



Art in America

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Focus
Sculpture

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Patricia Esquivias: *Natures at the Hand*, 2006-10, video, approx. 4 minutes; at Murray Guy.

Amir Zaki: *Untitled (Tower 21)*, 2009, Ultrachrome photograph, 60 by 76 inches; at Perry Rubenstein.



souvenir vendors' offerings a model Aztec pyramid. She interprets it as an indication that the connection between old and new is strong.

The press release helpfully explains that *Folklore III* relates to Galicia, Spain, and Nueva Galicia, Mexico—the former a coastal region with a city called Finisterre (Land's End), the latter a colony renamed in honor of the former by the 16th-century Spanish Queen Juana la Loca (Joanna the Mad). Without this information, the rambling talk would have been pretty obscure, but that very sense of mystery, along with the work's intimate tone and Esquivias's likable quirkiness, made the show all the more intriguing.

—Brian Boucher

AMIR ZAKI

PERRY RUBENSTEIN

The subjects of the 10 color Ultrachromes in Amir Zaki's new series, "Relics," are, at least nominally, lifeguard towers on beaches in Southern California. The photographs—seven large prints (60 by 76 inches) and three smaller ones (20 by 26 inches), all from 2009—were shot from below, with sand, water and every other contextualizing clue eliminated. They suggest architectural studies or, occasionally, portraits—the small buildings standing in for awkward heads balanced on skinny necks. Zaki digitally altered the photographs—combining one image of a lifeguard station with another of the sky taken on a different day, for example, or removing ladders and ramps, leaving the structures essentially dysfunctional and often unidentifiable. He photographed

the pink structure in *Untitled (Tower 51)* and placed it against an ominous sky; the small, angular building tilts back, like a surprised face looking up. *Untitled (Tower 30)* is practically monochrome: a robin's egg blue lifeguard stand nearly melts into the cerulean sky behind it. It's one of the few photographs in the series that conforms to the stereotype of a sunny California day at the beach. There's something too picture-postcard perfect about it. Which, of course, is Zaki's intention: to make photographs that are slightly off-key, like a troubling thought you can't dislodge.

Contemporary photographers such as the Germans Florian Maier-Aichen (who, like Zaki, earned his MFA from UCLA and spends much of his time in Southern California) and Beate Gütschow incorporate digital alterations that give a disorienting twist to pictures of familiar buildings and landscapes. Zaki's *Untitled (Tower 63-64)*, showing a spindly stand of gray brick and metal against a background of dark, portentous cliffs, recalls Maier-Aichen's *Salton Seas I* (2008), in which the domesticated landscape of geometrically plotted farmlands gives way to harsh, rocky terrain. Zaki's *Untitled (Tower 21)*, on the other hand, a white cottagelike building with cheerful red and blue trim, perches in the sky like a birdhouse.

Architectural studies, of a sort, were the focus of Zaki's previous series as well, in which he incorporated strange, invented symbols into the signage of ordinary churches, gas stations and strip mall eateries. Here he also manipulates his images in order to disrupt the

assumed veracity of the photograph. It's not a new idea, but his pictures are seamless and quite beautiful. And the subject is well chosen. Iconic and easily overlooked, lifeguard towers—pedestals for tanned, robust, youthful saviors—become, in Zaki's work, unexpectedly and unforgettably alien.

—Jean Dykstra

SHOJA AZARI

LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER

Since Warhol, art's flirtations with popular imagery have often been associated with entertainment and consumerism. If political at all, they take the form of commodity critiques that accept a global capitalist system as a given. So it is bracing to encounter the work of Iranian-born Shoja Azari, which is deeply engaged with a distinct vernacular culture.

Azari, a respected filmmaker and frequent collaborator with his partner, Shirin Neshat, draws on strains of popular imagery that in Iran signify political resistance to both secular and religious despotism. For this show, he blended "painting" and video in works that express solidarity with last year's post-election uprising in Iran. These hybrids derive from two traditional sources: mass-produced posters portraying famous Shiite martyrs, and a famous Iranian "coffee house painting."

The posters on which Azari's "Icons" (2010) are based—they bear a certain resemblance to Catholic holy cards—have a history of political use. Portraits of legendary imams, they appeared in various forms during the 1977-79 Islamic