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March 22, 2007 Edition > Section: [Arts and Letters](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

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Photography

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It is commonly believed that in 1781, when Lord Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington after the siege of Yorktown, the British fife and drum corps played the ballad "The World Turned Upside Down." It did not, but the title might well serve as an alternate for "Abelardo Morell: Camera Obscuras: 1991–2006," the title of the current exhibition at Danziger Projects. The world here is not only turned upside down, but also reversed left to right and outside in. It combines the most primitive of optical reproduction devices with contemporary photographic techniques. Mr. Morell rings continuously interesting changes on his set convention.

"Camera obscura" is Latin for "dark room." A pinhole opening in the wall of a dark room will cause an image of whatever is in the light outside the room to be projected upside down and reversed on the interior walls. This phenomenon was described as long ago as the fifth century B.C.E. by the Chinese philosopher Mo-Ti, and subsequently interested such champions of Western culture as Aristotle and Leonardo da Vinci. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler first used the term "camera obscura" in the 17th century. Around that time, artists began using camera obscuras to study perspective and make quick, accurate sketches. In the middle of the 19th century, the rear wall of box-size camera obscuras was replaced by plates coated with light sensitive chemicals and — hoorah — the modern photographic camera came into being.

Mr. Morell is a professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art. At the beginning of a new term he makes his classroom into a camera obscura to impress his introductory level students with the mystery of optics. Their "oohs" and "aahs" must be a very satisfactory way to launch the course. In 1991, it occurred to Mr. Morell that it

would be interesting if he could permanently capture these projected images, and he began experimenting at his home in Quincy, Mass. The result is on display at Danziger Projects in a 30-inch-by-40-inch black-and-white print, "Houses Across the Street in Our Living Room, Quincy, MA" (1991).

Quincy is a town in southeastern Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, and the architecture is colonial. The image Mr. Morell created was taken in a room where the door moldings and the conspicuous presence of a captain's chair indicate colonial ambience, a modern reading lamp and art photographs on the wall are markers for a professor of photography, and an artsy model of a horseman dangling from a hook gives the room personality. Projected onto two walls and the ceiling of the room are two colonial-style houses with peaked roofs, chimneys, window shutters, and wooden siding. A sturdy New England fir tree, its top pointed toward the floor, stands (or hangs) between the two topsyturvy houses.

To take this picture, and the subsequent ones, Mr. Morell used a view camera, the device closest to the classic camera obscura, supported on a tripod. Because very little light is actually admitted, exposures have to be extraordinarily long, sometimes as much as six or even eight hours. It is a considerable technical feat to have both the room and the projected image rendered clearly. It sounds cockamamie — it is cockamamie — but Mr. Morell has produced a series of engaging photographs: The trick, once the technical difficulties are mastered, is to find the right room in the right neighborhood.

Mr. Morell has scoured America, Europe, and his native Cuba for subjects. Several of the sites he selected are well known to tourists. "The Tower Bridge in the Tower Hotel, London, England" (2001) has one of the bridge's towers plunging down into one of the pillows on a double bed. "Santa Maria Della Salute in Palazzo Bedroom, Venice, Italy" (2006) shows the ornate dome of this Baroque masterpiece levitating upside down on the wall of an appropriately furnished room; beyond the rumpled bedclothes in the foreground is a mirror with an elaborate rococo frame, a chest of drawers with family photos neatly displayed on top, patterned wallpaper, a vase of flowers, and a superfluous statue. Inside and outside complement each other.

As a New York chauvinist, it is satisfying to me that "Brooklyn Bridge in Bedroom, Brooklyn, NY" (1999) has the highest price of any of the 15 photographs in the show, and that the edition in the 20-inch-by-24-inch format is sold out. More than a quarter of the pictures were taken in bedrooms, perhaps because as a practical matter bedrooms are not likely to be in use during the day when the pictures must be taken. It also seems appropriate for these somewhat surreal images, as if the bedrooms are dreaming of the neighborhoods in which they are set.

There are pictures from Havana; Miami Beach; Jackson Hole, Wyo.; Rockport, Maine, and elsewhere. In many of them, the projected image is a panorama of the surrounding countryside. "Tuscan Landscape in Large Bedroom, Florence, Italy" and "Umbrian Landscape in Empty Room, Umbertide, Italy" (both 2000) are two examples. Mr. Morell

is deft in juxtaposing the vastness of the outside with the closeness of the inside, reminding us that we, too, inhabit both realms.

Over the desk in his office, Mr. Danziger has another recent picture by Mr. Morell of Santa Maria della Salute, this one projected into the palazzo living room and in color. The rich Venetian colors work very nicely. Where will this new interest in color take Mr. Morell in his world turned upside down?

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Until April 14 (521 W. 26th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-629-6778).

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