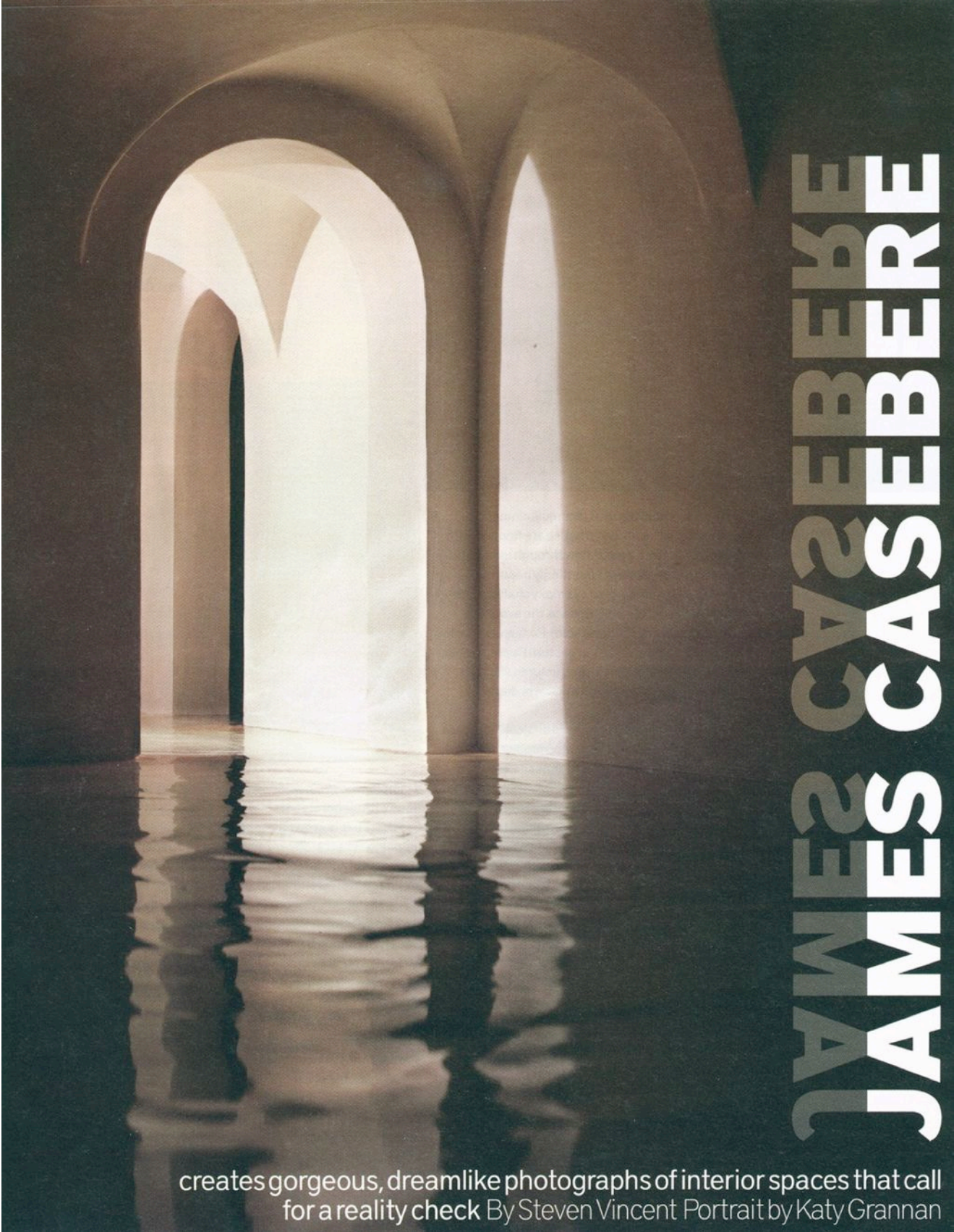


# SEANKELLY

Vincent, Steven. "In the Studio," *Art + Auction*, November 2003.





# JAMES CASERBERE

creates gorgeous, dreamlike photographs of interior spaces that call for a reality check By Steven Vincent Portrait by Katy Grannan



"Everything I photograph is a fabrication," says James Casebere, a pioneer of setup photography, pictured in his East Village studio with the tabletop model used in his *Red Room* images. Opposite: *Siena Vertical*, 2003

HIS PHOTOGRAPHS ARE MYSTERIOUS, tranquil, almost uncanny. The rooms of a Neoclassical house are flooded with shimmering pools of water. Streams flow through moodily lit tunnels and vaulted passageways. Hauntingly beautiful prison cells stand empty, illuminated by smoky shafts of light. Stripped of all context and human presence, the evocative settings are not immediately recognizable—Portuguese forts in West Africa, a federal penitentiary in eastern Pennsylvania, an arched corridor in Afghanistan. The structures seem unearthly, as if photographed through a prism of dreams. What exactly are we looking at?

Actually, they're fictions. The spaces depicted in James Casebere's photographs are in fact tabletop models that he builds to scale and meticulously lights to appear lifelike. Showing a visitor around his studio in New York's East Village, he stops in front of a two-foot-high maquette of a bath in the famous Spanish fortress of Alhambra. "Everything I photograph is a fabrication—there's nothing 'real' in my work," Casebere explains. "In this way I hope to draw attention to the artificiality of what we believe is actual and true and how we construct our subjective responses to life."

Critics call it "setup photography," a genre that Casebere, 50, helped pioneer in the mid-1970s. Challenging the notion that photography is an art form concerned with capturing objective images of the real world, Casebere—along with David Levinthal and Laurie Simmons, all working independently—began constructing and photographing models that mimicked "reality" and toyed with notions of truth in pictures. Since the early 1990s, setup photography, also known as constructed photography, has become a red-hot field with its own major stars, such as Thomas Demand, Oliver Boberg and—considered by some to be the leader in the genre—Gregory Crewdson.

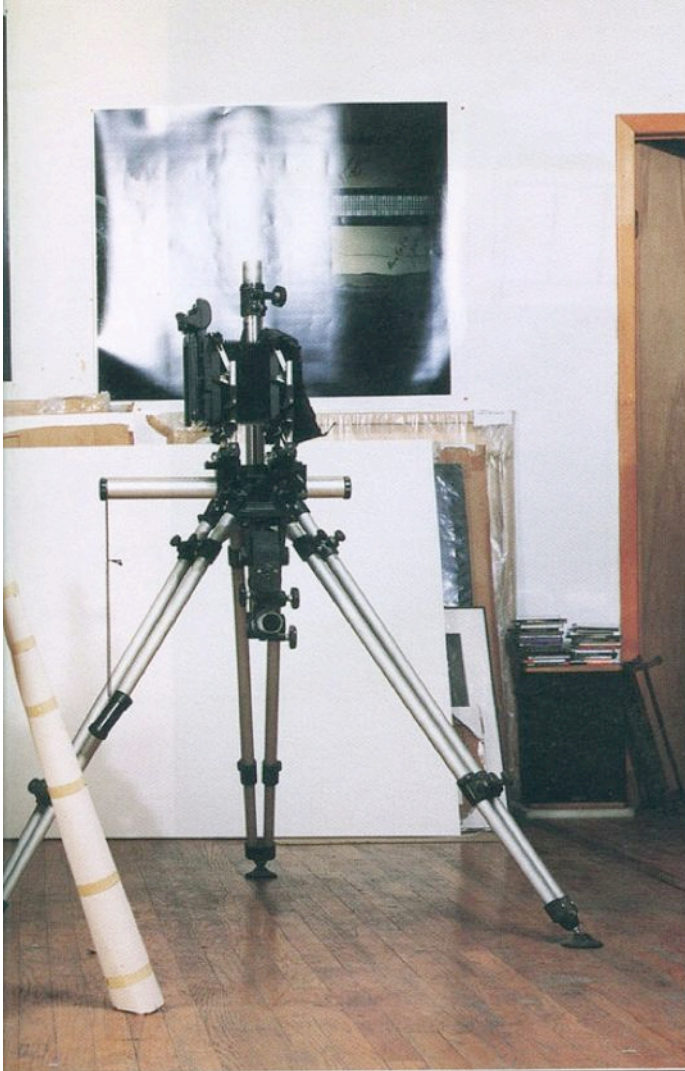
Modest and soft-spoken, Casebere has never been particularly comfortable with the idea that his innovations helped changed the course of art photography. He has tended to avoid the kind of hype that has surrounded Crewdson, for example, whose cinematic work involves big-budget productions with elaborate sets and casts of actors. Instead, Casebere has burrowed deeper into his interest in photographing small cardboard, foamcore and paper models. "I've always wanted to create art that combines photography, architecture, sculpture, film, even animation," he says.

His latest work, on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York from October 30 through December 6 and at Lisson Gallery in London from November 12 through December 20, features a number of flooded interiors. There are the striking *Red Room*, a traditional living room decorated with vibrant striped wallpaper, and *Spanish Bath*, a starkly lit Moorish bath surrounded by warm yellow walls. There are also spare modern spaces with no water, shot in cool, gray tones so subtle as to appear almost black and white. Mounted between two sheets of Plexiglas, the photographs measure up to 92 by 120 inches for multipanel works and 72 by 90 inches for single images, the largest he has ever made. In the past, because of the limitations of the printer he used, Casebere had to combine two or three different panels to achieve images of that size. "My printer in New York now has the same laser-jet printer technology that German photographers like Gursky and Struth use," he says.



Beautiful illusions: Clockwise from above, *Flooded Hallway*, 1998–99; Casebere's studio; *Monticello #1*, 2001; and *Red Room #1*, 2003, one of the artist's new works at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York and Lisson Gallery in London

STUDIO: PHOTOGRAPHY © KATY DEBRIAN



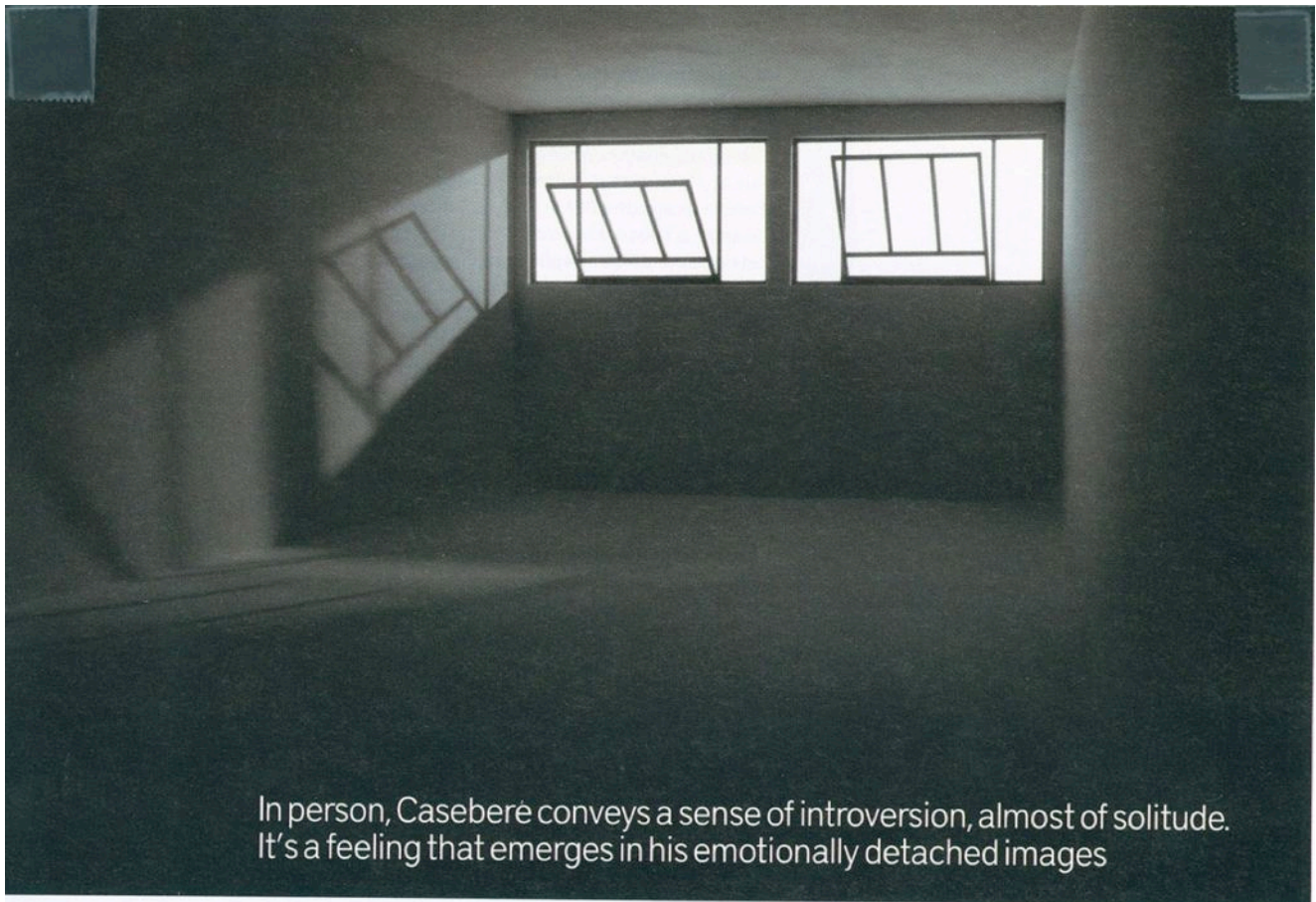
The shows have generated a great deal of advance interest. "Even before the show opened, we had an extensive waiting list for Jim's work," says Kelly.

The idea of manufacturing the subjects of his photographs seemed to emerge nearly full-blown from Casebere's youthful imagination. While an undergraduate at Michigan State, and later, at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where he received his BFA in 1976, he noticed that "our education about art was coming from photographic reproductions. That made me realize how photography constructs our notions of art and life in general." In 1975 Casebere created *Fan as Eudemonist: Relaxing After an Exhausting Day at the Beach*. A seminal setup photograph, it depicts, in soft shades of black and white, a cardboard living room in which a real fan lies on a sofa watching television. "At the time, I was trying to get at the essential artificiality of a photograph by combining photography with sculpture," he explains. "I was really influenced by Claus Oldenburg—but where he was making softer-than-real images, I wanted to make mine smaller than real."

Through the 1970s, at the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in New York and at CalArts in Los Angeles, Casebere continued to make mostly black-and-white, often surrealistic images of domestic interiors. In the

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In person, Casebere conveys a sense of introversion, almost of solitude. It's a feeling that emerges in his emotionally detached images

following decade, he turned to eerie outdoor scenes, illuminated in a kind of film-noirish chiaroscuro. Moving to color in the early '90s, he began to catch public interest and critical acclaim with a series of photographs based on models of prisons across the U.S. He followed these with beautiful but ultimately sinister images of former slave trade facilities in West Africa and the Caribbean. Beginning in 2000, he created perhaps his greatest work to date: interiors of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's Neoclassical home in Virginia. Casebere painstakingly re-created the rooms and photographed them to appear as if they were flooded with a foot or so of water (actually, a highly reflective resin). Together with the African and Caribbean scenes, Casebere explains, "the Monticello photographs form a triangle based on the slave trade, and how it forms an undercurrent of the American experience."

Undercurrents play an important role in Casebere's imagination. Born in Lansing, Michigan, of Scots-Irish descent (the family includes a long line of Presbyterian ministers), he was raised in a Detroit suburb and had, on the surface, an echt American childhood. His mother taught first grade and his father was a junior high school principal. His artistic inclinations apparently came from his grandfathers, one an amateur photographer, the other an inveterate builder of small wooden models, especially spinning wheels. "I remember as a kid peering through the window of my grandfather's workshop," says the artist, "marveling at the models he constructed."

But beneath the ostensible normality of his childhood surroundings, Casebere sensed a disquiet. There was, he

recalls, an essential unreality in American middle-class life during the Cold War—the staginess of suburban communities, the artificiality of television and mind-warping shows like *The Twilight Zone*. Coming of age in the late 1960s, Casebere developed an interest in Zen Buddhism and its core notion that reality lies in the subjectivity of the individual. "Zen intensified a sense I'd gotten from the suburbs about how reality is created, how our ideas of life are actually models that we build in our minds," he says.

Today the artist lives in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn with his wife, the photographer and video artist Lorna Simpson, and their 5-year-old daughter, Zora. Despite his success and comfortable family life, Casebere conveys a sense of introversion, almost of solitude. It's a feeling that emerges in his subtle, emotionally detached photographs. "My work addresses the fact that we are all isolated in our own perspectives," he explains, "whether it be our own little worlds or larger constructions of society and history."

In these comments, one hears the teachings of Zen masters, but also the echo of Presbyterian ancestors, who held that life was a stage upon which individual consciousness stood alone and unaided before God. "There is a limit to human subjectivity—in the end, we are all enslaved by our models of life," the artist muses. Yet his photographs suggest that the more aware we become of how we create our own constructions of reality, the less likely we are to impose these constructions on others in the name of "objective" truth. And that, in Casebere's view, is freedom.

In his latest work, Casebere has created images of empty, minimalist spaces, such as *Dorm Room*, above. The cool, gray tones are so subtle as to appear almost black and white