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Amir Zaki: 'Nothing to Say'

A Master at Compositing

by Jody Zellen



Amir Zaki is a **Southern California**-based artist who uses digital photography to scrutinize the natural as well as the built landscape to make pictures in the documentary tradition that transform what actually exists “in the world.” He begins by capturing his surroundings with a camera (sometimes also using a **GigaPan**, a device for stitching many digital images together into one). Using other digital tools, he transforms these images into something other than reality. At first glance, Zaki’s photographic images often appear “normal”, but upon closer examination something is off — added, subtracted or perhaps both — causing pause and reflection between what is pictured and what is expected. In his series **On Being Here**, (2022), Zaki architecturally skewed the perspective of piers. For **Empty Vessels**, (2019) his subject was skateparks where he manipulated the forms to emphasize their bunker-like architecture and in **Getting Lost**, (2018) he illuminated and photographed trees at night, capturing them so they seemed to be in conversation with each other.

In his exhibit **Nothing to Say**, he presents two new series: **Signs** and **Trees**. The photographs in **Signs** feature outdoor commercial signage devoid of text, presented as architectural monumental structures that jut into the sky. The images that comprise **Trees** similarly tower into the sky against a variety of cloud filled backgrounds. Looking closely reveals isolated birds nested within the leaves or perched atop the branches. Taking the title of the show literally — and Zaki’s titles do direct the reading of his works — the signage without words does have “nothing to say.” **Beautician** (all works 2023) is an altered **Norms Restaurant** sign where Zaki has digitally removed the letters— **N, O, R, M, S**—

and replaced each of the original five white shapes that supported the letters with light hues ranging from yellow, cyan and magenta to a soft black. The newly colored and empty sign appears sculptural against the somber yellow-gray sky (the way **Los Angelesskies** often appear at dawn or dusk). In the lower left-hand corner, an airplane appears as a tiny spec flying out of the frame.

The Designer references a **Modernist** era, **Art Deco**-style sign. Shot from below and looking up at an angle rather than straight on, the photograph features a white pole that rises from the bottom of the image. The pole is bisected by three ovals with orange fronts, above which is a large rectangular box filled with a delicate pattern of small orange dots to the left, and empty space to the right where letters would have been. In **The Painter**, a rusted pole supports six rounded rectangles that at one time advertised a restaurant or business, but in Zaki's rendering, the letters are gone and each rectangle has been filled in with a single color: red, green, light orange, cyan, off white and purple, becoming a geometric abstraction against a pale blue sky.

Zaki never depicts the ground or base of the sign, but rather presents them as flattened shapes against the sky. Once the words are removed, Zaki either fills the empty space — inside the signs structure— with sky or opaque colors. Although these signs no longer advertise places or things, they do communicate and engage not only with Zaki's past works, but with the history of art, as well as with the shrinking boundaries between photography and digital technologies. In addition to the signs, Zaki also displays a series of photographs, also called **Trees**. The **Trees** are named after family members and could perhaps be thought of as portraits or tributes to those close to him. Like the signs, they are shot from below, have no anchors (ground or trunks) and enter from the bottom of the frame where they intersect with an image of the sky. In **Dori**, Zaki presents a tree with brown, rust and green colored leaves, and peeling bark against a light blue sky filled with billowing pink-orange clouds. Sitting on a small branch on the left side of the picture is a solitary bird. Similarly, in **Mateo**, Zaki includes a bird resting on a thin branch at the top of the tree.

While it is hard to identify the species, perhaps it is the birds rather than the trees that Zaki is pairing with family members. Nevertheless, though these image are silent, it is possible to imagine the birds singing— perhaps even to the ones that populate the other pictures. Were the birds actually in the trees when Zaki shot the pictures? Probably not, but their presence gives the photographs a surreal aura. While a photograph cannot replicate a bird's song, Zaki's juxtapositions, be it birds and trees or wordless, signs still communicate. As the tree photographs represent an extended family, and the birds a focal point of each image, it appears that they and Zaki have "something," rather than "nothing" to say.

Zaki is a master at compositing— adding as well as erasing aspects of images he shoots— transforming the observable into something hyperreal, imagined and fantastical. Throughout this disparate series, he has converted the natural world as well as the built environment into images and scenes that depict impossible, but believable places. He consistently transforms that which is objective into something subjective, beautiful and unexpected and this is what sets his work apart.