Paris Photo 2017: patrician grandeur and underground culture

Less familiar names make a splash at the annual photography showcase
PARTING SHOT

‘Landscape With Houses, #10’ JAMES CASEBERE, 2011

Welcome to Dutchess County, New York. The streets are clean, the lawns neat, and the crime rate is zero. Move here and you’d remain entirely untroubled by undesirable people or experiences. But there’s a snag. This bit of suburban real estate is a tabletop model crafted from paper and plastic in the studio of artist James Casebere. You could trample all over it in a Godzilla costume, but you couldn’t live in it.

Casebere is one of the Pictures Generation, artists who arrived in the 1970s, intending to unsettle the conventions of photography by making those conventions part of their subject matter. For the past five decades, he has been reproducing small sections of the world as scaled-down architectural models. When photographed, they expose the ideas upon which the built environment is founded. Our homes, for example, the ones we work to pay for: They may be no more secure than Casebere’s paper town. What use are solar panels or mortgages when, in the next valley, a fire is burning? —MATTHEW SWEET

Framed digital chromogenic print mounted to Dibond, 74 x 86 x 3 inches (188 x 218.4 x 7.6 centimeters), edition of five, $80,000; Sean Kelly Gallery, SKNY.COM
Fall Inside the Captivating Images of James Casebere

On the eve of his major New York exhibition, the artist reveals what it takes to build and photograph little spaces that deliver outsize emotional impact.

The photographs that put artist James Casebere on the map are chilling. Like an architect, he builds a highly detailed model. But instead of turning the model into a life-size construction, Casebere zeroes in on the nano-details of the space and then photographs it to create his “constructed photography.” In the past, he has built and then photographed empty spaces, from miniature prison cells to flooded rooms to suburban homes that recall the housing crisis. To call these sparse, meditative images haunting, with their careful placement of light and shadow, is an understatement.

While Casebere’s new work certainly triggers a visceral reaction, his latest exhibition—“Emotional Architecture,” on display from January 27 through March 11
Redressing Form and Space

JAMES CASEBERE

Over the last 30 years, James Casebere has developed an evocative and often disquieting style that places him at the forefront of his field. He creates table-sized models of imaginary spaces and structures, often derived from historical, architectural, and cinematic sources, and photographs them in his studio. The ambiguous and uninhabited scenes he creates, ranging from landscapes to theatres, are haunting and suggestive of recent, unseen events. By lacking a foundation in any external, documentary reality, they evoke a sense of the uncanny, and invite the viewer to imagine and to reconstruct their own narrative or symbolic interpretation.

For his first solo show since 2010, and his first in the new space at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, the artist returns to his exploration of interior spaces, this time in a direct response to the work of the Mexican architect Luis Barragán. The exhibition’s title, Emotional Architecture, refers to the name that Barragán and artist Mathias Goeritz coined for their latest approach to modernist buildings; they rejected cold functionalism to embrace space, colour and light and create structures that encouraged meditation and reflection.

Born in 1953, Casebere is often associated with the "Pictures Generation" which came to prominence in the 1980s and included figures such as Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Laurie Simmons, Richard Prince, Matt Mullican, James Welling, Michael Zwick and Barbara Kruger.

A running theme in Casebere’s work is investigating the iconic spaces and mythologies of contemporary America, beginning with everyday suburban and urban dwellings, as well as images of the West, which often take on a humorous quality. Later, his focus moved towards institutional architecture and its relationship to the concept of control, notably social institutions such as prisons, which developed alongside the rise of Enlightenment thought. Casebere’s work has taken on increasingly surreal and sophisticated levels of interpretation, exploiting the contradictions that are inherent when communal spaces are pictured devoid of inhabitants. Historical events are often obliquely referred to — Flooded Hallway is modelled on the bunker beneath the Reichstag in Berlin, whilst Flooded Arches, Revision Underground, Moriklelo references the Atlantic slave trade. Following the events of 9/11 and the "War on Terror," Casebere turned his attention to the architecture of Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean and its historic role as a crossroads of culture and, particularly in the case of 10th century Andalusia, a place where Islamic, Jewish and Christian cultures co-existed.

Though this show shares a sense of serene austerity with Casebere’s earlier studies on prison cells, the atmosphere evoked — rather than isolation and confinement — is one of joy in the spirit of Barragán, whose enigmatic colour and dramatic light combine with simple forms and planes.

"Though this unique show shares a sense of serene austerity with Casebere’s earlier studies on prison cells, the atmosphere evoked — rather than isolation and confinement — is one of joy in the spirit of Barragán."

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www.skny.com
Scaling up: photographer James Casebere's miniature worlds

Belgium's Bozar gallery plays host to an exhibition of work by American artist James Casebere, as part of its 'Summer of Photography' expo. Pictured: Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County NY) #3, 2010. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris and Brussels.
American conceptual photographer James Casebere is fascinated by architecture. Throughout an illustrious and diverse career, he has captured the flooded corridors of grand mansions to the bare spaces of prison cells, to ancient water tunnels in Bologna and the Jewish Ghetto in Venice. These images, however, share a common quirk: none of the buildings photographed are real, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, they are impeccably detailed, self-made models.

A new exhibition at Bozar in Belgium will display one of these sculptures, *Screw Device* (1991), along with related photographs. 'The exhibition space here is very special,' Casebere says of the antechambers of the Victor Horta-designed Centre for Fine Arts, where the show takes place. 'It comprises a round space at the centre, and the photographs appear in adjacent, radial galleries like the spokes of a wheel.'

This tendrillic layout literally places the sculptures at the core of Casebere's practice, which has become more and more complex over the years. 'The models can take anywhere from one night to several months to build,' he explains. 'The landscapes are constructed from cardboard, chicken-wire, plaster cheesecloth, and covered with artificial flora. The miniature houses have a foam core, but are later drawn in 3D modelling software, laser cut and air-brushed in different colours.'

Perhaps it is this lengthy, process-driven approach that gives the images there characteristic sterility – else it is the lack of humans. An empty sports field is made emptier still by the lack of children playing; a picture-postcard, whitewashed house is left to turn a neglected shade of brown. Blank, monochrome interiors invoke the unblemished walls of a mental asylum. Later photographs (*Cloudy/Sunny Skies, Landscape with Houses*) share this disquieting air, made more pronounced by the ironically chirpy colour palette.

These lonely, absurdist worlds aren't without humour. Earlier works like *Bed Upturning its Belly at Dawn* (1976) have a comedic simplicity that Casebere is keen to return to. 'At the moment I am trying to learn from my earlier, more spontaneous ways of making and bring back a sense of humour to the photographs,' he reveals. 'One gets to a certain point, when their main influence is the history of their own work to date.'

The Bozar exhibition covers over 40 years of this history. The exhibition is hot on the heels of another extensive retrospective at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, suggesting that Casebere is having a much-deserved European moment in the spotlight.

TAGS: PHOTOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY
Aesthetica
Cultural Microcosm

James Casebere

James Casebere (b. 1953) is renowned for a pioneering use of models in his constructed photographs. Closely associated with the Pictures Generation, the artist’s early practice was characteristic of the postmodern cultural appropriation of his peers. Architectural and contemporary references populate the otherwise uninhabited work of the past four decades, which encompasses large-scale sculptural installations alongside tabletop constructions. *Landscape with Houses* (2009) represents a continuation of Casebere’s interest in suburban America. These illusionistic models, meticulously assembled by hand, against composite digital backgrounds, were inspired by the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008. Whilst travelling in upstate New York, the artist was struck by the sprawl of urban development. Casebere’s work features in the collections of New York’s Guggenheim and Metropolitan museums and at the Tate, in London. www.jamescasebere.com.
at Manhattan’s Sean Kelly Gallery—conjures emotion of a different sort. Largely
influenced by the late Mexican architect Luis Barragán, whose vibrant work was
considered not modernist but Emotional Architecture, Casebere plays with space,
color, and light yet again, but this time in a way that is blissfully cheerful and
serene. As he re-creates Barragán’s large-scale work in his miniature format,
Casebere’s cerebral images highlight the formal architectural and design elements
of the architect’s famed structures, which are ultimately marked by a sense of beauty.

Architectural Digest: What inspired you to transition from creating work that
focused on environments like prison cells to the colorful architecture of Luis
Barragán?

James Casebere: I was really looking for a way to revisit the prisons, in fact, only
from a different perspective. I wanted to create space in a way of solitude or
reflection that was more uplifting and more open and accessible and not about
confinement. I started working with color in a way that was more self-conscious.
Barragán was such a color expert; he was friends with [artist] Josef Albers, for
example, and so some of what I did in this exhibition involved thinking about that
relationship and translating three-dimensional space to a two-dimensional image.

AD: How did you first become interested in Barragán?

JC: I think it was just in the back of my mind because of my experience with
Moorish architecture in Spain. I went to all those places that he visited. He visited
them with Le Corbusier, actually, and that always intrigued me. It left a real imprint
because I thought of what an influence this beautiful architecture had on him—this
Mediterranean architecture from North Africa and the influence it had on
modernism—that’s what intrigued me. And then Barragán took this notion of the
Mexican vernacular and tied it to this Mediterranean style, along with an
International Style to create something that was unique.

AD: Did you work from photographs to create your constructed photography, and
how long did it take you to create this work?

JC: I worked from photographs and images online that I found. I have all the books
on Barragán that I’ve managed to collect. It’s all work that I’ve done between June
2016 and now.

AD: The precision of your table-size models is astounding. Did you have any formal
architectural training?

JC: I guess I always had an interest in models and architecture. My dad was an
educator, and he built a couple of schools. As I was growing up, he’d bring the
blueprints home and I’d look at them with him. I remember making architectural
drawings myself of all kinds of things when I was young, just as a fantasy, and thinking I might want to be an architect, but I never actually trained as an architect.

**AD:** What do you believe is the power of looking back at another artist’s work?  
**JC:** I think it felt fairly personal, but it also felt important at this point in time. I think it’s the values that Barragán embedded his work with. The notion of Emotional Architecture, for him, was about beauty and serenity and solitude and space. For him, he was Catholic, so it was a real spiritual thing. I think just building with those kinds of values in mind is what intrigued me so much. It’s like what I wanted to create for myself, I suppose, but not in the Christian sense. The desire to create space changes you.

**AD:** What do you hope people come away with after seeing the show?  
**JC:** Honestly, I hope they come away with an appreciation for the same values that Barragán held. That they have a little inkling of a similar experience in terms of how color and space and light work together to create a space where you want to be, essentially.
Exhibition at Haus der Kunst covers all periods of James Casebere’s 40-year artistic career

MUNICH. - In the mid-1970s, when James Casebere (born 1953 in Lansing, Michigan, United States) began his career in art, the medium of photography was in a state of transition, as artists were formulating different approaches to the medium. Casebere belongs to a generation of artists who have questioned the veracity of images from the beginning and for whom a photograph is something other than a document.

Casebere’s early representations questioned the established codes of American Midwestern middle-class value system. A well-known work from this period is the latently violent and somewhat morbid photograph of a refrigerator penetrated by an oversized fork (Fork in the Refrigerator, 1975). In general, the detailed images depict architectural models made by the artist using materials such as polystyrene, paper and plaster. The models are clearly models, i.e. they do not conceal their construction. Over the years, Casebere has created his own distinctive visual language through the use of his cinematic and architectural approach.

“I am trying to create something that embodies or dramatizes the kind of psychic space that exaggerates certain ideas and experiences,” is how Casebere describes his pictorial understanding, a strategy in which the models exemplify what might be characterized as the architectural unconscious of a given spatial system.
With over 50 works produced in a variety of formats and techniques, the exhibition covers all periods of his 40-year artistic career: large single and multi-part colour photographs, black and white silver gelatin prints, dye destruction prints, and waterless lithographs. For the first time, Casebere also presents work- and sketchbooks, as well as an extensive selection of previously unseen Polaroid studies, thereby revealing the development process of selected works, from the various production stages to the finished frame.

For the exhibition Casebere has created site-specific works for the large staircase of the exhibition space: four friezes that refer to the Haus der Kunst's complex political history as a representational National Socialist structure. The new works, which also explore the ceremonial system of the Albert Speer-designed Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg, are thus part of the continuing confrontation with historically burdened architecture - a topic that both James Casebere and the Haus der Kunst have long been investigating.

Considerations of problems related to the representation of architecture and ideology have played a role in Casebere's other works, including his examination of Thomas Jefferson's home Monticello in Virginia, the arena of the Acropolis of Athens, the slave dormitory in Topkapi Palace in Istanbul and mobile prison cells in the state of Georgia.

Flooded and desolate spaces, whether illuminated or dark, are recurring illusionistic motifs in series of works from the late 1990s and early 2000s. In "Monticello No. 3 "(2001), Casebere presents the entrance hall of Jefferson's house as a dark space flooded by ankle-deep water. "We need to look beyond the myth of what Jefferson represents, and that's what the darkness you see is about," says Casebere.

The artist came up with the idea of flooding rooms with water on a trip to Berlin, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall of 1989. Although - or perhaps because - the prevailing mood in Berlin at that time was especially optimistic and enthusiastic, Casebere studied the neglected parts of the city with particular attention, including the sewage system and the metro stations linking West and East Berlin, which he believed especially clearly expressed "the historical unconscious of Germany."

Initially, with the flooding of rooms, Casebere also thought of prison toilets and sewers. Research led him to early 19th century model penitentiaries in the United States such as Auburn, Sing Sing and Eastern State Penitentiary. At the time, reformers tried to manifest Quaker ideas of redemption in prison architecture. For example, solitary confinement was intended to inspire the occupant to contemplation, prayer and self-reform. However, this method led to the devastation of the prisoner's mind and became something monstrous. Charles Dickens visited the Eastern State Penitentiary in 1842 and recorded his impressions of it in his travel journal ("American Notes"), in which he denounced solitary confinement.

In Casebere's depictions of cells, light often falls into the spaces from outside and from above, in a single beam. In reference to Quaker thought, this might be interpreted as the possibility of redemption through divine grace. The water, however, is a metaphor for transience and the passage of time, and also, in the flooded prison cells, for a system subject to decay. For the artist, the previous methods of punishment and the deprivation of liberty illuminate a tension in the architecture of prisons.

Casebere's images do not refer to stable, existing objects. Rather, compressed in them is a system of political and associative references, even to things such as volatile memories or dreams. Thus, he was also fascinated by mosques, madrassas, caravanserais in Istanbul built by Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan (1489/1490-1588) - in part because their aesthetic, bright interiors were human in scale despite their height. His research on Islam's complex history has lead Casebere to eras and cultures that represent the coexistence of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, as well as mutual cultural enrichment, such as Spain in the period from 711 to 1492. With works such as "Mosque (after Sinan) # 2", "Spanish Bath" and "La Alberca", Casebere makes viewers aware of these epochs and sublime moments.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, edited by Okwui Enwezor; with contributions by Okwui Enwezor, Caleb Smith and Brian Wallis (Prestel Publishers).

"James Casebere: Fugitive" is curated by Okwui Enwezor, assisted by Anna F. Schneider.
The New York Times

2015 Through the Lens of 5 Artists

Turning Points asked five artists what 2015 meant to them, and what their fears, fancies and hopes were for 2016. Their visual responses are below.   DEC. 11, 2015

*Landscape with Houses (Duchess County, NY) #7* James Camber
James Casebere

“This is the existential tipping point of the global citizen and the collective straining of identities toward a new unknown.”

My picture suggests the mythic “Morning in America” of the Ronald Reagan era in the United States, one characterized by the optimism of distorted growth, speculative real estate and inflated financial markets.

The bizarre bedroom communities of the exurbs don’t always seem planned — rather, they sometimes erupt spontaneously from the moist earth like mushrooms, some of them poisonous. What is this dream giving way to?

A hilltop assembly anxiously awaits the scorching summer. Aren’t suburbs, exurbs and cities all variants of refuge? The mood is one of a planetary burn and sting, the result of a human hustle on autopilot.

This town is asleep, but about to awaken to the buzz of a myriad of vehicles. Busy little ants are about to pour out of every opening and scurry off to nowhere. They’re stranded on a mound above an otherwise drowned world. This is the existential tipping point of the global citizen and the collective straining of identities toward a new unknown.

James Casebere is an American visual artist living in New York who works from studio-constructed architectural models. His work has been collected by museums worldwide, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Victoria and Albert and Tate Museums in London, among others. A career retrospective, “James Casebere: Fugitive,” curated by Okwui Enwezor, runs from February 12 - June 12, 2016 at Haus der Kunst in Munich.
Letter of Recommendation: The Thorne Miniature Rooms

By CHARLES SIEBERT  SEPT. 17, 2015

One of the Thorne rooms — an English cottage kitchen of the Queen Anne period (1702-14), made in about 1937. It is 10 inches high. James Casebere for The New York Times
Down a center flight of marble stairs in the front entrance hall of the Art Institute of Chicago, there is a real-life time machine. It bears no resemblance, however, to any such devices from fiction. There are no displacement spheres, quantum-leap accelerators or flux capacitors; it looks nothing like H.G. Wells’s gilded time-sleigh with its gleaming dinner platter, crystal-knobbed control lever and plush velvet driver’s seat. Indeed, this particular time machine doesn’t even have space for passengers, a fact that becomes immediately apparent upon approaching it. There is only a roomful of wide-eyed drifters trying to project themselves, via intensely prolonged gazes, through a series of glass-paned portals, tilting their torsos and craning their necks as if trying to inhabit the miniature worlds beyond.

The institute’s Thorne Miniature Rooms collection comprises 68 deftly dwarfed and obsessively detailed re-creations, on a scale of one inch for every foot, of English, French and American household interiors ranging from the 13th to the 19th century. Each one is, in essence, a fully fixed and furnished moment from a bygone day. Adults peering in on these little dioramas become children again, and their children the suddenly more mature and seasoned guides to the Tom Thumb fantasies the rooms contain — the minuscule violin resting in an open case on the cushioned window seat of a circa-1800 English drawing room, for instance, or the swath of afternoon sunlight cast across a pair of glasses and a porcelain tea set on a late-18th-century Cape Cod living-room table.

James Casebere for The New York Times
The earliest dollhouses were, in fact, born of a most adult yearning: immortality. What is believed to have been the very first “baby house,” as the dollhouse was formerly known, was built in 1558 on behalf of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria. It was a diminutive 3-D ensirinement of all the owner’s worldly belongings, of his literal and figurative station in life. Soon a fad among the nobility and rich, such distillate minidwellings were intended not for play but for study, as working models of how to properly design and manage a home. This is the tradition that was ingeniously revived in the 20th century by Mrs. Narcissa Niblack Thorne.

Born in 1882 in Vincennes, Ind., she married James Ward Thorne, the heir to the Montgomery Ward department-store fortune, while they were young, leaving her free to pursue her artwork. One story has it that her original inspiration was a miniature shadow box that she came upon in an Istanbul bazaar in the 1920s. It suggested to her a way to meld a childhood fascination — the many antique dollhouse miniatures that an uncle, Vice Adm. Albert P. Niblack, sent her in the course of his world travels — with her later love of all the grand and stately interiors from centuries past that she encountered during her own frequent travels to Europe and the major cities of the Northeast.

The Thornes’ apartment on Chicago’s North Lake Shore Drive was said to be overrun with miniatures. Mrs. Thorne compulsively collected over the years old royal dollhouse relics, a number of them purchased from her favorite Parisian antiques shop, a place she refused all her life to identify. By designing her own rooms, she now had a way to permanently house those remnants and bestow them to posterity. Beginning in 1930, she scoured whatever reference material she could find on period architecture, interior design and decorative arts to flesh out the sketches and blueprints for the different quarters in which such pieces would have once resided. She then seized upon the ready availability during the Depression of some of the country’s finest architects and interior designers. By 1940, Thorne and her team of skilled craftsmen made over 100 pint-size “period rooms.” They constitute a beguilingly timeless bit of child’s play: a series of lushly lived-in pasts, chambers haunted by distant presences you feel certain have just left the premises — or are poised to enter at any moment from a flower-strewed side garden, a rear entrance foyer or the top of a lovely front-hallway staircase.
I stopped off at the Art Institute while making a cross-country drive this summer. It had been over 30 years since I last saw the Thorne rooms, and yet the scene upon entering the exhibit was instantly familiar. Paintings and sculpture induce silence, furtive whispers at most; the Thorne rooms, a ruckus. Everybody wants in. Not just on sharing the universal thrill of seeing daily life represented on a Lilliputian scale — they want in on that life itself. This is the particular genius behind Thorne’s rooms. It is not just their verisimilitude, but also the way they draw us in with enticing glimpses of spaces just beyond the ones recreated — an upward-winding staircase, a hanging coat in an adjacent chamber, a shiny silver cocktail tray on an outer balcony table, a mock city skyline twinkling in the distance. Somehow, these various doors, ajar on endlessness, inspire in us an altogether lofty and untenable urge to abide forever within a lavishly furnished shadow box.

“Listen to you,” I overheard one woman saying to her husband, as he carried on about all the things he would plant in the tiny garden outside the latticework window of an early 18th-century English cottage kitchen. “Since when did you get such delusions of grandeur?”

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A version of this article appears in print on September 20, 2015, on page MM32 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Thorne Miniature Rooms. Today’s Paper | Subscribe