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MUSE EVERYONE LOVES A STORY JAMES CASEBERE



Yellow Passage, 2017 © James Casebere.
Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

WS Let's start with your new work.

JC It was intuitive once I got back from having several shows in Europe. I retreated into territory that I felt more comfortable with – architecture and architectural interiors. I wanted to work with spaces again, but without the sense of enforced solitude that there is in my Prisons series. I gravitated toward Luis Barragán, the Mexican architect. He went to Europe, met Le Corbusier, studied Moorish architecture in Sevilla, Córdoba and was particularly affected by the Alhambra in Grenada. Barragán then returned to Mexico and had a very long career. In his later years, he worked with indigenous colors, and he paired a minimal international style aesthetic with the Mexican vernacular.

As a devout Catholic, Barragán was very devoted to beauty and serenity. He developed large residential projects and public monuments like the Satellite City Towers in Mexico City, as well as horse stables with large stretches of concrete walls and reflecting pools – all using color. He collaborated with artists and was close to Josef Albers. He paid particular attention to how his work was photographed. Here is the first image I shot – a model of Barragán's house. For a while, I was working with other people to build models, and it all got very complex. I wanted to do it myself for a change, and get back to making things on my own. I threw this first one together with foam core without any measurements.

WS It reminds me of John Divola's early minimal work or Sarah Charlesworth's abstractions. This feels so different from your prior work. People tend to attach this generalized gloomy, nostalgic psychological association to your work because of their *noir* quality, but these feel like they are in a different register. How would you describe this new emotional range?

JC That's true. As with the prison cells, on one hand, it's not clear whether or not these are real. But I could switch my thinking, and look at them as if they were a 3-D animation. There's a simplicity and ambiguity, but

also something different about them because of this animated quality. I'm trying to do something different in terms of movement, color, and space. I'd also like to think that the work is in the spirit of Barragán's own ambitions.

WS Why do you think that historians and critics always want to see a psychological narrative and not a formal or compositional narrative? This is endemic to conceptual photography generally.

JC It's something people crave. Everyone loves a story. Looking back on my early constructed photography, for instance, it was not narrative, but the title often suggested a story, such as *Fan as Eudemonist: Relaxing After an Exhausting Day at the Beach* (1975). You're supposed to look at the image and see it in that context. But it's also the iconic space of watching television, and the ubiquitous setting for the TV sitcom. I was looking at it from the perspective of the anxiety of influence. I was quoting Claes Oldenberg, but I was making a picture that reflected my place in the TV generation – the generation that was the first to be raised with a TV in the house. That was my inspiration, and my image bank came out of that. But at the same time, the fan represented symbolic things – breath and wind and divine inspiration. In that sense, it was primarily iconic, and about inspiration at that moment.

WS If your earlier work was in direct response to a generational moment, might it be considered documentary?

JC I don't think so. I was acting in opposition to the idea of truth in photography. I had no interest photographic history. I was more interested in making pictures. I identified with Eleanor Antin's approach, especially works like *100 Boots at the Bank, Solana Beach, California, February 9, 1971, 10:00 am* (1971). I had been more influenced by going to Mexico and reading Latin American literature – like Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes – people who really challenged the way history is constructed for political purposes. I was coming out of a more political perspective that was challenging the truth claims of photography. I wanted to project my experience into what I was making, which isn't that different from painting or sculpture.

WS There's a performative element. You're not just creating an image. These new works are almost like light installations.

JC That's why I started finally showing the models and the process a little bit more at my shows at Cornell University and at Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany. It's really fun – setting up the lights and getting things into shape! The process is a big deal. The goal is always the relationship between lighting and the space. Move it just a little bit to the left or right and it falls apart. The challenge recently has been in how I use materials. In the Prisons, there is only one material – concrete. In capturing Barragán, however, you have to deal with wood and stone and water. I'm trying to include light, color, texture, nature, and simple geometric forms. It's a balance of those things that puts you in a space that is fundamentally material.

WS Well, these really feel like somebody could be hanging out in these buildings. I couldn't imagine anyone saying these have to do with dread or nostalgia. They feel very present and very warm. They remind me of Cubist bodies. They also remind me of the treatment of architecture by avant-garde artists like Aleksandr Rodchenko.

JC Constructivism was actually a big departure point for me. Maybe it's not manifest in all the images, but it is, at least conceptually. All of my work has to do with place, and in this case, a certain reverence for this particular architect, but I always transform something. I try to play with the sculptural qualities of space. I always wonder, what am I bringing to bear that is different? I'm discovering as I go.

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