

## ART REVIEW

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**Ordinary becomes extraordinary**

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | November 2, 2007

AMHERST - Abelardo Morell straddles the uncertain border between dislocation and enchantment. He transforms the everyday, exalting it. He tames the exotic, domesticating it. And in his best-known photographs, which show camera obscura images superimposed on blank walls, he turns the world literally upside down.

"A Room With a View: The Photography of Abelardo Morell," which runs at Amherst College's Mead Art Museum through Jan. 20, isn't all that big a show - just 32 images. Many are quite large, though, which gives the show a certain heft. Greatly increasing that heft are the quality and variety of the images. Career retrospectives are rarely this small. That's all right, since career retrospectives are rarely this good.

Born in Cuba in 1948, Morell came to this country with his family in 1962. The Morells moved to New York, and one can see the city's influence in the two earliest photographs here. "Central Park, Skating Rink" seems conventional, even touristy, until one realizes Morell was barely into his teens when he took it. Conversely, "Twins," which shows a pair of identical young men standing in front of a Greyhound bus, could have been taken anywhere. But the sensibility is pure - which is to say impure - New York street. Diane Arbus (twins) meets Robert Frank (bus). It's a picture taken by a young man waiting for something to happen who was also a photographer waiting for a sensibility to emerge. For all that "Twins" is a memorable picture, most of the memorableness derives from other, better photographers. Soon enough, the memorableness would be Morell's own.

The title "A Room With a View" is both witty and inadequate. It's witty because for some 15 years Morell has followed a distinctive procedure in many of his photographs. He'll set up shop in an interior space - often, but not always, a hotel room - that overlooks an impressive exterior. Morell will then reduce all incoming light to a single small source, in effect turning the room into a supersize pinhole camera, which projects an inverted image of what's outside. He then takes an actual camera to photograph the result.

Morell's recurring use of the camera obscura could seem like a gimmick, little more than a visual calling card, like the black frame lines on an Avedon portrait. Morell uses the device for so much more, though - and by no means does he use it exclusively (hence the inadequacy of the show's title). These camera obscura images collapse differences - not just inside and out, but rich and plain, familiar and novel - and give Morell a stage of his own making on which to induce the unexpected.

The range of effects Morell produces with the camera obscura is great. "Camera Obscura Image of Umbrian Landscape over Bed, Umbertide, Italy" is strange and unsettling. What's more mundane than a bed - yet what's it doing seemingly in the middle of an Italian field? Conversely, the patent unreality of "Camera Obscura Image of Times Square in Hotel Room" reinforces the dizzying effect the actual place can have. The pair of camera obscura images from a 2002 trip to Havana, Morell's first visit to Cuba in 40 years, carry a weight of profound emotion: the woman's portrait, the two roses, the inviting chair, in one; the cracked, scarred, and chipped plaster, flecked with feeling, in the other

Morell, who teaches photography at Massachusetts College of Art + Design, can also use the technique for comedy. "Camera Obscura Image of Manhattan View Looking West in Empty Room" is a study in incongruity. Amid the forest of skyscrapers projected from outside, one can make out a stepladder and electric plug inside - a sly reminder that construction comes in all shapes and sizes. Even better is "Camera Obscura Image of the Empire State Building in Bedroom." The sight of the tower's limp phallic immensity sprawled across the bed, tired perhaps after a long day spent skyscraping, is hilarious. It also nods to Andy Warhol's marathon film "Empire" and, more distantly, Lewis Hine's noble chronicling of the building's construction.

The presence of others' art is a near-constant in Morell's work. They range from Lewis Carroll and Edward Hopper to Irving Penn and William Henry Fox Talbot. Sometimes that art is front and center. "King Philip IV by Velasquez, Gardner Museum," a distorted photograph of the kingly portrait, functions as shrewd commentary on its subject: It's

artifice (photograph) about artifice (painting) about artifice (costume, pose, monarchy). "Tim and Rembrandt, Gardner Museum" shows a young man next to the canvas resembling the painter on the canvas. It might just as well be called "Time and Rembrandt," as it folds together past and present, art and life, here and there.

One of three color images in the show, "Camera Obscura Image of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, East Entrance in Gallery #171 with a de Chirico Painting" is nearly as spectacular as its title is long. The shades of orange and dun in both painting and façade chime lusciously. The painting itself works as a window within the frame, letting Morell play vertiginous games with depth and perception.

Art in his photographs need not take the form of great paintings. Morell delights in objets trouves: paper bags, maps, boxes. The more banal the item, the more pleasure he takes in its metamorphosis. The thumb indentations of the thick volumes stacked high in "Six Dictionaries" take on an almost geological solidity. "\$7 Million," a real crowd-pleaser, is just what its titles say it is: that much cash in elastic-band-held blocks (a few bucks here, a few bucks here - it does add up).

In "Slide," Morell shoots the piece of namesake playground equipment so that it looks horizontal, receding into the picture plane (descent as depth). He's wild about light, yes (what photographer isn't?), but Morell revels in the sheer thing-ness of objects, too. The raised metal letters of the manufacturer's stamp on the slide take on a monumental quality.

A different sort of monumentality is on display in "My Eyeglasses." Making the optical sculptural, he declares how much his work is a tribute to the act of seeing. Seeing is believing?

For Morell, seeing is loving, too.

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