



**Abelardo Morell (American, born in Cuba, 1948)**

***Thoreau: 40 Journals in Chronological Order, 2017***

**Archival inkjet print**

**Gift of the artist in honor of the security guards of the Morgan Library & Museum; courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery**

In 1979, a young Cuban-American artist named [Abelardo Morell](#) worked as a night guard at the Morgan Library & Museum, helping to ensure the security of a major Michelangelo exhibition that was on view that year. Thirty-eight years later, Morell—now a prominent art photographer—has created a [new work](#) based on the Morgan's collections and donated it in honor of the museum's security guards. Morell created the large-format photograph, entitled *Thoreau: 40 Journals in Chronological Order*, in collaboration with the Morgan to mark Henry David Thoreau's bicentenary. It will be on prominent view from August 22 to September 10 at the entrance to the exhibition *This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal*, which features many of the journals that appear in Morell's photograph.

In late April, Morell and his assistants spent a day working closely with Christine Nelson, the Morgan's Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts, to create high-resolution photographs of the back covers of thirty-nine blank books in which Thoreau kept his journal over the course of twenty-four years. (A fortieth notebook, from the collection of the New York Public Library, also appears in Morell's

finished work.) Morell then created a visual grid, which reads like text on a page, to map the colorful covers of the blank books and, by extension, the progress of Thoreau's life. The grid begins in the top left corner with Thoreau's earliest surviving notebook, continues across to the top right corner (which features a notebook Thoreau used while living in a small house by Walden Pond), and ends at the bottom right with the final one, which Thoreau kept in the early 1860s before dying of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four. The visible wear, heightened in Morell's photograph, reflects the hundreds of times each notebook has been handled over the years, first by Thoreau himself, later by friends, editors, scholars, librarians, and others who have studied, read, and preserved the volumes.

Morell's photograph, part of a [larger series](#) on Thoreau's journals, came to fruition through pure serendipity. Nelson, curator of the Morgan's Thoreau exhibition, was working with David Wood, her curatorial partner at the Concord Museum, to develop installation plans for *This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal*. The Concord Museum had already commissioned Morell to create a series of Thoreau-related photographs for a separate exhibition, entitled [Walden: Four Views](#), and Wood suggested that the Morgan might incorporate one of them. Nelson invited Morell to the Morgan discuss the possibility, and ultimately Morell's work *Walden: Woods and Pond* was incorporated into the installation.

As the two looked at Thoreau's journals together, Morell had another idea. He told Nelson of his profound responsiveness to physical books (see [A Book of Books](#), his collaboration with author Nicholson Baker). Almost in passing, he mentioned his long-ago stint as a Morgan security guard. Nelson invited Morell to return, a few weeks later, to photograph all the journals before they were installed in *This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal*.

"I've always been deeply affected by the physical presence of the journals," Nelson said. "As Abe and I looked at them together, all laid out on the studio tables, I experienced them as a tangible log of an extraordinary life. Abe's finished photograph conveys that richness."

They completed the work in the Morgan's photography studio, located in the institution's basement level, not far from the old security console where Morell would have reported for guard duty back in 1979. At the time, his girlfriend, Lisa McElaney (now his wife) was organizing group tours of the Morgan's *Michelangelo and His World* exhibition as part of her work for sponsor Philip Morris's corporate affairs division, and Morell began working as a full-time security guard at the same time. Both were preparing to enter graduate school that fall—McElaney in Columbia's film program, Morell in Yale's photography program.

Morell's work was the subject of a recent major traveling retrospective exhibition and catalog entitled [Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door](#) at the Art Institute of Chicago, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the High Museum (2013–14). His work is in the collections of many major museums, including [MoMA](#) and the [Getty](#), and he has been an artist in residence at the [Gardner Museum](#). He is represented by Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.