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Looking at the Obscure

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When Abelardo Morell was around 22, he took a self-portrait. Hanging upside down from the doorway of a partition, the walls painted white, a black cat perched on the top ledge of the doorframe, his black curls cascading from his head, Morell was setting the tone for his future as a one of the most inventive camera obscura artists to date.

Perhaps he had no idea that the simple self-portrait taken in 1970 would be a precursor to the upside down world that he has been bringing to life since 1991.

So what exactly is the camera obscura?

Dated back as far as Aristotle, the camera obscura is not actually a camera as we know it. In fact, it was found as a paperless camera that worked as a way for artists to accurately and proportionally interpret the world around them. Through a small hole in a dark box or a dark room, light would infiltrate and project an image of the world outside the box onto a wall, except upside down. This inverted image was bounced off a mirror and reflected up to a piece of glass or some viewfinder, which served as a tracing plate for artists. It was the camera obscura that allowed many artists to gain a more realistic and natural perspective of their subjects.

For Morell, the camera obscura serves the opposite purpose. It allows him to create a surreal world in which juxtapositions, ironies and feelings of timelessness overtake the mundane realities of normalcy.

With the photograph Time Square in Hotel Room, 1997, Morell has taken a typical hotel room equipped with all the clichés including a quilted bedspread and splashed the inverted image of Time Square over the photo. You'll notice that because of his use of an eight-hour exposure, the hands of the clock on the wall in the bedroom are missing and the busy New York City street, which appears on the ceiling, is vacant.

Employing the hotel room as the camera obscura by blocking out the light from the window except for a pinhole and then capturing the effect with a camera set at a long exposure, Morell says he has created a style of photography not done before.

Traditionally, camera obscura or pinhole photography, has been used to record the world as it appears inverted through a hole. Morell has taken this art one step further by photographing the inverted image as it relates a traditional, existing space such as bedrooms, hotel rooms and bathrooms.

"I felt like I was breaking new ground," comments Morell from his Brookline, Mass. home.

First coming to appreciate camera obscura as a professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, he furthered his interest by adding his own twist. Since then, he has grown his attachment to obscurity and this skewed vantage point in most of his photography non camera obscura related as well.

At the end of this month a variety of all his work will appear at the Yale University Art Gallery in Behind the Seen: The Photographs of Abelardo Morell.

This comes in the wake of a residence he has taken with the museum, called the Happy and Bob Doran Artist-in-Residence which runs through 2009. In 1998, he did a similar residency at the Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where the museum's collection became his muse and fell subject to his unique perspective.

With Yale's art gallery at his fingertips, Morell says, "That seems like fun. To tweak with the masters."

By tweak, one can expect nothing less than the slightly askew style that Morell applies to most of his work, where a reality as it is in real life will appear slightly off kilter and with a touch of his famed obscurity.

Graciously, Yale Art Gallery has opened their works, which include some of the state's best collections including works by Edward Hopper and the newly acquired Van Gogh pieces *Cypress* and *Starry Night* (running June 15 to Sept. 7) to Morell, where he has taken the liberty to photograph them in unique juxtapositions and marrying works like paintings and statues that don't normally fit together.

Expounding, he says, "I'm not interested in total radical transformation of a thing, but just viewing it with something new so it becomes an ongoing experience."

Other ongoing experiences from Morell include his work creating pictures of books, some of which will be on exhibit at the Yale Art Gallery and have been published as *A Book of Books* (photographs by Abelardo Morell, introduction by Nicholson Baker, Bulfinch Press, New York, 2002), as well as his work with camera obscura that highlights antiquity next to modern society.

Referencing his works done in Rome, Paris and London, which take ancient structures contrasted with modern spaces, he says, "It's an image coming into a room with images; that sandwiching of realities has always been interesting to me."

Morell comes to the Yale Art Gallery as not only an accomplished artist, but also as a graduate of the university, where he earned a Masters of Fine Art in 1981.

Laughing, he comments that this is his first time back to the school. "You know graduate school is never the most pleasant of experiences. It took a while to lick my wounds," says a good-natured Morell.

A Cuban-born immigrant, Morell came to America in 1962 with his family and resided in New York. Before attending Yale he earned a bachelor's degree in art from Bowdoin College in Maine and later an honorary doctor of fine arts from Bowdoin.

Today he lives life as a typical American father and husband. He and his wife, Lisa, who is a filmmaker, have two children, Brady and Laura. He says with pride that he's a "quite, committed family person." Evidence can be seen in Allie Humenuk's documentary about Morell, *Shadow of The House* (shadowofthehouse.com). Humenuk's film, which will show at the Yale Art Gallery July 12, depicts many facets of Morell, specifically the duality of his life as both a father and an artist as well as the internal struggle he deals with as a Cuban refugee.

Though being Cuban has played a role in Morell's life, he finds humor when asked how it affects his art. Chuckling, he says, "Eating bacon in the morning affects me as much as I am Cuban, you know. I'm not constantly thinking about my Cubaness." However, he adds, "My work doesn't overtly speak about that, but I am sure, psychologically, there's a lot of overtones and undertones of exile and separateness and those issues."

Morell will come to Yale for an artist talk and gallery walk-through June 25. His insight regarding his own progressive obscura works as well as his perspective of a storied and well-read professor is certainly an opportunity not to be missed- plus the gallery will have a camera obscura room for attendees to experience the phenomenon.

Affirming his talent as a great teacher and master of the real art of camera obscura, Morell parts, "When I teach beginning classes I turn my classroom into a camera obscura and we talk about the principles of photography and it's always really wonderful because it's so disarming. Really cool hipsters who are just too cool for the world, they turn into babies. They go, 'Oh wow' or 'no way.' So it's really nice to disarm them with this very magical experience."

And magical, surreal and mystifying it is indeed.