

Morell's photos balance austerity and playfulness

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NEW HAVEN - All art is about other art. With his camera obscura photographs, Abelardo Morell turns that truism on its head - literally.

A camera obscura is the age-old principle behind that physics-class favorite, the pinhole camera. Let light from a small opening enter a dark space, and an inverted image of what's on the other side of the opening will be projected within. The phenomenon works equally well if the space is a shoebox, for middle schoolers - or a full-size room, for Morell (who then records the image with an actual camera). Either way, there's an almost-eerie effect of dislocation and otherworldliness that makes for terrific teachable moments - and equally terrific art. In Morell's hands, a trick of optics becomes a triumph of aesthetics.

Camera obscura pictures make up half of the 36 images in "Behind the Seen: The Photographs of Abelardo Morell," which runs at the Yale University Art Gallery through Aug. 10. The exhibition is in the way of a homecoming. Morell, who teaches at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, has a master of fine arts degree from Yale. He'll be artist in residence there this academic year.

"Behind the Seen" is slightly bigger than "A Room With a View," the Morell retrospective that ran at Amherst College's Mead Art Museum last fall. The shows have only two or three images in common. Its greater size notwithstanding, "Behind the Seen" feels smaller than the Amherst show, including as it does work from just the last 17 years (Morell started taking pictures in the 1960s). That's all right, though, since it's such good work.

Two floors up from the Morell show there's a lovely little Joseph Cornell construction, "Untitled (Vasco Nunez de Balboa)." It's an elegantly curved page from a book resting inside what looks like a papered-over cigar box. The sight of it makes one realize that so many of Morell's pictures - minus a dimension, of course - are akin to Cornell boxes. They share a similar otherworldliness, a sense of grave whimsy, and reverence for the handiwork of others.

The last point is important. Again and again in Morell's photographs, both the ones that employ the camera obscura and those that don't, he takes art as his subject. That art can take various forms: books, buildings, paintings, prints, stage sets.

Call it Morell's curatorial side. In "The Metropolitan Opera: Romeo and Juliet Set" and "The Metropolitan Opera: Manon Building Facades" a designer of two-dimensional interiors salutes peers who do it in three. "Old Travel Scrapbook: Pyramids" brings together book, architecture, and photos (both Morell's and those of 19th-century travelers). A Renaissance notable can be glimpsed inside the pages of an art book in "Portrait of Inghirami by Raphael."

That peekaboo glance at Inghirami exemplifies Morell's ability to balance austerity of approach and playfulness of effect. There's nothing solemn about his love of art. This balance is most evident in the camera obscura pictures, where Morell's deadpan pleasure in turning the world upside down is unmistakable.

An Arbor Day celebration seems to have taken over a bathroom shower in "Camera Obscura Image of Tree in Bathroom, Little Compton, RI." The London Eye looks like a ship's wheel somehow relocated in Morell's hotel room in "Camera Obscura Image of the London Wheel inside the Royal Horseguards Hotel, London, England." "Camera Obscura Image of the Sea in Attic" offers a view of the ultimate ceiling - or ultimate ceiling leak? In "Camera Obscura Image of Times Square in Hotel Room" a sign for the Broadway musical "Rent," seen bottom up, looks Cyrillic. (What exactly is the Russian for "show tune"?)

With their combination of right-side-up interior and inverted projection, the camera obscura images have a distinctly surreal quality. And, as did the Surrealists, Morell likes to juxtapose the exalted and everyday in his art. Yet there's a gravity to his images, a weightiness, that separates them from the Surrealists. The Surrealists specialized in the evanescent and oneiric. They thrilled to the insubstantiality of dreams. It's true that Morell shares their taste for the unexpected and incongruous - the familiar made alien. Yet he makes his startling pictures seem somehow solid and tactile.

In part, that's because Morell tends to print them big; also, he arranges their contents with such exacting care. At the

heart of Surrealism is free association. Chance has hardly any place in Morell's work. His pictures are architectural rather than aleatory. That's another affinity with Cornell's boxes. These photographs, within their flattened expanses, aspire to - and very nearly achieve - the condition of sculpture.

Someone at Yale had the very happy inspiration of darkening part of the exhibition space adjacent to the show and turning it into a room-size camera obscura. Images from Prospect Street, outside the gallery, are projected on a wall. They look like a spooky frieze. Their artlessness makes you appreciate all the more both the wonder of the camera obscura and Morell's skill in so imaginatively exploiting it.

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