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Knoblauch, Loring. "James Casebere, On the Water's Edge @Sean Kelly."
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JTF (just the facts): A total of 15 large scale color photographs, framed in brown wood and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the main gallery space, the smaller side room, and the entry area. All of the works are archival pigment prints mounted to dibond, made in 2017, 2018, or 2019. Physical sizes range from roughly 60x47 to 70x47 inches (or the reverse), and all of the prints are available in editions of 5+2AP. (Installation shots below.)

Comments/Context: With the benefit of hindsight, it often seems possible to chart an artist's career as a series of step-wise progressions. One idea starts everything off, only to be followed by a new one which evolves the old in an adjacent direction, and then subsequent ideas keep building onward and upward, almost in a brick-by-brick fashion. Of course, the reality is never quite so neat and ordered, the evolution from one idea to the next far messier and idiosyncratic than we want to imagine.

James Casebere's recent body of work seems to offer us a straightforward set of backward-looking connections. In his previous show (in 2017), he applied his signature tabletop construction methods to the architecture of the Mexican Modernist Luis Barragán (reviewed [here](#)), keying in on bright colors and bold geometric planes that danced on the edge of abstraction. His recreations were at once faithful and pared down, celebrating Barragán's vision while reducing it to its essential elements.

Casebere's new photographs leave Barragán behind, but leverage that same palette of simplified architectural forms to make new constructions. His stripped-down structures cluster in a tight aesthetic group, each a version of shoreline or seaside building: beach houses, cabanas, pavilions with large windows facing the water, and even one blocky design made in the Brutalist style. Many are set up on thin stilts, seemingly ready for the punishing waves of hurricanes or rising seas.

All of these buildings have then been flooded, the waters leaving them partially submerged, floating like islands, or still just outside the reach of the incoming waves. If this watery treatment sounds vaguely familiar, it should – Casebere began flooding some of his tabletop models back in the late 1990s (a small survey of this late 1990s/early 2000s work from 2013 was reviewed [here](#)). While those works were interior studies, with the water providing an encroaching sense of claustrophobia, here Casebere is ostensibly outdoors, with a range of weather

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conditions represented, from sunny midday brightness to dark, ominous-looking storms approaching. In a sense, he has repurposed his own idea from two decades ago, giving that flooding a new range of potential meanings.

Climate change is of course the obvious culprit for these rising waters, but Casebere's images aren't as universally pessimistic about the future as we might have guessed. Yes, there are a few images where the skies are indeed quite gloomy and the waters have risen to the midpoint of the windows, the houses feeling abandoned and empty – they effectively document the point of no return. But the vast majority of the images have a pluckier, more survivalist feeling, where the sun is out and the intelligence of the designs (the stilts, the platforms, the raised floors, and the flow through first floors) has generally worked. The waters have indeed risen precipitously as predicted, but all is not lost – we're just using our smarts to adapt to new conditions. Even the tightly packed town that has flooded isn't a complete disaster – every single structure on the street has been waterproofed.

Stylistically, the flooding has also offered Casebere the opportunity to more fully experiment with reflection and distortion. In some cases, Casebere has made the water quite still, so the reflections double neatly, the tops and bottoms mirroring each other with pleasing balance; in others, the waters are more roiled, so the reflections dissolve and bend, the straight stilts becoming squiggled lines and interrupted jags. Casebere also creates push and pull with his color choices, the eye popping yellows, oranges, and pinks feeling exaggeratedly (almost off-puttingly) upbeat, and the more muted browns, beiges, and greys softening and underplaying the waterlogged outcomes.

As Casebere works through this re-hybridization of old and new ideas, it's clear he's still grappling with how to best intermingle these influences. There are a few standout images in this show, a couple of obvious misses, and several artistic avenues only lightly explored. What this likely says is that there's plenty more for Casebere to discover here, and that his next turn of the crank will likely be more consistently annealed.

Collector's POV: The prints in this show are priced at \$50000 or \$60000, based on the place in the edition. Casebere's work has become consistently available in the secondary markets, with a handful of lots available every year. Recent prices at auction have ranged between \$2000 and \$75000.

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