

Saura, Jennifer. "James Casebere's Suburban Constructs," *LOEBlog*, November 5, 2012.

LOEBlog

James Casebere's Suburban Constructs

BY JENNIFER SAURA / NOVEMBER 5, 2012 / FEATURES



Landscape with Houses, (Dutchess County, NY) #1, 2009



Recently, James Casebere came to Harvard's Carpenter Center to give a lecture on his photography. Introduced by Harvard professor of photography Chris Killib, Casebere presented an array of his carefully-crafted photographs to a packed audience and gave insight into the invisible story of his creative process.

Casebere is known for his constructed photography formed through a process of building architectural models and photographing them in his Brooklyn studio. His photographs tend to be devoid of any presence of human life—instead they are often eerily anthropomorphic. The meticulously crafted, lit and photographed model hallways, rooms, buildings, neighborhoods and cities command an uncanny subjectivity, which, in dark lighting, might be reminiscent of the menacing hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Casebere's spaces are capable of reflecting trauma, fear, conflict and doubt. If you are a willing and able listener, they may also invite you in to hear their story.

Casebere discussed his "Landscape with Houses" from 2009, inspired by the American suburb. "I was looking at sources online, these McMansions and things. Aesthetically, I couldn't stomach it. So I kept changing these houses—I'd start with what I thought was a cliché or stereotype of an overbuilt, overblown suburban home. I couldn't photograph it, so I'd change it a little bit, and I'd change it a little bit, without changing the basic idea."

Color was particularly important for Casebere in establishing the landscape's tone. "I started with a color scheme. I'd been spending a lot of time in Bologna, so I was looking at Morandi, and I started with his very earthy color scheme, and so you have the red roofs, and the yellows, and the ochers. But I started to heighten the color, and paint over and over."

Once the concept for "Landscape with Houses" was developed, Casebere took his rough suburban house models and had them drawn up in SketchUp, a 3D modeling program. A template was made for laser cutting each house, and the laser-cut versions were airbrushed for a clean and neat effect. "I'm pretty crude when it comes to making things, and kind of rough, so I would make them and then I'd have somebody else try to remake them and then I'd remake them again."

Finally, after the painstakingly detailed physical construction period, the model was ready to be photographed. But in the case of this American suburban landscape, photographing was a pixelated building process rather than a simple documentation shot. "There was a lot of digital work done after taking the picture. For some of the houses the sizes changed, even the placement changed. We moved them around, put them closer, further away, we'd enlarge one, and the colors, in some cases, changed pretty dramatically, from what they were in the original photograph," admits Casebere. "So, it became a more complicated process."

Casebere's detailed attention to color, size, and placement of houses was matched by his careful thought to photographic lighting. "I know how to shoot something in twilight, and late afternoon, how to turn a light on inside a house and make it look a little mysterious and inviting—but to shoot something in broad daylight struck me as something of a challenge, and I'm not sure I succeeded in the end. So we had a little rainbow across the sky, and, you know, the American dream."

The last images Casebere showed were "Landscape with Houses" ablaze. "And then I set the whole model on fire—I was kind of done at that point. I'm thinking a little bit about wildfires raging in the west, and the mortgage crisis, the sense of anxiety and fear—the undercurrents of culture in that moment."

"We rented special effects equipment, and this was all done indoors. We used fire gel which is essentially napalm that you paint on the surface, and the fire stays relatively contained," says Casebere. "It was fun, actually, it was a lot of fun."

View more of [James Casabere's photography](#).