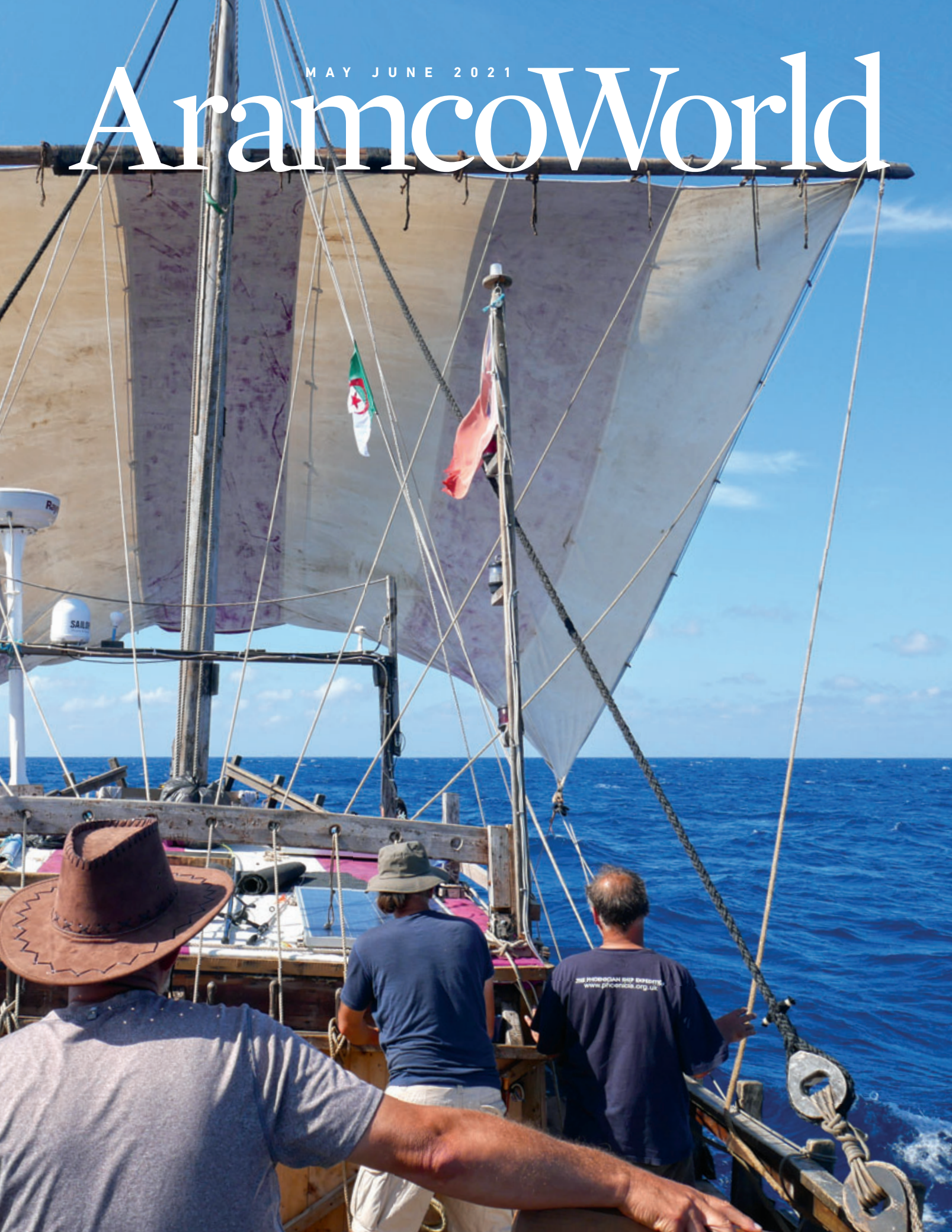


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The SCULPTURE *of* Skateparks

Written by
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Photographs courtesy of
AMIR ZAKI

When Amir Zaki looks at a skate park, he sees more than a place to do tricks. He sees a geography in concrete, a landscape of hummocks, valleys, cornices, bowls, twisting riverbeds and waves.

“Now I go as an artist,” says the 46-year-old Zaki, who has skateboarded on and off over the course of his life and is now a professor of photography and digital technology at the University of California, Riverside.

Zaki’s ample body of work has been shown in museums and galleries throughout the US West Coast as well as New York and Atlanta, and abroad in Australia, China and Indonesia. Many of

“I’m a deeply curious person who loves to learn about different philosophical ideas coming from all over the world,” says Amir Zaki. As a kid with a skateboard in suburban Los Angeles, however, the early, pool-shaped skateparks were “sort of scary,” he says. “I was intimidated by the older kids who were better.”







his shots transform everyday landscape objects—houses, vehicles, towers, rocks, bushes, trees or what have you—into carefully observed, often austere, graphic compositions.

His 2019 book, *California Concrete: A Landscape of Skateparks*, looks into a world largely unknown to nonskaters and, because skateparks are created below ground level, often invisible to them. And in the skateboarding world, Zaki's images are unique for their focus on the empty, curvaceous, weathered concrete canvases upon which skaters carve their expressive, ephemeral lines.

His images contrast sharply with the action-oriented skateboard photography that helped popularize the sport in the 1970s and 1980s. Like the sport, it was imagery that came out of the visual depictions of surfing: rugged renegades adapting streets, sidewalks, handrails, plazas and pools into stunt arenas on days when they couldn't go surfing. Popularized by magazines such as *Thrasher*, the most iconic action shots—famously from photographers Craig Stecyk, Hugh Holland

and J. Grant Brittain, among others—focused on lone skaters, often shirtless, sometimes barefoot, almost always sun bleached.

Zaki's focus on the forms of the skateparks themselves has won him admiration in the fine-art world. Virginia Heckert, curator of photography at The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, says that when she first saw his skatepark images, she was drawn to the "sweeping, brutalist forms of the concrete skateparks that have an almost meditative quality."

It all started, Zaki recalls, with growing up in the 1980s in the "boring" Southern California town of Beaumont, on the eastern fringe of Los Angeles. Before becoming a camera enthusiast, he and his

friends took to zipping around the wide, smooth streets and catching air off plywood backyard ramps.

"Skating was a big part of the culture and our identity," says Zaki. His parents, he says, accepted it—as they did his decision later to pursue an art career. His late father, a plant pathologist and a Muslim, had come to the US from Alexandria, Egypt, and he met his mother, an educator and a Catholic, in Minnesota.

"Perhaps my dad—who became a teacher himself—would have liked me to study science, but mostly they wanted me to do what made me happy," Zaki says. "I grew up a freethinker with parents who were the most open-minded people I could imagine," he says.

A trip to Egypt at age 11 with his father had a particular impact, he says, on how he viewed the world. "I learned that there was much more than my suburban neighborhood. And my father's family was so welcoming and caring, especially the grandfather I'd only met once," he says. "I also learned humility by going someplace where you don't understand the language.

His images
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skateboard
photography.



I learned patience for people who didn't speak English, and that's carried over to my career as a teacher."

This kind of openness, it turned out, was also part of skateboard culture, where all you needed was a board to be accepted.

Yet Zaki never went to a skatepark. "They were sort of scary," he says. "The closest skatepark was in Upland, 45 miles away. I never even went because I was intimidated by the older kids there, who were way better."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the first skateparks were based on bowls, much like the empty backyard pools that, during the 1970s California drought, became the domains of early skateboarders. These first parks had fast transitions between flat bottoms and high, steep walls. Nowadays skateparks are complex, layered and infused with dimension and texture. This can be seen in Zaki's photographs,

which capture parks that have become increasingly elaborate as skateboarding has evolved toward ever-greater athleticism and technical difficulty. Now they are subterranean wonderlands of deep pools accompanied by quarter pipes, half and full pipes, handrails, snake runs, ramps, pyramids, boxes and rail slides. Each one is a unique, complex topography.

It was only after 1998, Zaki explains, that skatepark building took off. That was when California passed legislation declaring skateboarding a "hazardous recreational activity." Those words freed municipalities from liability for injuries a skater might sustain in a publicly owned skatepark. As a result, there are now an estimated 450 skateparks in the state and hundreds more worldwide, all serving as both athletic and social hubs.

Aaron Spohn, 60, is founder of Los Angeles-based Spohn Ranch Skateparks,

which over three decades has built more than 1,000 skateparks around the world. "The dynamic nature of skateboarding inspires artistic shapes that can look like standing waves or canyons or undulating riverbeds," says Spohn, who gathers input from local skaters for his designs. "Then beyond the sculptural aspect, we can add texture with brick or granite or marble to create a truly architectural space."

After Zaki earned a master's degree in fine arts from the University of California, Los Angeles, he married and had two children. It was around then, in his early 30s while living in North Hollywood, that he was drawn to photographing a skatepark near his home. Dawn, when the shadows were long and he could be alone and unconcerned about being run over by younger versions of himself, turned out to be a beautiful time to visit.

"Early in the morning was when I



could get down inside the skateparks, and that made the biggest difference in the kind of art I was able to achieve,” he says.

Some of his photographic influences, he says, have come from contemporary landscape photographers including German duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose photographs turn industrial constructions like water towers, warehouses or gas storage spheres into a kind of functionalist art; Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, famous for vast, luminous, minimalist black-and-white seascapes; pop and conceptual artist Ed Ruscha, who grew up in the Midwest and photographed for decades in California, and photographer Lewis Baltz, known for his formalist interpretations of suburbia and light-industrial constructions.

“I’m super interested in architecture

and how different parts of the landscape are used in contemporary times,” Zaki says. “I look at buildings, and even life-guard towers, as being sculptural.”

And in the skateparks, Zaki brought his own experience to the lens.

“Amir does a really nice job of showcasing the unique character of a skatepark landscape. It can look brutalist, elegant, and otherworldly all at the same time.”

—Jaxon Statzell, lead designer, CA Skateparks

“I was also photographing the skateparks as a skateboarder,” he says, “so I have a bodily, visceral reaction to those forms. ... I know what it feels like to move through that space with my body.”

When he finds the right spot, he explains, he sets up his robotic tripod, which he has calibrated to shoot what will become a photo in 25 to 70 sections. When Zaki downloads the images, they are arranged so he can digitally stitch them into a huge file that can be enlarged to several meters without losing resolution. “You start in the top left corner of the scene, and the camera takes a series of photos in rows and columns over a number of minutes,” he explains.

Early in the project, he noticed that while the camera was shooting, birds would often fly into one or more of the



frames. “I liked the results,” he says. “Ultimately, I decided that every series with sky would have birds in it. Some were flying through space in the actual photos, and others were imported later.”

His images also caught the eye of Tony Hawk, who is arguably the world’s most accomplished skateboarder, a pioneer of the sport and one of its most prominent advocates. Hawk wrote the introduction to *Concrete California*, stating that when he first saw Zaki’s photographs of the vacant skateparks and skies punctuated by birds in flight, he recalled the “initial idyllic sense of freedom” that first drew him to the skateboard in the 1970s, back when “we wanted to fly.”

“I’ve been skating now for several decades, and so whenever I visit a skatepark for the first time, I analyze it in a much

more sophisticated and technical way than I did as a kid. But that original feeling has remained the same,” Hawk wrote.

Today, Zaki says he has made a point to return to Egypt with his own children, too, even after his father passed in 2012. “But my identity is a conglomeration of ideas and values, not a geographical location or ethnic label,” he says.

It was while traveling to Egypt in 2016 that Zaki learned of the White Desert, famous for its natural, dramatically wind-eroded rock formations. He hopes to photograph it one day, perhaps for a future project.

Back in California, Zaki remains drawn to the skateparks. He doesn’t mention a favorite, but he muses that one day he might like to design one. It would, he says, be one that captures the light of dawn just right. 🌍



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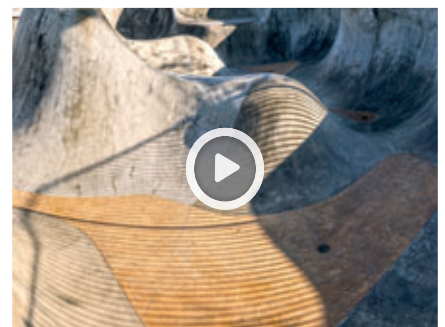


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