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FEATURED

Function versus dysfunction

Nika Bartoo-Smith

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(Courtesy of the Center for Art Research)

Destruction and creation can exist together, photographer Amir Zaki said at an artist talk on Thursday. He described the relationship between the two and the power of synthesis in his work.

At the virtual event put on by UO's Department of Art and Center for Art Reach Zaki discussed "Empty Vessel," a series of photographs from 2019 that consists of empty skateparks and broken ceramics. Zaki said that while at first glance the two seem vastly different, they are both "objects of potential."

"The piece implies the whole just like the skatepark implies the skaters," Zaki said.



The relationship between function and dysfunction is a common theme throughout his photographs. The series “Ice” from his time in grad school captures movement. Zaki took photos of a sprinkler against a plain background, outside of the context of watering the grass and thus not functioning for its intended purpose. Later on, Zaki photographed a series of covered up fireplaces and unused pools during a Los Angeles winter.

Landscapes and nature are Zaki’s main subjects. His work includes many photos of buildings, city scapes, streets and plants. None of his photographs include people yet, “all photographs are about the human condition,” Zaki said.

He cited one of his ongoing series from 2018, “Getting Lost,” that features different trees blended together. The photographs are all of two trees from two different locations, on two different days that are blended together with photoshop. The images are supposed to be about the relationships between two people — simultaneously messy and beautiful.

Zaki is interested in the ideas of what is considered built versus what is considered natural. He does not believe in purity, he said. Many of his photographs are edited.

“There is this power that photography has about truthfulness and veracity,” Zaki said. “The default is that you want to believe what you’re looking at. And I’m not interested in fantasy. I want these things to feel plausible.”

At an early gallery showing in 2003, Zaki remembers truly realizing how others responded to his work. He realized that while his work looked obviously altered to him, the viewer would not necessarily know that.

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“It’s amazing the things you can find when you look for them,” Zaki said, quoting something an audience member said about his work. “It is something I think about quite a bit.”

Every photographer understands the context behind which something was made, but Zaki said that this line helped him realize that the viewers of his work do not have that same context.

Zaki is aware of his body’s position in the landscape as he is photographing, he said. Whether that is above, below or parallel to his subjects. But he never takes a photo at the eye level, Zaki said.

During the talk, Zaki detailed his process for several photographs including lighting, time of day and photoshopping.

Currently, Zaki is photographing piers all along the coast in southern California. He wakes up early, when only fishermen are out, and spends 45 minutes to an hour taking photos.

The synthesis between the ocean and the human made piers represents a wider theme of Zaki’s: what is natural and what is built. While Zaki has never included people in his photographs, he said that he is thinking about including the fisherman in his latest work.

Zaki received his MFA from UCLA in 1999. He is currently a professor of photography and digital technology at the University of California, Riverside. He has been teaching there since he graduated in 1999.

Nika Bartoo-Smith

Nika is a writer at the Arts & Culture desk. Send her an email if you know of any local artists or events that should be featured!