

SEAN KELLY

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James Casebere's New Work, Inspired by the Architecture of Luis Barragán, On View at Sean Kelly Gallery



James Casebere. *Yellow Overhang with Patio*, 2016. framed archival pigment print mounted to dibond paper: 44 3/8 x 66 1/2 inches (112.7 x 168.9 cm). framed: 47 x 69 3/16 inches (119.4 x 175.7 cm). edition of 5 with 2 APs

COURTESY: SEAN KELLY GALLERY

The work on view in "Emotional Architecture," James Casebere's show of new photographs — so new many are dated 2017 — on view at Sean Kelly through March 11, take renowned Mexican architect Luis Barragán as their point of departure. In his own brand of constructed photography, Casebere painstakingly fabricates real-life architectural spaces at a miniature scale, and with a good dose of artistic license thrown in, to create photographs that, as he puts it, convey "a certain character or emotional impact," rather than a replication of objects and forms. The images he's based on Barragán's spaces capture the architect's color palette of canary yellow, sunset pink, and deep orange, in striking five by four foot prints that feel so real it's like the viewer could just walk on in. Casebere spoke with Artinfo about what led him to this new, vibrant body of work.

Tell me about the inspiration for this new series, and how you become interested in the architecture of Luis Barragán.

Well I guess I have always liked his work, though I've never visited any of his architecture, actually. I've been to Mexico a little bit over the years but I never made it to his house and studio — on which five of the images are based — or the other houses in Mexico City I used for this series. I don't remember when I first learned about his work, it was a long time ago and I think that the decision to use it here was very intuitive. My survey in Munich at the Haus der Kunst opened at the end of February last year, and I came back from that wanting to make something that was more or less on my own, again. There have been times when the models I build get pretty complicated and I have a whole team of people building houses or working on miniatures. I wanted to pair it down to basics and get simple. In Germany I did this installation that involved looking back at the history of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, which was built by Hitler and one of his architects as a place to showcase German art, and it's this fabulous piece of fascist architecture that is now a contemporary art museum. I was reflecting

on the fascist idea of art and place and how the building functioned as a backdrop for spectacle. So in the end what I had were pictures about rallies, like the Nuremberg rallies for example, and I used this place as something like a theatrical backdrop. I came back from that immersion, and the politics of that work, and I don't know, I just stumbled into Barragán as a point of departure because, for me, his work is about beauty and serenity. It was the opposite of the subject matter I'd been dealing with and so a place of refuge, I suppose. I wanted to be recreating something that was a place you want to be — that was positive instead of negative.

And in the past you've looked at the work of other architects, as well. Names like Richard Neutra or Victor Horta are often mentioned. I'm curious about what it's like to work with somebody else's space — what is the relationship, so to speak, that you develop with that person or with their work?

Well that's an interesting question. I guess it varies. When I started out as an artist I was seriously influenced by Venturi's book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," so there's an architect who had a big theoretical influence on me. I began to think about architecture as a system of signs that we could read rather than the more modernist idea of space as God. That's where I started, in part, but then I looked at things like the Heineman brothers in California and the bungalow craze in the 1920s and '30s and the values that were embodied in the Arts and Crafts movement. I looked at it as kind of like the sociological origin of the contemporary suburb: the ideal of a certain type of house alone on its own plot of land, surrounded by a little private garden of Eden. It had this positive origin. I found myself over the years, however, looking at sort of perverted origins, in a way. So there's the picture of the Venice ghetto, which interested me because it is basically the origin of the high-rise apartment building in New York. Beginning in the 16th century, there was an island in Venice where Jewish people had to be every night between 5 pm and 9am. Then they'd go into the rest of Venice to work for the day. In that case it was looking at a kind of perverse origin for a phenomenon we have.

With other architects, like with Thomas Jefferson or with Horta, I'm looking at the larger historical perspective around the spaces they designed. In Jefferson's Monticello, the values that I appreciate in the space are sense of scale and intimacy, and the inventiveness. At the same time, the context encapsulates a reevaluation of him and his role in the slave trade, so my work was about looking at the larger context.

I looked at Horta in a similar way as well because there was this interesting transition from Art Nouveau to Modernism that he was a part of. Historically, Art Nouveau was occurring in Belgium and you had these greenhouses being built with tropical plants, and everything was about plant life, but it was really about the Congo. And when you look back you don't think about this idealization of the tropical environment in relation to the massacre of the Congo and it's history of colonization. I was interested in that kind of irony. On one hand, I appreciated his architecture, but I had to look at it in a social-political context.

They're inextricable, in a way.

Yeah, and when I did work that was based on Mimar Sinan from the Ottoman Empire, it was more about discovering somebody who was incredibly important in the history of architecture but understudied and underappreciated in the West. He was a pioneer of urban planning and built schools and really fantastic places. I wanted to share this discovery with others in the interest of cultural exchange, but I was also interested in those moments historically when religions were really cooperating with each other, rather than fighting. So I got interested in Moorish architecture in Andalusia, and the tenth century, roughly, when there was in fact a large conversation between cultures. Wars were being fought in little fiefdoms and things but they weren't large-scale religious wars. So you had Muslims and Jews and Christians all actually living together and cooperating and communicating and transferring ideas. You had like, classical philosophy transmitted via Arabic across North Africa to Spain, and then into European dialects. That moment became important, and the buildings in places like the Alhambra and Seville are significant to it. So to a certain extent when I look back, Barragán is somebody who, as a Mexican architect — or engineer originally — went to Europe to study, and with Corbusier traveled to Andalusia and to the Alhambra and was influenced by the Moorish architecture in Spain. So that may be where it really comes from for me. It's a continuing thread.

You're dealing with these spaces of such rich historical legacy. I'm interested in hearing you speak about what you think creating another presentation of a space, and working from that, verses a more straightforward image of the original, is able to achieve? Because it is different, of course, and there are many ideas one could venture on what that difference is.

Yes, there all kinds of ways to approach that question. Well, one thing is that I never to set out to represent preexisting places realistically. I'm not trying to document anything. I've never been interested in photographing the world. From the start I've always been more interested in the relationship between ideas than real things, and so I suppose when I started making photographs it was more like making a painting or sculpture. I mean, it was really about creating a language that was about relationships — about ideas, not things. But as William Carlos Williams said, "no ideas but in things." I had to photograph *something*, so I made it up myself. But even the earliest photographs referred to other artists, if not architects, and were about things like quotation and montage. Here, in this new work, maybe I get closer to actually quoting other photographs and maybe a little closer to being realistic, but I think in the end I'm trying to improve on any other photograph. I'm making it from scratch so I'm trying to eliminate the extraneous and get as close to the essential as I possibly can.

There's a certain level of control you're able to exert that would be inconceivable in shooting a large space, or from reality. You don't have to wait for the right light, or wish that a pillar were placed two feet to the left.

Yeah. I think back at some pictures where I worked from little black and white thumbnails of places and then made these big pictures, which in fact contained *more* detail than what I could see, but on the other hand lacked the detail that seemed extraneous or unimportant. So in this case, I just started looking at Barragán's work, and loving it, and trying to recreate that space for myself in my studio. You know, the studio becomes like a mirror to the room I'm working on. In a way, I'm trying to make my space as wonderful as Barragán's studio by making his space in mine. I'm trying to put myself in that place by building it from scratch. So it isn't an attempt to represent another photograph or a place realistically. For example, I took out all the staircases. I just didn't want any stairs. The vestibule picture excludes the signature unsupported staircase that he has attached to the wall, the library also had one. I changed a lot of the elements in the interest of making a better image, because I'm just making a two dimensional photograph that is supposed to have a certain character or emotional impact. I think the yellow passage is closest to other photographs you might see of his work than maybe any of the other images. The two pink ones with the reflecting pool and the reception room may also be pretty close to the pictures you've seen of those places, too, but in the latter I took out the fountain on the wall. I made it, I faked all this water and everything, but it was too narrative. I'm not trying to tell a story and it's not about the objects. It's about the space and the light and the materials.

I want to ask you about scale, and what seems to be almost like three translations or transformations of size that happens between the thing itself, and what you produce: there's the real-life space as it exists and is able to be lived in, the miniature that you make, and then the piece that you produce, which, like these on view, is often printed at a size that is very relatable on a human scale – four feet by five feet. It's very bodily.

Well size of the images I printed has varied in the past. I started out with eight by ten inch prints of little constructions, which were not too different in size from the constructions I'm working on now. Then I went to 16 by 20 inch, and then 24 by 30, and then 30 by 40, 48 by 60 – you get the picture. Some I printed as large as 11 by 16 feet in multiple panels and things. Usually, now, I make my model with the final size in mind, especially if I'm going to go that big. For a while I would do three sizes of each image — there was a period when I thought of them as just pictures. But then in the 4 by 5 foot scale it became more about that kind of Ad Reinhardt-like relationship to your body, as you say. So now with this show I'm only going to print it in this one size, and I really conceived of them all as having this physical relationship to the viewer. They vary in perspective and the size of the space, and sometimes the cues to the scale are a little confusing, but I like that they're somewhere between pictures and an entries into other rooms.

And in terms of creating a space where you want to see yourself, this size does feel very appropriate because of that feeling of wanting to project yourself into it.

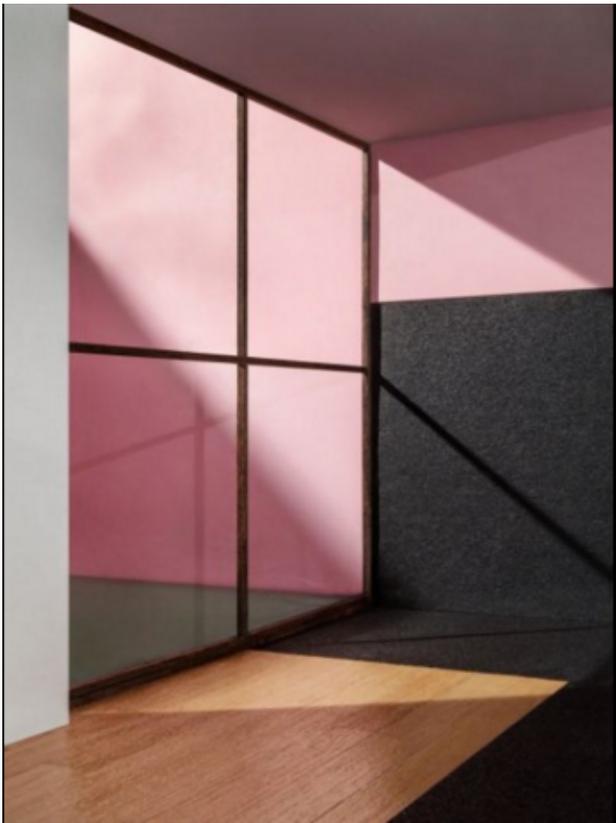
Right. And it's about the fact that you *want* to project yourself into it but you can't, you're not actually in it. With a larger work, it's so big you feel surrounded by it. You're partially in it already. But with these it's still a matter of imagining yourself there rather than being there.

What else do you have coming up?

Well, I'm going to Mexico in a couple of weeks to actually visit the Barragán houses and studio for the first time. That's the next step. And I'm going to keep following this trail. One of the dangers of doing a show now is that you stop working. I felt like I was on quite a roll in the studio; I wanted to just keep it up. So ideally I'm just going to get back to it and keep working on more images, approaching it in a similar way to how I did at the beginning, which was really more intuitively, and just one image at a time without the notion that this would become a compact, complete project all about Luis Barragán. We'll see where it leads.



James Casebere. Vestibule, 2016. framed archival pigment print mounted to dibond paper: 62 x 44 3/8 inches (157.5 x 112.7 cm). framed: 64 11/16 x 47 1/16 x 2 1/4 inches (164.3 x 119.8 x 5.7 cm.). edition of 5 with 2 APs
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James Casebere. Reception Room, 2017. framed archival pigment print mounted to dibond paper: 59 5/8 x 44 3/8 inches (151.4 x 112.7 cm). framed: 62 5/16 x 47 1/16 x 2 1/4 inches (158.3 x 119.5 x 5.7 cm). edition of 5 with 2 APs
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