

**Projects 59 : Architecture as metaphor :
James Casebere, David Deutsch, Y.Z.
Kami, Toba Khedoori, Bodys Isek
Kingelez, Langlands & Bell : the Museum
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59

architecture as metaphor

projects

james casebere

david deutsch

y.z. kami

toba khedoori

bodys isek kingelez

langlands & bell



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

April 10 – June 3, 1997

In the hands of artists, architecture mutates into a language rich in expressive possibilities. Classical and Romantic painters, for instance, mirrored through architecture the fluctuating perception of man's strength and frailty. Today, such investments of ideas and emotions into architecture are as varied as the artists themselves. Witness the work of Anselm Kiefer, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Rachel Whiteread. The contemporary resurgence of narrative, channeled through the representation of the body and its antithesis, the minimalist geometric structure, is now finding a malleable ally in architecture's evocative power. In this exhibition, the selected artists, whose backgrounds cover several continents,¹ have created landmarks where they have painted, photographed, chiseled, and constructed their multifaceted messages into the substance of architecture.

James Casebere unveils surveillance and delves into the terror of confinement. His prison series, begun in 1992, resulted from his researches into the relationship of architecture and social institutions since the Enlightenment. Instead of photographing the visible world, Casebere points his camera at the most hidden environments: the interior of jails and other correctional facilities. In reality, those interiors are models Casebere builds in his studio. Guided by a slide of the actual site, he constructs his scenes out of styrofoam, cardboard, and plaster. With dramatic lighting, he creates, in his own words, a "film noir atmosphere and the sense of impending something,"² which he then captures in photographs like *Tunnels* (1995), a cibachrome drained of color. The disparity from the real site lies in the degree of simplification achieved in the simulacrum and in the artifice that remains visible in the photograph. The original, The Eastern State Penitentiary, was designed by John Haviland and built in Philadelphia in the 1820s, where it remained in use until 1971. Its radial plan allowed close surveillance of the inmates, who

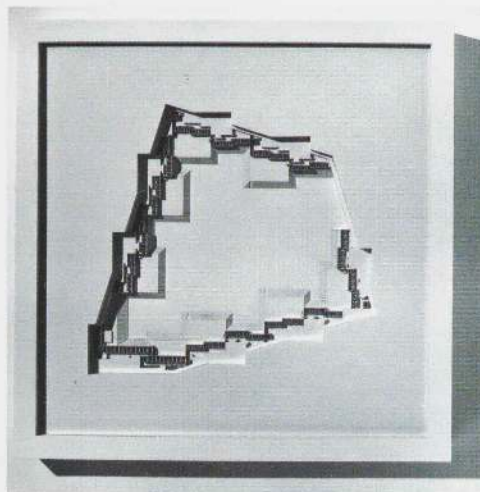


James Casebere. *Tunnels*. 1995. Cibachrome, 48 x 61 1/2" (121.9 x 156.2 cm). Collection Lois and Richard Plehn. Photo courtesy Lisson Gallery

were kept in solitary confinement. Abandoning corporal punishment and physical labor in favor of meditative contemplation, the facility was considered progressive in its philosophy, although it failed to fulfill its promise of rehabilitation.³ Casebere's fabricated fiction, by toying with our credulity, challenges photography's "presumption of veracity."⁴

Casebere also considers the work to be a metaphor for photography as a medium. As he explains, "The cell is a little box, like the camera, and the window is an aperture that lets in light. The room is a camera obscura."⁵

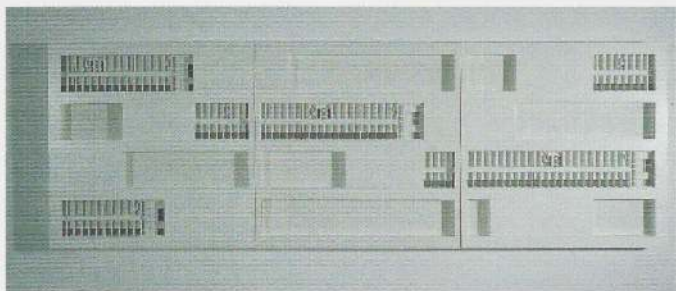
The powerful impact of a photograph such as *Tunnels*, however, resides somewhere beyond architecture and photography, fact and fiction. Airless, labyrinthine, cavernous, this fearsome interior frames a subjective projection. The inmate's condition duplicates the solitary activity and isolation of the artist in his studio.



Langlands & Bell. *Underground Prison*. 1997. Wood, card, rohacell, paint, glass, cellulose lacquer, 33 1/2 x 33 1/2 x 4 1/2" (86 x 86 x 11.5 cm). Courtesy the artists

For **Langlands & Bell**, whose collaboration dates back to the late 1970s, the controlling power of architecture over human behavior, most obvious in prison design, occupies the core of their investigations. "Every plan is an agenda," they often claim. Their work seeks to decode this hidden agenda. Like Casebere, they are interested in architecture as the intersection of the individual and society, but their approach differs in that they tone down the drama and target the architectural ground plans where the idea is deeply encrusted. Their conceptual pictographs are presented as handmade wall reliefs—pristine, elegant, and seemingly Minimalist abstractions.

Underground Prison (1997) is a scale representation of the lower level of the Minnesota High Security Correctional Facility, built in the 1980s in Oak Park Heights, Minnesota. Its subterranean location, evoking cemeteries, turns confinement into an experience of lethal entrapment. The artists confirm the morbid association by highlighting common traits between this prison and the funerary temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri in Egypt.⁶ When the buried correctional complex is juxtaposed with *Unité* (1993),



Langlands & Bell. *Unité* (triptych). 1993. Wood, rohacell, card, paint, glass, cellulose lacquer, 33½ x 8' 4½ x 4½" (86 x 255.3 x 11.5 cm). Courtesy the artists

based on Le Corbusier's soaring vision of a collective housing unit in Marseille, the pairing illuminates a frequent strategy of Langlands & Bell. It implies contamination, inviting reflection on the social function of all architecture. Le Corbusier's utopian *Unité d'Habitation* (1946–52) signaled a shift from his earlier machine aesthetic toward a more organic design with anthropocentric references. But it leaves Langlands & Bell as skeptical about its humane dimension as it did Lewis Mumford, one of its earlier critics, who stated, "The result is an egocentric extravagance, as imposing as an Egyptian pyramid, which was meant to give immortality to a corpse, and—humanly speaking—as desolate."⁷ Langlands & Bell's *Unité* reflects the antiseptic quality they perceive in the original design. They have commented:

*Despite the liberal humanist and progressive ideals [Le Corbusier] espoused at the time of the building's design, a person observing the plan for the first time nowadays is immediately struck by the rigorously regimented syntax of its layout: long rows of identical units, which may seem more reminiscent of the mechanical order of the production line than indicative of a future utopian city.*⁸

In their triptych, floor plans alternate with empty modules, the human habitat rhymes with void. The utopian vision of Le Corbusier thus crumbles and leaves the rigid scaffolding of control exposed.

While Langlands & Bell, anchored in rational architecture, unearth the skeletons of power with the scientific accuracy of an archaeologist, **Toba Khedoori's** incomplete façade stands to architecture as a mnemonic sign relates to its origin. Both hesitant and lucid, it exists somewhere between recognition and oblivion, comparable to a moment of memory.

Khedoori's images, some architectural, some not, hover in an awesome space and compete for attention with waves of engulfing wax into which they are meticulously incised.

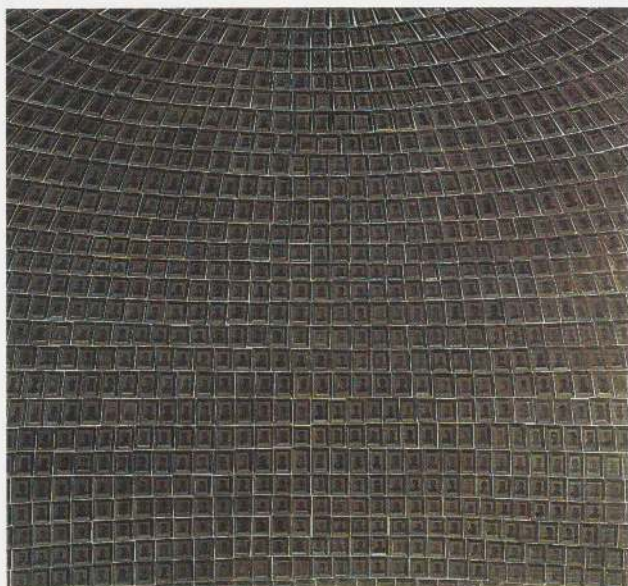
To borrow Collier Schorr's term, Khedoori achieves an "impossible union."⁹ Monumental yet intimate, executed on paper as an architect's rendering and irreverently stapled to the wall, *Untitled (Doors)* (1995) usurps the ambition reserved for painters. It conjures the epic scale of Abstract Expressionism, which she tackles not with grand impulsive gestures but with precise craftsmanship performed with the

obsessive brushstroke of a miniaturist. It is pristine from a distance, yet soiled with traces of footprints and dog hair. Khedoori's palette ranges from the shimmer of mother of pearl to shades of lapis lazuli to graphite pentimenti. With prosaic architecture she composes poetry. She begins with the incubus of fenced-off, regimented doors of slums and prisons but ends with a filigreed mirage as immaterial as fantasies. These doors hint at communal living as much as they speak about absence, and they open to a space as flat as the paper supporting them. Hushed, almost whispering, Khedoori's tranquil scene of a suspended façade takes the viewer to sites familiar and yet never visited—an elsewhere, heard about and imagined. Though not embarked on any specific journey, we surrender to the magnetic power of her oneiric peregrination.



Toba Khedoori. *Untitled (Doors)* (detail). 1995. Oil and wax on paper, 11' x 20' (332.7 x 594.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lenore and Bernard Greenberg. Photo courtesy Regen Projects and David Zwirner

Leaving the measured cadence of Khedoori's doors, we experience a symphonic space in **David Deutsch's** painting titled *Plasma* (1996–97). The concavity of an architectural structure, faintly reminiscent of a celestial observatory or rotunda, frames the anonymous faces. In his art, whether depicting landscape or indoor spaces, Deutsch situates himself and his viewers at an all-encompassing vantage point. In a sense, he transcends mortal vision. The landscapes appear as reconnaissance images unfathomable without technology. Similarly, the densely populated interiors postulate an omniscient or cosmic intelligence capable of sweeping overviews, a master at condensing a thousand narratives and pondering over a collective history. In *Plasma*, the majestic vault resonates with the grandeur of archetypal spaces like the Pantheon. In Deutsch's hands, this repository of the collective memory exudes a sense of antiquarian dust. Innumerable portraits, ancestral shadows perhaps, inhabit the concavity. They are rendered with the sepia tone of ancient manuscripts and wooden hues of library shelves. As if commissioned by some voracious collector,



David Deutsch. *Plasma*. 1996–97. Oil on canvas, 7'6" x 8'5" (228.6 x 256.6 cm). Courtesy Jay Gorney Gallery, New York

bibliophile, or archivist, the structure accommodates an obsessive urge to gather, compile, classify, and order knowledge. The erudite atmosphere would seem congenial to the encyclopedic mind of an Umberto Eco. The spherical structure in the end suggests an intellectual or cerebral space, constructed with a conceptual will, a space propitious to a dialogue with History.

In the past, **Y.Z. Kami** has woven tales of sexuality and fear, mortality and desire, through architectural photography of ancient phallic tomb towers and painted portraits. In his installations, the monuments helped situate the origin or perhaps the destination of his portrayed sitters. Architecture echoed the same riddles and hints etched in the gazes. In those works, Kami chose to make visible only the façades. Here, with his corner piece he turns the gaze inward and builds an interiorized self-portrait.

Untitled (*Diptych*) joins at right angles the computer manipulated photographs of two medieval Persian domes, stripped down to their details but blown up to gigantic proportions. Properly positioned, the viewer enters both spaces at once. The spiral dance of the brickwork in each monument creates a mesmerizing vortex which leads to the most profound recesses of the



Y.Z. Kami. Untitled (*Diptych*). 1997. Iris mounted on linen, each 9'4" x 10'4" (284.5 x 316 cm). Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

psyche, each dome reflecting a different facet of the experience. Although the vantage point remains the same, in one the bricks gyrate and lead deceptively into an abysmal darkness dilating under our feet; in the other they meander upward toward radiating light. The grid system accentuated in the tenebrous dome acts as a conscious effort, a cerebral screen preventing the descent into the murky domain of the unconscious. The same grid retreats in the other cupola to allow an unhindered path to clarity. The introspective nature of this work favors a lingering glance that is allowed to dissolve into the pulverized photographic grain and refocus later on the whirling motion of each circle.

In contrast to Deutsch's colloquium, Kami's domes witness a private soliloquy. Metaphors for soul searching, these panels join to mirror the inner seated anxieties and aspirations of the artist.

Bodys Isek Kingelez is a visionary who designs his architecture with the stuff of utopian dreams. Born in the village of Kimbembe-Ihunga in the Republic of Zaire, Kingelez is a self-taught artist. His contact with art began in the 1970s at the Institut des Musées Nationaux in Kinshasa, where he restored masks and statues. Believing in the rehabilitative power of architecture, he creates fairytale constructions that delineate, as he says, the "silhouette of [his] fantasies." The manifestations of his vision are absurdly grandiose. Poetic, magical, and witty, his small-scale models could never be materialized, but they are conceived with the community in mind. The monuments are destined for collective rather than individual use, an idea that recalls the social engagement of traditional African art.

Kingelez's first urban models predate his knowledge of European capital cities and continue to affirm his optimism with respect to modernity and progress. He formulates his ideas not only visually but also in the commentaries he composes for each work.

About his native village, which he has filtered through his dreams and transformed into a booming metropolis in works such as *Palais d'Ihunga* (1992) and *Kimbembe Ville* (1992), Kingelez explains, "This super-mod maquette incarnates a village which should become one day an ultra-modern and original city, the symbol of victory after a long period of agitation and combativeness."¹⁰

Fueled by the experience of a ravaged country, these manifestos expound an artistic mission to forge a more prosperous future. Whimsical inventiveness informs his writings, inscriptions, and some of his titles. *Papithec*a (1992), for instance, could be a pun on the word "bibliotheca" (library), a repository for "papier" or documents and papers. Kingelez also invents names such as "Chicodi Stars," inscribed on one of the surreal buildings in *Palais d'Ihunga*, which he defines as a

type of a new real estate composition of a picturesque residence in a world of marvelous future space, paradisiacal

and surrealist Its composition and its sumptuous and exaggerated decorative motifs, recall the exuberant richness of L'Afrique profonde.

Without having seen Disneyland or Las Vegas, Kingelez conjures the delirious frenzy of busy intersections, the excitement of amusement districts in bustling cities and their inevitable fabricated artificiality. Rem Koolhaas, the contemporary architect who favors complex urban textures, might well find this to his taste. The pluralistic architectural styles, increasingly evident in Kingelez's most recent models for entire cities, present an eclectic mélange of the observed and the imagined. They suggest such an impracticality and craziness that one can only read them as an index of freedom. Kingelez is a mad architect whose wisdom springs from his recognition of fantasy and pleasure as vital ingredients of survival in politically hostile environments.

From the prisons of Casebere and Langlands & Bell and the interior domes of Kami and Deutsch to the city hinted at by Khedoori and jazzed up by Kingelez, we have moved from an empty shell, the boldest confrontation of man with abstraction, to an urban model erected to the specifications of a dream—from distopia to utopia. Through private ruminations, subconscious quests, and rhetorics on the sociopolitical nature of architecture, these artists have expanded the metaphoric potential of spaces and turned architecture into the ventriloquist of their intentions.

Fereshteh Daftari

notes

1. James Casebere and David Deutsch were born in the U.S., Y.Z. Kami in Iran, Toba Khedoori in Australia, Bodys Isek Kingelez in Zaire, and Ben Langlands and Nikki Bell in England.
2. James Casebere and Gregory Creydson, "The Jim & Greg Show," *Blind Spot 2* (Fall 1993), n.p.
3. See Norman Johnston, *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994). I am indebted to James Casebere for this reference as well as his generous collaboration. See also Michel Foucault, *Crime and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [1977] (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990), p. 6.
5. See "A Conversation with James Casebere," in *James Casebere: Model Culture, Photographs 1975–1996* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1996), p. 85.
6. Correspondence with the author. I wish to thank the artists for all the information they have provided.
7. Lewis Mumford, cited in Robert Wojtowicz, *Lewis Mumford and American Modernism: Eutopian Theories for Architecture and Urban Planning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 149.
8. Correspondence with the author.
9. See Collier Schorr, "Over the Underneath," in *Toba Khedoori* (Overland Park, Kansas: Gallery of Art, Johnson County Community College, and New York: David Zwirner, 1996), p. 4.
10. André Magnin, author and representative of Kingelez in Paris, has made the artist's manuscripts accessible to me. He has furthermore supplied me with invaluable information. I cannot stress enough my gratitude for his generosity.

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cover: Bodys Isek Kingelez. *Kimbenbele Ville (Kimbenbele City)*. 1992. Mixed media, 20½ x 35¼ x 39" (52 x 91 x 99 cm). C.A.A.C. The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva Photo: Claude Postel

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