

PORTFOLIO

James Casebere

Much has been said about the artifice of James Casebere's works—studio photographs of architectural sets, suggesting habitable spaces subtly contaminated into fiction. In the '80s this art played a role in an influential body of critical thinking about the simulacrum, the image trouncing the real, the solid melting to air. At the same time, there always seemed to me to be another aspect to his photographs: a kind of regression, in a good sense—a feeling of the dollhouse or sand-castle play through which we might once have built the worlds we were interested to see. That tinge of fantasy is part of the work's seduction, even as Casebere's worlds are built to an artist's exacting standards and informed by an adult's historical awareness. Then, too, there's the mood—plangent and austere.

Ask Casebere what he was after in the new photos here, though, and he won't describe what they show, at least not right away; he'll say, "I was interested in creating two types of images from the same set through variation in direction and light." And so of course he was. Casebere shot the waterlogged yellow-walled room once from center front and once with the camera placed higher, to the right, and angled downward. This move produced or came with a sharper directional light cutting in from the left and a clearer view of the chessboard floor, its buckling water-refracted distortions adding to the instability insinuated by the midair viewpoint. The other pair of images also shows a single Casebere set, but different parts of it. The two corridors run parallel and adjacent, ending at separate points along the same back wall. Again there are changes in camera placement and light: "I was just experimenting with ways to shoot several views of the same model," Casebere tells me, "as though the viewer were moving through the space."

Yes—but—Jim, I say, the yellow room is at Versailles, right? "Oh! They told you?" he says, which they did, but I would have asked if they hadn't: Earlier Casebere images of sunken spaces were modeled on bunkers in Berlin, others on plantation ruins on the Caribbean island of Nevis, once a major slave-trading port. More recent images of flood show Monticello, the grand Virginia home of Thomas Jefferson, who left slavery issues of his own. "I was thinking of Jefferson's relationship to French aristocratic culture when I was making the Monticello photographs," says Casebere, "so it was natural to leap to Versailles. I wanted to go to that gaudy extreme." Yet he Americanized the French connection, managing to find, amid the guilt of the Sun King's palace, a relatively Puritan space—a gallery stripped of its art. Meanwhile the artist was also considering another sphere of French history: Although the corridor set has no one model, it is inspired by Cistercian monasteries like Sénanque. At the same time, the precedents in Casebere's work for this bare, simultaneously massive and minimal architecture are surely his various interiors of prisons. We are looking at two sides of power: an upper, sunny side that has been upset, a lower, moonlit side that is searching for its soul.

—DAVID FRANKEL

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Page 110: *Vaulted Corridor #1*, 2001, color photograph.

Page 111: *Vaulted Corridor #2*, 2001, color photograph.

Page 112: *Yellow Hallway #1*, 2001, color photograph.

Page 113: *Yellow Hallway #2*, 2001, color photograph.

Each month in this ongoing series, a photographer offers a preview of a previously unexhibited body of work.



