

CULTUREWATCH

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Morell created this 2006 image in the bedroom of a Venetian palazzo directly across from Santa Maria della Salute.



Upside Down and Inside Out

In his magical camera obscura images, Abelardo Morell takes one of photography's oldest and most basic principles and turns it on its head. **BY VINCE ALETTI**

As a photographer, Abelardo Morell has always been wide open to the wonderful and the unexpected. The first body of work that won him attention, in the early nineties, was a series of seductively simple black-and-white pictures taken from the point of view of his toddler son, Brady. There's a skyscraper of illustrated building blocks, a looming toy horse, a monumental baby bottle tantalizingly full of milk. The work came naturally, Morell says,

"because I was down on his level, wondering what he makes of things." Each image taps into a child's rapt amazement and allows us to recapture that moment when an open picture book or a big rubber ball wasn't commonplace; it was marvelous.

The Cuban-born photographer, now 58 (Brady is a junior at Trinity College in Hartford), continues to derive extraordinary results from the seemingly ordinary magic of photography. Like so many of his colleagues, Morell has been rediscovering and

rejuvenating his medium by going back to its roots. His signature body of work is an ongoing series of dreamlike interior views, also begun in the early nineties, which utilizes the oldest and most basic of photographic principles. To create these images, he first turns an entire room into a camera obscura, or pinhole camera, blocking out all the light save what enters a tiny opening he leaves in the plastic sheeting on the windows. Drawn through that hole, an image of the outside view is naturally projected upside down onto the opposite wall. Then, using a large-format camera, its shutter left open for about eight hours, he photographs the transformed, topsy-turvy room. The slightly disorienting effect is not unlike that of a double exposure, with one of the images turned on its head and less sharply focused. But it's all done with a straightforwardness that only underscores the surreal results.

Conflating interior and exterior spaces, blunt reality and fleeting apparitions, Morell's camera obscura images could be stage sets for Dalí, Cocteau, or Lewis Carroll; each is an invitation to follow him through the looking glass. On the evidence of his 2004 book *Camera Obscura* and an exhibition of works from the series currently at Danziger Projects in New York, Morell is quite comfortable on the other side. In one picture, the spire of the gleaming Empire State Building stretches across a white coverlet; in another, taken in Marblehead, Massachusetts, an upended seascape turns an attic room's white plank walls into a wish-you-were-here vacation spot; and another captures the Umbrian countryside suspended like a lowering cloud over a solitary wrought-iron bed.

It all started with Morell's 1991 photograph *Light Bulb*, an image of an illuminated bulb projected inside a camera obscura that he'd assembled using a lens and a cardboard box as a demonstration for his students at the Massachusetts College of Art

in Boston. His first experiments with room-size camera obscuras were done soon after at his former home in nearby Quincy, but he's long since moved out into the world, staking out spaces in San Francisco, Venice, Florence, Paris, and Havana. He's currently planning another visit to Venice for what he calls "an informal Canaletto project," capturing the painter's panoramic vistas on interior palazzo walls. And he's also looking for sites near the Egyptian pyramids in Giza. For Morell, the latter project is a way of paying homage to another admired

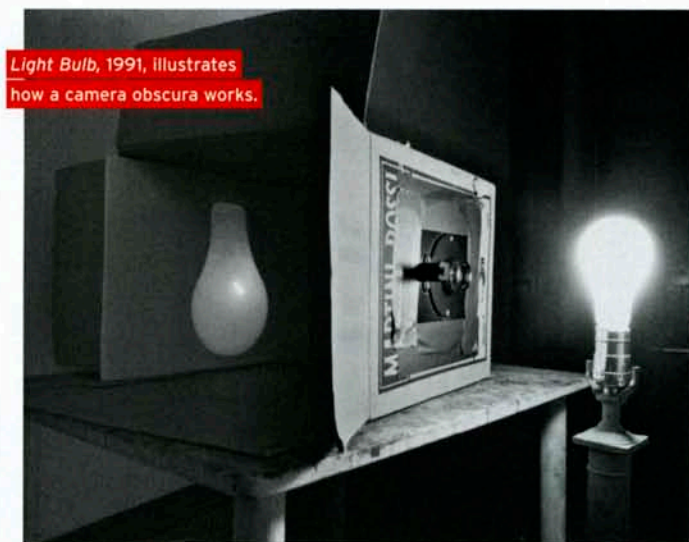
"The conceptual originality is what I liked in the beginning, but the way he's continued to work within this idea, combining repetition and variation in both urban and rural settings, is marvelous."

Recently Morell invigorated the series by introducing color for the first time, and early results, including an inside-out view of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, are spectacular. "Black and white seems eternal and color feels more like Impressionism," he says. "Color seems to reflect a particular time, like late-afternoon light, and that feeling has reenergized the project for me. Another change I think the work is going through is that the interiors are getting much more complicated. I started out with Zen and now I'm rococo."

But the camera obscura images are only one aspect of Morell's witty, inventive output. Following a substantial series of photographs of books, he's been making pictures of money. His show at Benrubi's gallery last fall included a striking image of \$7 million stacked up like so many bricks at a construction site, but he doesn't want to stop with bills. "I have a pretty good contact in Belgium where I can photograph diamonds," he says. And he's looking into gold, but he has no interest in its bling factor. Instead, he wants to bring it back down to earth, "to return things of

value to their materiality." At the same time, Morell recently launched a series of backstage photographs at theaters and opera houses that he'd like to expand to include film sets. "I enjoy the illusions," he says. "And I'm very much interested in photographing magic." Arguably, he's been doing that all along. ■

"Abelardo Morell: Camera Obscuras" is on view March 1 to April 7 at Danziger Projects (521 W. 26th St., New York; 212-629-6778). The works come in two sizes: 20 by 24 inches (edition of 30) and 30 by 40 inches (edition of 15). Prices range from \$5,000 to \$15,000.



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artist, in this case Francis Frith, the 19th-century British photographer famous for his Middle Eastern landscapes. "It's like revisiting Frith's photographs," he says. "Part of why I chose those monuments is that it's a way of recovering them, making them feel a little fresher. It's an attempt to give the work a new face."

The show at Danziger—organized in cooperation with Morell's primary New York dealer, Bonni Benrubi—features 18 pictures created between 1991 and 2006. "Morell's camera obscura work is one of the great ongoing series in photography right now," says gallery owner James Danziger.