

Mel Bochner and James Casebere at Sonnabend

At first glance Mel Bochner and James Casebere seem worlds

apart. In separate but concurrent shows, Bochner presented 11 "paintings"—multiple straight lines at sharp angles to one another on raw canvas—and Casebere presented photographs of little model tableaux—a courtroom, a library, a back porch, etc. These two artists are not of the same generation (this was Casebere's first solo show), and in style, medium and mode they have nothing in common. They do, however, share an idea of art as an epistemological as well as esthetic activity: to both, how we know things is as important as how we appreciate them.

Bochner's paintings are really drawings: lines cut, jag, cross and connect. The colors (warm pastels and charcoal) are openly physical, and the forms so complex as to seem almost random. But Bochner does ground these works—in his, and other, past art. In recent years he has done drawings and wall frescos, and the analytical edge of the first and the historical resonance of the second are both evident here. In effect, the structures of the earlier frescos (richly colored polygons that danced across the wall) are rendered skeletally—turned into drawing, supported by canvas.

But why drawings on canvas? Perhaps Bochner felt that the drawings needed the (historical) armature of painting that the canvas suggests. For, in a sense, these drawings ask to be seen in relation to (post) Renaissance art. At once volumetric and transparent, they recall the rational construction of classical painting—the mediation, through perspective, of a figure and its ground.

Bochner renders this old dichotomy ambivalent; he does the same to another old dichotomy—of painting as finished work versus drawing as sketch. Rubbed and redrawn, these works are not "finished," final—they are, in his words, a "mediation on the meaning of certainty." This could be called Bochner's Doubt, for just as Cézanne was interested in the (im)purity of sight, Bochner is interested in the (im)purity of conception.

In a different way James Casebere is also interested in such (im)purity. Out of museum board, spackle and paper he molds little models, which he then photographs. At once whimsical and profound, these photos confound the truth value that we accord photography, for they are (at least) two removes from what they represent. The models in no way fool us, and yet we want to see them as real—largely because we still regard the photograph as a document first, a record of the real. Casebere wittily plays with this conviction.

In one photograph the model is like a little set for an opera, whose libretto is cued by the title: *Sut-*

pen's Cave. Thomas Sutpen is a character (in Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*) who builds a mansion in the midst of slavery, incest, etc. The novel is about the complexities of "civilization" and "wilderness"—precisely the terms that the photograph plays with. Through worn "rocks" that signify wilderness we see a "temple" that represents civilization. Casebere shows that the real things—the rocks—are never simply that: they are always signs too. As in Coppola's *One From the Heart*, reality here is a site of projection where fact and fiction are one—a film or photo created in the studio of what (we think) we know.

—Hal Foster

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