

NIGHTLIGHTS

Night is a time, and also a place. It's developing country, a nation that each year grows in population, the size of its workforce, the range of its services, the wealth it generates. We have run out of space to colonize, the sociologist Murray Melbin observes, and so we are building in time. Night, not outer space, is our world's true new frontier. Outer space, in fact, is an extension of night ; after all, if it were not for night, we would not know outer space was there.

Like Australia, the nation of night was first colonized by outcasts and criminals. Artists, by Romantic legend also outlaw figures, transgressors of social norms, have long been its leading citizens. But in recent years, the night has siphoned off the cultural mainstream from the world of the day. A world once ruled by pimps and hustlers, B-girls, thugs, and the poets enamored of them has become the territory of white collar workers. Night country is not quite a norm, but increasingly it operates as though it were one — a doppelganger tracking by twelve hours the daylight world of cities, suburbs, offices and homes, the places of social responsibility, of meeting and encapsulation. It is a world in which the normal and the crazed are fused into the same image, in which the imagination is chopped up into consumer segments broken up by These Important Messages from our sponsors.

James Casebere is a master architect of night country. He builds settlements on the border strip between the old night world of the artist and the con-man and the new night populated by five-to-niners. His buildings are hybrids, dreamscapes crossed with suburban carpet-housing and the banal images beamed into the mind through its unblinking idiot boxes. They are designed to house a generation that grew up on watered-down Freud, a generation for whom dreams had become a form of public information, even a kind of advertising for the existence of a soul.

Often, Casebere builds in the style of the American West. They are ghosts of the old frontier, come back to haunt the settlers of the new. Spanish missions, covered wagons, desert landscapes : these emblems of territorial conquest, pictures of an old continent forced to receive the harsh projections of its new identity as a New World, once signified the journey of Europeans into the unknown. Now, drained of color as if by overexposure to automobile headlights and psychoanalysis, they line the path of a not less daunting voyage into the known.

We don't know whether the ghosts are friendly or menacing. The images are playful and violent, and the playfulness is as disturbing as the violence. Brutality has been domesticated. Guns and arrows are weapons but also toys, ghosts not only of genocidal wars but also of the toy chests of suburban children raised on Rin Tin Tin, Davy Crockett, Death Valley Days, Bonanza, Rawhide, Cheyenne, Gunsmoke, The Lone Ranger, and other manufactured episodes of American heroism. But the toys are also weapons, instruments in a fight to make everything ridiculous. Courage, resourcefulness, independence : the aim of TV Westerns, and of the family situation comedies that have also furnished Casebere's city, to propagate " traditional values ". But Casebere is tuned to the real tradition in operation here : infantilizing history into something to be bored with on a rainy afternoon.

These are quintessential images of the 1980s, the years of the former Death Valley Days host whose administration went far toward voiding the dividing line between history and escapist entertainment. Reagan may have thought he was promoting a return to traditional values ;

