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Art in Review; James Casebere

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The Levant

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528 West 29th Street, Chelsea

Through June 23

A couple of decades ago James Casebere was in the avant-garde of artists building architectural models and photographing them to look like actual spaces. He has now become so skilled at the building, lighting and photographing aspects of the project that the original illusion-versus-reality game has given way to other concerns.

The current show centers on architecture from the Levant, an area in the eastern Mediterranean that includes Lebanon, Syria and parts of Greece, Turkey and Egypt. (The term comes from the French word "lever," to rise, and refers to where the sun first rises.)

Among the photographs are an interior titled "Mosque (After Sinan)" that nods to that great Ottoman architect; the Roman theater at the Acropolis in Athens; and the dormitory in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, which housed pages who served the sultan. A nocturnally lighted model of a neighborhood in Tripoli includes apartment buildings rising on a hill, street lamps, satellite dishes and laundry hanging on balconies.

The photographs are lush and beautiful and uncanny in their desolation, although a bit less so than Mr. Casebere's previous works featuring abandoned Southern plantations and interiors marred by natural disasters. (One work here, "Samarra," with a rubble-strewn floor, is more in this vein.)

Like his colleague Thomas Demand, who also builds sculptural models and photographs them, Mr. Casebere injects politics and historical narrative in ways that can be heavy-handed. You feel that you must care about these works because they refer to structures in an embattled region -- or, more pointedly, to Muslim cultural heritage.

Yet, with their emphasis on exotic beauty and craftsmanship, they risk sliding into a kind of latter-day Orientalism, like Delacroix or Matisse, minus the nudes. Maybe this is perfect for an age in which architecture is treated as sexier than the human body. MARTHA SCHWENDENER