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Amir Zaki

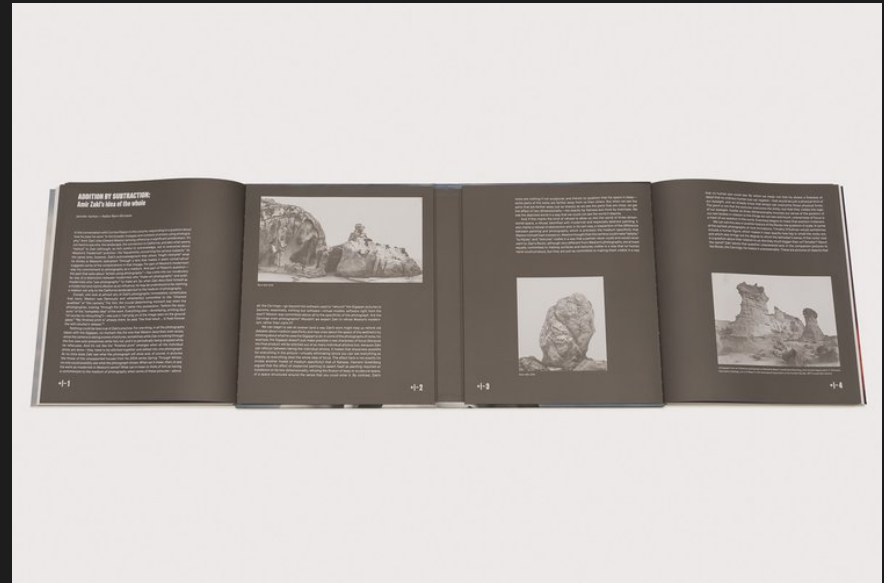
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MR: Can you describe how you became interested in photography?

AZ: Sure. Let's see. I grew up in a pretty small town in Southern California. My dad was from Egypt, my mom's from Minnesota. They both moved to California from Minnesota after my dad emigrated from Egypt. We lived in a small town. My dad was a scientist, my mom's a home economics teacher and nobody was an artist. That's my long way to get to the part that nobody made art in my family.

We were fairly isolated from any extended family, and I basically, I'm 47 now, so I was a punk/goth kid in that era. Friends were "alternative", which was the word we were using at the time. And basically in high school, I got a camera and was making these moody black and white pictures of friends smoking cigarettes and our weird haircuts.

MR: Sounds familiar.

AZ: That's what I was interested in, that's the subculture that I came from. Then, I got into university at UC Riverside. I was straight up from high school. I was young – I was just barely turning 18. I was a psychology major and then within a year changed to philosophy, and that's an important move because my interest in philosophy stays to this day.

I'm really interested in both Eastern, Western – anything I get my mind on. But after about a year of philosophy, in that period of time, I met, who's now my wife, but was my girlfriend at the time. She was interested in art, and philosophy started getting really dry for me. It was like I was just realizing that there were going to be some really difficult, boring classes, not all the fun, existential stuff I was interested in. In all of that, I landed in a photography class, encouraged by my girlfriend – wife now – and landed in a photo class, and it was taught by John Divola.

That was an important moment because a lot of time those beginning level classes are taught by a visiting lecturer, which could be great too. But I just happened to be very lucky that quarter. I had no idea who he was at the time, didn't know anything about photography, but I had a little background in what I was doing, just being an interested kid.

All these things came together – philosophy, an introduction to a beginning art class taught by someone who's a very, very gifted teacher and already an interesting artist. He just opened things up. It was really like, "Oh my God, I can express all these philosophical ideas, but visually." Being from that generation – I've been thinking about this a lot with this whole NFT thing and these generational differences – is that, so ingrained in people from that era was this questioning authority, not conforming, and that's what this felt like.

It was a realization that, "Oh, there isn't a right answer. You're not telling me go make these pictures. You're saying here's an idea. Go out in the world and use what you have." It was fucking amazing. It was exactly what I needed. It was just luck. And so then I just started taking photo classes.

I'm a little bit of a gearhead. Some science interest, math interest, made photography very accessible. And what made it even better is that I became an art major. I realized I couldn't draw. I never wanted to draw. I found it super intimidating. My girlfriend was great at drawing and painting. I hated it, and I realized I didn't have to do it. That wasn't what art had to be. I could be an artist and not know how to draw, and all that just seemed great. That was the beginning, and then grad school and all the other fun stuff, but that's the genesis of where it came from.

MR: Yes, so having Divola as an instructor meant prime access to the art world. I'm interested in how, what it sounds like you were finding in photography was the same thing that I was looking for in photography, which was that critical thinking part. I actually came into an art program because I could draw well. But the conversations were happening in the photography program, and that's where all the critical thinking was happening.

I'm interested in finding out what really pulled you in. I know Divola has a certain way of doing his own work, and I can see the impression that he had on you. But I'm curious about the philosophy part, how did photography satisfy that philosophy part for you?

AZ: Yes, It's great. At the time, I guess what I was doing a lot of is, I would write a lot of my own philosophical, really naive philosophical poetry – it was almost like half diary, half poetry – just stuff I was keeping to myself or maybe sharing with a couple of friends. I think that maybe there was something that I was just primed for, something expressive – so a lot of stuff was floating around.

As soon as I got the green light in a photo class to create things, I was doing stuff. I wouldn't say it was surreal, but I was doing stuff that was not like any other students. It's not because I was smarter – it was just because I thought, "Well, this would be really weird." I wanted to be unusual. Like, "I'll go out and do this." It was exactly the opposite of what I'm seeing in my students now, which is that they'll look at the internet and try to do something that looks like something someone else did. It's just so foreign to me. It's like I wanted to make something that didn't look like anything anybody had made before. It is a rebellious feeling and it is very deeply ingrained. The critical thinking part was, yes, I mean, there are a couple of unusual things like, I grew up in a house where I engaged in arguments and conversations about big stuff with my dad, like, all growing up.

That foundation for having a thick skin and being able to hold your own was really something that I definitely don't see in a lot of my students now. But it's something that was unusual even then, I would say, because when I met someone like John Divola or other professors, it's not like I felt like I was on their level, at all, intellectually, but it was that I knew that if I spoke up and I was genuine and trying, they would respond positively.

It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm intimidated by this person." Because that was something my dad was – smarter and older than me, too – but we clashed in good ways and bad ways. All of that translated perfectly into artmaking because it was like having critiques and having someone give you a hard time. And I wanted it.

Another professor I worked with a lot was Uta Barth. I would go into her office, and she would – I mean, she was a fantastic, a very gifted teacher. She encouraged me. But I would say, "I want to know what the problems are," and she would tell me, "So this looks like a fashion shoot," and whatever. I remember lots of comments that they both would give in independent meetings, but there was a strong desire to have a critical conversation. A lot of it is just upbringing. That was what I was used to and what I craved.

You don't get that in a lot of other classes in college actually. Philosophy, oddly enough, was turning me off because it got very academic, not conversational. Also, some of the professors I didn't like at the time.

MR: I didn't know Uta Barth was also a mentor of yours, I guess you could say a teacher. I want to get back to that, but I also want to get back to the idea that your dad comes from a different cultural perspective. That's really interesting, and I want to know how his cultural views of America have impacted you because you said that you butted heads a lot. How do you appreciate his viewpoints and how they impact and influence what you're doing now?

AZ: Just to give a little bit of background about that. Okay, so my dad coming from Egypt was Muslim, and my mom was Catholic. We grew up with zero dogma. We didn't grow up "religious", but both my parents were religious. My dad was an incredibly independent thinker. He's the only person in his family who left the country at 20 and moved across the world. He had to buck up and figure out how to survive in a very difficult situation alone and stuff. He was a tough dude, and he was also just very independent, even from his family. He didn't take bullshit, he didn't like religious dogma.

All that stuff is really important. A lot of his values are things that I shared. He just liked to engage. We've engaging in difficult conversations from the time that I was very young. Probably as soon as I could – like, 10, 12, or something. He always opened it like it was an open invitation to have a conversation. There were very little topics considered to be "off the table". In fact, that's also another weird thing about today, that so many things are getting added to the list of being "off the table" to talk about. That also really rubs me the wrong way.

My mom was the first of her family to go to a four year college too. They both came from really modest backgrounds. Those values were very important to me. I will say that something I've talked about a lot is the idea of feeling alienated. It's not something I thought about consciously at the time, but as I get older, I see that my attitude toward photography, all of it is a hybrid, non-purest thing: analog sure, digital sure, black and white, color.

That's who I am. I don't come from any very homogenous cultural background, it's very mixed. I surf. I grew up in Southern California. I'm half Egyptian. My mom is from the Midwest. My family from the Midwest, we look almost nothing alike but we love each other. There's just all this kind of hybrid attitude is who I am. It translates to my photography and into my attitude about a lot of things. That just has to do with my folks.

MR: Going back to Uta Barth as an influence and instructor. I think Uta Barth takes the common and the things that she is directly exposed to, to an extreme. We actually purchased some of her work that she had done three or four years ago, of curtains that had some light coming through

them. It's that kind of photography where you're just super aware of your surroundings. I can also see that in your work because you go to the skate parks. You're definitely in your environment.

A lot of photographers do this, but it's interesting to have influences like Barth and Divola, who do the same thing. They kind of change it and put their own spin on it. I think a lot of photographers think that they have to construct something very original or travel to some other place. They don't even look in their own backyard for inspiration, but it's right there. How have both Divola and Barth influenced you on how to make use of what you have available?

AZ: Yes, that's a really great observation. Actually, I hadn't thought about both of them in that sense, but absolutely, I think that one of the things that they both maybe subconsciously instilled was that art-making is a process. One should have a sustained engagement in something, and if you are to have a sustained engagement in something, you have to become familiar with it. So, if you live in a certain place, go out on a regular basis and observe.

I moved to Huntington Beach from Los Angeles in 2006. It took me a year to start to figure out how to make pictures here. I just was stunned, that the landscape didn't look interesting, didn't look familiar, didn't know how to make anything – but one time I noticed these lifeguard towers that I biked past every day for a year. Then it's, "Oh, that's an interesting thing. I can make a picture of that. I can make my picture of that, which is different." That's really the process.

I mean Uta is like – her world is actually very small and very big at the same time. She's an interior-focused kind of person. John and I are very good friends still. We're colleagues now at UC Riverside. We are now lifelong friends, and we talk all the time. I printed for both of them when I was a young student and learned a lot.

MR: You might have printed our photograph then.

AZ: I might have. I learned how to be really, really, what is it? Detailed and subtle, in printing and stuff. And they were tough, but it was such a great experience. The other thing is just about – I think they both, maybe it's just a California thing with that education or something, but they both were – I think, this idea of photography being so much about observation, that it's just a skill of observing the world. I have this stupid cell phone, I take pictures all the time. It's just a matter of, I just posted something today on Instagram that there's a building that I've walked past 200 times. Just yesterday, it was the only time the light was interesting and the conditions were such that I wanted to photograph it. I didn't go to some faraway place and make some exotic picture. It's like I just observed something that seemed that it would be an interesting photograph. I say this to students all the time, an interesting place does not necessarily make an interesting photograph. You can go to Disneyland and make a ton of shitty pictures. You can also go outside your front door and make fantastic pictures.

Seeing and experiencing versus photographing are very – it's a cultivated thing. Yes, you're right though. That's something important to both of them. Literally some of the things I've photographed, I gave myself the challenge of – for example, trees, I thought there's no way you're going to make photographs of trees. What a stupid idea.

Then the challenge was yes, go make good photographs of trees, and the same with waves in the ocean. There have been a bunch of subjects like that. It's a challenge actually to figure out how to make good things out of banal stuff.

MR: How did the skate park photography start? You said you were a surfer. I'm assuming you probably did some skateboarding too. I've seen some fantastic skater photography. Some of it is just like surf photography, the way it's done. How did you pull yourself back and say, "No, this space on its own is worth documenting." After I started looking at your work, I noticed that I have seen it in the past, like the lifeguard towers and things like that.

When I saw the skate parks, it seemed like it made complete sense to photograph them. When you start looking closely at them, they do become works of art. And because they are skate parks, it has a whimsical quality. You're working in this whimsical space, but the way you photograph it is very serious and beautiful. Can you talk more about that? Because like I said, it seems obvious, but then when you do it and you do it in the right way, in my opinion, you can really add to it.

AZ: That was a really interesting period of time because I tapped into a bit of pop culture that I don't normally tap into. But I got interested in conversations with the history of skate photography. That's an interesting side note, but it was a bit of a perfect storm, so yes, you're right. I grew up skateboarding – like ramps, backyard ramps. I lived in a very, almost rural place. We didn't have access to anything like those concrete parks. There was one place that was about a 45-minute drive where all the tough older kids went to. I never went, it was just too scary.

When I turned about 30 – I went all through my 20s without skateboarding at all, just doing other things. Around 30 – I had a toddler at that time, and probably one of my many midlife crises – I lived in a place where there was this small skate park about 15 minutes away. And I just started skating again. By myself, I would go midday when it wasn't crowded and just try to feel it out and learn how to skate these concrete parks. I just did that for a couple of years. Then falling gets really – I fell on my tailbone a couple of times. It's like as soon as you start falling, at that age, it gets scary. On and off, skated some of those places with some friends my age for several years, from 30 to 40 probably. I think around 2015, I had the idea, the initial idea. I thought, "Oh, that's pretty interesting."

I think I went to one of the skate parks and tried to photograph and just realized all the obstacles. Kids are there all the time, fences, and I gave up very quickly. I just thought it didn't work. I took a couple of snapshots, "That's not going to work." Put it on the back burner, and then around 2018, I don't know how the idea came again, but I started scouting the local skateparks. "Let me try on my way to Riverside go to this park at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. That's what I did, and it was fantastic.

I was the only person there. I walked into this place completely unmanned. I saw security cameras, and it was dawn, my perfect – I love photographing at dawn. I'm by myself, and I'm basically – it felt like I was hiking in a remote spot. I'm walking through the thing, I understand how they work and just started photographing and really looking at it like landscape. It just became so obvious that all the forms were taken from classical landscape, mountains, valleys.

What I realized, the potential was that I could access these things for a good hour or two when the light was unbelievable – and nobody was there because skaters don't get up early for the most part. That set me off. I started scouting on Google and looking at as many that I could possibly find, running into problems with ones that weren't accessible and things like that. I started writing to the people who ran them and said, "Hey, could I pay \$40 to show up at five in the morning and have you let me in?"

All that stuff pieced it together. That was for about an 18-month period, or two years, focused on California. It was a bit daunting, but I realized that being inside of them was key. I know what you're talking about when you say, "Yes, it seems obvious in a way." But what is not obvious is that most people either just don't see these things up close at all, because there are excavations into the ground that from a street level you miss completely, or if they're a parent, they see them from that fence, they see them from an outsider's perspective. Having experience in the spaces when I was younger, it was very natural for me to crawl inside, and to look at them as someone who skates would look at them. It's actually funny, because when I had to interview Tony Hawk for this thing, it's like skaters don't think about them as sculptural forms or as photographic things at all. They're just looking at a line to skate.

I see that, but I also have a photo background. Again, this hybrid thing, my personality led me into those spaces in an organic way. There's nothing forced about it. I also felt like at a certain point, while I was doing it, I realized that the whole activity is something that I won't be able to do forever, like crawling in and out of those things for another 10 years. I don't think so. I'll be too old to do it physically.

MR: Yes, I thought somebody would lift you in there, it's like there was a little crane.

AZ: Yes, exactly.

MR: The perspective too – the foreground, background relationships, and like you said, those organic forms that have a direct connection to landscape – once you put that photographer's hat on, you realize, "Wow, this form is just really impressive." I love abstract works of art, just the textures that are in there that you get to see, and it has an Art Informel quality that I connect with.

When you see that in the work, it pulls you right in right away. I think for me, it seems obvious. Once you really start looking at this from an artistic viewpoint, it has to be photographed.

AZ: That's always a tricky thing because of my digital alterations. I am coming out of a tradition of documentary photography. In some way, I feel like I am recording a phenomenon in the landscape that may not always be there. Skate parks have gone in and out of fashion. Twenty years from now they could all be filled in. There is a sense that I feel like I'm doing something that is recording a time in history, recording part of the contemporary landscape. But because I'm also removing things, I'm not tied to the document.

But I was going to say this thing about the relationship between what I was doing and traditional skate photography became an interesting conversation – there's both an acceptance and a resistance, depending on who I talk to. I think skateboard photographers do this for a living. I think it's literally perplexing that I would not focus on the person doing the activity.

It's what I noticed. I would look at these pictures. I'm like, "Man, this photographer is very good at what they do." But if there was a piece of concrete in the picture, I'd think, "That's what's interesting about this." I think it's the whole wide-angle skater thing. I'm like, "I'm not going to compete with that." First of all, I'm not interested. Not because I don't think it's good. It's not my thing.

Back to my beginning in photography, it was like, "I'm not going to conform to that way of making pictures. I'm going to make my pictures. This is what I want to do." That's where that came from. There was mostly acceptance. The book came out and some skaters seemed suspicious. Skaters are very territorial. I would get comments on Instagram, like, "Yes, but can he drop-in, and is he an outsider?" I defended myself, but for the most part, it was a very positive response.

MR: I think you touched on this in this last part of the conversation, that you do documentary work. In your practice, you are documenting spaces. Because of that, I think some people get confused with the idea of the archive, and how you are recording a moment in time.

With John Divola and Uta Barth, I feel like they're documenting moments, and I don't know exactly how to explain it. Maybe you can answer, "How do you get that across to your students, or to other artists?" Because I don't think every artist does this, even with photography. I don't think they're really documenting a moment. The idea that photography in and of itself does that automatically, is, I think, ingrained in people's minds. It's recording something, but how do you make that into an artistic document? How do you push it to become something that has artistic value? I guess that's more of what I'm getting at. It goes beyond a document.

AZ: Since I have had the privilege to have so many conversations with John over the years, I think in a way there's both a deep understanding of his practice, but also the saying about killing your idols. I have very important distinctions in the way that I approach things, and we're quite open about it, but for him, it is very important that he is documenting a particular place at a particular time in the world. I think that's very clear. Whether it's performative or not, if he spray paints something, that's happening in space, it's being recorded onto film.

For me, I haven't talked about this at all. I'll be brief, but since 2012, basically, every photograph I've made with rare exception, is made with a composite of many, many photographs. Time is already blown out and expanded. A skate park picture depicts probably 10 minutes passing. Sky light changes, birds come in and out, clouds move across the sky, and all of it is being compressed into something that uses the vocabulary of the document. It knows people's psychology, that people will look at this thing and see it as a photograph and want to make sense of it as a singular moment in time.

You want to see it as a moment in time, and I'm capitalizing on that. I know that too, and so I introduce subtle things in the work that call that idea into question. Also, I'm open about talking about it. I'm like, "Yes, that's a composite. I put that bird there or I didn't." I think that what I've noticed in the last 15 years or so is a slowly shifting attitude about that. There are still a lot of photo purists out there, and I welcome those conversations with people. But I find it conservative, and I'm not very conservative person. I don't know. That's just not my interest.

MR: When you talk about the composite, you're explaining exactly, I think, what I'm talking about, is that, you are making these individual documents that aren't manipulated. That's what photography does, but then you are using those documents in a way to create this artwork.

That's interesting because I love documentary photography. It is its own genre, and it has an absolute value. I like that there are rules for a documentary photographer or even a street photographer, where you don't want to manipulate the image. There's also this other part where you're creating an aesthetic, and you're using the camera. You're using what the camera produces – which is a document regardless of what the final result is – and then adding an aesthetic to it.

Like you said, when you started doing photography you didn't have the rules, and you didn't want to obey the rules probably from the beginning. And so once you realize this is just a tool, it can take you in so many different places, to street photography, documentary, fine art.

I think that's really interesting, understanding that you are an instructor and being able to express to your students and show that this is your tool and that you release yourself from some rules. It's like you said, they go to the internet and they try to find the rules, and then they want to reproduce it.

AZ: I'm teaching this black and white class and these students come to me with their test strips, and they ask, "What do you think?" I started telling them. Now that we're halfway or so through the quarter, I've got the ones who want to express their way of making a picture. I just say, "You asked my opinion, I'm going to tell you how I would make a picture." But I could see it in your eyes, you make your picture. It's such a relief for them because they're just used to checking the boxes about how you're supposed to do something. I'm like, "No, you want to make it contrasty and make that black part go to silhouette? Do it." Know the rules and then break them.

MR: I think that's what is frustrating with this NFT space because there is a lot of going to the internet and reproducing what other people have made. Part of the criticism that we are trying to provide is to suggest, "You genuinely have an interest in photography. Break free, release yourself of trying to duplicate what other people have done."

AZ: You don't know if you're duplicating what someone's done unless you have some desire and interest to know what someone else has done. So this idea of, "I'm just going to do my thing, or I make this work for myself," that's fine, but if you put it out in the world you're just – it's happened to me. I'll make something and someone will say, "You should look at so-and-so's work." If it's too close then I move on.

Even more argument to try to ensure that doesn't happen is to have a deep, personal, genuine engagement in what you're doing, that's coming from you. No one's immune from it, but at the same time, I find it really weird, this whole, "Oh, we're just doing our own new thing," except you're replicating. You're so derivative and you just don't know it, and on top of that you don't care that you're being derivative.

MR: It's extremely exciting. I'm glad more and more people are becoming interested not just in photography but in being creative. If this has allowed them to open that up, we always talk about as artists, it's trying to release that childhood innocence and trying to be expressive and feeling like we have no boundaries. I guess if the NFT space has allowed for that, that's fantastic, but at the same time, explore every aspect of this and don't think that you're doing something that's not been done before.

It's very hard to find something that's not been done before, and being derivative is what you expect. But if you continue at it and push yourself – what I'm afraid of is that we're going to have a lot of one-hit wonders kind of thing, or one-hit not-even wonders but like, oh, I mimic this and found some success, and I'm happy and I'm moving on, instead of what you're talking about, which is really diving into what you want to say.

AZ: Yes, totally.

MR: I'm really interested in UC Riverside as this place that's turning out photographers and having instructors that are fantastic. I don't know the history of UC Riverside. Can you talk about that a little bit because I think it's interesting that both John Divola and Uta Barth are there.

They are relying on their students to continue this legacy also, but you're bringing your own thing to it. I don't see Divola or Barth going to a skate park or even considering that as something worth photographing. I think it's a generational thing. So I'm curious about that and how UC Riverside has created this little niche photography community, and then also, what's coming up for you?

AZ: A brief history is that the art department was founded in the '70s. I want to say, late '60s early '70s. One of the founding artists was Joe Deal. Joe Deal was a New Topographics photographer and legendary in some circles, obviously not as quite as well-known as someone like Robert Adams or the Bechers, but fantastic.

He photographed a lot in the region. I love that work. Joe Deal was generation one. John Divola and Uta Barth were hired in the '80s, maybe early '90s even, and took it very seriously. What's also an important aspect of the area is that we have the UCR California Museum of Photography, which is in Riverside.

The Museum owns the largest collection of glass negatives. It's an incredible institution that not a lot of people actually know about, but it's really a treasure. We have this very strong photographic history – and when John came from CalArts and Uta came after she graduated from UCLA, they were both doing well in their careers. We have a very small concentrated program.

We didn't have a grad program until about 15 years ago. So when I was there the program was only undergraduate. I got a ton of attention being someone interested in the field. I went to UCLA afterwards and studied with James Welling and other people who were there at the time. But I was from the region, which was unusual. John is from LA, and Uta's from Germany and then LA. When I came back to teach after grad school they were both there.

Uta's long retired now, but yes, I feel like I continued that legacy. And so now we teach grad students and we have a new generation of some fantastic people who've come through our program. One of the people who has been getting a lot of attention lately is Mark McKnight, who recently got a tenure track job. He's just all over the place in terms of his work. And we have a bunch of students who've gone on to make great work.

It is a strong suit in our department, we're only eight faculty. We have sculpture and painting and photography, but we've always had a very, very strong interest in photography. I guess what I'll say is that part of what I think I brought to the program was a complete embracing of digital technology with a strong foundation of analog. We have both of those things, where people are just into it. Some of the programs, like, UCLA for a long time, was a complete holdout for digital. They just kept color processors, they kept analog, and no one there was interested in digital. I think that one of the things we at UCR did right was to really try to embrace technology and where it was going. I teach 3D modeling now. I'm interested in pushing that world.

What's going on now? I have a show opening on June 4th, at Diane Rosenstein gallery in Los Angeles. It's a brand new body of work. It's the first finished body of work since the skate park work, *Empty Vessel*. The new work is called *On Being Here*. In short, there are a series of 25 photographs of piers in California. I say piers and then I say, sort of, because they're composites. They're basically composites in the traditional way that I was doing them, with lots of images. But they're also a photograph of the top of the pier and a photograph of the bottom of the pier, spanning over one or two hours, and then composited together.

There's a lot going on in terms of compression of space and time, and it was during the height of the pandemic. There were a lot of internal feelings of wanting to escape in that work. I think of the piers as a perfect symbol of the farthest place you can go from the continental landmass

before you enter into the sea. There's a lot of really romantic, existential stuff going on in that work. It's all color, and it's about 18 months' worth of work, and that's coming up soon.

The book that just came out is a 23-year monograph. Hopefully, we can link to things, but it's a double gatefold design. It's organized chronologically, it's organized by theme, which is building and becoming. Basically, I split my work up into the built landscape or architecture and the natural landscape. Both of those are in quotations because, as we talked about, the whole idea of documenting is in question.

I liked that idea a lot about opening up this thing and sort of seeing different combinations and saying, "Wait a second, why is that in the natural part of the book?" All of that is really interesting. It's a book that I micromanaged, and it's a little bit of something that's been on my mind for five years. That's what's happening.

MR: The book looks like a retrospective of everything that you've been doing over the years. You can have another book 20 years from now and have that as another volume, so that's nice. I really liked it. I haven't gotten a hold of it yet, but I plan to. Amir, I appreciate you coming on and talking to me about your work and a bit about your personal history. This has been great.

AZ: We packed a lot in, and I really appreciate the opportunity.

Rodrigo Valenzuela >

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