

Exuberance

CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE WESCHLER



Figure 1. Abelardo Morell, *Flowers for Lisa #1*, 2014

Abelardo Morell and I meet in the ground-floor studio of a two-story unit he and his wife moved into a few years ago, in an apartment compound for artists—the onetime Claflin Elementary School in Newton, Massachusetts. He'd launched the current series of images back in his old, longtime home in nearby Brookline, but he tells me how it had really taken off only once he'd settled into these much more spacious haunts. . . .

LAWRENCE WESCHLER: I want to get to the first picture in this remarkable new series of yours, your *Flowers for Lisa* series, this one here (Figure 1), in just a moment, but allow me perhaps to surprise you here at the outset by telling you that some of my own first associations upon seeing it were with this earlier picture of yours, your *Light Bulb* from 1991 (Fig. 2). Bear with me. Perhaps you could first tell me the story of that lightbulb picture.

ABELARDO MORELL: I'm intrigued, if a bit dubious, but, okay. So in 1991, I had been teaching for a while, and one of my desires was to be clear about the fundamentals of photography. So I decided to make pictures that offered an explanation of how photography works, and this lightbulb picture was a way—

LW: A photograph interrogating itself, in a way?

AM: A way of showing the process, but one that would look nice as well. By way of a certain kind of simplicity—a plain cardboard box that had once contained wine bottles, as it happens, some duct tape, a lens—nevertheless arriving at a level of mystery and awe.

LW: So outside the box you have a bare lightbulb, turned on, and there on the other side of the photo, through the lens, you have an image of that same bulb, projected upside down on the far side of the box.

AM: Yep.

LW: One of the things that, to me, is absolutely astonishing about the resultant photo, though, is that the most real-seeming thing in the picture is the projected image of the bulb!

AM: Indeed. That's in part on account of the length of the exposure required—I had to do a lot of experimenting, trial and error, both in taking the photograph and then in developing the negative. The exposure ended up being something like five minutes, so that the actual bulb virtually whites itself out, whereas the projection takes on palpable substance, that sense of reality as you describe it, albeit upside down. You can even see the filament of the bulb burning there inside the projection, which you couldn't see looking at the actual bulb.

LW: And just as David Hockney likes to point out, the process of projection, of pushing the image through the pinhole, as it were, and spreading it out on the other side,

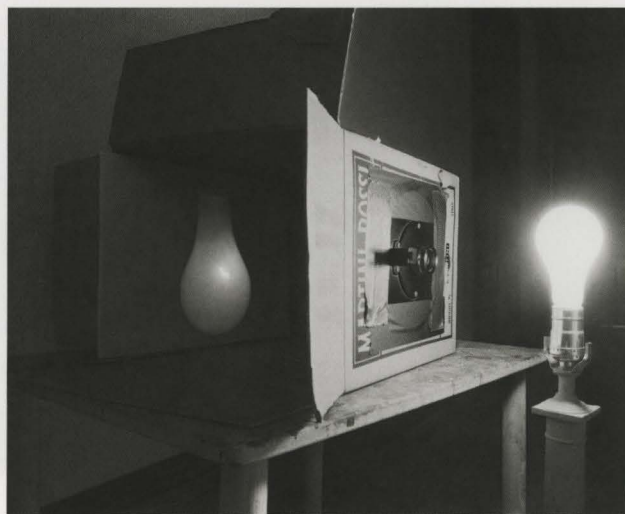


Figure 2. Abelardo Morell, *Light Bulb*, 1991

harmonizes relations and values within the projected image—almost makes it look like a painting. Were you amazed when you first saw the results?

AM: Absolutely, and I was also delighted, because post-modernism was at its highest then, in the early nineties, with all its nonsensical claims that everything had been done already, there was no room for anything original, and I could say, “Oh yeah?”

LW: “Did you ever see *this*?”

AM: So it was a way of rebelling against that kind of mindset. But it also really kind of made me think, “Oh, wow . . .,” and started me out on the series of optical experiments, projecting the outside world, upside down, into interiors of darkened rooms, literal cameras obscura.

LW: Photos like this one here (Fig. 3).

AM: And it’s true that those all grew out of the germ of that lightbulb image.

LW: Indeed, but do you hear what you are saying, especially in the context of this latest series, *Flowers for Lisa?* Because the lightbulb photo portrays precisely, especially in the projected image, a sort of bulb. Like a tulip bulb.

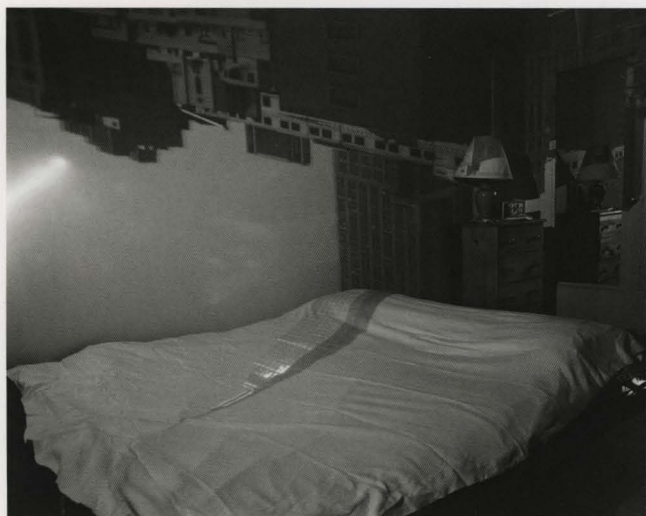


Figure 3. Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of the Empire State Building in Bedroom*, 1994

AM: Hmm. Wow, I hadn’t thought of that.

LW: And that sort of association has a history.

AM: How do you mean?

LW: Well, back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when, again as Hockney has pointed out, painters began deploying lenses and cameras obscura of all sorts, a whole series of diagrams of the process were being published, and it’s funny, because over and over the thing being projected onto the far wall in these diagrams turns out to be a tree (Figs. 4–7).

What’s more, in certain such renderings, the process of pinhole projection is consciously being likened to that of vision itself, the way, say, the image of a tree out there in the world goes through the pinhole pupil of the human eye before getting projected, upside down, onto the retina at the back of the eye. And look for a second at that diagram of vision (Fig. 5), or better yet at this version here (Fig. 8), where the diagram has been rotated by ninety degrees, and you begin to see that vision itself, seen in this way, replicates what happens with a tree (Fig. 9)! The branches . . . the trunk penetrating the pinhole earth . . . the roots. Indeed, centuries later, you get Lee Friedlander capturing this remarkable image (Fig. 10), where the curvature of the hill in the background suggests, if you squint your gaze just right, the curvature of an eyeball.

AM: And the shadows reading like the veins inside the eyeball.

LW: Yes, but also like the rays of light piercing the pupil of the eyeball and getting projected beyond.

AM: That’s fascinating, but—

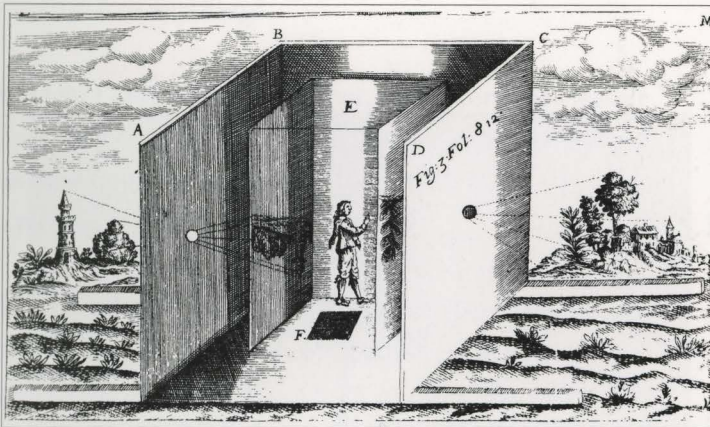


Figure 4. Illustration of a portable camera obscura, from Athanasius Kircher's *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, 1646

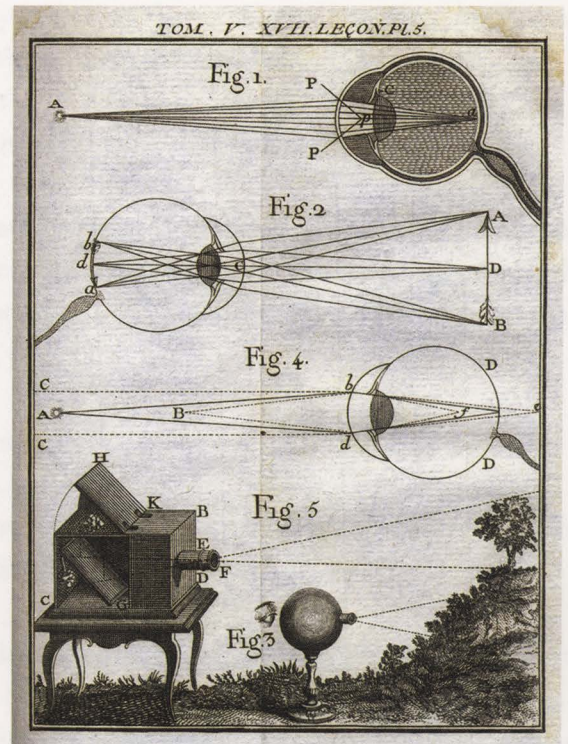


Figure 5. Illustration of a camera obscura compared to the mechanism of the eye, from Jean Antoine Nollet's *Leçons de physique expérimentale*, vol. 5, 1764

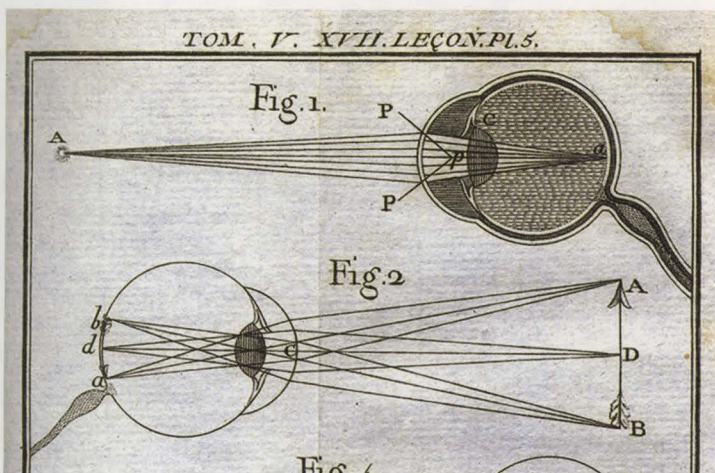


Figure 6. *Optics: The Principle of the Camera Obscura*, 1752

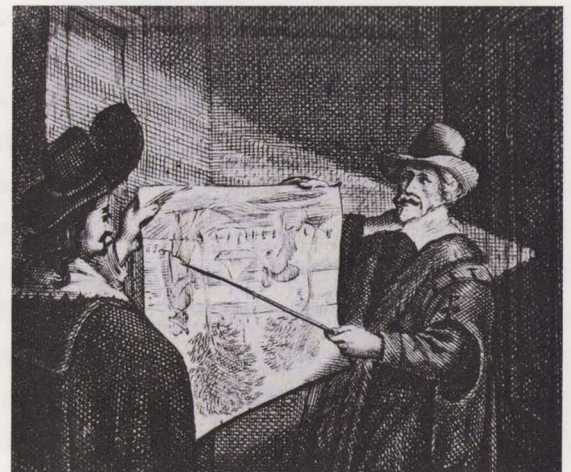


Figure 7. Illustration of the mechanism of the eye, from Johan van Beverwijck's *Schat der ongesontheit*, 1664

LW: But what does it have to do with the subject at hand? Well, look again at that first image in your *Flowers* series. Remind you of anything?

AM: Hah! I never thought of that, and it certainly wasn't my conscious intention. If anything, my associations had been with good old American fireworks, but I see what you mean.

LW: I'm certainly not the first to note the way that the pupil of the eye, or the eye more generally, is often deployed as a metaphor for the artist him- or herself: The world out there gets refracted through the sensibility incarnated in the artist-eye—Isherwood's "I am a camera . . ."—and then projected, in a form transmuted by the unique personality of the artist, onto the page or canvas. Impression becoming expression.

Which in turn reminds me of one of my favorite books, albeit a very odd and recondite one, the English philologist R. B. Onians's mid-twentieth-century *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*—

AM: Great title!

LW: Yeah, but what Onians does, with near-maniacal erudition, is to probe the linguistic roots of some of the key concepts in early pre-Socratic, pre-Hippocratic—and, for that matter, early Sanskrit—usage, thereby generating a sense of how those people thought of, say, the body. And in this context, he was able to show that they believed that the seat of thought, and more especially of vision, was in the lungs, of all places, not the brain. That for them, vision, like breathing, was a question of in-and-out: Breathe in, breathe out; the world enters one's pupils, to be sure, but one's gaze just as clearly bores out through the pupils and into the world: back and forth. Hence the overlap of words like *inspiration* and *respiration*.

AM: Which is exactly how a photographer moves through the world.

LW: Indeed, but your comment just now about fireworks makes me realize how that splay of light through the pupil or, for that matter, flower stems converging into a vase, applies to you even more profoundly.

AM: How so?

LW: Precisely because you are not a "good old American," or, rather, the status of your Americanness is decidedly more complex, more nuanced. You were born in Cuba, after all, yes?

AM: Yes, in 1948.

LW: How old were you when your family moved to the United States?

AM: Thirteen.

LW: Thirteen, whereupon your life turned inside out, as it were . . .

AM: Yeah. Literally . . . [*laughs*]

LW: . . . through the pinhole of immigration, of exile and displacement.

AM: Yes, that's a good point. In fact, there's something I have to show you.

When my parents, my sister, and I first came to New York, it was 1962. We were hardly fancy Cubans: My father was a mechanic in the navy, and afterward, as refugees, we were really lower class, living in a basement apartment on West 69th Street. And West 69th in those days was not like it is today: It was fairly bleak. I bought, with money from a pharmacy delivery job, a Brownie camera with a flash, sort of square like Diane Arbus's, who of course I had not yet heard of. My English was not so good at the beginning, and so I mediated some of my interactions with the world through that camera. But here (Fig. 11) is a photo I took of our apartment.



Figure 11. Abelardo Morell, *Our Living Room*, 1963

LW: That's uncanny, because it really does look like the kind of thing Arbus was doing some years later, for example, that one of *A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx*. Same sort of vantage, same cramped kind of room.

AM: As I say, newly arrived, at thirteen, I'd never heard of her. The only light we were getting in that apartment was through those small windows that looked up, because it was a basement apartment. So those windows were kind of important. It was sort of a peeping system, with all the bustle of New York up there rushing by.

LW: Another peephole.

AM: Well, I've always been grateful for that, because we were literally starting at the bottom, which gave one's life even more of a sense of the aspirational.

LW: You were a seed, transplanted into the loam of New York, and your life would rise up from that. Reminds me of that diagram we were looking at a few moments ago, of the bearded guy looking up from underground at the splay of vision through the eyeball. A theme that in your life clearly goes way back, and in turn comes forward through your subsequent pinhole images; for example, the one of that upside-down projection of the Empire State Building

across the bed, which, come to think of it, also sort of rhymes with the photo of your basement apartment.

LW: Well, let's fast-forward in time a little. Can you describe the kind of work you were doing immediately before *Flowers for Lisa*?

AM: Well, that would have been a series of different tent projects. About ten years ago, I got a commission from the Alturas Foundation to do some camera obscura-type work in Texas, in Big Bend National Park, and I told them, "The thing is, there are no rooms in the desert." But then I thought maybe I could make a room, a portable thing, such as a tent.

LW: A camping tent . . .

AM: Well, a camping tent, but completely dark inside, pitch-black, and outfitted with a periscope on top, which could look out—a little bit like some NASA rover—at the surrounding landscape (Fig. 12), projecting the image of that landscape onto the bare ground below, within the tent, whatever that ground might happen to be: pebbles, grass, pavement, or the like.

LW: A sort of open-faced sandwich, with the ground as the bread and the periscope-projected image evenly spread out across it.

AM: Okay, yeah, and I could then photograph that projection from within the tent. And over the years I proceeded to create several different series using that technique: the Golden Gate Bridge as projected onto pavement; Monet's gardens at Giverny as projected onto the gravelly pathways; more recently, Constable-like vistas spread across the very grass that Constable, whose work I love, would have trod (Fig. 13). It was my way to reinvent the nature of landscape pictures—something I'd never thought I was any good at before.

LW: Gotta love those trees! Interesting, too, in that periscopes have a history of their own in American photog-

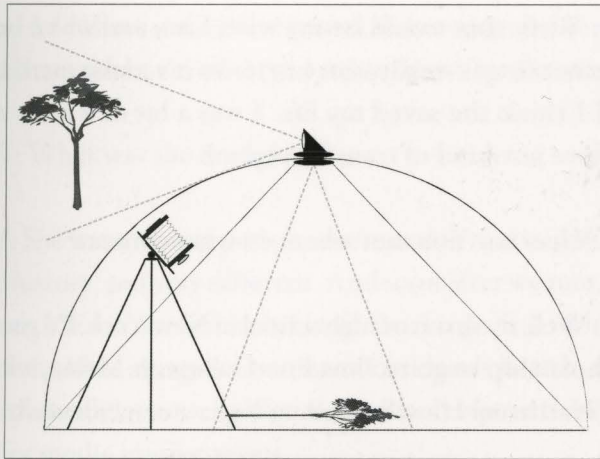


Figure 12. Diagram of camera obscura tent

raphy: Both Helen Levitt and Ben Shahn in their street work deployed primitive periscopes, although lateral ones, mounted in front of the forward-facing lenses of their boxy cameras, so that looking down into the viewfinder, they could seem to be aiming straight ahead when in fact they were focusing on something or someone at a right angle to what they seemed to be aiming at. Hence some of the incredibly unselfconscious vantages of common people that they were able to capture.

AM: Which I love.

LW: But that in turn reminds me of a great passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne, of all people, from his journal, where he writes:

I have before now experienced, that the best way to get a vivid impression and feeling of landscape, is to sit down before it and read, or become otherwise absorbed in thought; for then, when your eyes happen to be attracted to the landscape, you seem to catch Nature at unawares, and see her before she has time to change her aspect. The effect lasts but for a single instant, and passes away almost as soon as you are conscious of it; but it is real, for that moment. It is as if you could overhear and understand what the trees are whispering to one another; as if you caught a glimpse of a face unveiled, which veils itself



Figure 13. Abelardo Morell, *Tent-Camera Image: Rapidly Moving Clouds over Field, Flatford, England #1*, 2017

from every wilful glance. The mystery is revealed, and after a breath or two, becomes just as much a mystery as before.

AM: Wonderful. Marvelous.

LW: The world at a slant. Which in turn also reminds me of a terrific late poem of Seamus Heaney's, the last poem in his book *Spirit Level* ("spirit levels" being those little bubble things that carpenters and curators use to make sure something is perfectly level), entitled "Postscript":

And some time make the time to drive out west
 Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
 In September or October, when the wind
 And the light are working off each other
 So that the ocean on one side is wild
 With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
 The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
 By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
 Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
 Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
 Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
 Useless to think you'll park and capture it
 More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
 A hurry through which known and strange things pass
 As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
 And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

With your periscope tents, though, you did in fact contrive a way to “park and capture” nature more thoroughly, “Nature at unawares,” and to catch our hearts off guard and blow them open.

AM: Hmmm. That last poem is gorgeous, and especially uncanny for me, because back in 1978 my wife and I traveled to Scotland and then to Ireland, and we found a cottage in County Clare (Fig. 14), and for three months we lived inside the very center of that poem! And we loved it, though it was rough.



Figure 14. Abelardo Morell, *Lisa in County Clare*, 1978

LW: “Roughed and ruffling.”

AM: Extraordinary.

LW: Okay, though, enough with these preliminaries. Let’s turn to *Flowers for Lisa*. When did you start making these images?

AM: Let’s see, that would have been in 2014, in February sometime, because that was her birthday. I’d been in the habit of giving her big bouquets on her birthdays, but that year I decided to try something a little different.

LW: So I guess I should begin by asking, who is this “her,” this Lisa person?

AM: Well, that would be my wife, Lisa, and we’ve been together since—really, since 1976. So it’s a long marriage. And I think she saved my life. I was a bit of a mess and her love just kind of transformed me.

LW: How so? You met where, in what context?

AM: Well, fresh out of high school in New York, I’d gotten a scholarship to go to Bowdoin College in Maine, which was Nathaniel Hawthorne’s college, too, incidentally.

LW: And about as far from Cuba as you could find.

AM: Yes, and there I discovered music. I mean, I reported to college with Lawrence Welk albums. I mean really, I liked Muzak, and not in an ironic way, either, I thought, “This is good!” [*laughs*] But within a year, I had a radio show on the campus station and I was playing John Coltrane and Stockhausen, and John Cage was my bible. It was a radical, radical change for me at Bowdoin, which is reverberating still. And I discovered photography, and thought, “Oh, shit. This is—I can talk, I can say something.” And that was very immediate.

LW: Would you say that with this visual medium, you found your voice?

AM: Yeah, yeah. I could put things together in a kind of a sentence that made visual sense, which I still couldn’t have done in words at the time. My English has gotten better in the years since. But in other ways, I was not nearly prepared to do the work. I mean, I was planning to be an engineer, but I failed a lot of classes—I failed physics and I failed math. So in 1971, I dropped out, a year short of getting my degree.

LW: A lot of people were doing that in those days.

AM: Perhaps. I suppose so. But I came back to New York, lived with my parents, and worked in a hospital. Still I kept making photographs. And by 1975, I had the idea that maybe I should go to graduate school in photography. But I needed to finish Bowdoin first, so I went back for my final

year. And there was Lisa, who was in her true senior year, and that's when we met. And we've been together since.

LW: What was she doing?

AM: She was a history person, interested in music, politics, and history, and very different. And soon after we met, she got an MFA from Columbia in filmmaking. And went on to make films about women's and children's health, after which she did research about behavior change in response to her media interventions.

LW: And you say she saved your life? How?

AM: Well, she gave me a sense of what a life together with someone else could be. With her, it felt like—another visual thing—it felt like I could see for miles. And that was really reassuring, you know? We could fight here and there, but there was a long road together.

LW: I imagine when you first started, you weren't a famous photographer—

AM: Not at all.

LW: And it wasn't at all clear that you were going to be one, and so that must have required a lot of support from her . . .

AM: Support, and belief, absolutely. But we traveled together, County Clare and so forth, and that sense of steady love, especially in the context of the whole immigrant thing, was fundamental. Because exile is inherently unstable.

LW: She was not an exile?

AM: No, she's an American, of Irish background: Lisa McElaney. But I really envied people who were just Americans, you know? Seemed to have no baggage.

LW: On the train up here just now, I was looking at a survey of your early work, and it strikes me that one picture in particular of yours marked a clear breakthrough, and it's



Figure 15. Abelardo Morell, *Lisa and Brady behind Glass*, 1986

a picture of her from 1986, seen through a frosted door, holding your first baby together, Brady (Fig. 15).

AM: Oh, absolutely. Huge breakthrough.

LW: I mean, it's interesting, if you think about it, in terms of what you're going to do later on. On the one hand, it anticipates all the ways you were going to be playing with lenses and so forth, but also there's such intimacy.

AM: Right!

LW: You'd been off to photograph the world, and turning back, you'd seen that, and suddenly you recognized your subject, or at least one of them—the intimacy of family life.

AM: And it redirected me. It felt like someone saying as E. E. Cummings did, "Where are you going?" Just like that: "Listen: there's a hell of a good universe," and not even next door.

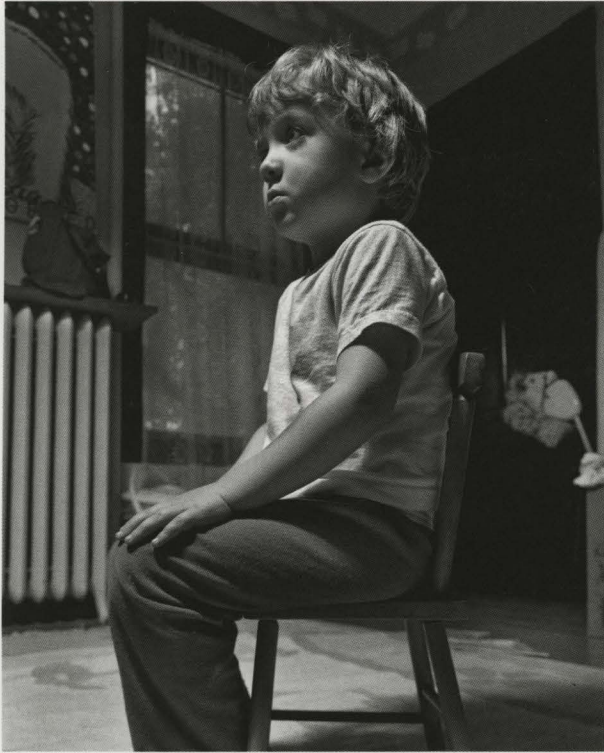


Figure 16. Abelardo Morell, *Brady Sitting*, 1989



Figure 17. Abelardo Morell, *Brady Looking at His Shadow*, 1991

LW: "Let's go!"

AM: "Let's go." I didn't know that Cummings poem ["pity this busy monster, manunkind"] then, but it was like that. Guess what? Right here is your salvation. In the meantime I'd gone to grad school at Yale University, where a lot of cool people went, and the idea of photographing babies was probably a no-no or something. So I had to work my way through some of those insecurities.

LW: And all that's tied in your mind with Lisa?

AM: Oh, very much. The idea that we could have children together, and that in some ways I could thrive with her love. And that my love for her could make me a better man.

LW: Ironically, as I think about your career, when you had children, you really hadn't found your vocation yet, so that was a tremendous leap of faith. But it was in the having of the children, and that particular child, as a subject and so forth that you really began to discover yourself as an artist (Figs. 16 and 17).

AM: You know, it took me years to really finally get it all together. My earlier street pictures were a little bit of, "Oh, those Americans, or those people that are doing things over there." Whereas with the baby, and the pictures that came after, it's no longer "They're there" but, rather, "We're here." I found a way to blend my perceptions with love and intimacy.

LW: It's interesting that you say that, because as it happens, the Nathaniel Hawthorne passage I referenced a few minutes ago, with its notion of "catching Nature at unawares," very much applies to some of your studies of your kids, Brady, for instance, and the weird thing is that the Hawthorne passage is from a section of his journal that's been excerpted in book form under the title *Twenty Days with Julian and Little Bunny by Papa*, which happens to concern three weeks that Hawthorne spent by himself in the company of his five-year-old son, Julian, while his wife and two daughters went to West Newton. Catching intimacy at unawares.



Figure 18. A bowerbird's nest

LW: But okay, one last time. *Flowers for Lisa*: Let's talk about those images themselves, and for starters, once again, that first one.

AM: As I mentioned, I had long had a tradition of giving Lisa a big bouquet of flowers for her birthday, but this time, in February 2014, I thought to myself, "Maybe I can make a picture instead: For one thing, it will last longer." But I didn't want to do my regular thing. I wanted, almost in some weird way, that it be like a display of plumage. Like a peacock. A little bit of a show-off, as if to catch her attention and gain her attraction. Sort of "Oh yeah? Look what I brought you this time. Watch *this*." And I wanted to start with a bang.

LW: Do you know about those male bowerbirds in Australia and New Guinea who as part of their mating rituals build gloriously colorful nests out of anything at hand?

AM: Oh? I don't know those . . .

LW: Well (Fig. 18) . . . Pretty great, no?

AM: That's real?

LW: Yes. You might have some competition. But keep going.

AM: Incredible. Well, I, too, wanted to make something special. And I started thinking about multiple exposures, but blended digitally somehow, testing a few ideas using Photoshop.

LW: Had you been using Photoshop much up to this point?

AM: Yes, but just in the normal ways of a conventional photographic, digital practice. You shoot a picture, and then you need to import it and work on it in Photoshop. Not like I was adding things to the image.

LW: So here you were deploying Photoshop in a new way?

AM: Yes. But in a way that I had not seen before, to my knowledge—even my assistant had no idea; he said: "What the hell is this?"

LW: Well, frankly, I have no idea, either, so describe what is going on here.

AM: So there's a vase, a table, and a pale background, and all that is immovable. That has to stay in one place. And the lighting, fairly straight on, also has to stay the same throughout. But then the first photograph consisted of, say, three or four strands of flowers leaning out of the vase. And then I would remove that bunch and insert another small bouquet, and photograph that one. In fact, in this instance, I photographed twenty separate small bouquets, all in the same vase.

LW: It might be noted at this point that in so doing you were behaving exactly like a seventeenth-century Dutch flower painter. Nowadays, when we come upon one of those bounteous canvases in the midst of our gallery walk, we're likely to imagine—in part because of the relatively recent hegemony of the photographic model—that the painter first put together an amazing bouquet and then simply painted the scene. But of course it couldn't have been like that: The flowers in question were all fast rotting. No, he or she—and many of them were she—would have painted them one flower at a time, slowly, with great consideration, building the floral array over many weeks, one bud and stem at a time.

AM: Huh. Well, in my case, once I'd photographed all twenty of my separate bunches, I then fed all twenty of the photographs into the Photoshop program. Now, when Photoshop is asked to blend such a collection of images together, it can get confused, for example, over which line is meant to flow into which.

LW: So the program itself is doing the rest of the work? This is not you doing it? You're saying, "Here are twenty pictures, Photoshop. . . ."

AM: Yeah, "... You figure it out." Though I'm giving this computer system what I want considered—there's a random quality to this, which I like—in the way that John Cage sometimes chose musical notes by rolling dice or consulting the I Ching.

LW: And Photoshop grinds away on the problem, doggedly applying all its algorithms, for, what? Two days or so? . . .

AM: Well, half an hour.

LW: And when it spews out the result, you say . . .

AM: "Good God." [*laughs*] Because you could see how the program was literally trying to integrate and harmonize what was in fact quite chaotic.

LW: Which is not that dissimilar to what the eye and the brain are doing when they look out at the world. Which takes us back to Onians in a way: in and out.

AM: Back and forth, right. Though I, too, would respond to what the program was doing, notice a gap in one place, too much in another, remove some photos from the array, add a few new vantages, run the program again. I love this dance with technology.

LW: Though also not unlike the practice of an abstract expressionist painter.

AM: In a way. But as with the abstract expressionists, the element of surprise was super important to me. Because in some ways, these flower pictures deal not with chaos, exactly, but just with the exuberance of things. Maybe it's something that I've wanted to do for a long time, maybe it's age, but a lot of these flower pictures contain my desire to—

LW: Your late style . . .

AM: Well, it is a little bit like de Kooning, I really wanted expression, and exuberance, and not just neat lines. And this is part of that desire.

LW: Though, as with the abstract expressionists, clarity, too, is of the essence, and that's what seems so striking about this first resultant effort. Because one is striving after a clear view of chaos, of bursting plenitude, not a blurry, out-of-focus one. And for all its exuberance, this image is preternaturally *in focus*.

AM: I'm glad you think so, that's what I was going for.

LW: What did Lisa think?

AM: Loved it. She was crazy for it. And there's of course a great satisfaction in having a client of sorts like that, you know?

LW: A patron . . . A matron . . .

AM: Way more than that.

LW: A muse.

AM: So I thought I was on good ground. And soon after that, I came to feel that if there's one picture like that in me, there must be others. That's an important element for me—maybe it's the modernist in me—this drive, once I get started, to explore themes across myriad variations. Wallace Stevens had "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and I was curious to see how many "Ways of Looking at Flowers" I could come up with.

LW: Which brings us to your second iteration (page 32) . . .

AM: Which was quite like the first, but I wanted to try a different palette. I started experimenting with more things drooping down, bigger petals. And whereas the first one feels more like early summer to me, this second felt a little bit more like the beginning of fall. And as you can see, different things happen depending on the kinds of flowers you use, and the different backgrounds—raw plywood in this case. But after this I started thinking, "Okay, maybe there are other ideas, other techniques."

LW: You were making most of these just right here in your studio.

AM: Right here on this table.

LW: Funny how from one series to the next you went, in effect, from the great outdoors, Big Bend National Park and the like, to the delimitations of this table—or maybe,

rather, the way you managed to turn this table into your own private national park.

AM: Indeed. And believe me, we've had it all, there's been dirt, things growing, bugs, all sorts of wildlife. There was one point, though, where it began to look like a funeral home in here, it got bad. You know, they began to smell, and things like that.

LW: After those first two, you began experimenting with different approaches, and the third and fourth variations indeed seem radically different.

AM: Well, for starters, I decided to give the multiple exposures a rest. And I've always liked the idea of impressions, especially in photography, and these are a little bit like light impressing itself onto film. The technique here is influenced by *cliché verre*, a nineteenth-century French method whereby one would draw or layer flat objects across glass, or some other such surface, and then press the resulting image onto light-sensitive paper in a darkroom. Except here I first layered a board, maybe even that very board from number 2, with a dark putty into which I then physically pressed wildflower stalks in the first instance (#3, page 33)—with, in the second (#4, page 35), a slightly lighter putty and a bit more color and volume in terms of what I pressed into it—and then photographed the result.

LW: So these are just straight photos of the result?

AM: With slightly raking light, simply from those windows. But just one straight shot. If you looked at the object, maybe it wasn't that impressive, but the photograph transformed it in a really interesting way.

I've always been super interested in printmaking, I love printmakers to death. I'm jealous of how they can do markings that look beautiful—even mistakes look great! And this is my attempt to emulate their practice. The result feels primordial, too, like cave paintings or, alternatively, a forest floor.

LW: And also darker, say, or more melancholy than the first two.



Figure 19. Severin Roesen, *Flower Still Life with Bird's Nest*, 1853



Figure 20. Abelardo Morell, *Flowers for Lisa #5*, 2014

AM: Well, yes, one wants to vary the register. I was especially interested in varying not just the imagery but the techniques as well. I was also interested in the particular challenge that this subject brought. In some circles, flowers can seem too pretty and trite.

LW: Which brings us to this next one (Fig. 20), which really looks like a Dutch seventeenth-century still life.

AM: Not surprisingly, because it is. Or anyway is based on one, or, rather, on a painting that is based on one. In this case, I decided to take my camera on a field trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where I happened upon a mid-nineteenth-century American painting by Severin Roesen (Fig. 19), which was clearly riffing off those Dutch models, and I took eight or nine shots of it, from different distances and different angles, close-ups, details, and the like, and then, coming back, fed them to Photoshop and said, "Do what you will!"

LW: Great name for the process: "What You Will." Almost sounds Shakespearean, given the time period of the original. Reminds me of a recent book by the great Shakespearean and cultural critic Harry Berger, Jr., about such Dutch floral still lifes generally, which begins by noting the way that we often rush past the rooms that contain scores of such paintings during our museum walks, whereas Berger advises us to stop and take a closer look, because, as he shows, the seemingly placid surfaces belie fairly conspicuous fields of violence, mayhem, damage, blight, resistance, mortality, and so forth: all those insects and frogs and snails and caterpillars laying siege to beauty, time itself eating away at the leaves and petals, just all kinds of drama. He calls the book *Caterpillars*.

AM: Talk about a great title. But I agree, those paintings are endlessly absorbing. And I especially love some of the things digital technology came up with in resolving this image. I mean look at some of those shadows, the height-



Figure 21. Pablo Picasso, *Marie-Thérèse accoudée*, 1939

ened tonalities. I wanted the formality of the frame and made a point of including it, but look at the way some of the stalks even seem to hover out *beyond* the frame.

LW: Again, that's Photoshop doing that, it's not you?

AM: Nope, just Photoshop. Though what I'm doing technically is a work in collaboration with it. But it struck me that I could remake all sorts of paintings, not just still lifes. I could just go to museums and say, "Hey, can I do your Picasso?" [*laughs*]

LW: Your mention of Picasso is also interesting in this context. David Hockney talks about the way that when Picasso does one of his pictures of Marie-Thérèse (Fig. 21), say, and she has two eyes on one side of her nose, and her lips are over here, and her nostrils . . . people say, "Oh my God, he's made a monster of her, the image is completely abstract and unrealistic," to which Hockney counters,



Figure 22. Gerri Davis, *When We Kiss*, 2013

"On the contrary, that's completely realistic. That's what happens when you lean in to kiss someone." Things in fact do go all weird. A painter friend of mine, Gerri Davis, in the same vein, literally made a painting called *When We Kiss* (Fig. 22), further thinking all that through . . .

AM: That's wild.

LW: But it seems to me that your Photoshopped riff on that Dutch still life partakes of a similar sort of delirium, a delicious profusion and confusion that I associate precisely with intimacy. Or maybe what it might be like to be a dog, sticking your face deep into all that splendid *stuff*, and smelling, breathing it all in, but with your eyes!

What did you do next? And by the way, how long had it been, say, between number 1 and number 5?

AM: Oh, three or four months—I mean, I was doing them in between other projects, but the deeper I got into the

flowers, the more I tended to focus on them to the exclusion of most anything else: playing with all the components of photographic practice within the confines of the theme. And not just the technical, mechanical components.

For example, with number 6 (page 38), I am obviously playing with the idea of receding one-point perspective, which is an inevitable effect with any conventional photography and has always fascinated me: those times when our expectations get violated and we end up going, "Wait? What's that? Where are we?" So in this particular case, across a flat board I have deployed the black and gray putties from earlier in order to create the illusion of such a recession, left to right, across a notional table, seen from above and to the side, and then added to the effect by including flowers atop stems ranged vertically along the table top from biggest to smallest, left to right—the idea being of course that the closer to you, the bigger otherwise identically sized objects will seem—and then I just took a simple photograph of the in fact completely flat panel from directly above.

LW: And number 7 (page 39)?

AM: Well, this is another view of a prepared panel as photographed from directly above, though in this case I am attempting to create the illusion, say, of looking into a forest by ranging variously sized stems, without flowers, as if they were tree trunks receding into the dark distance. The whole thing is pressed into black putty on board, and the forest floor gets suggested by a dusting of little flowers and shredded white petals. In this instance, I had in mind some of the stage sets of William Kentridge and Robert Wilson, for example, who I admire enormously.

LW: It also has the feel of some of Joseph Cornell's boxes, which in turn were consciously suggestive of earlier theatrical and particularly ballet sets. It feels like a winter scene: passing by woods on a snowy night.

AM: Yeah, but it's fascinating, too, how color works, the way its being whiter there at the bottom and less so higher up itself contributes to the image's sense of receding depth.

LW: Well, then you have a triptych, it looks like.

AM: I think of them as funereal scenes, sort of, the kinds of wreaths you might find at a funeral, but just flowers piled up within a frame, seen from above.

LW: And straight, simple photographs again?

AM: Actually, no. Or rather, the first of them (#8, page 40) is, but the other two (#9 and 10, pages 41 and 42) were put through Photoshop, although based on only two or three shots in each case—I was trying to dial back the effect a bit. Still, you can see strange doublings—there, for instance, and there.

LW: And in that last one (Fig. 23), once again you get the flowers tumbling out of the interior bounds of the frame. "Bursting out of all its contours," as Rilke might have put things, "like a star."

AM: Although in that case I myself put the petals there—that's not an effect of Photoshop. I was trying to doff my hat to the great trompe l'oeil painterly tradition of people like William Harnett and John Peto. As I say, in addition to everything else, I am consciously trying to engage the wider history of art with this series, and not just that of photography.

LW: But how does one photograph trompe l'oeil, especially since all of photography is in effect a sort of attempt at tricking the eye?

AM: Precisely: That was one of the things I was trying to play with here.

LW: And then the next one (Fig. 24), it's as if you've taken the funereal theme and gone all the way into death itself, sheer black, like the negative of the prior images. Is that some sort of darkroom trick, or . . . ?

AM: No, in fact I just arranged another collection of flowers in a frame and then spray-painted them black. Although I do love how little blushes of color persist here and there. Straight photograph.



Figure 23. Abelardo Morell, *Flowers for Lisa #10*, 2016

LW: Uncanny lighting, though.

AM: Raking flashlight from the side. Long exposure. I wanted to suggest a sense that notwithstanding its darkness, the thing was still kind of glowing. A feel of varnish.

LW: So on top of everything else, I suppose one could survey this entire series as a master class in lighting technique.

What about the next one (#12, page 45), which, though similarly black, feels somehow even more mysteriously evocative.

AM: Oh, I agree, maybe a little literary in its allusions. I was thinking of the English symbolist painters whom I've always loved, people like Rossetti, their maidens kind of drowning, Ophelia and the like. As I was doing this one, I was thinking that such a maiden might be lurking there behind that curtain of flowers. That's the kind of thing I can get to thinking alone there in my studio.



Figure 24. Abelardo Morell, *Flowers for Lisa #11*, 2016

LW: You're having way too much fun.

AM: I know. Lisa thought so as well, she thought some of these in here were going a bit overboard.

LW: "*What about me!?*" Reminds me of when Hockney was first doing those Polaroid collages back in the early eighties, where because of the relatively narrow depth of field of the Polaroid camera, he had to move all about the room in order to compose the various panels of any eventual grid, and how at one point he was doing a portrait of Stephen Spender seated in a chair, but he'd drifted all the way to the back of the room, twenty feet behind him, to capture a particular corner, and Spender shouted back, "David, are you still photographing *me?*"

At any rate, I can see how in the next one (Fig. 25), you dialed way back, to something more seemingly straightforward.

AM: My homage to Magritte.

LW: But then again, as with Magritte, not as straightforward as all that. Because, wait: Is that a mirror, did you spray-paint the part of the rose facing us gray and leave the other side unsprayed, and, for that matter, is it even three-dimensional, or did you just notch those pieces of plywood together up there at the top . . . ?

AM: [*laughs*] I know, see how one can explore all the variations. No, no mirror, and yes, three dimensions, in fact an open boxlike structure made out of four panels of raw plywood, two vases, two flowers—one sprayed gray, the backdrop beyond the frame stained that deep red.

LW: And the vases themselves looking conspicuously like bulbs—for that matter, like upside-down lightbulbs, which I suppose brings us full circle.

Surveying some of the ensuing images, there are all sorts of jokes and glories and allusions—I note, for example, the vase made out of flowers in number 14 (page 47), the eerie horizon line in the one after that, and is that your Jackson Pollock in number 16 (pages 50–51)? And there's that wonderful play on three-dimensionality in number 18 (pages 54–55), achieved through the simple expedient of four exactly placed green flower stalks. And then further ahead, riffs on Richter (#25, page 63) and Van Gogh (#23 and #28, pages 61 and 67) and, for that matter, you yourself in number 44 (page 83). Is that, I wonder, a bow to Picasso's bull's head in number 55 (page 97)? There's a witty hourglass in number 37 (page 76), grinding flowers to dust with the passage of time, other images playing off of the Necker cube perceptual illusion (#38, page 77) and its various cousins and, for that matter, a play on that other famous optical allusion of two facing profiles framing, naturally, come to think of it, a vase shape (#40, page 79)—and I notice from the title on that one that the profiles facing each other are none other than yours and Lisa's. Some are clearly Photoshopped, though many not—and wait, number 49 (pages 90–91) even seems to be a throwback to your outdoor tent camera obscura technique. The series in its entirety is like a deck of Rorschach cards—and sure enough, there's even a pair of Rorschach knock-offs (#59 and #60, pages 103 and 104).

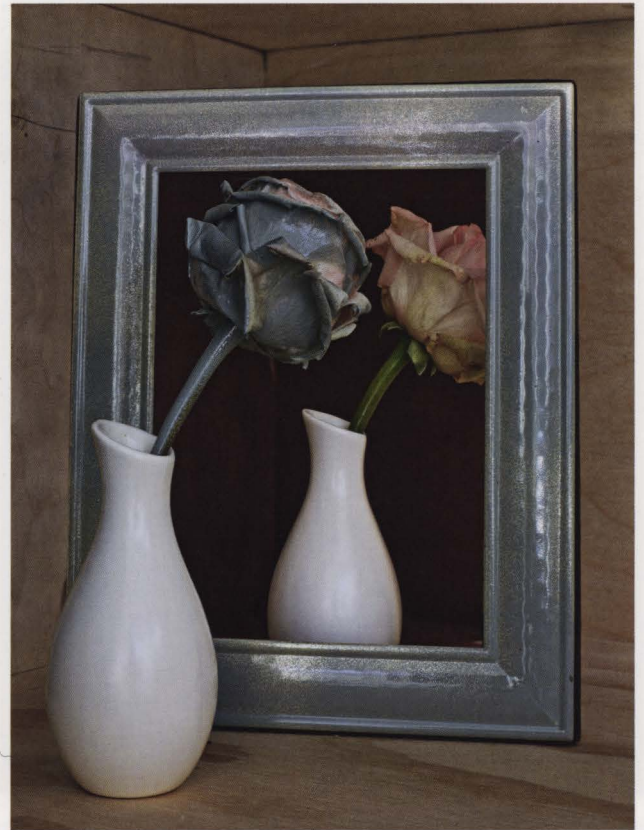


Figure 25. Abelardo Morell, *Flowers for Lisa #13: After René Magritte*, 2016

Well, it's just a whole wide world of associations, teeming away. Maybe the thing to do is to ask you to provide us with a grid at the back of the book where you could annotate thumbnails of each of the images with occasional hints of your process and intention—and, for that matter, we could ask Lisa to offer her thoughts and responses as well.

AM: Sounds good to me.

LW: In closing, though, there's a lot of commentary these days on so-called late style, and I wonder if you think of this series as something like that in your own case.

AM: Well, I hope not *too* late. I hope I still have a lot more to offer. Though I must say that in my own case, I find that aging is giving me a wider sense of freedom and boldness. I have more artistic energy now than when I started. Maybe it's an illusion to make me feel that I'll live forever.

LW: And well you might. But with late works generally, one thinks of summation and transcendence. I suppose I've been free-associating—the sense of a teeming, overbrimming world—to a marvelous late poem by the great Polish master Czeslaw Milosz, “An Honest Description of Myself with a Glass of Whiskey at an Airport, Let Us Say, in Minneapolis” in which he berates himself, old man that he is, for ogling the passing girls, but then goes on to give himself some slack, for, as he says,

I do what I have always done: compose scenes
of this earth under orders from the erotic
imagination.
It's not that I desire these creatures precisely;
I desire everything, and they are like a sign
of ecstatic union.

going on to celebrate

the proportions of human bodies, the color
of irises, a Paris street in June at dawn, all of
it incomprehensible, incomprehensible the
multitude of visible things.

And it seems to me something similar is going on here with you: a great upwelling of gratitude, as it were. Of thanksgiving.

AM: Yeah. Thanks to the world.

LW: *Gratitude* and *grace* share the same root.

AM: Well, then, that's what I have. And a feeling of plenty, of exuberance, an overflow of—my peacock turning to Lisa and saying, “I love you, and this is for you.”



Figure 26. Abelardo Morell and Lisa McLaney, 2018