

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 1995 \$7.00 SFr 15 I N T E R N A T I O N A L

JAMES CASEBERE

MICHAEL KLEIN GALLERY

As if attempting to keep up with the current boom in prison construction, James Casebere has gradually turned from building and photographing scale models of suburban row houses, ranches, and Venetian ghetto-dwellings to constructing and photographing scale models of various structures of imprisonment—Sing Sing, the now-defunct Eastern Pennsylvania State Penitentiary, and the mobile “jail cages” once used in Georgia. But looking to Casebere’s large, atmospheric Cibachromes for an explanation of what drives our increasingly carceral society is unlikely to get you very far.

First of all, there are no prisoners here. In the earlier works depicting eerily toylike, seemingly nocturnal prison exteriors, this absence was less remarkable. In his latest suite of photographs, however, with its focus on cells, hallways, and bathrooms, Casebere’s quasidocumentary gaze is the only indication of human presence. Further, it is no longer clear when or where the scene is set. The lone object—a cot—in *A Barrel Vaulted Room*, 1995, could be that of prisoner, monk, or madman. In *Empty Room*, 1995, the light mashing up against the high, barred window and pooling on the bare floor is the light of a previous, more heroic age—a light for de Sade or Blake. The walls here, as in the other works, are without blemish or much detail, as if rubbed smooth by the wind. By using color film to shoot the models (made of map board, foamcore, and paper), Casebere softens and lends nuance to these otherwise stark structures. In a more oblique way, this approach also signals a quest for color where there is little more than an extremely restricted range of blue and yellow—kind of Northern Romantic Institutional.



James Casebere. *Asylum (detail)*, 1995, Cibachrome. 48 x 60".

By turning inward, then, Casebere has also turned up the volume on universality: though carceral, the spaces in these five photographs speak of no particular time and no particular institution. This is the work’s virtue. For if such neutrality encourages a reading of these models as “model”—that is, as paradigmatic or Platonic—it also raises the question of what it is about such places that transforms people like Jean Genet, Malcolm X, George Jackson, and Nelson Mandela. In three of the show’s five photographs, the presence of a single aperture allowing light into a boxlike room suggests something more: photography’s origin in the camera obscura, the “darkroom” where the carceral and Casebere’s medium merge and develop.

—Thad Ziolkowski