

"All the News  
That's Fit to Print"

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## The Arts

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### An Artist's Novel Take on History: He Lets the Walls Talk

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

Walking into a space designed by James Casebere can be an unsettling experience. Mr. Casebere has based his architectural work on the Berlin sewer system, West African slave quarters, maximum-security prisons and Jefferson's Monticello (by design, Mr. Casebere's Monticello is ankle-deep in water).

That is, if you could walk into these spaces.

Mr. Casebere, a New York artist, designs and builds the work as models, photographs them, then blows the photographs up into large-scale prints, typically six by eight feet, that give the impression of reality. But the uneasy realm of caverns, parlors and cells, inhabited by unspoken intent, can be visited in the mind's eye only, like the architecture in dreams.

An exhibition of 10 of his photographs is on view at the new Sean Kelly gallery in Chelsea through June 16. A monograph, "James Casebere: The Spatial Unconscious," is being published next month. An exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which includes work by Mr. Casebere and Glen Seator, opened earlier this month, on view through July 29.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

James Casebere in his studio. He sees architecture as an unofficial witness to events.

Mr. Casebere, 47, who wanted to be an architect as a child, grew up outside Detroit, the son of a high school principal who designed two schools. He recalled poring over blueprints with his father. In 1975, while an undergraduate at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, he began taking photo-

graphs of things he had built. He graduated in 1976.

"There were a lot of interesting conceptual artists — Vito Acconci, Siah Armajani, Mary Miss — who began working with architecture in the 70's," Mr. Casebere said last week, sitting in a dusty leather lounge

chair in his East Village studio.

The tenement apartment, crowded to its corners with the parts of houses and sets of interior spaces, looks like the bedroom of a child who enjoys blowing up his toys. Mr. Casebere has recently moved residence to Fort Greene, Brooklyn, with his companion, Lorna Simpson, an artist, and their daughter, Zora.

"Robert Venturi became very important to me after I got out of school," he said, speaking of the architect and author of "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," a seminal book on postmodernism published in 1966. "To think about architecture as a system of visual signs. His terminology was borrowed by critics like Douglas Krimp and applied to people like Cindy Sherman: art that used popular conventions of picture making like photography, and used historical pastiche."

Mr. Casebere first exhibited his photographs in New York at Artists Space in 1977. Unlike his contemporaries Ms. Sherman, who took center stage in movielike locations for her "Film Stills," or Laurie Simmons, who staged dramatic scenes with dolls against backgrounds of miniature rooms and houses, Mr. Casebere created spaces without figures, based on architectural ar-

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