

ILLUMINATING SURFACES

*I photograph what I do not wish to paint and I
paint what I cannot photograph.*

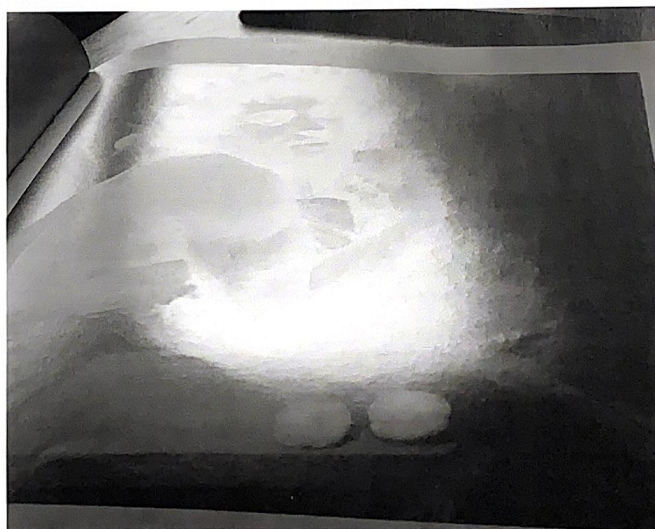
—Man Ray

The photograph's subject is unclear at first glance. A wash of light flows across the surface of the image in defiance of the viewer's possessive gaze and casts it aside, out of the picture frame. For an instant the eye flees in dissatisfaction and confusion, turned away from the photograph as a source of meaning and aesthetic gratification. The mind quickly rebounds, sending the gaze back over the picture, this time to indeterminate reward: two fruits balanced on the edge of a table, the negative impressions of a youth's smooth face and muscular arm. These shifting forms are created as light rakes the ink that has been laid over the surface of the book's page.

This artwork is a photograph of a printer's picture, made from a photographer's record of a painter's image. With the sun's assistance, Abelardo Morell has undone the photographic print of a painting by Caravaggio, the Renaissance master of light and shadow. Through a simple process of eliding images on the surface of photographic paper in his darkroom, Morell calls the viewer's attention to the fact that the photograph not only contains signs, but that it is a sign. The photograph's meaning is both subject and product of the viewer's gaze and imagination. On the surface of the photograph, Morell reveals the conflict and uncertainty inherent in knowledge created through the mediation of illumination and darkness in art. Caravaggio's passion was humanistic, even pagan, welling up from his fated life in the company of thieves, harlots, and charlatans. It was in this degraded world that he encountered the transcendent, the holiness to be found in ordinary human experience. In his paintings, Caravaggio rendered an eternal light that cut across the death in knowledge, the ephemerality of mortal flesh, and the deeper darkness of unknowing. The scenes and portraits he painted sent his ideas, his sight, his experience forward through time on the wings of this transforming light, to be caught up in the viewer's eye through the images formed across and through

the surfaces of his paintings. This is what we see when we look at his work.

Caravaggio's revelation of light as a harbinger of knowledge and the creator of images is a truth not lost on Abelardo Morell as he photographed the raised-letter text from a book of Proverbs. The drama of the photograph echoes the formal composition of much of Caravaggio's oeuvre. A searing shaft of light cuts across the surface of the page, mysteriously transforming the text's three-dimensional



letter forms into tenacious reflectors of light, dispersing them into optical oblivion as images without form, ciphers without meaning. The source of light in Morell's photographs, as in Caravaggio's paintings, consistently comes from outside the picture frame. It is

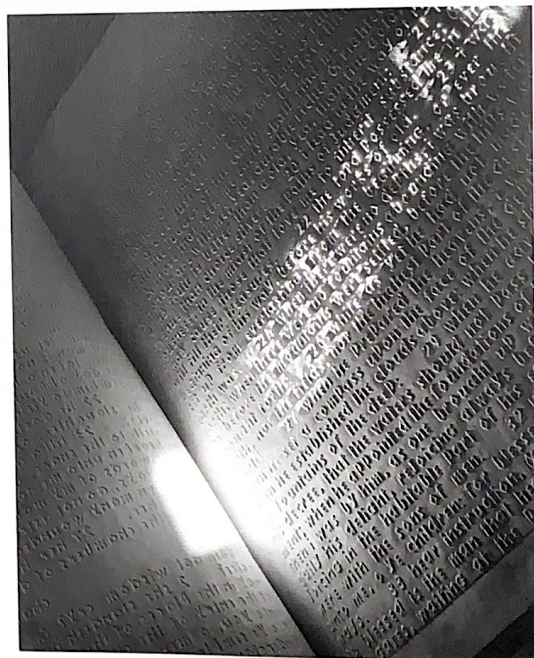
light that transcends time, and these artists insinuate that the light in the image comes from the viewer's present experience of the work. It is in this traversing of the boundaries of the frame and the picture plane that meaning and life are created in art each time a viewer brings light onto the surface of the image through the prism of the eye. Morell's fascination with letters is rooted in the function of alphabets as the most apt metaphor for art as both an image and a form of meaning. Language literally constructs images in the mind in the same way the eye constructs vision, building them form by form, developing and framing how objects are seen and given meaning. The photographer is a visual linguist translating the images of the world into form as well as meaning.

Morell was drawn to photography as a medium that has the power to reveal the unseen. His early work was documentary, and as a young graduate of Yale University's M.F.A. program, Morell snapped images of the abundant beauty and hardship that the world yields to the human eye and the camera lens. Believing Robert Frank's tenet that "the truth is somewhere between the documentary and the fictional," Morell looked for and found the surreal in the ordinary, cataloging his awareness of our image-choked world, spilling over with unrecorded truths.

With the start of his family, Morell's camera was turned toward the most familiar world of his house, family, and neighborhood. Not only did his camera function as Roland Barthes has described this tool, "as a clock for seeing," but it enabled Morell to possess the images of his world in the way of a child—awed, curious, yet unfazed by the objects and the images that are the common fruit of a nurturing yet sheltered domestic experience. The work from this time transformed Morell's relationship to the world in which he had previously been a mere observer. The voyeur became the unseen protagonist of each of these photographs, whose presence enters each room, construction, and portrait as a muse, intent on creating as well as on experiencing the wonder of the camera's ability at observation.

In *Brady Looking at His Shadow*, Morell photographed his young son in a posed portrait. The boy's shadow is the focal point of the image, as it records a heroic posture, the boy's arms arched away from his torso as if to present a young superhero. Additional shadows ripple and fade behind this primary form. These echoes of an

image belie the innocence implied in the photographing of a child. They reveal the photograph as the posed image of a child as everyman, constructed by a knowing adult. As the viewer looks more closely, he or she observes the boy's fatigued, nonheroic posture. Tired of the photographic session that may have begun as a spontaneous game, Brady grabs the sides of his trousers for support in holding the pose. His shadow is an image formed by light, as is the



profile view of the boy recorded in the photograph. The presentation of both images side by side simultaneously confirms the camera's inability to decipher meaning and its usefulness at recording likeness. Like a shadow, the photograph is a true image, but it is only

one image out of many that live between seeing and comprehension. Through his determination of the view recorded in each of his photographs, Morell shares with the viewer what is important to see and confirms that its significance was hidden until the camera brought it into focus. It is up to the viewer to decipher how the truth in the image will teach him or her its meaning.

Morell's questioning of the meaning in images led him to the conflation of textual and pictorial content that occurs in illustrated



books. His interest in this convergence of image and form flourished during an artist's residency he held at the Boston Athenaeum in 1995. His photographic practice shifted from recording the

Brady Looking at His Shadow, 1990

images to be revealed in people and places to photographing the images found in the Athenaeum's extraordinary collection of illustrated books. Morell became fascinated with the oddity and artificiality in the construction of book illustrations. As reproductions, book illustrations provided Morell with a ready-made resource for exploring the physicality of ink on paper, the photographer's palette, and the meaning to be revealed in these images used as objects and reinterpreted as images.

Morell's embrace of book illustrations as the subject of his photographs also allowed him the opportunity to exorcise the common misperception of photography as mere surface imagery. Recreating the visual tactility of two-dimensional surfaces through these works, Morell reminds the viewer of the nuanced comprehension of physicality that comes through the eye, without which our fingers would be confounded by such subtleties as the difference between wet and dry color or between soft and impervious form. Book: *Portraits by Da Vinci and School of Da Vinci*, 1993, exemplifies Morell's fascination with the camera's ability to transcend the boundaries of physics and time as it records two illustrations overlaid on each other in the turning of a page. In this photograph, which weds two portraits of Cecilia Gallerani, *Lady with an Ermine* and the so-called *Belle Ferronnière*, Morell reflects upon the standards of authenticity and connoisseurship by which the history of images have been edited. The photographer's fingers pool mysteriously in the surface of these images as if they were a pan of darkroom chemicals out of which another meaning is yet to emerge. Morell's nod to the transformative moment in the darkroom before the image appears on the photographic paper surface recognizes the element of chance inherent in the creative process and the making of meaning. It is in the darkroom that the photographer confronts the camera in his hand as independent from the image maker or interpreter in his mind. This camera has its own lens, one that consistently engages the photographer in a process of seeing that is outside of his head and closer to his physical experience of the world.

Morell's hand soaks simultaneously in the photograph's records of art and creativity. His fingertips touch the arm of the concurrently young and old sitter, who may have been well-known in her life but whose portraits have made her famous through time. Her confident gaze recognizes the makers of her portraits, both Da Vinci

and Morell, and reveals her self-consciousness. Through reproduction, she is also able to gaze out of a book and into whatever room and toward any viewer into whose hands the book has fallen. Cecilia Gallerani's mysterious gaze is transformed from quixotic history into clever commentary on an image's desire to transcend physical and temporal boundaries to achieve significance outside the book in the viewer's frame of reference, as in Morell's photograph of a book containing a reproduction of the Italian painter Raphael's portrait of Count Tommaso Inghirami, chief librarian to the Vatican under Pope Julius II.

This exhibition of photographs at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is a record of Abelardo Morell's scrutiny of a collection of art that is a physical place built of multiple images (paintings, sculpture, landscape, tapestries, and tableaux of objects) as much as it was built of stone and mortar. His photographs help the viewer take imaginary possession of a space in which they are cultural tourists traversing an unfamiliar and exotic terrain. Morell mediates the impressive and somewhat daunting sensual overload of images at the Museum, enriched through texture, scent, and aural reality, by bringing the experience down to image size. His choices of subject matter tell us where his professional eye has made editorial contact with the tactile experience of the collection. Morell's camera negotiates the torpor of the Museum as an unchanging context. Its lens refracts and transforms the images of the collection into fresh, visual experience enabled to pass through time and space, from the Dutch gallery into the contemporary exhibition space, from Isabella Gardner's unchanging contextualization of objects in the Museum into the world. It is through the mediation of the camera that Morell is able to measure out a portion of the Museum that is comprehensible so that he can savor his own experience of this place. The subjects that inhabit his photographs reveal that his standard for viewing this historical collection is not formed by traditional museum cataloging methods but is determined by the eye of an experienced photographer looking for meaning across the surface of objects in time.

Abelardo Morell's encounter with the meanings to be discovered in the images at the Gardner Museum occurred in direct response to the life he observed in the Museum through its staff. He was compelled by the notion that these individuals experienced this extraordinary collection of art on a daily basis while fulfilling rou-



tine responsibilities and that these quiet encounters imbued the art with its most consistent life, meaning, and relevance. *Tim and Rembrandt*, Gardner Museum, 1998, clearly conveys Morell's faith in the twentieth-century significance of Rembrandt van Rijn's *Self-Portrait*. The correlation between the two portraits, one of a man, the other of an image of a man, is striking. The sitters are literally grounded within the context of their shared space of the Gardner Museum, as Morell separately exposes two halves of one negative to form one black-and-white image. Thomas (Tim) Allen's pose echoes that of Rembrandt in his *Self-Portrait*, as each sitter has donned a hat, a signal of style and self-confidence. By stylizing the images, Morell creates an equivalence in the photograph's content and its physical

Book: Portrait by Da Vinci and School of Da Vinci, 1993

his station as a well-regarded physician in the sixteenth century—is somber but clearly conveys the responsibilities of her office. Morell has carefully posed his subject and reproduced the directness of her gaze. Her image is close to the surface of the photograph, leaving no space in which the viewer can mediate the intensity of her stare. In this encounter is no room for the casual regard of the distant consumer of aesthetic images. Unlike the profile of Dr. Butts, Joan appears to dare the viewer to see her without her permission. This photograph begs the question of image as a privately possessed and guarded object, as precious as a masterpiece. Commenting on this issue when he was asked to consider the reproduction of a photograph of himself on the cover of a pamphlet, Roland Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida* (1981), “The ‘private life’ is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect.” Morell’s photograph reveals the unprotected identity of images throughout time, their meaning subject to the projection and consumption of willful, wishful viewers. In *Joan and Sir William Butts, M.D.*, Morell has empowered Joan Hallaren to retain the value of her identity in present time and for the future. The viewer is clearly relegated to a knowledge of likeness, not individuality.

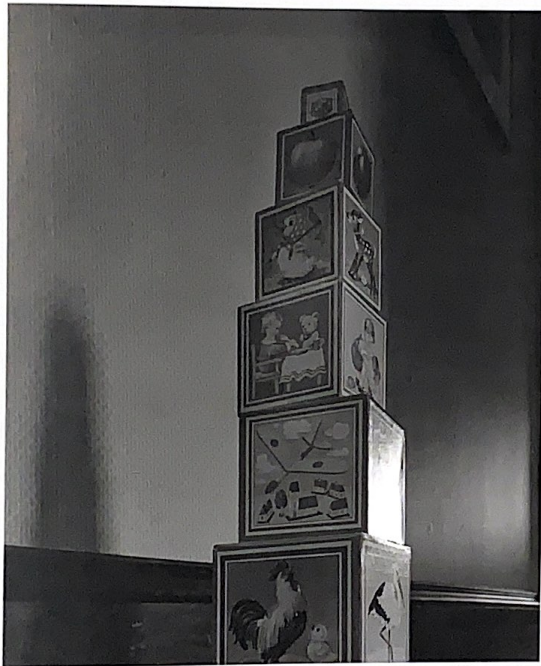
Morell’s portraits not only are representations of a subject but also can serve as poignant homages. *Two Gardens, Gardner Museum, 1998*, is the photographer’s poetic tribute to the nobility inherent in work. Pairing a garden tapestry from the Gardner Museum’s Little Salon with a gardener watering in the Museum’s courtyard, Morell’s image brings together the beauty wrought out of painstaking labor in the creation of the tapestry and the gardener’s meticulous care in the nurturing of the Museum’s horticulture. The extraordinary three-dimensional construction of plants in the weave of the tapestry image is well met in the rich foliage presented in the courtyard. The architectural and horticultural symmetries captured in this composite image reinforce the cohesion of the images’ extreme spatial and temporal disparities. Through this photograph, Morell and the viewer share an understanding of the deep-rooted continuum in human experience, despite revolutions in cultural, political, intellectual, and religious value systems through history.

This first photographic project of the artist’s residency in which he brought art and observer face to face in one image led

Morell to additional pairings of images in the collection through which he addressed the life of artwork in the Gardner collection. It was Morell’s appreciation of the mobility of books and their ability to bring images into private physical and mental spaces that motivated him to create new and unstructured views of permanently sited paintings. *Two Paintings Sharing an Archway, Gardner Museum, 1998*, is a photograph of two works that hang opposite each other in the Raphael Room of the Museum—Sandro Botticelli’s *Tragedy of Lucretia* (on the east wall) and *The Annunciation*, attributed to Piermatteo d’Amelia (on the west wall). Under the archway depicted in each of these paintings lies the point of infinite perspective, the aesthetic chalice of spiritual perfection in painting in sixteenth-century Italy. While seemingly frozen in time and place, these depictions of spiritual excellence and purity (Lucretia and Mary, the chaste and devout brides of both man and God) are not free from time’s unflagging demands on form and meaning, as the paintings are made of ephemeral matter destined to crumble and fade. Unlike the stoic, unmovable virtue represented in each of these artworks (affirmed in their installation across from each other to create a central position in which the viewer stands in the locus of perfection, enabled to “see” infinitely), Morell’s photograph reminds us that their material reality, like that of the viewer, is limited and entropic. The photograph’s prioritization of perception over intellectual understanding restores true value to these works, supplanting their appreciation as tokens of creative genius or imperishable wealth. The seam in the photograph represents the place in the viewer’s mind where the two images are conjoined in the gallery, an optic impossibility and a fleeting imaginative feat. The experience is ephemeral and subjective, but authentic and profound, unweakened by the acknowledgment of its value as a truth achieved through inspiration. Morell reinstates the religious mystery and political fervor that these artworks possessed in the time of their creation by recreating in the modern viewer the faith through which they were originally seen. He does this in his seamless joining of disparate realities beyond reason on the field of his own imagination on the surface of the photograph.

Morell explores similar issues concerning the life and death of images and meaning in art in a more disconcerting form in *Exquisite Corpse, Gardner Museum, 1998*. Experimenting with his observation that

relationships in art are not necessarily ones of outward form but can be founded on inner sympathies of meaning, Morell dismembered and then reconstructed objects and images in the collection. He did this in order to create a body that would transcend the archetypal depictions of the human male form that have developed over many centuries and in various mediums. A sixteenth-century procurator's portrait, a classical carved marble torso, and the painted



legs of an Eveless Adam are collaged together in emulation of the surrealist parlor game *Cadavre Exquis*. In this game, a different artist would each draw the head, torso, and legs of a figure on a single piece of paper without seeing to what they would be joined, each

Toy Blocks, 1987

section of the page folded to hide the efforts of each successive artist. The fantastic images that resulted from these sessions became exposés of the wild, imaginative culture of the artists' subconscious minds. Morell's masculine ideal is an aesthetic monstrosity, a pastiche of dislocated images that dramatizes the secondhand nature of the experience offered a viewer by pictures of objects.

In direct contrast to the complex meanings that resonate in *Exquisite Corpse*, Morell's *Detail, Gardner Museum, 1998*, reveals the camera's ability to turn any subject into a work of art. Photography has the same perspective and framing as painting, a paternity that reinforces the medium's self-definition as the offspring of a long line of methods of pictorial representation. Continuing his early interest in directly recording objects (as in *Toy Blocks, 1987*), in *Detail* Morell conveys his celebration of the ordinary when it is carefully observed, as an ideal of beauty and expressive form.

As the writer and philosopher Susan Sontag has stated, photography is in essence a practice of voyeurism, and "like sexual voyeurism, (taking photographs) is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening" (*On Photography, 1973*). This is Abelardo Morell's primary motive in his photographic record of his experience of the regular exchange of meanings that occurs between images at the Gardner Museum. Morell's photography affirms and facilitates Isabella Stewart Gardner's well-conceived, original aims in the creation of her Museum. Morell honors her idea and ideals in his photograph *Isabella in the Little Salon, Gardner Museum, 1998*, through which he reintroduces Isabella Stewart Gardner into her own collection as it exists at the end of the twentieth century. Morell transposes Anders Zorn's portrait of Isabella Stewart Gardner into the Little Salon, light streaming into the room on each side of her, enlivening her spectral appearance. In this photograph, Morell defers to Isabella Gardner's creative powers, honoring not only her ability to create powerful aesthetic images through the installation of her collection but also her artfulness in directing and orchestrating the resonance of her own image through time. This exemplifies the unique appointment of photography to join the ephemeral passions of humanity with the objects of their passions, the essences of photography and life that art critic and writer John Berger identified as "and our faces, my heart, brief as photos."

Perhaps this is why during most of her life Isabella Stewart Gardner chose to shield her face from the limiting definition of turn-of-the-century portrait photography. Not only was portrait painting more forgiving, but Gardner had already utilized the ability of painting to function as creative fiction in her own collection and was confident of its allure. Would we have preferred an Abelardo Morell photograph of Isabella Stewart Gardner to John Singer Sargent's portraits? Aesthetic appreciation might not permit one's fancy to stray so far from reality as to consider such a proposal, but perhaps the paintings of Isabella Gardner do not give the viewer enough of her. It is not an image that is desired of the photograph but a nail from a True Cross, a vestige of the founding sensibility and editorial eye that created the original play of meanings on which Isabella Gardner founded her Museum. As Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, has aptly identified,

... a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)—a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be. Between two fantasy alternatives, that Holbein the Younger had lived long enough to have painted Shakespeare or that a prototype of the camera had been invented early enough to have photographed him, most Bardolators would choose the photograph. This is not just because it would presumably show what Shakespeare really looked like, for even if the hypothetical photograph were faded, barely legible, a brownish shadow, we would probably still prefer it to another glorious Holbein. Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross.

Isabella Stewart Gardner understood the limits of photography at the turn of the century. Few photographs of her exist in which her face was not artfully shielded by the netting of a hat or the distortions of distance. Paintings made more room for meaning, not by the nature of the medium but by the nature of the viewer's expectations of the image. Photography used to be limited by the power of its supposed veracity. A photograph was a document. Today photography is granted to offer the same threshold for meaning that painting offered its viewers at the turn of the century. Both are perceived as creative abstractions, which offer themselves as both subject and object of the viewer's gaze, as latent experience. For all postmodern artists like Abelardo Morell, the meaning of images is always contingent on their context, but that context need not be limited by space and time. Photography enables Abelardo Morell to create pictures that traverse space and collapse centuries. These photographs will go out from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. They will take with them Cecilia Gallerani, Tim Allen, Dr. Butts, and Isabella herself, images formed of light and ink which dance in between the darkness in knowledge and the illumination of perception. Meanings pool across the surface of these photographs, and their art will alight in the eye of anyone who dares to take a second look.

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