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ARTFORUM

James Casebere



James Casebere, *Sea of Ice*, 2014, ink-jet print, 41 3/8 x 52 3/8".

There's a golden yet unspoken rule in architectural training and practice that scale models should be neither too realistic nor too detailed. Thus, trees and human figurines are just tolerable, but curtains, furniture, and other everyday features are questionable, if not prohibited. A model needs to retain a relative degree of abstraction as a material object to accomplish its conjectural quality—that is, to exemplify the project to which it gives scalar form. One of the most intriguing qualities of the architectural model is therefore how it balances materializing abstract plans with telling particular stories. This might explain its appeal to artists in the post-Conceptual era, as it allows for a material negotiation between idea and image, concept and object.

Over the past four decades, American artist James Casebere has built scale models, but only to photograph them. For him they serve as mere devices to make pictures. From the very start of his practice, in the mid-1970s, as he declared in a recent interview, the reproduction had to be the work itself. His interest in architecture derived from its capacity to deliver imagery for photography to capture. Modeling and then photographing the built environment allowed Casebere to address his social context and to trace both its historical and ideological formation. Domestic interiors and American vernacular architecture came first, followed by edifices of power and control, carceral structures, flooded interiors, world heritage sites (mostly Islamic), and lately, suburban environments. Whereas his early models often remained rather rough and schematic, the recent work has become ever more detailed and particular.

Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) # 9 Credit, Faith, Trust, 2010–11, depicts a neat set of colorful single-family homes, systematically distributed on a hilly setting around an empty athletic field. The prototypical yellow school buses and even bicycles are present, but no people. And this speciously charming scenery has fallen victim to fire—arson, maybe? Emblemizing, perhaps, the subprime mortgage crisis and the disastrous ecological effects of suburban housing schemes, this miniature exemplification of the American dream is up in flames. *Falling House with Fire (for MK)*, 2012, in turn, reveals the artificial nature of the evoked cataclysm. A paper house dangles on a thin wire (and hence doesn't fall) off the rim of a model, threatened by a straight line of gas fire. Not unlike the outrageous final scene of the Quentin Tarantino-scripted *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), a peaceful scene promptly shifts into horror, with devastation occurring right behind the back fence. Casebere never suppressed the material facture of the depicted models, yet this direct revelation of the hors *champ* of the vast construction in his studio in Brooklyn, including lighting and other studio props, is novel and refreshing within the artist's oeuvre.

Caffey's Inlet Lifesaving Station (Dare County, NC), 2013, is modeled after one of the stations that were built along North Carolina's Outer Banks with the noble purpose of saving lives from the treacherous sea. Inadvertently, the photograph recalls George Ault's disquieting paintings of 1930s and '40s American pastoral, capturing the sense of doom of a world at war on the other side of the Atlantic. An explicit reference to painting was also to be found in *Sea of Ice*, 2014, installed on the right wall upon entering the gallery, a photograph of a meticulous material remodeling of Caspar David Friedrich's *Sea of Ice (The Failed North Pole Expedition; The Wreck of Hope)*, 1823–24. Casebere, however, omits the shipwreck, the very element that introduced narrative into an otherwise almost abstract picture.

Casebere radically works against the grain of conventional model-making. A model's degree of detailing, the artist demonstrates, does not stand in a reversely proportional relationship to its capacity to stir one's imagination regarding the future reality it projects. Nor is a plainly realistic model anecdotal by default. Casebere achieves generalization through extreme particularization. Today, when polar ice caps are melting at terrifying speed and seashores around the world face rising tides, his photographs remind us that ecological wreckage is not a distant tale, but a real story that is unfolding in our very own twenty-first-century backyards.