

# Artweek



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## Amir Zaki at the MAK Center and Roberts & Tilton

**A**mir Zaki's photographic images present an aspect of Los Angeles that is never seen; while the photographs are familiar, they never could exist. Zaki begins by documenting a facade, a hillside or a swimming pool in the Southern California suburban landscape. Rather than shoot straight on, he usually angles his camera up or down to create a skewed perspective and a sense of unbalance. He then enhances a feeling of vulnerability by exaggerating the angles, making solid structures seem precarious.

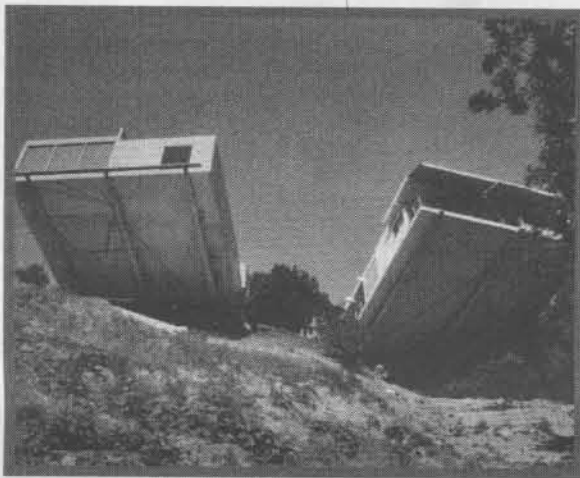
At the MAK Center and at Roberts & Tilton, Zaki's new color photographs present an extreme. The work is architectural and documentary, yet its magic comes from Zaki's subtle manipulations that transform the generic and the banal of the Southern California landscape into something spectacular that triggers the imagination. The images tease: "what if?," "is that possible?" and "can that exist?" Once one recognizes the impossibility of the image, they can indulge in its sensationalism. However, the works transcend Photoshop additions and subtractions—like any artist who is skilled in their medium, the skills disappear leaving a perfectly finished image.

The MAK Center is an exhibition space in a home designed by Rudolf Schindler. Within these low ceilings, short walls and dim light, Zaki carefully filled the space with three series of large and small-scaled photographs. Zaki plays off the confining nature of the architecture and the concrete gallery walls with images of concrete: swimming pools shot from above, cantilevered residences shot from below, and sealed up fireplaces shot straight on. The last of these are small images that depict generic interiors decorated in a wide range of styles and furnishings; the actual opening where the fireplace should be has been digitally filled in with the materials and textures of the rocks and bricks of the surrounding facade. Zaki presents these images as if this is how he found the scene.

More subtle are Zaki's dilapidated backyard swimming pools. Shot from above, they are abstracted into geometric shapes. No longer the symbols of luxury and oasis of fun, they appear as remnants from an apocalypse.

While Zaki looks down upon the swimming pools, he points his camera up to exaggerate the perspective in his images of single-story suburban, modernist homes that cantilever off hillsides and cliffs. Usually supported by vertical beams, these homes now emerge from their bases as if ready for flight. In one photograph (all works are untitled) the house angles up toward the right. The vast understructure is visible; a series of beams and cross-wires that angle up toward the sky. Architectural details are obscured by the enormity of its base, which floats above a few green shrubs and ambiguous wooden retaining walls. Zaki does an impeccable job removing the columns that are essential to structures in earthquake and mudslide prone Southern California.

Simultaneous with the exhibition at the MAK Center, Zaki also showed a



Amir Zaki, *Spring Through Winter*, 2004, Ultrachrome archival photograph, 45" x 57", at the Schindler House, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles.

series photographs, *South ... West ... Cold ... Water ... South ... West ... Studio ... City* at Roberts & Tilton. In these, more conventional homes from Studio City and Coldwater Canyon hover precariously above the natural landscape as an air-plane descends across the sky. The artist taunts his viewers by making images of unbalanced homes alluding to the potential for danger. His fictions undermine the notion of Southern California as utopia and the camera as "truthful." And while the works as a whole are more about the poetics of place and the vulnerability of architecture, the powers of digital manipulation cannot be overlooked.

—Jody Zellen

*Amir Zaki: Spring Through Winter* closed in February at the Schindler House, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, and *Amir Zaki: South ... West ... Cold ... Water ... South ... West ... Studio ... City* closed in February at Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles.

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## Oregon

### Marie Watt at the Hoffman Gallery, Lewis & Clark College

*We are received in blankets and we leave in blankets.*

—Marie Watt

**Q**uestion: Why is a stack of used blankets assumed to be merchandise in a Salvation Army Thrift Store and a sculpture in an art gallery? Thanks to our father of conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp, we know the answer: context, context, context. If that revelation remains elusive, a visit to Lewis & Clark College's Hoffman Gallery is in order. In her recent show there, *Blanket Stories: Receiving*, Portland-based artist Marie Watt dominated the main gallery with three towering eighteen-foot stacks of blankets, called *Three Sisters: Six Pelts, Cousin Rose, Sky Woman and Relations*. Originated in the fall at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in New York, the exhibition was comprised of works either made from or referring to blankets.

Watt is half Seneca, a tribe belonging to the Iroquois Nation, and her work usually incorporates Native American references. Here, she has woven stories, traditions, and rituals into the fabric of the content, if not in the actual material, of the sculptures, wall hangings, prints and photos that fill the gallery's two spacious rooms. Attracted to the idea of blankets as markers in our lives from birth to death, Watt has used both their visual and functional characteristics as the basis for this most recent body of work. Folded and stacked, they become three-dimensional works; used flat they are transformed into wall works, which she thinks of as paintings. The most commonplace, utilitarian and necessary of household belongings, they are conveyers of her continuing interest in evoking human stories and rituals in everyday objects. In her artist's statement Watt writes, "In Native American communities blankets are given away to honor people for being witnesses to important events—births and comings-of-age, graduations, and marriages, nam-

ings and honorings. For this reason it is as much of a privilege to give a blanket away as it is to receive one." In mainstream culture, too, they are popular gifts, especially for newlyweds and babies.

The wall-mounted pieces, or "paintings," easily move from associations with function to those with aesthetic history. Like many modern paintings, some are huge—king-blanket size or larger. In addition, they're abstract. The largest, the complex, colorful *Braid*, measures 128 by 259 inches, and represents a mobius strip, a symbol of infinity.

Dominated by a horizontal figure-eight image on two black wool panels, it was produced by piecing small diamond-shape bits of wool together to create an image reminiscent of a traditional quilt pattern or a braided rug. A major sewing project, it was done, like quilting bees of old, by many hands: A total of seventy-seven women, men and children participated in completing it. The arrangement and the carefully modulated hues were, of course, Watt's, but the participation of so many people as they visited, told stories, and shared experiences, imparted an integral, important meaning to the work. Additionally, it resonates with the many cooperative projects, past and present, that bring about community and enjoyment along with the material benefits that are its purpose.

Other wall pieces have different themes. *Wool of the West*, for example, features target-like circles of red, yellow and blue against a dark background with a side panel made up of green, red, yellow and blue cut pieces. The circles do not represent a target, however; they are, in Watt's visual vocabulary, symbols of unity and completion. A very personal story is embedded in *Edson's Flag*. Along with Army, Navy and Hudson Bay (four point) blankets, it contains sections of the flag that covered the casket of Watt's Uncle Edson Plummer, a World War II veteran.

Marie Watt, *Wool of the West*, 2004, reclaimed wool, satin bind, 12" x 13", at Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art, Lewis & Clark College, Portland.

