GETTY EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE FANTASTIC VISUAL WORLD
OF PHOTOGRAPHER ABELARDO MORELL

Exhibition Features Morell’s Best Visual Experimentations

Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door

October 1, 2013–January 5, 2014
At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center

LOS ANGELES—Over the past 25 years, Abelardo Morell (American, born Cuba, 1948) has become internationally renowned for photographs that push the boundaries of the medium while exploring visual surprise and wonder. Throughout his career, he has looked at things with a fresh vision and investigated simple optics in myriad forms. Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door, on view October 1, 2013–January 5, 2014 at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center, traces the artist’s innovative work as he has continued to mine the essential strangeness and complexity of photography. The exhibition was organized by The Art Institute of Chicago, in association with the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

“Abelardo Morell is one of this country’s great contemporary photographers whose very distinctive achievement is celebrated in this first major survey of his work,” explains Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. “The exhibition also celebrates the growth of the holdings of Morell at three major museums, which have recently been augmented through the generosity of Dan Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser, who have promised significant groups of works by the artist to each institution’s permanent collection.”

Morell came to the United States as a teenager. He attended Bowdoin College in Maine, and later completed an MFA in photography at Yale University. In 1986 he began creating large-format pictures around his home, examining common household objects with childlike curiosity. As a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, he experimented with optics in his teaching and initiated a series of images in which he turned entire rooms into camera obscuras, capturing the outside world as projected onto interior surfaces. These visual experiments and endless exploration of the medium are at the heart of the work on view in the exhibition.

From a Child’s Perspective

The earliest photographs in the exhibition date from the mid-1980s, when the birth of his son, Brady, led Morell to a radical shift in his work. Looking inward at his own family life, Morell found novel subject matter in domestic interiors. He set aside his hand-held camera in favor of a large-format view camera that necessitated a more deliberate style and elicited a wealth of tactile detail from his subjects. Of this shift, Morell writes: “I started making photographs as if I were a child myself. This strategy got me to look at things around me more closely, more slowly, and from vantage points I hadn’t considered before.” This technique can be seen in Refrigerator (negative, 1987; print, 2012), where Morell portrays a common refrigerator as a giant monolith with Toy Blocks, 1987. Abelardo Morell (American, born Cuba, 1948). Inkjet print. Lent by the artist, courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York. © Abelardo Morell, courtesy of Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.
jumbled letters on it, evoking the preverbal vision of a child. This concept recurs in Toy Blocks (negative, 1987; print, 2012), where toy blocks photographed from a steep perspective on the floor are made to seem like a mysterious Tower of Babel, as they might to a small child.

**Camera Obscursa Experiments**

The basis for all photography, the principle of the camera obscura (Latin for “dark chamber”) has been known since antiquity. In 1991, Morell began transforming entire rooms into cameras by covering the windows and inserting a small hole. He used a second camera to photograph the superimposition of the outside world as projected onto various interiors. Morell started by making black-and-white pictures in his own home before traveling in search of other compelling subjects for his uncanny, disorienting images. Morell made a pilgrimage to photograph Lacock Abbey, the country house of William Henry Fox Talbot (British, 1800–1877), one of the inventors of photography. Talbot’s era was an ideal model for the camera obscura work, as the general interest in a variety of intersecting subject matter at that time mirrored Morell’s own interest in uniting science, art, philosophy, and religion.

In 2005, Morell turned to creating camera obscura works in color, eventually incorporating technical refinements that made his photographs less raw and immediate and more explicitly constructed. In View of the Brooklyn Bridge in the Bedroom (2009), bold red sheets serve as a reminder of the bed as a site of intimacy, contrasting with the public space of the Brooklyn Bridge. This strange juxtaposition also evokes a dreamlike state, as the outdoor image floats just above the bed.

**Tent Camera Images**

In 2010, following the example of 19th century photographers such as Carleton Watkins (American, 1829–1916) and William Henry Jackson (American, 1843–1942), Morell set out to capture the grandeur of the American wilderness. At Big Bend National Park in Texas, he began experimenting with a portable tent camera featuring a periscope lens on top, which
projected the scene outside onto the ground. Morell found it appealing that what was overlooked because it was underfoot—something so common and shared—formed the backdrop for these images. In *Tent Camera Image on Ground: El Capitan from Cathedral Beach, Yosemite National Park, California* (2012), Morell followed Carleton Watkins’s path into Yosemite, where he used the tent camera to create a landscape that is no longer fresh and pristine, but set against such modern visual disruptions as bike tracks in the dirt.

**Additional Experiments**

Also on view in the exhibition are additional visual experiments employed by Morell, including a simulation of Eadweard Muybridge’s early use of stop-motion using a water pitcher and wine glass, as well as optical curiosities like dappled sunlight under trees, which Morell said results from hundreds of “tiny cameras” that form in the minute spaces between leaves.


“Morell is driven by his unflagging intellectual curiosity and his love of the medium of photography,” said Paul Martineau, associate curator of photographs and curator of the exhibition at the Getty Museum. “His work is grounded in the past, but it also contains an unexpected twist that causes us to reexamine what we think we know. I am delighted to be able to share this unique collection of photographs with our visitors.”
Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door is on view October 1, 2013–January 5, 2014 at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center. The exhibition was on view at the the Art Institute of Chicago from June 1–September 2, 2013, and will be on view at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta from February 22–May 18, 2014. The exhibition is curated by Paul Martineau, associate curator in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Elizabeth Siegel, associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, and Brett Abbott, curator of photography at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, where it travels after the Getty. Funding for the exhibition catalogue was provided by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Generous in-kind support for the exhibition was provided by Tru Vue Inc. and Gemini Moulding Inc.

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