

SEAN KELLY

Battaglia, Andy. "Jose Dávila: Stones Don't Move, Sean Kelly Gallery," *ArtNews*, March 10, 2017.

ARTNEWS

Model Behavior: James Casebere Photographs Mini Sets Inspired by Luis Barragán



James Casebere, *Yellow Passage*, 2017, archival pigment print mounted on Dibond.
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The architecture of Luis Barragán—somehow both lush and austere, inviting and severe, formalist but spirited and congenial—has inspired many a visitor to Mexico City, where his former home is open for tours and other beckoning sites can be found. It has also inspired a series of miniature sets photographed in confounding fashion by James Casebere.

For “Emotional Architecture,” a show at Sean Kelly gallery in New York, Casebere built scale-model simulacra of Barragán designs and shot them in close-up compositions that make their facsimile status hard to discern. The stillness in them seems real, and the look of the materials has all the hallmarks of glass, stucco, and wood. The reality, though, is simpler: they are studio contrivances made up of things like poster board, rubber exercise mats, joint compound, and E-Z Water, a pourable clear resin for model builders that liquefies with heat and hardens nicely into decorative pools and reflecting ponds.

Casebere came to an interest in Barragán more than a decade ago after a visit to the south of Spain. There, upon seeing the Alhambra and sites in Seville, he was struck by the same centuries-old Moorish architecture that inspired the kind of spare but sumptuous modernism devised by Le Corbusier and Barragán himself. “Putting it in the context of Moorish architecture of the 10th century or earlier intrigued me,” Casebere said of Barragán’s work, “particularly the way he incorporated the aesthetics of the Mediterranean with the local architecture, materials, and colors of Mexico.”



James Casebere, *Vestibule*, 2016, archival pigment print mounted on Dibond.
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Casebere was strolling through the gallery looking at photographs of his models, as close to a real Barragán house as he had ever been—considering he has never actually visited one but instead came to learn their contours in books. Architecture has long been one of his interests, the artist said, going back to childhood and especially after school in the 1970s at CalArts, where he studied alongside Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, and others in a fertile conceptual milieu.

“I got interested in Robert Venturi after graduating, and reading *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* had a big influence on how I thought about what I did,” Casebere said. “I was interested in architecture as a sign system and the way that Venturi incorporated semiotics. I thought that way about how I made pictures.”

After coming of age as part of the Pictures Generation, Casebere moved through different modes of photography before hitting upon the model-building practice that featured in the Barragán works and other prior projects. Before the latest, he made a series inspired by prison spaces as well as a work—featured at the entry of the Sean Kelly show—that figured in a 2016 survey, “James Casebere: Fugitive,” at Haus der Kunst in Munich. That piece, a model of a podium from the Nuremberg Trials, titled *Grandstand* (2016), played with the show-site’s history as a Nazi-era creation. “It’s a shining example of Nazi architecture, basically,” Casebere said of the storied German museum.

Proceeding further into the gallery show—on view through Saturday, March 11—takes one into more welcoming territory, with empty Barragán stage sets shot and presented in large-scale prints. All of them emulate real sites, but many have minor adjustments, like the removal of staircases and furniture or else other design-minded tweaks to suit the photos’ ultimate ends. “In the process I would change each to correspond to my needs in making a two-dimensional representation,” Casebere said. “It’s my attempt to embody the spirit and ambition and values that Barragán tried to create—to create ‘an emotional architecture,’ as he put it.”