thrift store hardcover volumes are pinned open and then folded, page by page, to create wavelike forms spanning between the covers like fans or carved blocks of wood. Using what seems to be this same simple technique, she achieves an impressive variety of results, from the lyrical to the geometric. Some of the books feature two arching, rhythmic shapes, one above the other with a narrow waist in between, while others are formed into a series of angular dips and swells, like a mansard roof with dormer windows. The text mostly appears as a sort of grey decorative fringe, or like a faintly colored layer in a layer cake.

Speaking of text, Marritz, like many altered book artists, seems to have an ambivalent relationship to the question of the literary content of her source material and its relationship to the final product. None of the 14 pieces is titled, and most of the books are unidentifiable by either text (mostly illegible) or cover (mostly hidden). If there's a link between what the books are about and the shapes they have been folded into, it's not apparent. In the case of one book whose title is visible, the Pride and Prejudice, it's tempting to see a hooped skirt or fringed parasol in the resulting construction, one which shares with several other works on view a more feminine or arabesque (versus angular) selection of folds. In other books, evocative phrases are occasionally exposed: "Mona always longed"... "before he left"... "poured over his head". These last phrases are all taken from my favorite piece, a volume where a relatively small number of pages has been gently curled at their edges and loosely linked together by white threads. The result has the appearance of a skirt blowing in the wind in a series of time-lapse photographs, or a biomorphic abstraction in the manner of Jean Arp.

It is hard not to draw certain conclusions about the decline of the book as an honored cultural artifact bearing the collective wisdom of society, when faced with work in which the book is used as mere raw material like mud or straw, and the text is essentially irrelevant. In the case of Marritz one could argue that the surplus books she uses are being given a second life far more vivid than the obscurity of the junk store or the remainder bin, but no one would have dreamed of carving up a book back in the day when they were more rare and precious. One thing is clear; both Marritz and Zaki share a common goal of unearthing the art in objects that are usually thought of in terms of function alone, and both succeed at that goal in fascinating ways.

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