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Amir Zaki's photographs give depth to artifice

BY NATE LIPPENS
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ART REVIEW

AMIR ZAKI: At What Point Is the Wax no Longer Wax?

WHERE: James Harris Gallery, 309A Third Ave. S.; 206-903-6226

WHEN: Through June 2; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday

Amir Zaki's mission to unsettle the West continues with "At What Point Is the Wax no Longer Wax?" at James Harris Gallery. The suite of 12 black-and-white photographs depict isolated trees and bushes against dark backgrounds. The dark blue-greens of his color work have been replaced by velvety black expanses with bare branches and tree stumps foregrounded like startled society portraiture.

In the past his depopulated pictures have shown buildings floating and sliding, mausoleum-like suburbs and slices of landscape. "At What Point Is the Wax no Longer Wax?" offers a desiccated terrain up close and impersonal. It's nature truncated, turned malleable and unstable. The trees and shrubs, stripped of leaves, are isolated shapes that seem like props, set in place rather than rooted. Against deep black that acts less as backdrop than as envelope, atmosphere and subject, the trees and stumps are settled on grass articulated down to each blade. The untitled photographs question nature, fabrication and authenticity in equal measure.

The Southern California that Zaki works within is a place of artifice, and even though

the state's past is comparatively short, as a mythological place and a destination for collective dreams it has made up for brevity with mythic abundance. Zaki, an Angeleno, parses the dream of self-actualization and reinvention promised by California: Both the state and its state of being are ahistoric.

He reckons with previous California photographers such as Wynn Bullock and Edward Weston, but his concerns are conceptual and his formalism comments on his subjects rather than belies it. His relationship to these landscape photographers isn't a lineage so much as a shared meridian. Zaki's aesthetic is beyond purely photographic. His challenge is the object itself. It isn't whether the "truth" of an image is important but why a "true" object is still necessary and why it is

yearned for: Is it nostalgia? Are we in love with homesickness? Is faked authenticity more potent than authentic falsity?

In the best photographs, Zaki upsets notions of documentation and documentary, as he has done in the past, such as by creating images of fictive locations in projects like LVHV (Lake Valley Hollywood Village), a city he made up, "documenting" it by combining photos from two neighborhoods. The images were cropped to suggest mausoleums, the kind of middle-class place where women with ash-blond bubble hairdos medicate themselves and the noir of Chandler, Ellroy and Lynch barely subverts itself. A place unadventurous generation after generation confuses for comfort and "making it."

"Wax" takes this notion further, stripping the comforts of noir – the expectancy we have for its meanings, the easy-reader critique of "normal life," the fractures and fault lines of middle-class life and suburban angst – for stage sets from Joan Didion's nightmares of her native California. These photos are a kind of scorched earth, a place where the Santa Ana winds can be felt in full. Zaki achieves this by polluting ideas about documentation; by using what filmmaker Werner Herzog calls "ecstatic truth," a finer, more poetic grain of capturing something essential.

Staring into the night blackness surrounding boldly foregrounded dead trees and bushes, it is clear: There is no such thing as non-fiction and nothing is truer than fiction.

Herzog has said, "Facts are shallow." Zaki shows that artifice has roots.

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TIM EITEL

Speaking Friday night at 7 at the Frye Art Museum (free admission) is Tim Eitel, one of seven East German painters who turned their backs on the contemporary scene to create their own scene, now known as the Leipzig School. "Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings From the Rubell Family Collection" continues at the Frye through June 3.

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