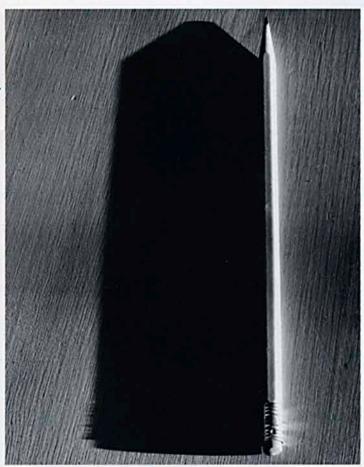


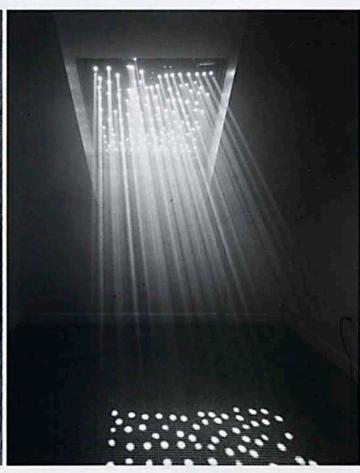
ORDINARY THINGS—MONEY, BOOKS, LANDSCAPES—TAKE ON A
UNIQUE SLANT WHEN SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF INTERNATIONALLY
RENOWNED MASSACHUSETTS PHOTOGRAPHER ABELARDO MORELL

## AN EYE FOR THE UNUSUAL

TEXT BY CHRISTINE TEMIN | PORTRAIT BY LILY BROOKS

he identity of the stacks of paper bound with rubber bands is a mystery until you read the title of the photograph: "\$7 Million." Money—for its looks, not its value—is one of the subjects that currently fascinate Abelardo Morell, an internationally celebrated photographer who lives in the Boston area and teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art. "It started when I took a dollar





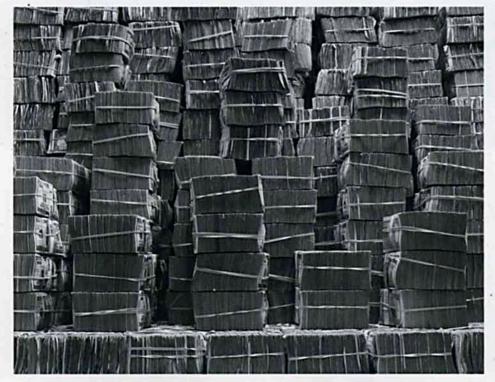
bill out of my pocket one day," Morell says, "and I thought, 'This is universal. It affects everyone.'"

How did he talk his way into a Federal Reserve Bank vault to take the picture? "I think I come across as a nice guy, not threatening," he says. He's persistent without being insistent. He also laughs a lot and is tremendous-

ly sociable. No artist's life alone in a garret for him.

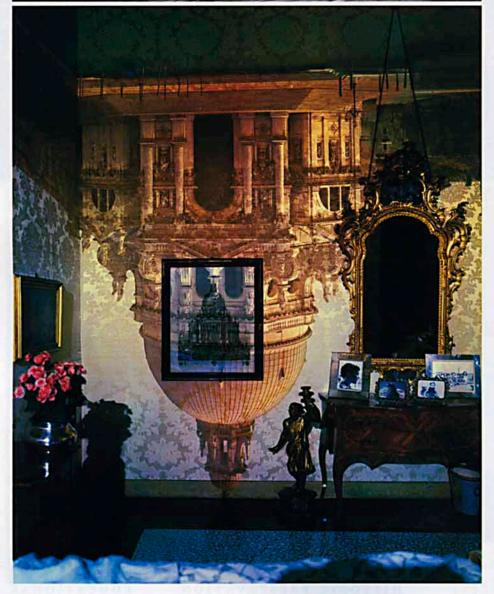
Morell tends to work in series. Currently, it's images of cash. Other subjects have included books, maps, views of Venice and the illustrations from *Alice* in Wonderland. His work has a sense of playfulness, especially when it comes to viewpoint and scale. When his nowgrown son, Brady, was a baby, Morell got down on the floor with him and photographed a tower of toy blocks, making them look like a skyscraper. When he was an artist-in-residence at the Boston Athenaeum, he made images of the rare books in that venerable institution, capturing their warped or crumbling pages, or the light falling on their illustrations, obscuring rather than illuminating them. To emphasize the tiny size of one book he photographed it next to a paper clip that dwarfs it. Another, an enormously fat book open in the center, looks like a mountain range.

Born in Cuba in 1948, Morell fled the island with his family in 1962, after his father, who had twice been imprisoned, was tipped off that he was marked for a firing squad. The family ended up in a basement apartment in New York, with sidewalk-level views that influenced Morell's later penchant for odd perspectives. (One of the family's first acquisitions was a couch. Morell's mother im-



TOP LEFT: "Pencil" (2000) TOP RIGHT: "Light Entering Our House" (2006) BOT-TOM: "\$7 Million" (2006)





mediately cut out the label when she saw that it said "Castro Convertible.")

Morell spoke no English when he arrived in the United States, so the camera quickly became his way of communicating. He bought a Brownie camera with money earned as a drugstore delivery boy. One of his earliest photographs shows his father shoveling coal into a basement boiler. His mother stands nearby. "They're smiling," he noted. "The place was Dickensian, subterranean, a complete contrast to Cuban light. But they were happy. In America, no one could come and take them away."

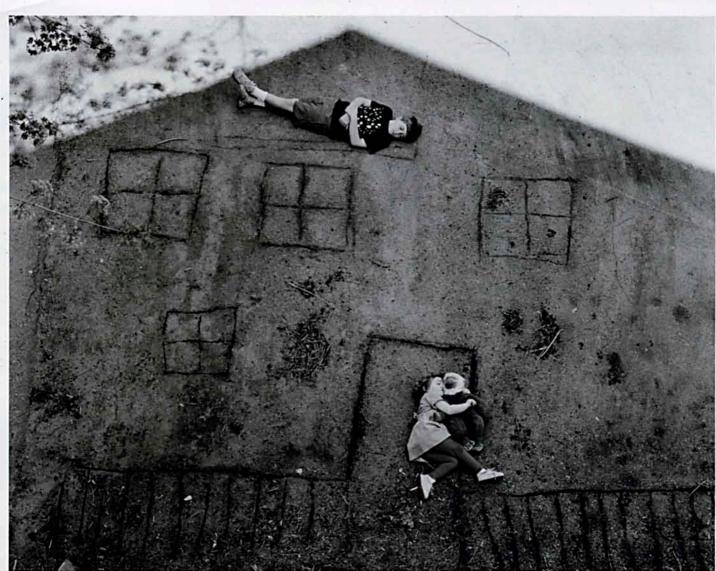
Bowdoin College took Morell away, after an admissions officer came to his high school and offered him a scholarship. "They were trying to recruit people who were not like them," he recalls.

The more rural the landscape on the bus ride to Maine became, "the more frightened I got," he says. But Bowdoin, which has since given him an honorary doctorate, was where a photography course in his sophomore year convinced him that, as he says, "I was going to do this forever."

Graduate school at Yale followed, then the teaching job at MassArt. By now, he's won a Guggenheim and other fellowships and last year was the recipient of the \$25,000 Rappaport Prize awarded by the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. His work is in the permanent collections of dozens of museums worldwide, among them the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. He's even the subject of a documentary, Shadow of the House: Photographer Abelardo Morell, by Allie Humenuk, which will show this fall at Museum of Fine Arts.

Despite his success, he lives modestly, sharing a three-decker with his wife, Lisa McElaney, their daughter, Laura, McElaney's father and an old friend who lives on the second floor. "It's a friendly, family kind of place," Morell says.

TOP: Detail, "Book Damaged by Water" (2001) LEFT: "Camera Obscura Image of Santa Maria della Salute in Palazzo Bedroom," Venice, Italy (2006)



"Laura and Brady in the Shadow of Our House" (2004)

He likes to borrow other art to use for his own, cropping it, layering it and giving it new meaning. During a residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, he layered a photograph of Anders Zorn's full-length portrait of Gardner over one of the museum's ornate rooms. Morell made Gardner, a famous hostess in her time, into a translucent, ghostly presence, as if she had come back from the dead to welcome the viewer.

He has worked frequently with the camera obscura. One of the most primitive of photographic processes, dating back at least to Leonardo da Vinci, camera obscura involves blocking all light from a box except for one tiny hole. Whatever is outside the box will appear inside, upside-down. Morell then photo-

graphs the upside-down image. The "box" can be as big as a room, preferably one with a great view. Last summer, exercising the powers of persuasion that led to his Federal Reserve Bank series, Morell managed to talk the owner of a Venetian palazzo into letting him use a room with a view of the Church of Santa Maria della Salute.

One of the simplest and most poignant of Morell's camera obscura pieces is his photograph of a bare light-bulb outside an ordinary cardboard box. The light passes through a tiny hole in the box, and inside is the pale echo of the bulb, hanging upside down.

In 2002, Morell went back to Cuba for the first time in forty years. "I still have cousins, aunts and uncles there," he says. "Some of my family are entrenched in the politics of the place. They're Castro fans."

Not Morell. "Castro is a tyrant," he says emphatically.

Returning to the subject of money, he says, "It really fascinates me, the idea of security, accumulating wealth." His photographs of money, and a series of piles of diamonds he's doing in Antwerp, "aren't a criticism of anything," he says.

And it doesn't have to be millions of dollars or ten-carat diamonds. "I did a series of falling coins," he says. It sounds like Titian's famous painting *Danae and the Shower of Gold*. But the down-to-earth Morell had another inspiration, he says. "It was based on the song 'Pennies from Heaven.'"

Next up? There is one group of buildings that he feels just beg to be turned upside down: the Pyramids. **NEH** 

EDITOR'S NOTE Abelardo Morell is represented in Boston by the Bernard Toale Gallery, (617) 482-2477, www.bernardtoalegallery.com. To see more of his work, go to www.abelardomorell.net. For information on showings of Shadow of the House Photographer Abelardo Morell, call the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (617) 267-9300.