

## AMIR ZAKI - CALIFORNIA CONCRETE



Amir Zaki is a Californian born and based photographer. Having grown up in the surrounding area it only seemed logical that the sport of skateboarding would soon take hold of his life. The latest project titled "California Concrete" steps away from your stereotypical skate photography...no boards, no people, no culture. Just the empty bowls, halfpipes and drop-ins undulating above and below the earth's surface. Amir's eery eye transports the viewer to alien-like hangouts. TNO virtually sat down to with Amir to get some insights into life and inspiration behind his latest project.

***I guess the obvious first question should be, how long have you been skating for/what got you into it? And the same question goes for photography?***

I started skating when I was about 12 I guess. I'm a child of the 80s so it was all about Bones Brigade, VHS videos, home made launch ramps, back yard half-pipes, and skating with friends to the liquor store for candy. I got into it because I gravitated to a certain kind of social group and friends that didn't quite fit into the mainstream. At least it felt that way at the time. These days, I'm mellow and middle-aged. I've been cruising an electronic skateboard lately and it's one of the most joyous things I've experienced in a long time. It satisfies my craving to

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been in, going almost 20MPH on a skateboard. It's so god damn fun. I got seriously into photography in college. I was a psychology major, then a philosophy major, then an art major working mainly in photography. I never felt good at art when I was a kid and I was always jealous of friends who could draw. I liked drafting and drawing with a ruler though. And, I liked wood-shop class. When I discovered photography, I felt very connected to the mechanical element and it felt really natural to be creative with it.



***If your work suggests the personality behind the creator, I would assume that you were an individual who enjoyed solitude? Would this be a correct assumption?***

Ha! Pretty good. Yes, in a way. I would certainly describe myself as on the introverted side. I love photographing by myself, or sometimes with my son who has accompanied me from time to time. I talk out loud to myself when I'm photographing. So, I'm both content in my solitude but not alone. I have the whole world to look at and converse with. I always like to think about the person viewing my photographs as seeing the world as I see it; A little strange and alienating but also incredibly beautiful.

***The book features an essay by Tony Hawk, we published a feature on him a while back on TNO so I wanted to ask about how you guys came to meet and start discussing the idea of him writing an essay for the book?***

So, I was introduced to Tony by a friend who was working at a gallery where I show my work. We discussed the project and he was interested. He has a foundation which helps fundraise for the construction of concrete skateparks worldwide so there was an obvious connection there. It was very generous of him to write for the book.

***If you look at skate photography through time the subject tends to be that of the skater. What made you decide to go against this and make the subject the place in which the activity takes place?***

Yes, you are so right. There is a great and rich history of skateboard photography that highlights the skater, branding, and tricks. I like and respect that approach, and have nothing but respect for the folks who have been at it for decades, refining their skills and pushing their limits of photography right along with the skaters pushing their limits and abilities. I'm an artist, and I have a long history of photographing the built and natural landscape using digital technology to alter the images in unusual ways. That's my gig I guess. I like the idea that my photographs of empty skateparks add to the history of both



*The way that you put together the photographs with the Gigapan tripod, stitching together the images in post edit, is this a conscious thing you think of when creating images? (I'd imagine a lot of people would just go for a telephoto/wide angle lens and capture as much as possible within the one image). What I'm trying to ask is how does the process compare to the final image for you?*

Great question. So, the Gigapan process yields a really unique kind of 'image' and allows me to capture unusual points of view. Since each individual image is somewhat telephoto (flattening space) but the overall view I can capture is

incredibly wide angle, I can be really close to my subject in the foreground, but it doesn't look distorted like a traditional wide-angle lens. Some of this can be manipulated in post-production too. This process also allows me to have a crazy amount of detail and control. I can choose to change focus as I go, which

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sometimes, and the files I create are several gigabytes. This process allows me to make any size print I want and it will be sharper and more detailed than with any other process.

***In the exhibition “Empty Vessels” you paired images of the parks with ceramics. What drew you to the idea of pairing these two objects together?***

As an artist, I’m always thinking about the connection between images I make. I like what happens when we compare one image to another one next to it. The process can make both images more interesting. As I was photographing some of the skateparks from deep down inside the valleys and bowls, that they were like vessels in the landscape. That got me thinking about the function of vessels, which is to hold something, usually something to nourish us. But, what’s left when it can’t function anymore? What’s left when a skatepark has no skaters? It’s still something. It’s empty but full of potential. Plus, it is really fun to brake ceramics and find pieces that are so beautiful on their own. They become a new thing. Destruction and creation are two sides of the same coin.



***Have you got any anecdotes from when you were breaking/entering into areas to get the photos for the book?***

I don’t know if I want to admit to doing anything illegal here :) I had several ways of getting into some of the more locked up parts at dawn, most of which were begging the person who ran the thing to meet me there at such an early time to let me in. Not too exciting. I do have a story of one park that I made special arrangements for. I showed up and it was completely dark still. The wind was howling like 30 MPH and it was freezing. I thought the shoot was going to be ruined because of the weather. But, I tried anyway since this nice guy got up at 5am to let me in. But, as I got set up and crawled down into the park, all the concrete walls that surrounded me completely shielded me from the wind, just as it was getting light enough to work. It’s cool to me that the pictures all seem so quiet and still, but the world around us is chaotic. Photography is a lie.

I wish I had a more lawless story to tell, but I don’t.

***One of your images has been used on Drumskull’s new album “Interlocked”. You hear of creatives being asked to come up with artwork for releases after listening to the music and creating a visual representation for the album itself. What was the process for you guys/why***

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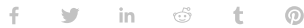
Joel reached out to me out of the blue. I have a modest collection of vinyl and I've always wanted to do an album cover. I love the size. I was happy and flattered to be involved.

*Considering your style of photography (i.e empty spaces/lack of people) I imagine this period of time during Covid-19 has been pretty exciting for you since people are staying indoors, opening up all these outdoor landscapes which would be full of people normally? Have you managed to get out at all to take any photos?*

You would think so! But, it has been a really challenging time for me creatively. My head has been preoccupied with life, politics, and just trying to keep my family healthy. I tend to work in a kind of binge fashion. When I feel inspired about photography, I do it every day. Then, sometimes I take breaks. I do have a really active Instagram photography practice that I take pretty seriously. I've been really into photographing crows lately. I have this weird feeling that they have been taking over the skies since Covid happened.

Images / [Amir Zaki](#)

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