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Renaissance of wonder

Camera obscura pictures glimpse photography's past

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The more examples you see of any art, the more you're deadened to their wonder. Perception sharpens, understanding grows and appreciation deepens, but the amazement that came at first inevitably diminishes and cannot be recovered.

Or can it? "A View With a Room: Abelardo Morell's Camera Obscura Photographs," the small exhibition (nearly 30) of black-and-white prints at the Art Institute of Chicago, presents work that, in the words of the artist, attempts to get back to the "mysterious and charming roots of the medium." Such roots were, Morell says, related to his own beginnings in photography, so his pictures are part of reclaiming a kind of innocence, and that has led to a renaissance of wonder.

The roots he speaks of go back at least as far as Aristotle and Euclid, who both wrote about the camera obscura. It is a "dark chamber" that has a hole pierced in one side. The hole may be fitted with a lens through which light passes, forming an inverted image on a surface directly opposite. The simplest form of this device has been used since antiquity to view solar eclipses safely. More elaborate ones had a mirror to turn the images right side up, and they were often employed by artists to aid in drawing.

William Henry Fox Talbot was one of those artists. In 1833 he became impatient with his inability to draw and had recourse to a camera obscura. While viewing various images, he mused on their fugitive nature and thought how wonderful it would be "if it were possible to cause these

natural images to imprint themselves durably and remain fixed on the paper." It was, of course, the principle behind photography.

In the mid-1980s the Cuban-born Morell used a camera obscura for demonstrations in his classes at the Massachusetts College of Art. A few years later he began to document the demonstrations with a large-format camera and eight-hour-long exposures, necessary because of low levels of light. His images in the exhibition were made by darkening a room, making a hole in the window covering and photographing the inverted image.

Morell has done that all over the world, and the wonder of his work results from having brought immense natural and architectural phenomena inside, imposing them on a domestic scale. The effect is rather like sitting in a tiny room with one of Alex Katz's giant paintings of a face. The juxtaposition is overwhelming, and in Morell's case, mysterious because of the inverted, dim -- and, therefore, dreamlike -- projections.

Sometimes the pictures are amusing because of the disjunction between the images brought into the room and the objects already there. At other times the results are disarming because some of the images fall on many different surfaces where they appear to lie, as if melting. Most often, however, the impossible grandeur of what's been brought in gives the pictures the quality of a hallucination, which remains pretty much intact even after viewers know how it was achieved.

Here is a show just the right size not to have drained the magic from the artist's simple means.

"A View With a Room: Abelardo Morell's Camera Obscura Photographs" will continue at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Ave., through Oct. 16. 312-443-3660.