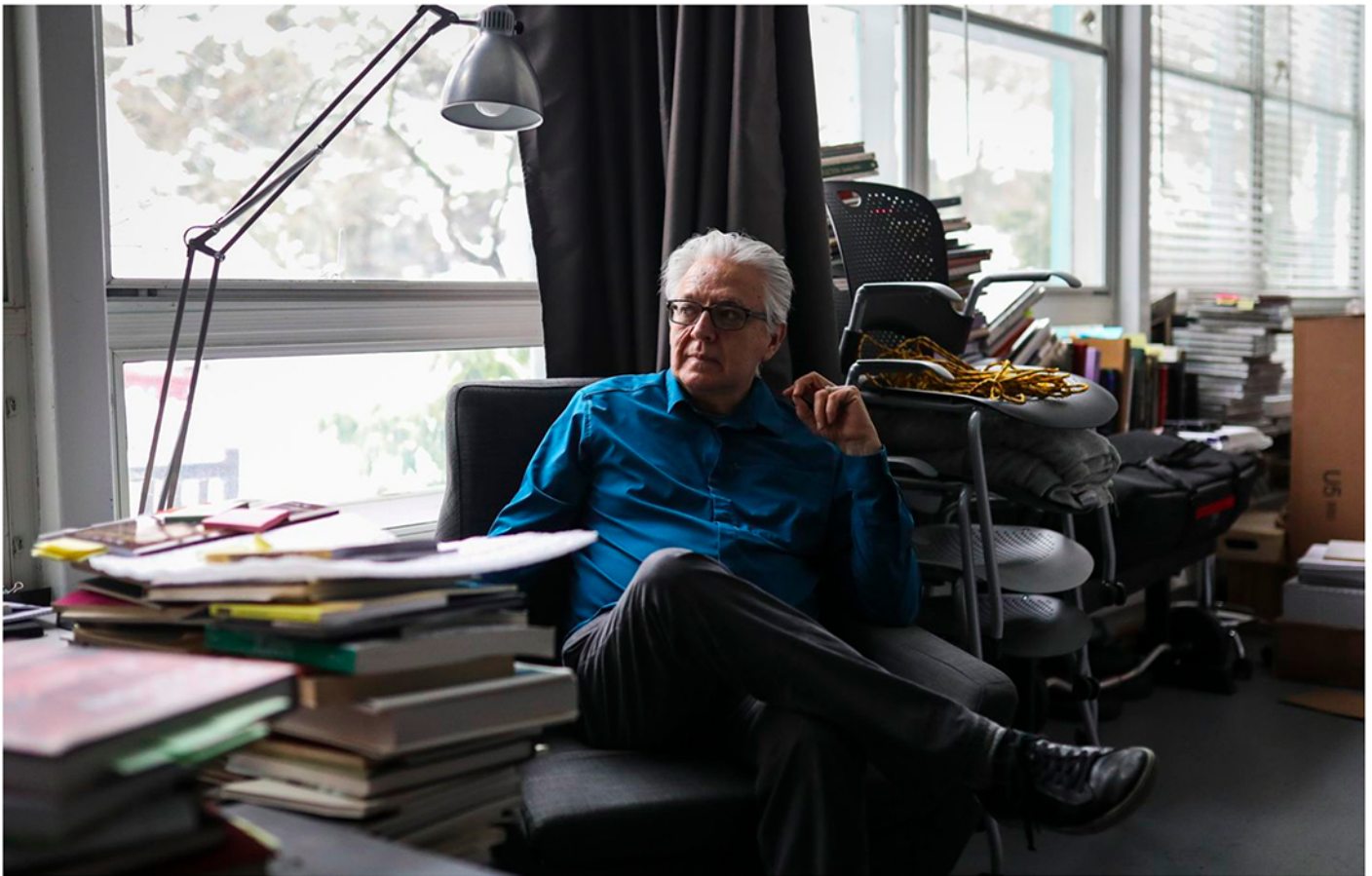


PHOTOGRAPHY

Abelardo Morell keeps sharing 'tricks the camera can do'

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated February 17, 2021, 9:00 a.m.



Abelardo Morell sat for a portrait at his photo studio in Newton. The photographer's new "Vessels" series has a lot in common with his well-known camera obscura works. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Abelardo Morell has spent a lot of time inside cameras. Literally. Often with several other people.

Thirty years ago, the photographer, now 72, was the first artist to shoot the inside of a

KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

10 NEWBURY STREET BOSTON MASSACHUSETTS 02116 +1 617 262 4490 INFO@KRAKOWWITKINGALLERY.COM WWW.KRAKOWWITKINGALLERY.COM

camera obscura. The work made a name for him, and in the years since, he has built an international reputation on a broad body of work.

Anyone can make a camera obscura. Mask all the light from a room except for a tiny hole in one window shade. Morell did this regularly in classrooms at Massachusetts College of Art, where he taught from 1983 to 2011. An upside-down image of whatever was across Brookline Avenue would stream in and project on the opposite wall.

“The surprise was how almost religious the room became,” Morell said in a Zoom conversation from his home in Newton. The exercise in how a camera works led to his own photographs of the insides of camera obscuras — a pillar of his career that includes experimenting with optics, playing with ideas of painting, and engaging with art history.

Recent images from his “Vessels” series, now in an online exhibition at Krakow Witkin Gallery, nod to Giorgio Morandi’s muted still lifes and the geometry and punchy colors of Sol LeWitt. Morell shoots multiple exposures of arrangements of cubes, spheres and cylinders, or glassware, or porcelain crockery. Solids turn ghostly and imprecise. Tones overlap. Everything seems to jiggle and be on the verge of mutating, except the tabletop the arrangements rest on.



"Pyramid" by Abelardo Morell. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

Karen E. Haas, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, where Morell has had a steady presence as a teacher and an exhibiting artist, sees a through line from his camera obscura pictures — which he still makes — to these latest images.

“The idea of a vessel is about what’s contained within it — nothing we can see or feel,” she said. “It’s like what happens inside the camera.”

Morell himself is like a camera; you don’t quite know what’s going on inside that produces the magic that comes out. He has a restless imagination, and he says, a bit ironically, that his perennial inventiveness springs from desperation.

The artist was born to a poor family in Cuba in 1948. In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution, his father was arrested more than once for what Morell calls “invented crimes,” so his family fled to Miami when he was 13. They ultimately landed in New York.

“Refugees have a sense of wanting to do well,” he said. “To prove even to those naysayers that I’m actually pretty good.”



Abelardo Morell's "Motorcycle, Girl and Calendar," from 1969. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

To that end, he matriculated at Bowdoin, and fell in love with photography in a class taught by photographer John McKee. His English then was still not entirely fluent.

“It was as if I had finally found my language, my way of being, my way of speaking,” Morell said.

The first week of class, he photographed a girl bathed in white light standing beside a motorcycle. A calendar hangs over her shoulder.

“I loved that in some ways that picture could have been ... a new way of putting three or four things together,” Morell said.

Putting unlikely things together is the essence of the artist’s work. Like Central Park hanging upside down over a wall socket. Or paint in a photograph.

“I think most photographers, if you torture them, will declare that they want to be

painters,” Morell said. “And I’m one of them.”

A few years back, instead of giving flowers to his wife, Lisa McElaney, for her birthday, Morell opted to give her something that would last. He made 76 photographs, often adding paint, sometimes just the painterliness of smudges, scratches, and layers of texture. In “Flowers for Lisa #1,” the flowers and vase look glassy as a watercolor, with blossoms and stems that replicate through multiple exposures.

“You think, flowers are banal and cliché and everything has been done with flowers,” Morell said. “And of course, that’s not true if you approach it with some ingenuity.”



"Flowers for Lisa" by Abelardo Morell. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

“The thing with Abe,” said Haas, “is that there’s something of the magician in him. He’s fascinated with sharing magic tricks, tricks the camera can do. And he’s willing to take you behind the screen and show you how it’s done.”

Or inside the camera. With camera obscuras — including landscapes made within a tent Morell rigged with a periscope, projecting the outdoors onto the ground — he brings together outside and inside, upside up and upside down. He makes the old new.

“It’s important to me that I have a sense of newness to what I do, just because it’s a way to say life is interesting,” Morell said. “And that’s, I think, a requirement to stay alive.”

ABELARDO MORELL: VESSELS

At Krakow Witkin Gallery, online exhibition through March 17,

www.krakowwitkingallery.com

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmcq](https://twitter.com/cmcq).