

# AMIR ZAKI

VLHV

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# AZ

VALLEY LAKE HOLLYWOOD VILLAGE

## FAMILY PLOT

This is the \_\_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_\_ built.

It's not the house and not only Amir Zaki built it. By which I mean that Los Angeles and its noir myths help determine what is seen and how it's seen. Remember *Sunset Boulevard*, Billy Wilder's ode to Hollywood's past: it's narrated by a dead man; all that is seen is "seen" through the eyes of the body floating facedown in the pool. Now imagine such a narrator telling a story about that notorious place nearby, the Valley.

Zaki's concern is not only what a photograph is of, but also what a photograph is anymore, given that a photograph can traffic in many ways, art being only one of them: How to use photography in the context of art, while keeping its specificity, slowing its slippage into fashion and preventing its becoming an image reproducible anywhere in any manner? With *VLHV* (an acronym for Valley Lake Hollywood Village, a fictional city combining and reorganizing the names of two existing neighborhoods where the photographs were taken), Zaki presents an additional, potentially alarming question: what does it mean that photographers, in their investigation of the digital, decreasingly use photography to show what is not normally seen (photographers, from the get-go, have used the camera and its technologies to show what the eyes do not see: Muybridge's horse's atomized gallop; Atget's ignored and soon to be demolished Paris; Shulman's perfected views of Neutra homes, idealizing daily life) but to show what has never been?

To show simultaneously the same weed from two different moments in time, as Zaki does in *Boring Weed Quite Dead, Same Weed Just Pulled*, is fascinating and completely disturbing. Fascinating in that it ends up diagramming something akin to Proustian memory--an involuntary sudden rush of time past, overtaking and momentarily becoming time present. Samuel Beckett has written about Proust's concept of memory: "But if this mystical experience communicates an extratemporal essence, it follows that the communicant is for the moment an extratemporal being. Consequently the Proustian solution consists, in so far as it has been examined, in the negation of Time and Death, the negation of Death because the negation of Time. Death is dead because Time is dead." Disturbing in that anyone's ability to exist extratemporally is brief, and one is left with the fact that Death is not so dead. Most photography attempts to sustain a moment like this indefinitely, which perhaps has something to do with why Proust both loved and hated the medium. Zaki's pictures of weeds in two different states and at two different times, spatially unified, diagram the extratemporal, while they represent nature. They do this: first by simply being depictions of weeds; second by recalling the thrust of the horizontality of landscape. At once extratemporal and natural, the pictures suggest, paradoxically, that the natural state of photography is something *supernatural and inhuman*.

While the "family" pictures of VLHV refer to the grave, as if a casket stood vertically, they also invoke the weird architecture of mausoleums. This impossible, dual POV--of being *in* a grave and looking *at* the grave--uncannily complicates and mortifies the concept of the extratemporal. The verticality of these images figures the body upright but shows only the places where a body might dwell--an absence underscoring the death in all photographs. As Roland Barthes has written: "In each of [the images], inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented. I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake." A wrenching event of which there is, of course, no photograph, though perhaps the site where it occurred could still be shown, a forlorn, mad street corner. Standing in front of Zaki's "family" photos, large as dressing room mirrors, they're reflections as much as they're portraits of "us", of "our" absence: fictions of what the world looks like when we're no longer in it. In most of the photographs, it's as if the view were slanted: a POV of someone prostrate, on or *in* the ground, perhaps never getting up. Last thing seen. Inferential interment.

Sculptural aspects that Zaki has previously negotiated through framing devices and by, at times, literally slicing through his photographs have been eerily, if seamlessly, figured in the architectural structures and foregrounds shown in the VLHV photographs. They are full of distortions, hallucinations, and hauntings. And if *impossibility* is, physically and psychically, the images' leitmotif, *A Rebours* may be their ur-text. The importance of Huysmans' essayistic fiction in considering the strangeness and beauty of Zaki's project, despite its at times morbid resonances, shouldn't be underestimated--even if Huysmans' book had nothing to do with how or why the project was made. Los Angeles channels Des Esseintes-like fictive energies: think of the Valley-like suburban streets and houses of the commuter development which erupted demonically in *Poltergeist* because they were built over a burial ground; of the intensity, despite the ubiquity, of spooky houses at Halloween; of Chandleresque locales and atmospheres; of Manson ghosts. In *Family Sombra*, something almost a castle huddles in the gloaming; trees surround it and a witch flying on a broomstick is either a weather vane or a compass to hell. Day is as ominous as night here; it is the light of the imaginary, the big sleep.

*Family Beck. Family Benda. Family Califa. Family Falda. Family Irvin. Family Lemp. Family Lindo. Family Radford. Family Simpson. Family Sombra. Family Tareco. Family Tiara. Family Troost.*

"Family" because some suggestion of inhabitability and human activity remains: mailboxes, open windows, garages, driveways, lit lights, sometimes something like doors. "Family" because the identifiers seem as if they could be names; family names often become street names, town names--a remnant of pioneers staking claim. But, teetering between solemnity and haunted-mansion scariness, the plot--the narrative--leads to another locale as well: the family burial site, with its idea that the family, generation after generation, resting in peace or not, stayed together, remained family, in a domain where remains remain remains--mausoleum as family home.

This is the plot of how things end.

These are the sites and the grounds that death portends, which look like yards a gardener mends.

Let no one look away from them.

The \_\_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_\_ built.

*Bruce Hainley. October, 2002*







*Ugly Weed Quite Dead, Same Weed Just Pulled*















*Pretty Weed Just Pulled, Same Weed Quite Dead*











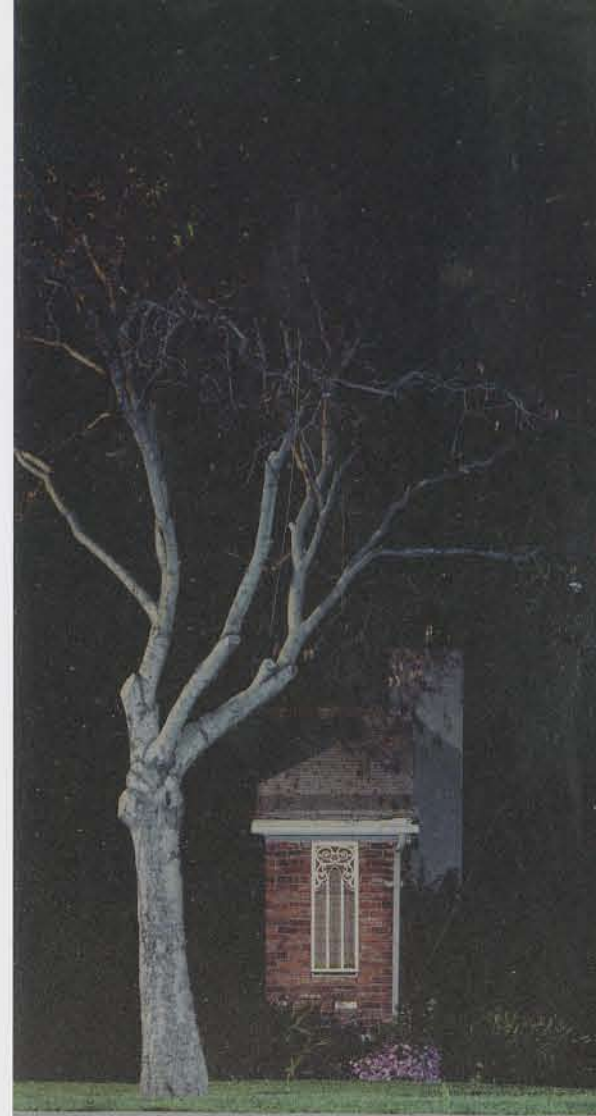














All images are archival pigment photographs realized in the year 2002

All *Family* images measure 73.25 x 22.5 framed

*Pretty Weed...* measures 22.5 x 33 framed

*Ugly Weed...* measures 22.5 x 27.25 framed

*Boring Weed...* measures 22.5 x 22.5 framed

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