

SEAN KELLY

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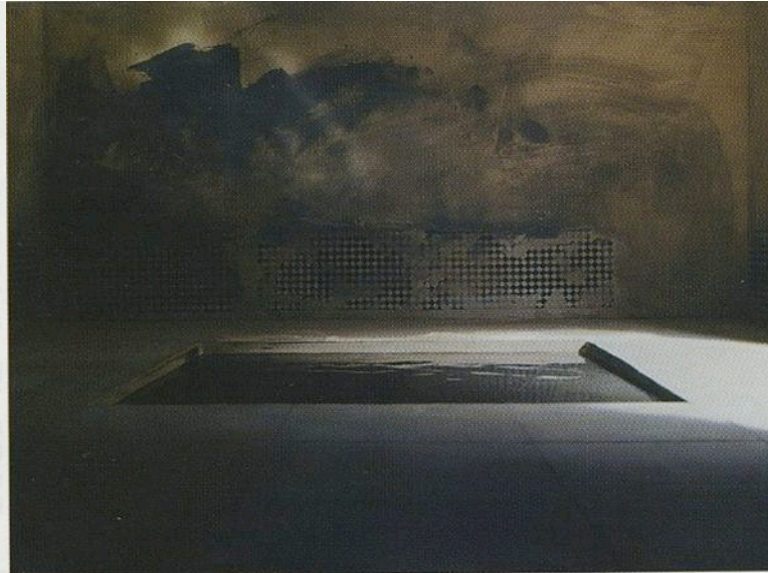
Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

James Casebere at Sean Kelly

James Casebere is one of a number of artists who, beginning in the '70s, took up the Surrealists' challenge and, by using a medium that ostensibly documents reality to record images of fantasy, explored photography's ironic possibilities. But while most of his like-minded colleagues—Duane Michals, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons and Thomas Demand, to name a few—engage in staged photography to suggest a narrative, presenting encapsulated moments that imply an ongoing drama, Casebere's unpeopled architectural scenes may have more in common with the installations of someone like Robert Irwin, where the visitor's engagement and imagination are an essential component. Like Irwin, Casebere is only setting the stage.

That these are photographs not of real places but of tabletop models enlarged to monumental proportions (6-by-8-foot digital prints mounted on Plexiglas) is not initially evident, adding a further element of unreality that sparks a feeling or causes viewers to question the space and fill it with answers of their own. Casebere sets the tone, but because the place is not actual, the story of what happened there, or is about to happen, is infinitely variable.

Since it seems to take no special eye or sensibility to shoot a cardboard model on a table—any good technician could do it—the personality of the photographer recedes as part of the viewer's experience. When I'm looking at, say, one of Lynn Davis's stunning photographs of icebergs, I'm subliminally aware of her presence behind the camera, choosing this light or that angle, being intrepid and most likely feeling the cold. It's clear that she's there in this intimidating, far-away place, and I'm not. This surrogacy is an aspect of photography I never



James Casebere: *La Alberca*, 2005, digital C-print mounted on Plexiglas, 72 by 90 inches; at Sean Kelly.

recognized or thought about until its utter absence in Casebere's work made me feel that I, the viewer, had in a sense taken the place of the photographer.

Much of the architecture Casebere invents in this exhibition is exotic and iconic, inspired by the public buildings, both religious and secular, of the Levant, an imprecisely defined Middle Eastern area that extends inland from the eastern Mediterranean coast. While this show offers no depictions of flooded floors, a trope Casebere has used effectively in the past, water appears in the murky bath of *La Alberca* (The Pool), 2005, probably the most evocative image of the group. Certainly it's the most ambiguous, inhabiting the gap between abstraction and image, as well as that between photography and painting. Often Casebere's settings include beckoning hallways, windows and doors that hint at the possibility of further reaches, and from which light, mimicking natural light, radiates. The illumination in *La Alberca*, however, is dim and its source not visible—nor is the way out. We are contained, incarcerated,

and the dark, slightly menacing water awaits. The effect is Rothko-esque, with the allusion to painting amplified by gestural strokes on the wall that suggest crumbling plaster, while a broken black-and-white grid of eroding tiles forms a pattern beneath. The strokes, however, are too broad and sweeping to make the illusion convincing, and the ripples in the pool, which are meant to indicate some disturbance of the surface, are not to scale but oversize. In general, Casebere employs a limited palette, but even more so in this instance, and his grayed sepia hues enhance the haunted atmosphere steeped in humidity and must. Some of Casebere's other pieces, those that employ more fine detail or where the source of the image as a model is more obvious, teeter on the brink of novelty, but they are offset by those where he has found the perfect balance to create that magical suspension of disbelief, of which he is a master.

—Carol Diehl