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ART IN REVIEW

James Casebere: 'House'

By ROBERTA SMITH

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Sean Kelly Gallery

Through Dec. 4

In the last Whitney Biennial, James Casebere, one of the founders of postmodern set-up photography, raised his game by pulling back for the long view, in this case of American suburbia, and taking on the full color spectrum. Now he is following up with a show of six images from the series, including the two that were at the Whitney, and it is his best effort in some time.

The suburbia here isn't real, of course. It's an elaborate tabletop model built and painted and then photographed by the artist, an adept sculptor with a nuanced sense of American architecture who has been working this way for years. The show devotes two smaller galleries to a dozen images dating from 1978 to 1992 when Mr. Casebere concentrated on whitewashed tableaux redolent of American history and myth that he lighted carefully and shot mostly in close-up.

The examples here depict a tenement, a lighthouse, Sing-Sing and a mansarded Victorian like the one in "Psycho" as well as postwar suburbia. Shorn of details and slightly inflated in scale, these works have an appealing yet haunted quality. You are drawn in by their delicate shadows and almost toylike charm and then left to deal with their subject, which was in many ways the tragedy of America.

I'm not sure that Mr. Casebere's present vision is any more sanguine, despite the beautiful colors and more expansive space. In one image, a group of blocky McMansions overlooks a more modest white house that was clearly the original farmhouse on this particular tract of subdivided land. But as his camera moves about the landscape he has created, usually from an aerial perspective, and we see the scene in twilight in one image and with fall colors in another, it is clear that Mr. Casebere has decisively opened up the possibilities of his own work.

These scenes bring to mind the images of Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, absent the people. But while Mr. Casebere is very much a storyteller, he also has an underlying interest in artifice and to some extent abstraction itself. Remaking familiar scenes so that they become strangely beautiful and nuanced, he invites us to look more deeply, to both take in what he has done and think about the distance between these subtly adjusted tributes and the less forgiving reality that inspires them. ROBERTA SMITH