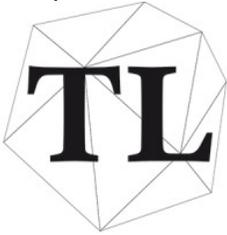


Chapman, Lara. "Floodscapes." *TLmag36*, Autumn–Winter 2022.



More than 2 billion people worldwide were affected by floods from 1998 to 2017 and floods continue to be one of the most common and most destructive natural disasters. For centuries, artists have been drawn to these unstoppable swells of water, exploring the moment when a landscape is subsumed — transforming it from lucid countryside to floodscape, from suburban concrete streets to a sea with rooftop islands. In 1517-18, Leonardo da Vinci sketched raging swirls of waves which swallowed cities, armies and even mountains in his series *The Deluge Drawings*; In 1896, Claude Monet painted the flooded meadows of Giverny, France, in *Flood Waters*, where the bare trees were the only witnesses to the aftermath of the flood; And, in 1967, Helen Frankenthaler abstractly captured the large plains of colours that emerge with a flood, when the details of a landscape or street are buried underwater, in her painting simply titled *Flood*. Over the years, many other artists have grappled with the subject of floods, using floodscapes to explore topics such as renewal, destruction, seasons, fertility. What compels artists to return to these watery vistas again and again? And, how is that changing today, as incidences of extreme flooding continue to grow in frequency and intensity across the world due to the climate crisis?

For artist and photographer James Casebere, who builds architectural models, complete with hyperrealistic water, and photographs them in his studio, his fascination with floods has been longstanding. Casebere says his work has been informed by “extremes in climate” since he was a graduate student in 1978 when he often photographed “storms, mudslides and car crashes on the highway.” In earlier works Casebere says “the use of flooding was psychological, meant to

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suggest the unconscious, as well as lost memories — be they historic or personal.” This cerebral use of flooding is apparent in *Pink Hallway #2*, a work he built and photographed in 2000. It depicts a hallway, painted a soft pale pink, with white trimmings, arching doorways and a chess-like chequered floor. The scene suggests a certain grandeur and yet the hallway is pooled, knee-deep, with water. The house is empty. There are no paintings on the walls, no photographs, no furniture. No signs of humans at all. The photograph is cinematic in its drama and lighting. It is uncanny, unnerving and leaves the viewer uncertain if it is a photograph of a real scenario or a staged one.

In 2018, 40 years after he first turned his attention to the subject of the climate, he is more self-consciously and “more directly addressing climate change and rising sea levels to draw attention to the issue.”

“It has become clear,” says Casebere, “that we need an all-out effort to reverse the trend in carbon emissions immediately on both a personal behavioural and especially a societal policy level. Mediation and adaptation are both necessary.” The result of his more concentrated focus in how he approaches floodscapes is the series “*On the Water’s Edge*” (2018 - ongoing) which presents strikingly modernist houses enveloped by water. Their foundations and bottom levels are often not visible under the weight and volume of the flood. *Blue House on Water*, for example, shows the upper half of duck egg blue façade with a gently sloping white roof and red column against an almost black-grey sky. At first glance, it looks like the house reaches below the crop of the photograph. But this is an illusion of normalcy. In fact, the bottom of the house is a perfectly aligned reflection of the top half, shimmering on the water’s surface. The house has been rendered unliveable by water and the work points to the unsuitability of much of our architecture and built environments for the extreme climate-related events we are beginning to face.

Another work in this series shows a more promising future when we have learned to live with water and flooding. In *Yellow House on Water*, the house sits on a pontoon or raised structure and the house is partially on stilts, protecting it from at least some potential damage. The yellow seems to sit in cheery defiance of the dark water and clouds surrounding it, suggesting a kind of resilience to the landscape or perhaps an acknowledgement that we must work with the environment. The pieces capture what Casebere describes as “a sense of apprehension, loss, foreboding, and calm, and the way social issues and personal history intersect.” Like Casebere, US-based artist Christopher Burk also depicts houses in floodscapes. “When I began these series’, it was not for political reasons,” he said. Indeed, his engagement with this subject matter emerged from a chance moment in 2018, when in an uncharacteristic move, Burk switched on the evening news. He saw images of the flooding in the south-eastern United States caused by Hurricane Florence. They were taken from a helicopter from a bird-eye vantage point. “Not only did I see something tragic in the imagery there was also a profound beauty in the destruction’s serenity.” Captivated by the images, he paused the news and took photos on his phone of the footage. This led to two new bodies of work “*Flooded House*” and “*Flooded Landscapes*”. The first series depicts the tips of houses seen from above, their familiar pitch-styled roofs sticking out of the flat plains of water that fill the rest of the canvas. The mud-sullied orange-brown water sits in stark contrast to the jovial blues and whites of the houses’ exteriors. The latter series consists of paintings of trees and fields submerged in water, the lines of agriculture replaced with boxes of brown, the normal green hidden under the weight of settled rain.

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4 — Christopher Burk, *Flooded House 7*, huile sur lin /oil on linen, courtesy of the Artist



Burk says that he originally created this work because he liked “that they were an alternative vision to the concept of landscape painting and found the images to be hauntingly beautiful.” A few years on, his thought process has changed due to the world he sees around him. “With each new season, the storms and devastation that bring these surges have grown with intensity, regardless of ones’ location. As global citizens, we will continue to be impacted, directly and indirectly, by these natural disasters.” He believes that “floodscapes are an important topic, not only for artists, but for all of us.”



There is a strange tension at play in both the artists’ works. On the one hand, they are serene and beautiful, the calm stretches of water and lack of humans or human destruction presenting a world at peace. They risk leaving the viewer somewhat soothed, which sits in

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conflict with the artists' desires to make us think more deeply and act more urgently about the climate crisis. On the other hand, they are eerie in their implication that an environmental disaster has taken place and with it, devastation and havoc, the uneasy calm after the storm. Casebere deliberately plays with the beauty of destruction. He says the tension between pleasure in art and a kind of criticality are key for him, explaining, "it is important to grieve, but I want to leave the viewer with the sense that they have the power to act." Building on the tradition of floodscapes, artists today are approaching this genre as a form of activism. They are photographing and painting from a palette of concern, urgency and a touch of optimism, helping us to face the ongoing challenges of our planet.



1 — James Casebere, *Pink Hallway #2*, 2000, cibachrome monté sur Plexiglas /cibachrome mounted to Plexiglas, courtesy of James Casebere, courtesy of the Artist and Sean Kelly, New York  
2 — James Casebere, *Blue House on Water*, 2018, épreuve pigmentaire d'archivage montée sur dibond /archival pigment print mounted to dibond, courtesy of James Casebere, courtesy of the Artist and Sean Kelly, New York  
3 — James Casebere, *Yellow House on Water*, 2018, impression au pigment d'archivage montée sur dibond /archival pigment print mounted to dibond, courtesy of James Casebere, courtesy of the Artist and Sean Kelly, New York