

### Natural wonders

**Abelardo Morell's photos give new life to books; Bill Timmerman's works take an angular look at the world**

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ART CRITIC

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Books become architecture in Abelardo Morell's sumptuously printed black-and-white photographs, towers that look a bit wobbly because much of their height consists of paper. They also turn into landscapes, as if they were a network of canals or a furrowed field as seen from above.

The pictures in this show at the Joseph Bellows Gallery – Morell's first in San Diego since an exemplary 1999 exhibition at the Museum of Photographic Arts – are love letters to the book, as both wonderfully varied artifact and vessel of knowledge or art. But the romance isn't couched in sweet or sentimental terms. It's more an expression of wonder at the mystery of these objects of affection.

Morell would likely appreciate what the late writer Eudora Welty said in her autobiography: "It had been startling and disappointing to me," she wrote, "to find out that story books had been written by people, that books were not natural wonders, come up of themselves like grass."

"Book Damaged by Water" (2001) looks like nothing so much as a natural wonder. And, in a sense, it is a book returned to organic form by the elements. The pages twist and writhe in all directions, defying anyone to see the rectangular form to which they once conformed. Its warped form consists of sensual curves and folds, with a touch of type peering through here and there.

Just as exotic is "Book With Wavy Pages" (2001) with its spine at the bottom of the image and the meandering groups of pages taking the eye up to the top. You can marvel at the object in and of itself, but squint just a bit and this photograph becomes a sort of imaginary aerial landscape.

Morell's "Two Tall Books" are improbably tall, curving toward each other like soft

buildings straining to support their weight. They are the most architectural of the pictures on view, but "Six Dictionaries" is a kindred composition, with the rows of crescents designed for easy thumbing of the alphabet resembling Seussian windows in a skyscraper.

There is a dimension of childlike vision in these pictures, as in much of his work. Alongside that view, perhaps intertwined with it, is a strain of the fantastic, as in "Curiousier and Curiousier: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1998). John Tenniel's Alice – that is, the Alice of the original illustrations – is in her gigantic mode, her head reaching for a ceiling. But at the same time, she's only as tall as a stack of 14 books. The scale defies that of the ordinary world. (Morell did images for an entire edition of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" seven years ago.)

Nearly all of the photographs in this exhibition were assembled into one excellent and elegantly designed volume called "A Book of Books" in 2002. Well-chosen comments about books are sprinkled throughout its pages and one of the best is from Samuel Butler, lasting Victorian-era novelist as well as painter and composer.

Butler said, "Books are like imprisoned souls till someone takes them down from a shelf and frees them."

Morell has done that with a camera, even giving new life to books that would no longer get a spot on any shelf. These photographs of books create their own sort of wonderland.

## **Far-flung places**

Bill Timmerman is drawn to flourishes of geometry in the world: a triangle of cropped commercial building emphasizing its peaked roof, the rectangles of a banner, sign and shutters within the rectangular contour of a white building.

Scrutinize his pictures closely and you'll find even more shapes. "Commercial Building, Hout Bay, South Africa," the image that contains the peaked roof, is framed so that the building behind it becomes still more triangles – one at each edge. In "Bureau Street, Cape Town, South Africa" a tall building, full of rectangles, rises behind the white building.

South Africa is one locale in the Phoenix-based photographer's exhibition at the Bellows Gallery. The other is the Southwest. And these far-flung places have supplied his show's title: "33 South/ 33 North."

The best pictures were taken in South Africa. Its sights yielded fresher images. The muted gray stones of Timmerman's silver gelatin prints are well-suited to the soft geometric forms of the Taal Monument, located near the village of Paarl.

His landscapes in the Anza Borrego Desert are, by comparison, rather dull and conventional. Their big skies are supposed to bear comparison to the expansive views of the South African landscape, which is one of the points of his show's title. But the photographer's eye never really unites South Africa with the Southwest and the show's theme becomes a strained conceit.