

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE

Amir Zaki Publishes 23 Years of Photography in New Monograph, 'Building+Becoming'

The book weaves stories that capture both nature and architecture. It goes on sale on April 26

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With a camera in hand, Amir Zaki captures California's astonishing beauty — spaces that become precise moments unveiled only at dawn.

"Building+Becoming," a new monograph by Zaki, an art professor at UC Riverside, will be co-published by X Artists' Books and DoppelHouse Press. The book showcases a body of work that spans over 23 years. The 272-page monograph is designed as a double gatefold that opens to a full width of roughly 40 inches, allowing the reader to explore images and texts in different combinations.

In this monograph, Zaki weaves stories that capture both nature and architecture. He visits these spaces before the morning's full sun interrupts the silence and emptiness found in cities, beaches, or any of the landscapes where he places himself to capture environments that are illuminated by the early morning's soft light. The title of the book, "Building+Becoming," takes readers on an interactive journey as they simultaneously open the double gatefold pages to find striking images of trees, skateparks, ocean waves, or scenery that makes the reader stop to appreciate the serenity captured in those images. He prefers to photograph landscapes, not people, he said.

"The quality of light in a photograph is something I hold dear," said Zaki, who has been photographing California since he was a teenager living in Beaumont, California. He attended UCR and graduated in 1996 with a major in art and a philosophy minor.

“Although I started my career photographing very late at night making minutes-long exposures, I most often now photograph in the very early morning, for the dual benefit of capturing soft, beautiful light, as well as the solitude this time of day affords. (Both late night and early morning have similar psychological benefits for us solitary folks),” he said. “I photograph alone for the most part, and often when I show up somewhere, I am the only person around. I frequently experience a bit of an adrenaline buzz from this. For some reason, it feels like I am getting away with something, and that merely my presence in that particular place and time with my camera is a form of transgression. Photography is a kind of theft in that way. I steal the light while others are asleep.”

Knowing light is the essence of his work, Zaki admits he’s always aware of his surroundings, always looking at buildings and landscapes and imagining what a photograph might look like. His work has benefited from the help of mentors such as John Divola, a UCR art professor, and Uta Barth, professor emeritus with UCR’s Department of Art, and inspired by many photographers, including Roy DeCarava.

Over the past decade Zaki has been using a process that involves taking dozens of high-resolution images of a particular view or scene, then stitching them together to produce a single image. To help with that he uses a tripod head called a Gigapan, which serves to move the camera left and right, up and down in a precise manner.

“The locations I choose for my photographs are just grown out of experiences. I have always found ways to photograph relatively near where I live to sustain a long, engaged process over several months or years,” said Zaki, who has been teaching at UCR since 2000.

Toward the end of the book a section titled “Stealing Light” is Zaki’s personal story, formatted in a Q&A with artist and art consultant, Corrina Peipon. Through this Q&A the reader gets an intimate understanding of what inspires Zaki, and allows a closer look at his family, career, and life as a professor. This sculptural monograph also include an essay by authors Jennifer Ashton and Walter Benn Michaels.

In the Q&A with Peipon, Zaki explains the importance observation and movement, both at the personal level and in his work.

“Movement through space is experienced in time. Driving, walking, standing, surfing, skating, and sitting all affect how one experiences time. The mind/body practices I have dedicated much of my life to, like yoga, tai chi, and meditation, all cultivate an acute awareness and embodiment of time,” Zaki said. “I consider the idea and the experience of time quite often. Photography is always about time, either implicitly or explicitly. Light and time; those are it.”