



# ART IN THE AGE OF SUBPRIME LENDING

JAMES CASEBERE'S NEWEST  
WORK IS ABOUT CARBON-BASED  
LIFESTYLES IN AMERICAN SUBURBS.

Text **Katya Tylevich** / Photos **James Casebere**



‘EVEN THE MOST ENVIRONMENTALLY  
CONCERNED PLANNERS  
HAVE EMBRACED A DISNEY-LIKE,  
NEO-TRADITIONAL MODEL’

– James Casebere –

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01 FLOODED HALLWAY FROM RIGHT, 1999, DYE DESTRUCTION PRINT.

02 MONTICELLO #3, 2001, DIGITAL CHROMOGENIC PRINT.



A building wakes up one morning alone, with no makeup on, thinking: where have the years gone? What have I done with my life? And there's James Casebere with a camera, waiting to capture the moment. That's the illusion, anyway, or the answer I would give were Casebere's work shown to me as a Rorschach test.

But the reality of a Casebere photograph is a table-sized model of an interior or exterior space, a subject with a name as anonymous as *Flooded Hallway from Right* (Casebere's 1999 depiction of a bunker under Berlin's Reichstag) or as notorious as *Monticello #3* (Casebere's 2001 image of Thomas Jefferson's plantation home just outside Charlottesville, Virginia). The former shows a hallway 'knee deep' in water, its off-white walls wrinkled with shadows and reflections of the floods below, one wall lined with four open doors, three of which are plugged with darkness, one illuminated by a light so faint and ominous it seems to whisper: don't get too excited.

And the latter photograph, *Monticello #3*,

shows the third American president's neoclassical digs, looking not quite presidential, with foggy water slowly creeping from the floor, up deep blue walls and towards white-trimmed arched windows. Behind the windows, a uniform darkness. One window's doors open slightly; captured mid-swing, they look like a creak might sound.

In *Monticello #1*, from the same series, something peeks above the water. Casebere later tells me it's part of Jefferson's Great Clock, a symbol of order powered by 8-kg weights that descend into Jefferson's cellar through holes cut in the floor. Apparently, the president learned only *post factum* that the entrance hall's ceiling was not high enough to accommodate the clock's weights. In Casebere's *Monticello #3*, the weights appear again, higher on the wall this time. The artist moves them in each image, quietly marking the passage of time. Well. That's depressing.

Depressing in the same way a large, imposing building's nondescript hallway is depress-

ing when it unexpectedly leads you into some buried memory; or in the way a slowly eroding temple in a foreign country is depressing when you confront it in the absence of tourists and tour guides and silently assess its cracked walls and phantom limbs – those empty quarters once filled with something or someone thought to be permanent.

Such are the Casebere photographs with which I first became acquainted. His best-known pieces, perhaps, they feature public spaces bereft of people; agoraphobic arenas and institutions made claustrophobic by risings waters, caved ceilings, piles of dirt, the aftermath of history and the visible effects of time. Flooded prisons, classrooms and public bathhouses. An interrogation room. An empty Richard Neutra garage.

But this spring, visiting New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art, I met a different kind of Casebere work. An aerial view of an American suburb, glowing with muted colours, caught in the magic hour when the »



LANDSCAPE WITH HOUSES, (DUTCHESS COUNTY, NY) #1, 2009, DIGITAL CHROMOGENIC PRINT.



sun is neither up nor down. The architecture in this photograph is more blatantly cardboard than in a 'typical Casebere'; the multiple homes in the image would collapse were there so much as a gust of wind. These structures are not heavy with history; they are heavy with the lack of it.

While I'm reading the artist's name below his photograph, the artist is some 25 km away in Brooklyn, working in his office. That's where he first receives a phone call from yours truly. He is preparing for a show in Madrid, he tells me. Our conversation, which continues over several e-mails, continents and time changes as Casebere flies to Spain and back, begins with my saying, 'I don't want to put words in your mouth.'

But?

'It seems your photographs are headed in a different direction.'

'Yes. In a new direction,' he says. One that references the artist's beginnings: his premier works from the '70s, which focus on suburban domestic spaces.

'But the new works are a fresh look at today's suburbs and what's transpired since I first became enamoured of Robert Venturi,' Casebere explains. He tells me how, in the '70s, he grew fond of Venturi's 'democratic embrace of the vernacular, and the influence that pop art had on his thinking'.

Casebere says that his latest work process included lengthy visits to suburbs and developments in Peach Tree City near Atlanta, Georgia, and Dutchess County near Poughkeepsie, New York, among others.

'When I visit the suburbs of today, I feel like I'm experiencing the revenge of the post-modern,' the artist tells me. 'The neo-historical eclecticism seems way out of hand. Even the most environmentally concerned planners have embraced this Disney-like, neo-traditional model. It strikes me as bizarre.'

But a judgment like 'bizarre' doesn't necessarily surface in Casebere's latest works. Rather, a timely observation rears its head, or is it an underscoring of what's quite ordinary (bizarrely so?) in the American suburb today

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01 TRIPOLI, 2007, DIGITAL CHROMOGENIC PRINT.

02 BOLOGNA TUNNEL #4, 2010, DIGITAL CHROMOGENIC PRINT.



– Casebere summons some sort of Jungian unease to the subtext of his spaces.

'The neighbourhood I chose to construct is not meant to appear planned at all, but suggests a more ad hoc or arbitrary adaptation of styles by individual homeowners,' says Casebere. 'It's really an identification with the anxious mortgage-burdened homeowner in the age of subprime lending. It's a look at the absurdity of our carbon-based lifestyles, with oversized houses on big lots, big cars, and segregated homes far from retail, manufacturing and places of employment.'

The biography on Casebere's website describes the artist's works as 'based solidly on an understanding of architecture'. I ask Casebere where that understanding comes from, half expecting him to say he took a class in college or something to that effect. Instead, he retreats into a childhood memory. 'My father was a junior high school principal. When I was a child, he worked with architects to design two new schools, and I remember going over blueprints with him, visiting both buildings

## 'WHY SHOULD I HAVE PEOPLE IN THE SPACES I CREATE?'

– James Casebere –

during construction and exploring them once they were done. I also remember designing my own houses as a kid, and drawing floor plans.'

Later, while at art school, Casebere became interested in conceptual artists and sculptors who worked with architectural ideas. He names 'Vito Acconci, Siah Armajani – whom I studied with, Robert Morris, Mary Miss and Robert Irwin. I was a big fan of philosopher Gaston Bachelard. I liked to contemplate domestic space and the role of personal memory in our experience of architecture.

'I think this is a stage a lot of students go through,' Casebere adds and, in doing so, simultaneously undercuts the significance of his last sentence and multiplies it tenfold, making it somehow more universal or touching.

I ask him a big question. 'Why are there never people in the spaces you create?'

He answers with an even bigger question. 'Why should there be?' <<

<http://jamescasebere.com>