

Flash: Amir Zaki

June 1–July 27, 2013

This is not a photograph of a tree. It is an impression of a tree created by an artist aided with a robot. Amir Zaki's *Tree Portrait #16*—part of his new body of work “Time moves still.” (2012)—depicts a deciduous plant, carefully framed to encompass every outer tip of spindly branches that protrude from a densely leaved crown. To make it, Zaki produced a grid-based series of image-captures with a GigaPan machine, and the

many photographs that resulted were stitched together with image editing software.

Contained within the picture is an uncanny record of changing weather and light: shadow shrouds parts of the plant while other sections are illuminated by the sun; a leaf near the center is blurred by a breeze even as it is surrounded by precisely defined foliage. In this



Amir Zaki, *Tree Portrait #16*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and ACME., Los Angeles.

way the picture holds an immense quantity of detail, but upon close inspection comes apart as so many fragments. In another distinct glitch, a branch reaching into the sky is rendered in high detail while its leafy tip is completely (visually) severed by a gust of wind. “Time moves still.” is full of such discrepancies.

The strangeness of *Tree Portrait #16* owes not only to the fact that it is composed of images made successively over time. Though each of the dozens of photographic fragments describes a recognizable part of the tree, the logic of perspective is compromised by their assembly. As a result Zaki's pictures only resemble their referents to a degree, indeed at times grossly distorting the trees' forms.¹ Instead these portraits map more closely the human project of looking—eyes in constant motion—than the singular creation of image by camera. The picture brings together multiple perspectives that span a quarter of an hour (a considerably longer duration than a typical click of the shutter), recording breezes and shadows as they pass through the tree's branches and over its surface, and evoking a sense of stillness and movement. What is heightened is a truth about the subject's surface—an Impressionist's approach more than a realist's—and the raw *feeling* of a tree in time and space.

This is a picture of a tree. The quotidian subject is severed from roots and ground, the body of its trunk disappearing beyond the frame, and set against a flat sky; all distractions are eliminated to enable careful looking. Crisp lines describe branches, bark, and leaves in rich monochromatic tones. Every picture is a distinct portrait of an individual plant. “I approached each tree as I would approach a portrait of someone with whom I had a personal relationship,” the artist reflects, “by spending extended periods of time observing and staring before photographing.”² Accordingly, each subject is afforded its own treatment: the uneven pruning of a bushy evergreen is heightened by the asymmetrical framing employed in *Tree Portrait #17*; the gnarly branches of a eucalyptus evoke the skinny limbs of an old man in *Tree Portrait #30*; the dense leafy fullness of another is set low within the bottom half of the picture plane in *Tree Portrait #18*, clear sky stretching far above its uppermost branches. Evinced abuse by the elements and meddling at the hands of humans, in these

pictures the trees are undeniably living, a motley crew of resilient California offspring of so many imported varieties. They are both unique subjects and but singular within a larger (implied urban) landscape.

Printed at ample size, the works in this series are intricately informative in their hyper-real depiction of surface. The pictorial space is flat, the depth of field large. “Time moves still.” discloses Zaki's influence by the Düsseldorf School. His approach in photographing urban trees falls between the typological studies of built structures by Bernd and Hilla Becher in the 1960s–70s, and Thomas Ruff's straight-on portraits of people made in his studio in the early 1980s. To this classificatory mode Zaki brings a decidedly Southern Californian spin: an interest in extended time, deep focus, and animism borrowed from Eastern philosophy.

By training his attention so intently on the natural landscape, Zaki demands that the viewer consider a longer, slower time. Even while undergoing the fifteen minutes of photographing this portrait required—a relatively short span of its long life—the tree is not static but living, its branches growing, its leaves withering. The picture captures its growth and dying.

Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions

Notes

1. Conversation with the artist, April 2013.
2. Amir Zaki, “Time moves still.” (artist statement), dated February 2013 (www.amirzaki.com, accessed May 2013).

Amir Zaki is an artist who lives and works in Southern California. He has an ongoing interest in the rhetoric of authenticity as it relates to photography as an indexical medium, and is committed to exploring the transformative potential of digital technology to disrupt that presumed authenticity. His work has been included in exhibitions at the Orange County Museum of Art, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, and New Museum of Contemporary Art, among elsewhere. Zaki is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art at UCR. He earned his MFA at UCLA in 1999.

Flash! is a contemporary art series organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *Flash: Amir Zaki* is curated by Joanna Szupinska-Myers and is the inaugural exhibition project of the series.