

EMPTY VESSEL



AMIR ZAKI



Concrete Vessel 4, 2018, 36" x 45", archival pigment photograph

**THE THIRD SPACE
IN
EMPTY VESSEL –
AMIR ZAKI**

BY TYLER STALLINGS

Empty Vessel presents two new bodies of photographs by Amir Zaki featuring either vacant landscapes of skateparks or still lifes of shards from broken, ceramic containers. The shards are clearly from earthenware pots, but both subjects are “vessels” in that the skateparks are sunken into the clay of the earth. Hung in proximity to one another, sometimes juxtaposed, the images generate a complex conversation around the notion of “emptiness,” which includes removing presuppositions from one’s mind about what one is about to experience, is experiencing, or has experienced. By disentangling the mind of one’s own stories and worries, one can be open to other possibilities presented by perception itself. Thus Zaki’s *Empty Vessel*, as an exhibition, provides a platform for contemplating duality and the more ambiguous third space that exists between linked elements which cannot exist without each other: form and emptiness; function and aesthetics; holding and letting go; containing and emptying.

**PHOTOGRAPHY
AND SCULPTURE**

Empty Vessel and much of Zaki’s work over the past two decades explores the relationship between photography and sculpture, a thread running throughout the last century of art and which the Museum of Modern Art brought to attention with its 1970 exhibition, *Photography into Sculpture*. Notably, the majority of the twenty-three American and Canadian artists included were from the West Coast. The fact of their

leading edge was perhaps the result of a robust photographic experimentation in the region, exemplified by Robert Heinecken's influence as founder in 1962 of the photography program at UCLA, Zaki's graduate school alma mater. In 2010, MoMA presented a different perspective on the topic, *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today*, which demonstrated the long history and ongoing influence of photography and sculpture's relationship.

In the 1998 anthology *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, edited by Geraldine Johnson, she describes the way in which many twentieth-century sculptors have worked in dialog with photographs. Sometimes they aid in the formulation of the sculpture, other times photographs become both documents and works in and of themselves. She cites artists such as Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, David Smith, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Robert Mapplethorpe, Richard Serra, and Jeff Wall. One of Zaki's direct influences is the massive catalog of Brassai's photographs of Picasso's sculptures, *Brassai/Picasso: Conversations Avec La Lumière* (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000) that gives each artist equal authorial quality.

Other reference points over the past century include Karl Blossfeldt's (1865–1932) photographs of plants that re-present them as sculpture-like objects, functioning both as taxonomy and as decorative inspirations; the Surrealist artists' fascination with extreme close-ups and other cropping techniques for transforming the everyday into the unreal, as in the collaboration between Brassai and Salvador Dalí with their *Sculptures Involontaires* (1933). After World War II, Walker Evans (1903–1975) created a series based on tools, also re-imagining them as sculptural objects. And in the 1960s and '70s, Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (1934–2015) began their decades-long project of photographing industrial buildings and structures in Germany, such as barns and water towers, organizing these structures into conceptual typologies with a standardized methodology for framing, which brought to light an unintended, sculptural monumentality. This is just a partial list, but it provides some foundational twentieth-century references for members of Zaki's generation, who have evolved their own practices.

Over the last several years, Zaki has utilized a dialogic, exhibition-design tactic of intermingling two different aesthetics and bodies of photographic work in the same show. For example, in his 2017 show at ACME gallery in Los Angeles titled *Formal Matter*, he comingled photographs of "Rocks" and "Carvings." The "Rocks" series presents iconic, monumental outcrops along the California coast (sometimes coinciding with Zaki's treks to various surf spots). Their textured, rocky surfaces register with exquisite hyperreality. Zaki's subject matter

of natural coastal forms and his emphasis on capturing surface detail exists in conversation with Edward Weston's photographs of early-to mid-twentieth century California. However, the detail of Zaki's images is mystifying because the rocky surfaces never seem to go out of focus, no matter how closely one approaches the surface of the print. This effect is a result of Zaki using a GigaPan mechanism connected to his camera, which allows him to take fifty to sixty photographs, for example, of a landscape feature and then stitch them all together digitally to create a single, highly detailed image. It is akin to a very long exposure, such as that of Edward Weston's bell peppers, which took hours to make and transformed the peppers into what seem to be table-top, biomorphic sculptures that have been carved by a person, rather than which have come out of the soil.

Zaki's comfort level with the ambiguous verisimilarities of his photographs underscores that he is from a generation of early-2000s photographers who embrace the transition from analog, darkroom techniques to the digital, claiming that they are making only an image and, in a sense, being less reverent about the indexical quality of a photograph. For Zaki and others, it has become more relevant to ask whether something *could be*, rather than what *was*.

Zaki has continued to use the GigaPan for the images of the skateparks in *Empty Vessel*. One of his foremost realizations when he began the work was that he needed to be down inside the bowls or walking among the geometric, concrete shapes in order to make the kinds of images that he wanted. He photographed in the early morning hours, his favorite light of the day, and luckily also a time when most skateboarders are still sleeping. For each photograph of a skatepark, he would shoot thirty to seventy-five individual images and stitch them together later. The resulting series (titled "Concrete Vessels") have wide-angle views that are not affected by the warping edges of a wide-angle lens, since each individual image is slightly telephoto and the GigaPan moves side-to-side in rows, up and down in columns, capturing a large grid of images within the programmed dimensions of a plane. The details of the poured concrete's surfaces are sumptuous, much like the "Rocks" photos.

The second body of work in *Empty Vessel* depicts shards from broken, ceramic containers like bowls, cups, and vases. The broken pieces are a result of an intentional, performative act by Zaki, whereby he bought ceramics from various sources, such as yard sales or thrift stores, and would later drop each one, letting them break into pieces on his concrete, backyard patio. He then selected a shard based on an intrinsically interesting shape, but also one that might evoke aspects of

the skateparks in miniature form. And, of course, once the dialog was established between these bodies of work, Zaki may have also selected details of the skateparks that would then reference the broken shards.

Zaki photographed the pieces as if they were small sculptures. This process was not dissimilar from his work to create his simulated wooden "Carvings" in 2017, displayed with "Rocks" in *Formal Matter*. "Carvings" is a series that appears to be of wood planks warped and twisted into tabletop-sized sculptures. Their apparent veracity belies the fact they are, in fact, digital fabrications; their textures are derived from GigaPan images of large sheets of wood veneer, and the forms are created using complex algorithms and 3D-modeling software. In the current show, Zaki has constructed the images of the broken ceramics (a series titled "Broken Vessels") by photographing them under certain environmental conditions — using natural light filtered through palm tree fronds in his backyard during the late afternoon, and when it was moderately windy so the light and shadows changed from moment to moment. It is a simpler process that contrasts with the complexity of shooting skateparks. But, when Zaki intermingles these two bodies of works, the experience of walking through the exhibition offers a comparative study of macro and micro environments, between nature and artifice, between stillness and motion, permanence and impermanence, being and nothingness.

PERFORMANCE

In his images of the skateparks, Zaki focuses on the ironic absence of human athleticism and performance. And he does not document his performative actions of dropping the pots in the air, but rather presents their aftermath. In both cases, although absent from the final images, the human act of *doing* is latent and implied, though the emphasis of the images is on the *being* of the objects.

Zaki's subject matter of exurban and suburban skateparks could suggest some kinship with skateboard photography, such as C.R. Stecyk's documentation of the Z-boys skating the empty swimming pools in the draught-times of 1970s Southern California. However, such photos always prioritized and highlighted the performances of the skateboarders, their tricks, the emblems on the undersides of their boards, and the environs where they hung out. Fundamentally, this kind of work is a variation on street photography, to which Zaki's work does not belong. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in the context of skateboard photography, Zaki's photographs are perhaps the first to focus on skateparks, that is, the built environments created for skateboarders.

Knowing that Zaki tosses his ceramic pots into the air and selects a shard from the detritus does bring to mind the photographic works of some contemporaries, who also consider the shattering of ceramic vessels as metaphors about fragility, impermanence, and how destruction can lead to transformation. Ori Gersht's photographs, for example, capture on high-speed film the moment when a vase of flowers explodes. For Gersht, they are symbols of how something peaceful can be changed suddenly by violence and are part of a larger conceptual oeuvre in which he contemplates the bloodshed of contemporary wars and ethnic skirmishes. Ai Weiwei's infamous project, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* from 1995, also comes to mind. The work consists of a series of photographs depicting Ai's performative act of dropping a 2000-year-old ceremonial urn. The work can be read as a political commentary about who creates and owns history and heritage, taking into consideration the centuries of Chinese culture and the way Chinese people are being shattered too by the current authoritarian, communist regime.

TRANSCENDENCE

In past bodies of work, one of Zaki's main techniques for transforming familiar architecture into uncanny sculptural objects is through the sly removal of details in post-production with Photoshop. For example, in his series "Relics," which features lifeguard towers along the beach, he removed architectural elements like guardrails and signage. For a viewer, the towers become odd, somewhat alienating sculptures as their sense of functionality comes into question, creating images of surreal verisimilitude. Zaki employs the same decision-making with the skatepark images, such as removing graffiti, decals, company logos, and sometimes background distractions, as well as an occasional figure. The effect of removing outside references transforms the concrete bowls, hills, and angular shapes into utopian-like, Brutalist architectonic monuments, with the suggestion that these bizarre, architectural structures are dotted throughout California. The images seem to depict architecture created by a people that we recognize as ourselves, yet from which we now feel alienated.

Zaki's emphasis on the built-environment of Southern California, often along the coastal region, bears some connection with the groundbreaking 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. Photographers such as Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal accentuated urban sprawl, suburbs, and industrial parks, focusing on their banality, largely through their repetitive forms and lack of

ornamentation. More importantly, the exhibition represented a shift away from the landscape photography that preceded it, such as in Ansel Adams' photographs taken in Yosemite, often absent of people or hints of encroaching buildings, preserving an aura of untouched wild country and depicting a transcendent landscape. Viewers of Zaki's current exhibition may recognize the Yosemite reference in one particular skatepark image.

There can also be an argument made for Zaki's skateparks and ceramic shards sharing some connection to Earth Art from the 1960s and '70s and the many Earthworks located throughout the American West. Consider Nancy Holt's tubular *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) or Light and Space artist James Turrell's *Roden Crater* (construction ongoing) and Turrell's Skyrooms — the rims of the openings akin to the rims of the skateparks when one is standing down in the concrete bowls. In the act of looking up, whether from within Turrell's crater or the bowl of a skatepark, one's perception of the sky above is altered, as if viewing a disorienting painting in motion, to the point that one may lose a sense of the bodily self.

Some of the formations in the skateparks also bring to mind the work of Michael Heizer's ongoing project that began in 1972, *City*. Situated in an arid region of Nevada, it is a massive sculpture that is one and a quarter miles long and a quarter-mile wide, composed of dirt, sand, and concrete. In the same vein as Heizer, Zaki evokes the aesthetics of Minimalism and monuments from ancient cultures, such as Mayan pyramids, with his eye for composition and his decontextualization of the skateparks' locations and function. Whether miles-long compacted earth, concrete skateparks, or close-ups on ceramic shards, they all feel like sculptures or images of monuments for an unknown future humanity.

Despite sharing kinship with these disparate photographic and sculptural heritages, Zaki's approach in *Empty Vessel* to the undulating, concrete bowls, rises, and angular forms of the skateparks is to emphasize their sense of emptiness and as potential places for meditative stillness rather than the action of flips in the air off the rims. In this sense, the influence of two other photographers can be detected as interwoven into Zaki's *Empty Vessel*. The first is the California-situated, modernist aesthetic of Edward Weston. Conceivably, if Weston were alive today, he most likely would have embraced the GigaPan for its ability to assist in creating a photographic image with the same, if not exponentially increased, level of detail as his trees and rocks at Point Lobos, California, or as his smaller still lifes. But, more importantly, Weston possessed the ability to transform the life force of nature by wrangling its inherent, life energy into sculptures of stillness —

photographic images full of detail requiring a viewer's attention, giving a moment's rest for a restless mind. This is a precedent to Zaki's playful use of broken, ceramic shards that become vessels for mindfulness rather than for water, food, or flowers.

The other photographer who comes to mind as an important figure in relation to Zaki is Hiroshi Sugimoto. Much of Sugimoto's work explores how we perceive time, such as his "Theaters" series from the late 1970s, where he traveled to old, grand movie theaters and drive-ins, set up a 4x5 camera, and took long exposures of movies as they played in their entirety. The resulting black and white images are of the theater's interior and the screen aglow with white light. The images suggest that these are places where people go to meditate on the emptiness of the large, glowing wall before them, rather than to absorb an onslaught of imagery laden with someone else's story rather than one's own. Zaki and Sugimoto share the sensibility that emptiness itself is a mode of perception.

THE SURFACE OF DEPTH

In a sense, just as Zaki has emptied out the functionality of the skatepark or the ceramic pot, the same could be said here about the idea of a photograph too. Zaki is after a sense of transcendence, as in past landscape photography, but the purity of the image is irrelevant. In fact, it may be incomplete to call Zaki's works photographs. They are images made with photographic vocabulary but not tied to "what actually was." Here, Zaki's work provides an opportunity for letting go of controlling definitions and categories. Perhaps these are not simply photographs of skateparks and ceramic shards. Rather, they are images of differently scaled vessels for holding the imagination.

Zaki underscores this intention with his selective use of matte paper and the absence of glazing within his frames; instead, the surface of the print is exposed. The combination of the extreme detail, the uncanniness of the architectural subject matter created through decontextualization or recontextualization, and the quality of the substrate causes one to wonder if his prints may be drawings. If you empty your mind of needless categorization and the story of art through the centuries, then you will have an opportunity to see what is in front of you: a vessel to contain your emptiness.

EMPTY VESSEL



AMIR ZAKI



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Concrete Vessel 49, 48" x 60", 2018, archival pigment photograph
Broken Vessel 40, 48" x 60", 2018, archival pigment photograph
Concrete Vessel 130, 24" x 30", 2018, archival pigment photograph
Broken Vessel 74, 24" x 30", 2018, archival pigment photograph
Broken Vessel 22, 48" x 60", 2018, archival pigment photograph
Concrete Vessel 10, 48" x 60", 2018, archival pigment photograph



Broken Vessel 29, 36" x 48", 2018, archival pigment photograph

FIRST THERE IS A MOUNTAIN

BY CORRINA PEIPON

When I first began to practice, the mountains and rivers were simply mountains and rivers. After I advanced in my practice, the mountains and rivers were no longer mountains and rivers. But when I reached the end of my practice, the mountains and rivers were simply mountains and rivers...

— Seigen Ishin

I don't remember exactly when I noticed images of broken bowls coming into my Instagram feed from Amir Zaki's account, but I remember that it was somewhat jarring. Amid earnest documentation of his tai chi and yoga practices, adoring snapshots of his wife and children, notable moments in heated tennis tournaments, travel photos, and the occasional shot of a finished artwork, the broken bowls were something apart, like punctuation marks. These interruptions were somehow both neutral and affected, which is why, I think, they struck me as they did. And then there was their violence, which seemed at odds with Amir's temperament. Though the resulting images are tranquil, the process of breaking the bowl is intentional, not accidental. It requires setting one's mind to committing an act of destruction.

The pictures were unexpected in the history and progression of Amir's work, too, as I was aware of it: I think of landscape and the built environment when I think of his work, not arranged still lifes. But as I processed my surprise at this turn in his work, I finally saw the spiritual sense in the images, if not yet the aesthetic or conceptual kinship with previous work. Amir's study of Zen Buddhist ideas and practices was familiar to me, and I saw the empty vessel as a symbol of openness to the possibility of enlightenment. The empty vessel *is* the Buddha-nature. The broken bowls suggest the foolishness of attachment, and so the broken vessel, too, *is* the Buddha-nature, perhaps represented

even more fully: imperfect, non-striving, maybe even in a state of becoming. If these broken ceramic vessels are in a state of becoming, then where will that evolution lead? What will they become? A philosophical question becomes a formal one. In considering this question, the transformation of the utilitarian object into a photographic subject comes into focus. One thing is destroyed to create another. Use gives way to contemplation.

When he started breaking bowls and photographing the evidence, Amir was already following a parallel impulse to photograph empty skateparks. The shapes, the images, and the language overlapped; most obviously in the word "bowl" itself, referring to both the ceramic objects and to skatepark features that resemble half of a giant sphere impressed into the ground. The skatepark images made a more immediate kind of sense to me. The built environment and its interface with nature has been a primary concern for Amir over time. From lifeguard stands and retaining walls, to impossibly cantilevered buildings and trees pruned to avoid electrical wires, Amir shows us the southern California landscape as a collaboration between humans and nature in pictures that can be at turns stunningly beautiful and somewhat heartbreaking. Amir took up skateboarding at the age of twelve, at a time when the sport was evolving from the relatively simple "street surfing" of the 1960s and early-1970s into the fast, acrobatic, rebellious skating scene of the 1970s and 1980s, driven largely by inventive skaters who took advantage of California's drought to drop in on empty swimming pools. Later, public skate parks integrated simulated architectural elements like handrails, curbs, and empty pools with forms that mimicked natural phenomena like hills, berms, and waves, offering skateboarders a compact set of features to interpret within a confined, officially sanctioned space.

The profiles formed by these features beckon with their strange shapes, unified by the hard, grey surface of the cast concrete used to fashion them. Like *Earthworks* by artists such as Michael Heizer and Nancy Holt, skateparks are big, abstract spaces that are meant to be experienced, navigated, interpreted, and defined by bodies. They are also defined by the space around them. Amir is intentionally photographing *skateparks* for this series, not skateboarders. Are they landscapes or architecture or objects? How can we know what "natural" landscape elements they conform to, and does it matter? What is on view here is the sculptural quality of these environments. Like Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), a giant canyon excavated from a mesa; or like Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), four giant concrete cylinders positioned on a desert plain to align with the sunrise and sunset on the summer and winter solstices, skateparks can be

circumnavigated, but they are activated when they are entered and experienced by bodies moving through their spaces. The formal similarities between Amir's broken vessels and his skateparks have an uncanniness that is underscored by the enormous disparity in their scale. While the vessels are designed to be held by a singular body, a skatepark is designed to hold multiple bodies.

Seeing Amir's prints of these two series side by side for the first time, I thought about something that Amir wrote which has stuck with me: "Practice makes perfection irrelevant." The practices of art, skateboarding, and meditation are all solitary pursuits that, when engaged with complete integration of the body and mind, can yield the soaring feeling that comes with the glimpse of freedom from self-consciousness lying maybe just beyond, or maybe deeply within, our own sense of the possible. This full embodiment yields liberation from the what-ifs of life: doubt, insecurity, uncertainty. Practicing not only allows us to develop skills but gives us access to our inner potential as well as our physical limitations and strengths. Practicing leads to self-knowledge and self-awareness and hopefully, self-acceptance — not to perfection. "Practice makes perfect" doesn't hold, once you understand that perfection does not exist. "Practice makes perfection irrelevant" is what you realize when you see that practice is all there is. Like enlightenment, practice is within us and around us, all the time.

I wonder if this idea, that practice makes perfection irrelevant, occurred to Amir as a way to understand his own perpetual becoming within his various practices of art, yoga, tai chi, and meditation. Becoming, along with impermanence and transformation, are central to the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, which involves repairing broken pieces of ceramic with gold or other materials. The result is a new thing that is not new. The flaws of the old, broken objects are elevated by the labor-intensive process of adhering the pieces together with a precious metal. Amir's skateparks appear like *kintsugi* — the cracks in the concrete used to form their giant swooping shapes are given emphasis by the damp atmosphere and diffused morning light, flaws highlighting the scale and dynamism of the shapes. Depopulated, they are formal subjects. His vessels are intentionally robbed of their utility, powdery insides revealed beneath their glazes where the objects break. Broken, they are formal subjects. Both series of photographs offer an opportunity to consider concepts of becoming, impermanence, and transformation. They offer an alternative to perfection and a meditation on the rewards of practice. First there is a vessel, then there is no vessel, then there is.

EMPTY VESSEL



Concrete Vessel 118, 60" x 75", 2018, archival pigment photograph



ABOVE: *Broken Vessel 16*, 2018, 24" x 30", archival pigment photograph

FRONT COVER: *Concrete Vessel 65*, 2018, 60" x 75", archival pigment photograph

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