Outside In and Upside Down: the Art of Abelardo Morell

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> The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us. There is the same interchange between these two worlds that there is between one art and another, migratory passings to and fro, quickenings—Promethean liberations and discoveries.
>
> ----Wallace Stevens

Curiouser and curiouser. The room has been darkened with black plastic. Only a small hole at one end lets in the light. Through this hole, an image of the world beyond enters upside down and settles on the opposite wall, to hang above the chairs or streak across the bed. You are inside a spacious, primitive camera, a camera obscura. The physics of light that causes this projection has been known since Aristotle; it fascinated and terrified audiences in the 16th century; painters employed it in the seventeenth century to enhance the verisimilitude of their work. Purists may protest, faced with evidence that Vermeer's delicate hand was guided by technology, but art has always advanced thus, in collaboration with science. At the same time, art often renews itself by returning to its roots.

In the long history of the relationship between painting and photography, Abelardo Morell presents a new chapter—or rather, recovers and rewrites a very old chapter—by making camera obscura photographs that find new affinities with the art of

painting. While painters since the Renaissance drew on camera obscura to create a transparent sense of reality, for Morell the technique provides a window into the inner life, or rather the world as seen from the vantage point of the inner life, giving photography access to a texture and temporality more often associated with painting. In recent years Morell has made this affinity with painting explicit—tightening Hopper's frame, or taking the view from Canaletto. Whether working directly with camera obscura effects or pursuing the mysteries of light and image through other techniques, Morell has moved photography forward by going back to its beginnings.

Morell was born in Havana Cuba in 1948 and came to New York City at age 14, when his family fled Castro's regime. He discovered the photographic medium as a college student at Bowdoin, and continued his studies at Yale School of Art, where he perfected various styles of street photography gaining prominence in the Sixties and Seventies. (Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand were among his influences.) His signature was anxiety over unseen narrative objects: a woman turns her head and covers her mouth while her male companion looks out at the Washington Bridge—has someone jumped?; five children at a dock in Spain look into the clear sky at something above the frame—a Fascist menace? But indelible as such images are, they are not the foundation of his mature style. The anxious feeling recurs, but contemplative, intimate and signifying objects would become his focus as he settled into family life and teaching.

Wanting to illustrate for his students the fundamentals of photography, Morell began turning rooms into camera obscura devices and recording the effects with a large format view camera in 1990. These upside down and outside in images can be seen

immediately by the eye, but their precise photographic rendering requires a 6-8 hour exposure akin to the long exposures of early photography, which still took its cues from painting. (The first photograph was a still life.) The process itself made him slow down and become more contemplative as a perceiver, and more focused on interiors rather than on the transient life of the street. This pedagogic aim soon turned into an expressive one. Since he had a young son at home and spent much of his time there he was developing an interest in the domestic world and its special sense of time and space. He realized that the camera obscura might be a positive space in its own right, not just a device for projection onto a blank slate, but part of an encounter between inside and outside.

Morell has since moved out from home to the more liminal and institutional spaces of hotel rooms, offices, board rooms, libraries, museums, but he has retained this language of interiority, creating dreamlike states explicitly not the real world, or at least not the world as we usually know it. Some of his rooms are indeed “under construction,” with ladders, piping, and other building materials lying about, as if to remind us that our interior world is an unstable place. Yet this is not an alarming surrealism of collage and superimposition, of dark room manipulation that ruptures and reassembles the world—it is more like thought itself—the taking in of the world to our personal space, where it is inverted and revealed. His magical effects are environmental, a tryst between darkness and light. The distant becomes proximate and the intimate strange. Morell has not so much declared the end of the real as affirmed the connection of the imaginary to the individual as he confronts the real. This quality pervades the entire range of Morell’s photographic practice, which includes studio still lifes, photograms, cliché verre, creative angling and cropping and other techniques. It informs his obsession with all kinds of

representation—prints, paintings, books, the alphabet, money, opera, maps, toys. He is a versatile photographer with a remarkably coherent and distinctive sensibility. And in the patient work of the camera obscura the full range of the artist's thematic and compositional brilliance is on view.

Morell's magic begins with his selection and arrangement of the sites for camera obscura. The world does not imprint itself on a tabula rasa, but on an already furnished subjectivy. In bringing the outside in he concerns himself with the particular intersections, and the visual and thematic patterns, that will result, whether the neighbor's house drops into the suburban bedroom or the city skyline hangs over the corporate boardroom. Design arises in the fusion of inside and outside: the curves of an armchair echo the swirls of the upside-down highway in one image; in another black wicker chairs perfectly flank the dark inverted cone of the Hotel Coronado. And the visual patterns often have thematic vitality so that our sense of space is not only renewed formally, but also conceptually. Entering these shadowy worlds, with their few objects that bear the traces of the human inhabitant, one has an experience of the uncanny—the familiar world made strange. This is partly because things are not where they belong. The Atlantic Ocean is in the attic, the Umbrian forest hovers over an iron-framed bed. Manhattan's barbaric skyscrapers cast on a living room wall become civilized—the chairs wait as if to be asked to dance. Many of these rooms are quite bare. In "Manhattan View Looking West in Empty Room" the two tightly stacked sides of the island, with the cool green thought of Central Park between them, are suspended upside down over two walls, with only a floor and three doors, outlets and a ladder defining the room. There are obvious practical reasons for turning the room into a projection screen. But in even the barest

room a few objects not only establish scale and orient the viewer to the game of inversion, but also contrive a simple iconography, and plant seeds of a narrative.

Ladders, which appear even in rooms otherwise bare, indicate and signify the **logic of the vertical**, reminding us what is floor and what is ceiling. They thrust the picture in the upright direction even as the image projected from outside descends. Ladders mean scale, both measuring the room and offering mobility. The ladder in a camera obscura projection lets us climb into deep space. These ladders, like Piranesi stairways, lead nowhere. They leave you in the middle of a wall, or rather in the forest or city projected onto that wall. A ladder suggests not only structure but also construction; it tells us that work has been going on to build or arrange this room. It is a symbol of artifice. Hence Morell's ladders are sometimes accompanied by electrical outlets and wires, lamps, building materials.

Doors, which all usable rooms have, connote **the logic of the horizontal**. If camera obscura records the outside coming in, the doors in these rooms tell us we can leave. Even closed doors deepen the shallow space of a room by reminding us that there is somewhere else, behind or beyond the door. But as part of the wall, the photographic surface, they lose their context and seem, like the ladders, to be suspended in the outside environment—doors into what? If we are already oriented, in the camera obscura illusion, to outside, then does the door lead to an anteroom of the outside? To a deeper outside of the world's interior? The most intimate spaces become like Wallace Stevens's "foyers of the spirit in a landscape of the mind." In "Central Park in Office," for instance, we are invited to go out by the umbrella hanging on the door, as if in midair. Doors are often featured in surrealist art because they evoke threshold experience, and while Morell's

work has none of the disfigurement of surrealism, his doors share this quality of suspense. These are, in a sense, anti-doors, in that they both evoke and subvert the impulse to close out or contain. The camera obscura schools us in the logic of inversion. Ye lest we become too accustomed to this logic, the artist introduces a second rotation in one early work, inverting the photographic print so that the image appears now right-side up. The attic is upside-down, suggesting rooflessness with the sea reflected on its white walls; a white stretch of gleaming ocean laps on the walls, with a little sandbar in the horizon. The eaves of the attic bear the weight of the shorerocks. The two doors of the attic closet remind us that the top of the image is not the ceiling but the floor, but the overall effect of these doors is of an invitation—to walk on water.

Through **windows** we discover **the logic of the frame**. The little hole in the camera obscura is a kind of window (without a shutter) and in Morell's work quite literally the aperture is part of a window otherwise blackened. Painters of all times have sought to remind us that art is a window. Illusionist art frames a window into the world; cubist art shatters the glass. Art also depicts windows, looked out of or into, or both. Morell admires Edward Hopper, whose figures are seen looking out windows, as we, like the artist-voyeur, look in on them. In a recent picture the photographer crops Hopper's solitary, window-gazing nude into an even tighter frame. Then he crops even more, capturing just a corner of Hopper's image, in black and white: nothing but the window sill is left, with a curtain breathing out from the airless world of art.

When Morell chooses a museum as his camera obscura site he creates a postmodern image-consciousness. But a sense of intimacy remains through the hall of mirrors. In the Whitney gallery, with the neighboring tenement projected over the gallery

wall, Morell locates another Hopper nude standing beside a window. [fig. 1] Hopper gives us a characteristic set of paradoxes which Morell further pursues. He has depicted the nude in profile, not looking out the window but staring at a painting on the wall. He has placed the window in the center of the painting where the beholder can gaze out at the spare, almost abstract mountain scenery even as the nude ignores it in favor of the wall picture. Through Morell's camera obscura effects these pared down elements of Hopper's work, hung in the Whitney gallery, meet the brick façade across the street from the museum—an anonymous building like many Hopper himself depicted in his New York days. Thus Hopper's image, with its woman, window view, and painted scene, hangs not on the walls of the Whitney but on the upside-down façade of that anonymous brick dwelling with its own grid of windows and air-conditioners. In one version of this photograph the Hopper painiting stands alone in the gallery. But a Roy Lichtenstein hangs next to the Hopper in the Whitney (and hence, photographically, on the camera obscura tenement wall). Together in another Morell image of this space, the Hopper and Lichtenstein seem like two frames, or two points of view, on the same narrative. The second painting is one of Lichtenstein's comic strip silkscreens--here a cartoon woman, arms crossed, expression unreadable though her lips are open. She is leaning out a curtained window and there is an abstract painting behind her. We are caught, then, in a labyrinth of images. Curiouser and curiouser.

Like Hopper, Morell finds the bedroom a complex space of exposure and illusion. **Beds** introduce **the logic of dream**, and the invitation to dream. The world that has pleased us or assaulted us revisits us in shadow, "as if a magic lantern cast my nerves upon a screen." In his first camera obscura work Morell evoked the dream-life of

suburbia with its leafy, branching shadows and the face-like houses we see everyday out our domestic windows. But even in these suburban scenes there is a quiet unease, as in Magritte; the neighbor's house, the trees that line the street, come in to our living room, refusing safe distances. Elsewhere Morell projects pastoral dreams of Umbria and Tuscany, where society disappears. But dreams of aspiration often include bridges, which have special threshold meaning relevant to the mood of camera obscura. The Brooklyn Bridge is "suspended" above a bedroom like a giant inverted hammock, with DUMBO (the district under the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges) oddly held up by two lampstands. Like Hopper, Morell captures the fugitive intimacy of the hotel room, where one may catch some sleep but cannot feel at home. But for Morell the strange room can afford expansion as much as isolation of the psyche. These camera obscura photographs are invitations to voyage, to sleep in Paris, in Florence, in London.

Of course beds also connote **erotic desire,** especially where **towers** are involved**:** the "Empire State Building in a Bedroom" is a brilliantly funny image, the gleaming, silvery camera obscura image of the skyscraper drooping, like one of Claes Oldenburg's erotic soft objects or Salvador Dali's melted watch, across the feminine-ruffled sheets with their two buxom pillows near the top,. [fig. 2] The inverted Eiffel tower hops onto the foot of a bed in Paris, city of the rendez-vous. On Broadway (capital of dreams) the hotel offers no sleep, the posters for *Rent*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Sunset Boulevard* creating a camera obscura collage as loud as a Stuart Davis painting. Here the phallus is not a skyscraper or monument but a giant neon coke bottle, descending from consumer-heaven. But **towers** can also introduce **the logic of power** which brings death, the terror of dreams. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the tower of London, really two towers

linked with its bridge looming over two pillows with impressions left from the heads that once rested there—perhaps those innocent, slumbering princes in Richard III. But then again there's something comic in such a tourist icon, turning terror to kitsch.

Many rooms have **chairs,** markers for people and invitations to enter the space, to rest, to consider. Chairs introduce **the logic of position.** They define the individual's most localized space. One considers the world differently depending on the chair—a rocker or a desk chair, for instance; we are armchair philosophers or power brokers. In one office image the seats of power are on wheels, surrogate chairmen, lined up facing us, modern, uniform like firing squad. The old mills and bridge scaffolding of decaying, dispensable working class Lawrence line the wall behind them. In this image the bridge work also structurally echoes the room's long table with its leg supports. Some chairs are social: under the downward pressure of the Manhattan skyline one rests alone near a door while the others are gathered round a table. Chairs, like most furniture, generally belong to interiors. But in a picture of the Grand Tetons in resort room the chairs are outside, rustic lawn-chairs paradoxically brought inside by the camera obscura projection which also includes the snowcapped mountain range suspended upside down on the wall from a sublime distance. Surely this is what one looks for in a resort.

Morell has studied and paid tribute to Piranesi, whose spirals twist outside and inside. "In the tonal quality of the French language," writes Gaston Bachelard, "the là is so forceful, that to designate being by être-là is to point an energetic forefinger that might easily relegate intimate being to an exteriorized place . . . But what a spiral man's being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral!" Like Piranesi, Morell knows that the wall itself is thematically potent, not just a surface for

projection. **Walls** convey **the logic of containment and division.** During his 2002 trip to Cuba, his first since his family fled, Morell seemed to look at walls with a special attention to the lives written on them. As if marking the fragility and exposure of the personal world in this dilapidated communist state, Morell creates a camera obscura in which a grand old Havana monument is projected on a wall. But the wall is broken at one end, exposing behind it the shattered tile and rusted plumbing of a ruined washroom.

I do not mean to suggest that Morell's images are created out of a political agenda. These walls happen to be Cuban, but they could be part of any stressed and repressive environment at any time. They are about the imagination, about feelings, about the way the private world takes in the public world, sometimes against its will. One of the most moving camera obscura images from this Cuban trip is of a multi-use room, remarkable for its orderly clutter. In "EL Vedado" he creates a fusion of kitsch and glamour that is not condescending, but captures the state of nostalgia in which many contemporary Cubans live. [fig. 3] The studio headshot of a young woman suggests a pre-Castro career; this idealized self seems to center the room, which is full of things upside down and right-side up many times over: the city's high-rises pressing down, and the upright ironing board pressing up against the door (another sign of the effort to maintain order in the decay of modern Cuba). In the camera obscura crossing the ironing board suggests the outline of a tower, while the high-rises and slums (with their laundry hung from windows) press downward from the ceiling; the many perfume bottles that line up along the battered, chipped-veneer bureau form a little ideal city of their own. A crude porcelain puppy atop the bureau looks out quizzically, his gaze parallel to that of the woman in the photograph, their past and present lived in this small space. Walter

Benjamin has remarked on folk art and kitsch: “Art allows us to look into objects. Folk art and kitsch allow us to look outward from within objects.” The camera obscura photograph provides insight in both directions.

“El Vidado” exemplifies Morell’s fascination with the many ways we represent the world to ourselves in order to understand it and manipulate it. His darkened rooms are often supplied with wall-hangings and miniatures. These **prints and miniatures** evoke **the logic of representation** and its accompanying **logic of scale.** Often he will place (or find?) on the wall a drawing or painting of the scene immediately outside the window. In many cases these images were already in the room, as when a tourist hotel advertises the scenic icon that brought the visitor to the area: the Eiffel tower done in a fluid watercolor in the Hotel Frantour; a small framed image of the Brooklyn Bridge inside the larger camera obscura projection of the bridge. Similarly the “Grand” Tetons, cast by the pinhole light onto the wall of a rustic motel, stretch over a small picture of themselves, and over an old engraving of a bison, and some plastic miniature elk on the night table. Reality becomes mysterious as the sublime image, the Grand Tetons in camera obscura, absorbs its representations.

In childhood the boundaries of reality and image are not so sharp, and Morell has made a special study of this stage of epistemological and psychological openness. He is hardly the first photographer to be fascinated with childhood, or to acknowledge that the child’s world is full of fear and affliction as well as charm. The secure suburban overlay projected in upside down shadows on his son’s bedroom wall, is little more than a scrim of protection. But Morell has been especially inventive in capturing the point of view of the child, which is a matter of physics as much as of psychology. The imagination does

not obey the laws of proportion, and the child's bedroom with its dinosaurs and globe throws off scale. The child can show us things we might not see and in this world of monsters, rashes and high slides we may rediscover our own sense of mystery. We may see the ferocity of a fork penetrating a water-filled glass, the terrifying abyss in an empty paper bag. Or we may rejoice in a phalanx of sharpened pencils, a reserve of new crayons.

I have been describing the way the camera obscura and other work by Morell challenge our sense of space, but the long exposures, the memorabilia, the window into childhood also alert us to the complex experience of **time**. Morell might ultimately concede to a claim made by a Borges narrator: "the world . . .is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial." Morell has certainly, along with many other photographers, paid his homage to Muybridge. But since he is more interested in images than in narratives, Morell tends to approach time iconographically rather than sequentially. **Clocks** introduce **the logic of temporality**, but the goal is often to thwart that logic**.** Morell has said that his image of an hour glass--with the depression in the sands at the top corresponding in size and shape to the mound formed in the bottom lobe--reassures us that time is never really lost. We can see eternity in the grains of sand as they run through this double bell jar. (We might observe, incidentally, that this endlessly inverted hour glass forms an analogy with the camera obscura's inversions.) Paradoxically, a plethora of clocks tend to cancel rather than affirm chronological time. In "Boston's Old Custom House" the camera obscura clock-tower projects downward from the hotel room ceiling where the inverted urban landscape is hung, the tower point just touching the floor and dividing the interior desk

and chair. [fig.4] On the desk a slender object is barely identifiable as a clock radio, its illegible digital gleam reflected in the mirror-shine of the varnished desktop and doubled in the lit window of a building in the landscape outside. The only other object in the room is a wall clock, hanging “above” the clock-tower projection. This room-clock is missing its hands, making the room literally timeless. The room’s wall structure is obscured by the mass of vertical lines and highway swirls from the projected cityscape, its vanishing point curving off into a deep interior/exterior, so that silhouetted chair, desk and clock seem to float in a twilight zone.

Morell’s interest in painting suggests his affinity with this slower temporality and reverie. He has returned to Venice several times in the past couple of years and has said that he is “feeling Canaletto.” But this does not mean he is trying to paint with a camera, or even imitate the effects of painting, as early photographers had done. One might more appropriately call this work a conversation with painting. Perhaps the most magnificent of all his camera obscura images is the one he made at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, projecting the columned façade of its east entrance into gallery # 171 with a de Chirico painting, *The Soothsayer’s Recompense*, on the wall. [fig.5] The painting features de Chirico’s inevitable, theatrical town square with walls, arches and colonnades, emptied of humans but set with a reclining stone figure and a clock and passing train in the background. Perhaps inspired by de Chirico’s unsettling treatment of scale and perspective, Morell enlarged the digitial chromogenic print to an impressive 50 x 60—his largest to date. The work captures many times over the enigma of the real and the represented. This is of course a theme prevalent in much postmodern art. Yet Morell requested the removal of a Jasper Johns painting that had originally hung in this space,

persuading the staff to put the de Chirico in the gallery instead. Perhaps he felt that Johns had taken the metaphysics and even the psychology out of the enigma, or perhaps he simply preferred the design of de Chirico's painting, which matches the elements of Morell's image. The architectural iconography of de Chirico's painting evokes the neo-classical columns and corners of the Philadelphia museum's east entrance, projected upside down on the interior wall of its west side. De Chirico's inside out logic enhances the uncanny feeling produced by camera obscura. But painting and building meet to create a new work. If de Chirico has in a sense brought the interior outside, displaying the reclining figure in a town square, Morell answers him by projecting the outside in, and setting the painting in the middle of his large format image. The painter's fusion of proximate and distant objects, of still life and landscape or architecture, his use of doors and windows, clocks and trains, his profound language of shadow and subversions of scale and perspective, all resonate with Morell's aesthetic. We are lost in the labyrinth of representations, where ordinary time and space funnel into the maze of the mind. This image also represents one of the first times Morell has introduced **color** into his camera obscura work. (All of his previous work is in gelatin silver prints.) His handling of color has all the intentionality of a painter and in fact adds to the painterly feel of the work even though it is introduced digitally. Yet it is worth remembering that the Old Masters using camera obscura effects were themselves *adding* color. A black and white image underneath Vermeer's *Girl with Cavalier* has been used as evidence of his employment of camera obscura devices.

In addition to his camera obscura work, Morell is well known for his photographs of books. And what book could be more appropriate for this upside down and outside in

artist than **Alice in Wonderland** with its magical "hole" through which we pass into an inverted world with a new, unsettling language. Morell thrives in its counter-clockwise sense of time, its bizarre scale and doors that open out into unexpected, off kilter worlds. Lewis Carroll himself was an avid photographer in the early days of the medium, and it is highly likely that the physics of photography factored in his invention of the world beyond the looking glass. Morell's rabbit hole is deep—that is to say, profound—not child's play exactly, but play in earnest. The hole in Morell's tribute to Carroll has been drilled through a thick book, a dictionary, and illuminated almost as if it were a camera shaft. [fig. 6] The book lies on floral brocade upholstery, but "real" leaves overhang the volume as if it were discovered in a forest rather than a living room. The rabbit, indigene of this strange world, is a cut out from the classic Sir John Tenniel illustration of Alice. His back is turned, as if he had hopped out of the book only to escort us in. Morell is not the first to drill holes in books. The practice was a common trope in surrealist art, and Joseph Cornell in particular made several constructions that play with this strange dimension of reading. Cornell would certainly have appreciated Morell's work, and especially his "Curiouser and Curiouser" with its cut-out etching of long-necked Alice next to a vertical stack of books reaching to the checker board ceiling (shouldn't that be the floor?). Is she grown very tall, or is she only the size of a stack of books? The shadow of this cut-out Alice cascades down the stack of volumes, like peter pan's shadow. But our focus is on Alice, eyes dilated and hair risen, as if to share her alarm with us as we enter Morell's outside in and upside down world.

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