

His self and the sun were one

And his poems, although makings of his self

Were no less makings of the sun.

Wallace Stevens, "The Planet on the Table"

ABELARDO MORELL AND THE CAMERA EYE

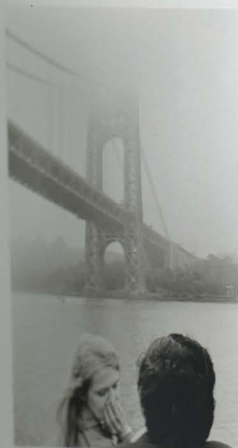


inspired in equal parts by the magical properties of scientific phenomena, the potential of poetry to transform the mundane, and the camera as an agent of vision and light, Abelardo Morell's photographs explore the workings of the everyday world. He approaches the medium as a philosopher might, constantly questioning and probing its inherent properties, seeking a more complete understanding of the camera's logic and mystery. Through the most fundamental principles of photography he explores optical phenomena that have long been understood by artists and scientists but never fully visualized as images. His subjects are decidedly familiar — domestic objects and interiors, water running from a faucet or spilled on a tabletop, illustrated books and maps, his children at play—as if to demonstrate the extraordinary visual possibilities at work on the surface of the commonplace.

Morell's exploration of the domestic environment began with the birth of his son, Brady, in 1986. He had, up until that time, worked as a black-and-white street photographer in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. He describes his early pictures as being somewhat removed from their subjects, the result of reacting quickly, snatching frames intuitively from a distance. This approach is indicative of the strong tradition of street photography taught at Yale University when he received his MFA in photography in 1981, but also reflects the cultural distance he experienced as an immigrant living in the United States.

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1948, Morell immigrated with his family to the U.S. when he was fourteen. They settled in New York City, where his father worked as a building superintendent and they lived in one of the basement apartments. Morell describes this period of his life as something of a subterranean existence, living below ground, helping his father in the evening hours with the building maintenance, watching the world outside through a single, street level window. He gradually adjusted to the cold grey light of the region and a new language. In school he was given Ernest Hemingway novels to help him learn English, and the teenager Abelardo was immediately struck by the potential of such simple, concise sentences to carry complex human dramas. After high school he received a full scholarship to attend Bowdoin College in Maine where, after a brief attempt to study engineering, he settled into a course of study in Comparative Religion. It was during his undergraduate program that he discovered photography in classes with John McKee, who also introduced him to the writings of Minor White and John Cage. For a young student, their work signaled the potential of the everyday world to yield evidence of the spiritual, and he remembers carrying their writings around like a bible.

For Morell, who grew up Catholic but did not maintain any strong belief in the teachings of the Church, the mystical qualities of Minor White's photographs and writings were particularly meaningful. In much the same way that White found art to be "a minor mysticism," Morell was drawn to the powerful transformative qualities of photography in its purest form.¹ The photographic image, much like a poem, invites the viewer to experience the spiritual, the fantastic, and the sublime in the flesh of the everyday world. And over the past decade, beginning with the birth of his first child, he has searched out a kind of beauty in ordinary things.



Couple, New York City, 1976

Things for What Else They Are

Like so many new parents Morell turned the camera on his immediate domestic environment. He began exploring the world from a child's perspective, approaching even mundane objects and visual effects with renewed curiosity. Through his unusual vantage points and exaggerated use of scale, once familiar objects achieve new significance: the opening of a brown paper bag, viewed from above, becomes a dark and immeasurable void; the dramatic view from the top of a playground slide is both terrifying and irresistible; an image of his son Brady, sitting in what we rationally understand to be an appropriately proportioned wooden chair, looms in monumental scale, the photographer's low vantage point giving the illusion that the child all but fills the room. Morell redefines the domestic space through such odd vantage points, inviting the jaded adult imagination to be recharged by the faintly ominous lure of unfamiliar textures and peculiar objects. He reveals, in the words of Minor White, "things for what else they are."²

A pot of water runs over, a steady stream pouring from its metal lip at eye level. We recognize the subject, yet we've seldom seen it treated with quite this degree of significance. Morell transforms the simplest of subjects through surprisingly traditional means, achieving his wondrous effects through the camera's ability to fix unusual perspectives, reflections of light and shadow, and the passage of time. Long exposures such as the one that transformed the humble overflowing pot of water are common for this photographer. Here, an otherwise ordinary stream of water becomes a weighty column, achieving its shape over the course of a five-minute exposure. A long exposure does not snatch an image from its environment with the quick release of a shutter so much as it absorbs it, slowly accumulating its impression through the action of light on film. As he explains it, "rigor is important," and he physically waits out many of his long exposures. More than a technical compulsion to oversee every detail, he believes that by consciously experiencing the actual duration of the camera's exposure he is making a more deliberate photograph. He perceives this approach as a form of respect, or a method of paying homage to the subjects of his photographs.

The Secrets of Rooms

Revealing the closed space of the camera and the optics of the camera eye are at the core of Morell's most ambitious series to date. His ongoing work with the remarkable effects of the *camera obscura* (which literally translates as dark room or chamber) began with a demonstration for his students at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where he teaches. Every semester he transforms a classroom into a *camera obscura*, demonstrating the principles of photography through the first and most rudimentary of photographic devices. "When my students see projections of people on Huntington Avenue walking upside down on the classroom walls, their reaction is always total amazement that something this low tech could be so magical,"³ he explains.

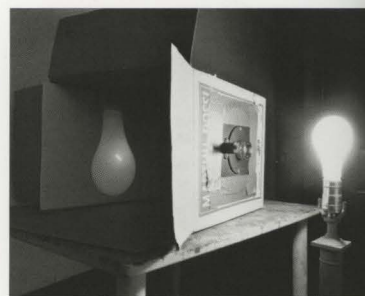
The principles of the *camera obscura* have been recognized for at least four hundred years, long before the actual development of the modern photographic camera.⁴ Just as the *camera obscura* was frequently employed to demonstrate human vision, Morell now uses the device to demonstrate the workings of the camera eye. As Morell's simple cardboard box in *Light Bulb*, 1991, so clearly reveals, when a beam of light passes through the opening of a lens into an enclosed, darkened room or chamber, an inverted image of the outside world is projected onto the opposite wall. As the illuminated light bulb shows us, the image appears inside the box upside down and reversed. Morell immediately recognized the potential picture in the cardboard box camera, its homely materials only underscoring the photographer's pursuit of extraordinary occurrences within the world of everyday things. It also prompted him to explore the construction of a darkened chamber on a much larger scale.



Water Pouring Out of a Pot, 1993



Athanasius Kircher, *Large Portable Camera Obscura*, 1646, engraving
Collection George Eastman House/International Museum of Photography and Film



Light Bulb, 1991

As new technology radically alters the means by which we visualize and record the world, it is somewhat remarkable that Morell would retreat to the poetic space of the *camera obscura*. His extensive experimentation with the device reveals his general interest in optics, but his actual use of the device—turning entire rooms into cameras—seems to be inspired by an almost childlike fascination with its transformative effects. “I want my photographs to reflect a time when science, art, philosophy and religion were closer brothers and sisters, as they were during [William Henry] Fox Talbot’s time,” he explains. He makes frequent reference to scientific inquiry, as in his photographs of the optical effects of the *camera obscura*, or the shadowy imprint of a solar eclipse reflected through the leaves of a tree onto the street below (a picture first imagined by Aristotle).⁵ Not intended as scientific records of such optical phenomena, even so, they effectively draw us in to the magical properties of the physical world. These images convey the photographer’s simple, hopeful message, that his imagery might restore in the viewer a sense of wonder.

Given this moment in our technological history, inspiring a state of visual innocence is no mean feat. As we become more and more entrenched in information systems, and photographic imagery increasingly mediates and distances us from firsthand sensory experience, the *camera obscura* stands in stark relief, almost otherworldly in its purity of translation. With the exception of selecting the view, or positioning the aperture, the artist who makes use of a *camera obscura* has no real control over its operation. A box which relies on optics rather than the subjective eye of the photographer, the *camera obscura* produces images purely through the vehicle of light traveling in straight lines through a narrow opening. Like the first observers who viewed the effects of the *camera obscura*, the contemporary viewer stands similarly transfixed by the clarity and detail with which the darkened chamber frames the world in real time.

In the close, dark space of Morell’s room-size *camera obscura* he collapses the history of optical devices, turning his own view camera back upon the imagery of its precursor. The ongoing *camera obscura* series began fairly simply in 1991, with the photographer first converting his living room, then his bedroom and finally his son’s room into light-tight chambers. Doors and windows are covered with dark plastic and a small circular opening, approximately 3/8” in diameter, is made which serves as the camera’s aperture. He does not use a lens to focus the view, preferring instead the purity and immediacy of the uncorrected image that is emitted through the handmade opening. Once the outside view is positioned within the room’s interior, the photographer sets up his camera on a tripod, opens the shutter and leaves the room, allowing the image to register on film over the course of several hours. A fair amount of trial and error determined that most views require an eight-hour exposure. Eight hours of real time collected on a single frame. During his early experimentation with the room-size *camera obscura* the family watched, as if from their own private theater, as the scene from across the street emerged, suspended and upside down, on the opposite wall.

Following his work within his own house, photographing familiar rooms occupied by evidence of real life, he gradually began to find opportunities to photograph interiors with views of well-known landmarks. Through the careful alignment of two cameras he merged the intimate space of the domestic or human realm with the public space of the outside world. A clean white attic encloses a view off the coast of Marblehead, Massachusetts; a simple bedroom is visited by the elegant form of the Empire State Building; a sparsely furnished Manhattan penthouse holds the expanse of the city skyline hovering upside down on its ceiling; an empty hotel room is crammed full of Times Square. These were among his *camera obscura* subjects between 1991–1997. Following such highly trafficked urban sites he began to seek out landscapes to expand his series of well-known public views. A trip west to Wyoming with his son secured the image *Camera Obscura Image of the Grand Tetons in Resort Room, 1997*. Here, the human element of the picture is



Camera Obscura Image of the Grand Tetons
in Resort Room, 1997

suggested by two Adirondack chairs visible just outside the window, clearly positioned to share the camera's spectacular view of the mountains.

Morell describes his *camera obscura* images as recording "what a room sees."⁶ And not unlike a painting by Edward Hopper, an artist who has been particularly influential for the photographer, his rooms are pronounced in their quiet loneliness. By the sheer duration of the exposure, it is not surprising that Morell's rooms would be unpopulated; and yet there is the unmistakable presence of people inhabiting these spaces. It is as though they have momentarily left the room, their physical presence still hanging in the air. Here he inverts the ordinary relationship of a person inhabiting a room, presenting instead a room that holds the lingering presence of its keeper. It is the memory of the room that we see in these images.

The *camera obscura* series might also be seen as a poetic interpretation of the Latin term *in camera*, generally used in reference to a private conversation taking place in the secure space of a judge's chamber.⁷ Here too, Morell invites the viewer to linger "in camera," in the private space of his pictures. By the very necessity of creating an enclosed, light-tight area for their production, these photographs are unusually intimate, even secretive. Too slow to be treated as surveillance records, they still possess the irresistible quality of a picture made unannounced. Here the patience and careful planning of their maker is balanced against the whims of natural lighting conditions and an extraordinary element of chance. Given the duality of these pictures—containing degrees of stasis and change, of technology and magic, of description and illusion—they are remarkably intense in their psychological capacity. The viewer is drawn in to survey the intricacies of a dark room and a strange looming representation of the outside world. In the case of the *Camera Obscura Image of Times Square*, 1997, for instance, commissioned by *The New York Times*, Morell worked from a carefully selected hotel room, bringing the visual chaos of Broadway inside through a small aperture. Because direct sunlight is blocked by skyscrapers during a portion of the day, this photograph required an unusually long exposure of two days. With its unblinking eye open for the duration, the camera slowly registered the passage of time on film. The light of the alarm clock on the bedside table glows, but the time does not register. The hands of the wall clock spin into oblivion. The light under the door fights to enter. Over the course of two days thousands of people pass through Times Square, and yet not a single person registers on film. The long exposure lends an eerie presence to the empty streets below, not unlike the ghostly representations of many nineteenth-century photographs.

The Planet on the Table

The private, almost contemplative space of the *camera obscura* is not far removed from the intimate structure of the book, which similarly reveals the vast exterior world within the space of its pages. Given this, it is not surprising that while Morell was regularly transforming the space of ordinary rooms he was also intently photographing books and maps. The ongoing series began, again quite simply, at home. A richly illustrated children's book served as one of his first subjects in 1987, an unknowing precursor to his photographic interpretation of Lewis Carroll's classic children's story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1998. Morell photographed the pages of the children's book as though they might be read all at once, opening the book to reveal a neat slice of each page.

The series resumed again in 1993 after a trip to the public library, where he picked up an illustrated book on El Greco and brought it home. As it lay open on the kitchen table, the play of light across the reflective inks caught his eye, and he became intrigued by the possibilities of light alone to transform the familiar structure of the book. Books have always been treasured objects for the photographer, and he speaks in almost hushed, reverent tones when describing them. He recalls his own early exposure to books as a child, having been brought into their expansive realm by his uncle, who was an architect



Camera Obscura Image of Times Square
in Hotel Room, 1997



Dictionary, 1994



Two Books of Astronomy, 1996

in Cuba. At the age of 10 he was allowed to roam freely through his uncle's private library, and he remembers this first immersive contact with the smell and touch of the volumes, the pages opening up images of previously unknown worlds.

An artist's residency in 1994-1995 at the Boston Athenaeum, a private library established in 1807, provided Morell with an abundance of rare volumes to pore over. Here, with the assistance of the staff, he photographed books of engravings by Piranesi, nineteenth-century astronomy books, and richly illustrated books. His images were frequently made in the reading rooms at the Athenaeum, where he used natural light for his long exposures of three to eight minutes. Not all of his subjects were especially rare or valuable books however, and he continued to photograph fairly ordinary books at home on his dining room table, the site of many of his more involved pictures.

Through his interpretation the book is treated as a sumptuous physical object. The textural surfaces of fine papers and leather bindings, the reflective quality of dark inks, and the strange rift that occurs within images that are printed across two pages all provide infinite possibilities for his lens. Some volumes lend themselves as formal studies, such as the massive architectural profile of *Dictionary*, 1994; others are brought into the immediate realm of the physical world by a wash of natural light, illuminating pages open to landscapes or planetary renderings; still others are placed in conversation with one another, two volumes extending and enriching the narrative, as in *Two Books of Astronomy*, 1996. And yet despite the magical transformation of the pages, upon which objects appear to move, figures very nearly fall off the edge or stridently stand up from the flat plane, the photographer respectfully maintains the structure of the book, revealing it as a highly charged space for the imagination to explore.

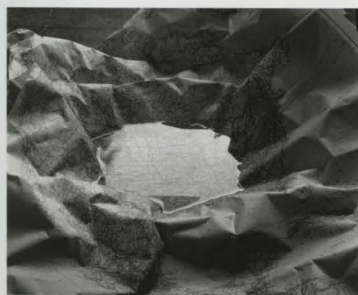
For this photographer, not only the printed book but language itself is experienced as a physical, malleable thing. Something to be rolled around on the tongue, relearned and expressed in different shapes and sounds. His photograph of an embossed page of text entitled *1841 Book of Proverbs for the Blind*, 1995, delineates this idea, revealing language as three-dimensional as it is conceptual. This material conception of language resurfaces throughout his work, seen early on in his image of a refrigerator covered with magnetic letters, a random group of lost symbols. More recently these ideas culminated in the surprising image of the Roman alphabet written out in ephemeral drops of water. Here the artist presents the most common of subjects anew, inviting the viewer to reexamine the shape and character of each letter. For those who look closely enough, the letters open up onto another level of reality, reflecting the distorted shape of a window cast in each watery form.

His most recent images continue to reconfigure familiar objects, unraveling the threads of our understanding only to show us the thing again more clearly. As in the image of the alphabet in water, its substance making these trusted characters unexpectedly fragile and temporal, the artist has also explored the nature of maps—even geography itself—as flexible systems of logic. In *Map in Sink*, 1996, a map lies crumpled and forlorn in a kitchen sink, partially submerged in water. Its new environment strangely extends its borders, allowing the rivers and canals pictured along its edges to flow easily into the basin. Or, in *Map of North America*, 1996, the photographer folds the central region of the United States—an area known for its wide, flat expanses of land—into a rugged, mountainous terrain, creating a virtual container for water. “A violent act against the Midwest, I suppose,” he shrugs almost apologetically.

Interpreted by Morell's playful imagination, even the continent of Africa is a malleable construct. An unwieldy spill of water on a table is contained by a generous smear of vaseline. Its outline is only vaguely familiar, and yet its title firmly declares it to be a *Map of Africa*. As with all of the photographer's titles, this one is concise and direct, encouraging an immediate recognition of the thing pictured; he recognizes that a more resonant understanding of the image is reached over time. What the photographer proclaims as a



1841 Book of Proverbs for the Blind, 1995



Map of North America, 1996



Map of Africa, 1996

map of Africa, for instance, is conceivable only from a certain height or perspective, where the shape readily comes together in the imagination of the viewer. Morell's image reflects the shifting realities that Wallace Stevens described in his poem *July Mountain*:

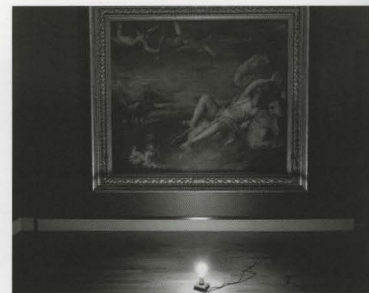
*We live in a constellation
Of patches and pitches,
Not in a single world,
In things said well in music,
On the piano, and in speech,
As in a page of poetry—
Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos,
The way, when we climb a mountain,
Vermont throws itself together.*⁸

The artist here extends his childhood fascination with Africa to a larger exploration of the shapes we take to represent specific geographic regions. The formation of this spill of water is, in keeping with Morell's whimsical view of the world, meant to parallel the geological formation of the continent; just as a random spill on a table might assume the shape of a country, so too a chaotic split from a major land mass might form an island. He points to a haphazard drop of water off his coast of "Africa," and compares it to the making of Madagascar.

From books and maps his subject matter logically extended to include paintings, and his recent work features the collection at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where he worked as an artist-in-residence in 1998.⁹ Just as his photographs of books serve to enliven and recontextualize their structure, these images impose a radical new interpretation of the museum space and its collections. Working in the galleries regularly, he soon became acquainted with the Museum staff and was particularly intrigued by their daily interaction with the collection. More than once he recognized uncanny likenesses between staff members and the subjects of paintings on exhibit, and felt compelled to pair them through his photographs. As in *Tim and Rembrandt, Gardner Museum*, 1998, Morell creates a jarring physical comparison between the Dutch artist's self-portrait and a young artist of the twentieth century who happens to work at the museum. These images represent for the photographer a series of "imaginary conversations" between the paintings and the individuals who, although separated by centuries, now share the same environment. Another image made during his residency, *Europa Dimly Lit, Gardner Museum*, 1998, finds the gallery very much as Morell experienced it after-hours. He illuminates a favorite painting with a glaring light bulb on the floor, a contemporary offering of sorts made to the painting and the quiet transcendent space of the museum.

Morell also brought some of the Museum's paintings into dialogue with one another. By exposing a half-sheet of film at a time he placed two otherwise unrelated works in close proximity, forging unexpected links between artist and history, space and time. In a playful handling of architectural space and one-point perspective, Morell combined two paintings — *Annunciation*, attributed to Piermatteo d'Amelia and *Tragedy of Lucretia*, by Sandro Botticelli — into the frame of one photographic image he calls *Two Paintings Sharing an Archway, Gardner Museum*, 1998. Undoing the narrative of each painting, he boldly created a new one. Here, Morell regards two permanently installed paintings on opposite sides of a gallery with the same pliancy as two books placed side by side.

Consistently throughout his work, Morell disrupts the boundaries of a fixed or permanent understanding of things. Like Lewis Carroll's *White Rabbit*, Morell tests the malleability of the everyday world, presenting ordinary objects from absurd or unfamiliar



Europa Dimly Lit, Gardner Museum, 1998



Two Paintings Sharing an Archway, Gardner Museum, 1998

vantage points. As Minor White summed up, "...like *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, with the camera one comes so close to the real that one goes beyond it and into the reality of the dream."¹⁰ Clearly, as Morell's imagery reminds us, there is not one neatly fixed version of reality, nor is there one definitive vantage point from which to best understand it. Like the photographer, who transforms his subjects through unexpected perspectives and mesmerizing description, the viewer becomes transfixed by the potential of the commonplace.

Diana Gaston

Notes

1. Quoted in Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (New York: Aperture, 1982) unpaginated.

2. Ibid.

3. Quoted in *A Camera in a Room: Photographs by Abelardo Morell* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p.7.

4. The phenomenon which the *camera obscura* demonstrates was first described in tenth century optical treatises by Arabian scholars. Its optical effects were later detailed in Leonardo da Vinci's manuscripts. The invention of the *camera obscura* is often credited to Giovanni Battista della Porta, who fully described it in his *Magia Naturalis* of 1558. The *camera obscura* became widely used by artists during the 17th and 18th centuries. For a detailed account of the *camera obscura* see Jonathan Crary, "The Camera Obscura and Its Subject," in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992), 25-66.

5. The optical phenomenon of the solar eclipse casting crescent-shaped images through the leaves of a tree and onto the ground below was first described by Aristotle during the fourth century B.C. What came to be known as "Aristotle's Problem" was not solved until the sixteenth century with the development of the *camera obscura*. See John J. Hammond, *The Camera Obscura: A Chronicle* (Bristol: Adam Hilger Ltd., 1981) and Richard Torchia, *Live Projections by Richard Torchia* (exhibition brochure), (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, 1997).

6. Quoted in "Assignment: Times Square," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 1997, section 6, p.50

7. Eugenia Parry introduced this idea of interior spaces paralleling the psychological state of the photographer in her exhibition and accompanying essay *In Camera*, presented at the Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe in 1993. Abelardo Morell's *Camera Obscura Image of Houses Across the Street in Our Bedroom*, 1991, was included in this exhibition.

8. Wallace Stevens, *July Mountain*, 1955, from *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 140.

9. See Jennifer R. Gross, "Illuminating Surfaces," in *Abelardo Morell: Face to Face* (exhibition catalogue), (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1998).

10. Minor White to Helmut Gernsheim, September 4, 1953. Quoted in *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations*, unpaginated.