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Why these photos of California's coast are not what they seem

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Amir Zaki, "Built in 1872. Damaged in 1878, 1887, 1921, 1973, 1983, 1986, 1987. Renovated 1928, 1930," 2021, archival photograph.(Diane Rosenstein Gallery)

Seductive estrangement

Pandemic disorientation is a surprising subtext of seductive new landscape photographs by **Amir Zaki**. Twenty-two color photographs at **Diane Rosenstein Gallery**, all made in 2021 as urban lockdowns and domestic quarantines were underway, show shoreline piers along the California coast. Although the occasional seabird does show up, the piers are unpopulated by human activity. Unpopulated, that is, except for the deft hand of the artist, who creates a subtle sense of estrangement.

They take a visual cue from the celebrated minimalist taxonomy of the late German photographers **Bernd and Hilla Becher**, who systematically recorded water towers, blast furnaces, grain elevators and other industrial structures, or the California bungalows and dingbat apartments photographed by **Judy Fiskin**. It takes a bit of looking to realize that the large-scale, frontally composed pictures, most 2 feet wide and 2.5 feet high, aren't what they at first appear to be.

Each colorful landscape image is cut in half by a wide band that goes edge to edge — what appears to be the blunt end of the pier. Top and bottom seem to go together, mostly because we casually assume that a camera's lens captures a transparent view of an actual scene. Here, however, something appears to be quietly out of whack.

Each pier is the site of a restaurant, a sport fisherman's outpost, a Red Cross station, a tourist lookout or some other mundane use, all of them shuttered and closed down. The top perspective is just above eye level, so that the raised platform's function is on clear view. Below, where massive wood or concrete structural pilings hold up the pier, a scene of roiling Pacific seawater, lazy waves or wet sand spreads out.

Slowly it dawns that there is no way for a person to get from the ground up onto the pier — no stairs, no ladder, no gentle rise where the platform might meet a bluff. Sorry, you can't get there from here. Zaki's seamless compositions digitally stitch together separate photographic imagery. The horizontal band, repeated in all the photographs, is a patch. For all a viewer knows, the pier and the supporting posts may or may not even be from the same location, such is the otherwise convincing fiction of the scene.

A pier is a meeting ground between two distinct realms — sea and land. As the catastrophic viral pandemic of COVID-19 was raging around the globe last year, killing more than 6.3 million people (so far), Zaki was out photographing at the plane of transition where, a few hundred million years ago, life crawled out from the sea. The L.A. artist's pictures record the site of the arrival of an evolutionary process whose lineage created us — a place that has left us cut off today.

Zaki titled each photograph with the year a pier was built, dutifully followed by notations of the years in which the structure was seriously damaged or had to be rebuilt, given the force of nature's destructive power. The oldest California pier was constructed in 1872 (in Ventura) and, according to the title, was damaged in 1878, 1887, 1921, 1973, 1983, 1986 and 1987, with renovations in 1928 and 1930.

All is not lost, however, as a bit of curdled hope peeks over the horizon. The piers in the pictures being fabrications, what you see is not documentary. Zaki's shrewd and elegant digital photographs offer the newest pier renovation, so life does go on — at least for the moment. Whether that digital sleight-of-hand ranks as construction, damage or perhaps both is up to you.

Tuesdays-Saturdays, through July 16, at Diane Rosenstein Gallery, 831 N. Highland Ave., L.A. (323) 462-2790.