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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Van Gogh through a pinhole

Inspired by the great masters, acclaimed photographer Abelardo Morell has revolutionized the ancient camera obscura

By Sebastian Smee
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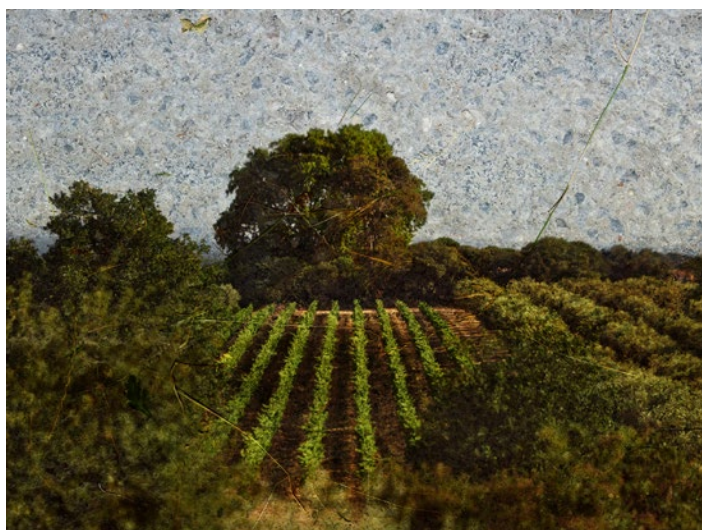
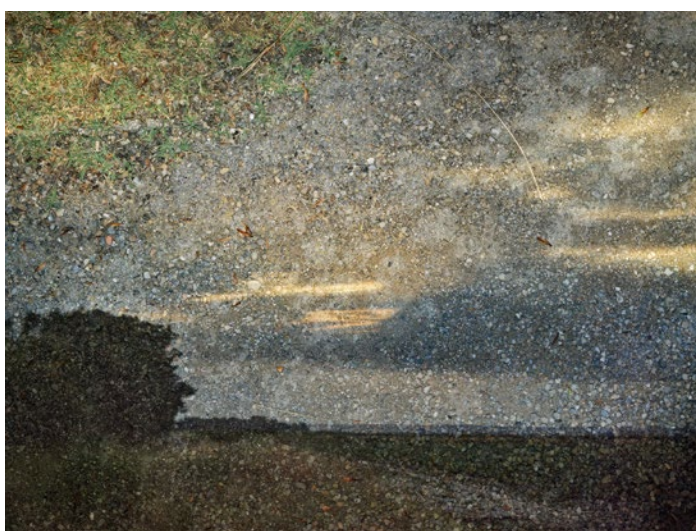




ARLES, France — Abelardo Morell was on a country road outside Arles, in the South of France. Cicadas were buzzing with almost hallucinatory intensity. It was 10 a.m., a hot day at the start of July. Scattered across a field, half a dozen cypress trees stood like shaggy sentinels. Down the road, a field of heavy-headed sunflowers dazzled yellow under a blue sky.

Morell had come to Arles to take photographs in the places Vincent van Gogh painted 130 years ago. But, even as he stood amid the painter's beloved Provençal landscape, he seemed undaunted.

Taking on Van Gogh requires chutzpah. The Dutchman's life has been so thoroughly co-opted by mass culture (in the form of saccharine pop songs, Hollywood movies and, most recently, several virtual reality exhibits that try to bring his paintings to life) that any serious artist who so much as nods at Van Gogh is flirting dangerously with kitsch.

None of this has deterred Morell, an acclaimed photographer in his 70s. "The fact that most people said it's a cliche encouraged me," he told me that day in France. "I like challenges like that."

Morell was born in Cuba and came to the United States as a teenager. Over several decades, he has established himself as a top photographer, regularly appearing in exhibitions and museum collections across the country.

A portrait of contemporary artist Abelardo Morell with a tent-camera, a device he created to merge landscapes with the texture and composition of the ground where he places his camera and tripod. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)

He is an experimentalist with a keen and often witty sense not only of the history of photography, but also of the history of art.

Morell's method, which is continually evolving, cannily combines ancient insights about optics with the most advanced photographic equipment. He has found a way to superimpose poetic or spectacular views on mundane, nondescript surfaces (dirt roads, muddy fields, dry grass), encouraging us to see the very ground we walk on with fresh eyes. His works combine intentional decisions with chance effects. Best of all, they reanimate a dialogue between photography and painting that seemed to have peaked in the 19th century.

This year, Morell wanted to use Van Gogh as a kind of medium in his process. He had no idea what would come out of it.

When the 34-year-old Van Gogh moved to Arles from Paris in early 1888 hoping to establish a community of artists, he walked around the town's environs carrying everything he needed to paint outdoors on his back: a folding easel, canvas, brushes and tubes of paint. He was very much alone.

Abelardo Morell came to Arles, France, to take photographs in the places Vincent van Gogh painted 130 years ago. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)

Morell, by contrast, had come to Arles from Boston, via Lisbon and Marseille, accompanied by his wife, Lisa McElaney, his assistant, Max Labelle, his friend John Spritz, and their two partners. The six established themselves in an Airbnb across the Rhone River from the old town, with its Roman coliseum and narrow streets. When Morell went out with Labelle and Spritz to take photographs, they loaded a rental car with a tripod topped by a device like a periscope, a digital camera, a laptop computer and a large piece of black fabric.

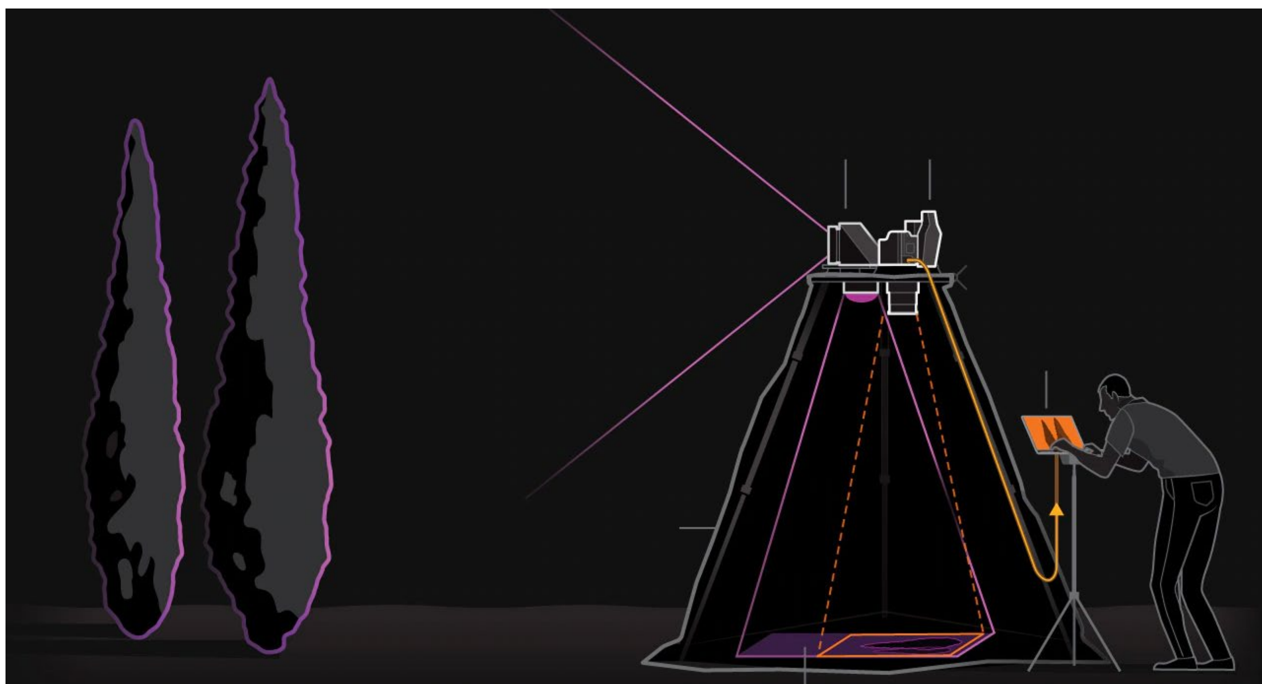
Abelardo Morell, left, and his assistant, Max Labelle, set up the tripod of his tent-camera for a project on the outskirts of Arles, France. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)

The black fabric was important. Morell needed it to negate as much light as possible because he makes photographs using a "camera obscura" — literally, a dark room.

The earliest written account of a camera obscura was provided by the Chinese philosopher Mo-tzu in about 400 B.C. Mo-tzu described how light from an illuminated object that passed through a pinhole into a dark room projected an inverted image of that object inside the room. Today, one of the first things many photography students are taught is how to blackout a room to create a camera obscura — or (same principle) a pinhole camera. And that's how Morell, who started out as a street photographer in New York, began working this way.

Ancient technique adapted to modern technology

For his daytime shoots, Morell creates a portable camera obscura with a tripod, a dark cloth and a lens.



The lens projects the outside sunlit landscape onto the textured ground inside the darkened tent.
The digital camera, triggered from the computer, takes a picture of the textured surface blended with the landscape projection.
MANUEL CANALES / THE WASHINGTON POST

In the early 1990s, wanting to demonstrate photography's fundamentals to a class he was teaching, Morell placed a cardboard box that once held bottles of sweet vermouth on its side on a table. He punctured a hole in one side and inserted a lens. He set up a bare electric bulb on a stand beside the box, and when he switched it on, the bulb was projected by the lens onto the inside wall of the carton. Morell then photographed the setup, showing both the real bulb (almost whited out and spectral because of the long exposure time) and its projection inside the box (comparatively real-looking, its glowing filament clearly visible).

Intrigued by this uncanny inversion of tangible reality and photographic projection, Morell went on to make dozens of photographs of rooms he'd converted into camera obscuras. He photographed the view across the street from his former home in Brookline, Mass., projected onto his son's toy-strewn bedroom. He showed the visual chaos of Times Square projected onto the walls and bed of a hotel room. He made similar works from rooms in Paris, London, Florence and St. Louis.

"Brookline in Brady's Room," 1992.

"Times Square in Hotel Room," 1997.

Then, around 2008, Morell realized he didn't need a solid, preexisting room to create a camera obscura. He could use a tent lined with dark fabric ("the blacker it is in there, the more vivid the image becomes," he explained), using a periscope and lens to project the surrounding landscape onto the ground beneath. The "tent-camera," as Morell called it, meant that he could take his technique on the road. And with that, a world of possibilities opened up.

Outside Arles on that midsummer day, Labelle, a talented photographer himself, was lengthening the legs of a tripod. Birds provided an intermittent descant to the insect buzz and the drone of a distant tractor. The deep calm of the setting was hard to square with the popular image of Van Gogh painting in an agitated frenzy, hounded by psychological demons.

"He walked a lot," Morell said of the artist. "I think he was often in a state of meditation with the landscape. He painted quickly. But it wasn't a case of 'I'm gonna kill myself, I better hurry up and paint that.' It was just an intense need to show the world as he saw it."

Morell and Spritz were both wearing blue shirts, and in the morning light, they looked preternaturally crisp against the intense blue Provençal sky. I remarked on this, and Spritz, who has been friends with Morell for half a century, said, "Van Gogh would have loved it."

“He would have worn yellow,” countered Morell.
“He probably had a whole wardrobe of yellow shirts,” said Spritz.
“And they were all Prada.”
“Right. He was really into product placement,” Spritz joked.

Once everything was set up, it was time to trigger the exposure — in this case 30 seconds. The banter ceased as the seconds ticked by. There was only the throb of cicadas.

Clockwise from top left:
“Wheat Field,” the Camargue, France, 2022.
“Grass Field With Path,” near Arles, France, 2022.
“Tree and Road,” La Crau, France, 2022.
“A Single Tree in Late Afternoon,” near Arles, France, 2022.

‘In the presence of history’

“It’s not like I want to make Van Goghs,” Morell said several weeks later. We were in his Newton, Mass., studio, which is downstairs from his home, and he and Labelle were showing me prints of the 20 photographs they had made in France. “But being in the presence of history — of someone who has walked there and seen something — is stimulating. It makes you feel you’re in a trajectory of great art, and that’s fun.”

Still, he said, “sometimes my tendency as an artist is to say ‘F--- history. Van Gogh might not have done this, but I’m going to do it and see.’ ” His own pictures, he noticed, often felt more like the work of Van Gogh’s predecessors, the poetic landscape painters Camille Corot and Jean-Francois Millet.”

Before going to Arles, Morell contacted Connie Homburg, a curator preparing a major Van Gogh retrospective for London’s National Gallery. Homburg lives in Montpelier, France, not far from Arles, so she traveled there to offer Morell insights into Van Gogh’s practices and his favorite locations.

“The Sower” by Vincent van Gogh, June 1888.

“Van Gogh is such a famous guy. So many people want to walk in his footsteps. I don’t love that, honestly,” she admitted. “But Abe didn’t want to document Van Gogh.”

Watching Morell work, she was often surprised by his choices. “There were views I thought he would jump at, but he couldn’t have cared less,” she said. One example was the cypresses, which Van Gogh said were the very essence of Provence and which feature in some of his most famous paintings, including “The Starry Night.” According to Homburg, Morell felt that he had to photograph those trees, “but he patterned the ground so much that the image almost becomes abstract. He also showed several cypresses dotted across the landscape — something Van Gogh never did.”

“Cypresses” (1889) by Vincent van Gogh.

“Cypress,” near Arles, France, 2022.

Copying Van Gogh would be “boring,” Morell told me. “And also silly.” With a playful smile, he said, “I want to be better than Van Gogh! I’m really just using him as a conduit for my own visions. What I really want to do is make something new.”

Morell first took his portable tent-camera to several American national parks, making photographs of famous sights projected onto the ground of those parks. In 2015, inspired by Claude Monet, he went to France.

He set up the tent-camera in Monet’s garden at Giverny, France, and then at other sites where Monet had painted, including the Normandy coast. Beautiful views — sometimes the very ones Monet had painted — were projected inside the tent onto nondescript gravel paths or rocky beaches, creating a new, richly layered patina, a palimpsest. Morell then took the tent-camera to England — to London’s Hampstead Heath and Flatford in Dedham Vale, where John Constable had painted.

“Being in the presence of history — of someone who has walked there and seen something — is stimulating,” Abelardo Morell says. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)

The portable tent-camera allowed him to layer the views observed by the painters he loved over the very ground they had stood on, creating effects, often by chance, that undercut the cliched landscape, augmenting it with new textures that can seem surprisingly “painterly.” Olive tree leaves meshing with grass in ways that resemble Van Gogh’s patterned, multidirectional brushstrokes. A field of lavender superimposed on a pebbled road creating the look of Van Gogh’s pointillist compositions. Stalks of dry grass and cracked mud looking like an old painting’s craquelure.

“I’ve long had the feeling of wanting to be a painter as a gateway into certain kinds of feelings,” said Morell. “Photography is wonderful and I’ll always be a photographer because I love the way photography looks at the world. But paintings can hold such emotional values and expressions!”

“Sunflower Field on Ground With Broken Tiles,” near Arles, France, 2022.

Making a portable camera obscura was, for Morell, a breakthrough comparable to the invention of paint tubes in the late 18th century. Before paint tubes, oil paints would dry out too quickly in the outside air, forcing artists to work in their studios. Paint tubes allowed the young painters who flocked to Rome in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to paint en plein-air (in the open air). Their methods were quickly adopted by such painters as Constable and Corot and, much later, Monet and Van Gogh.

Armed with portable paints, artists began painting subjects that caught their eyes rather than things invented and composed in their minds. A simple technical achievement had led to a revolution in art — a newly empirical way of looking at the world that, as the curator Peter Galassi pointed out in 1981, in many ways anticipated photography. When it was invented in the 1820s and '30s, photography simply harnessed a way of seeing that painters had already been shaping.

But by the 1860s, photographs were everywhere. The most commercially successful painters of the day — including Jean-Leon Gerome and Adolphe Bouguereau — exploited photography to enhance the accuracy of their fastidiously detailed paintings. But Van Gogh and his fellow avant-garde painters were mostly hostile to the medium. The camera posed a clear threat — especially for portrait painters; portrait photography studios were sprouting up everywhere. Before the end of his first year in Arles — 1888, the year the first Kodak box camera was invented — Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo saying that photographic portraits remain "dead." By contrast, he said, "painted portraits have a life of their own," a life that "comes from deep in the soul of the painter and where the machine can't go."

Morell seems beguiled by the 19th century, when painters paved the way for photographers, who then became a threat to painters. It's as if he wants to dive back into this warring period and — by combining the latest digital technology with the most primitive form of photography — lay the groundwork for a detente. His recent tent-camera photographs, he told me, are his attempt "to 'paint' with photographs — or at least to say, 'This is related.' "

Clockwise from top left:
"View of Fields on Plywood," Arles, France, 2022.
"Sunset With Sunflower Field," near Arles, France, 2022.
"A Stone Wall," Abbaye de Montmajour, Arles, France, 2022.

Seeing potential

Morell, Labelle and Spritz were standing around the tripod, now more than six feet high, while Labelle, the tallest of the three, was preparing to pull off the black cloth draped over it. Perched atop the tripod was a metal device like a submarine periscope. It supported both the lens that projects the image outside onto the earth below and Morell's digital camera, pointed straight down at the ground.

Two white horses were grazing behind some trees in the middle distance. These were the ubiquitous, semi-feral horses of the Camargues, another symbol of the region. (The previous night, dozens of them, cheered on by crowds, had paraded down the main street of Arles as part of a festival.)

The tent-camera Morell used for his Monet (2015-2016) and Constable (2017) projects had been an actual tent, 7-by-10 feet. It was "a monster," said Morell. "Max and I would have to be inside it and when it was hot, it was torture. We could see the projection down on the ground. But to photograph it, we couldn't really be over it because we would get in the way. So we had to photograph it at an angle, which is not ideal in terms of focus — it creates a slight distortion." It also had lots of pinholes, compromising the intensity of the projected image.

This new "tent," developed in response, looked much less cumbersome. With no frame apart from the tripod itself, it was more of a teepee. The black cloth draped over it, Morell said, "is the best thing I've ever found." Several companies had sent him materials promising "total blackout," but, he says, "we'd put a flashlight to it, and it just wasn't good enough." The cloth he eventually found is made by a scientific company that tests lasers in dark spaces. It creates "pitch blackness inside" the tent, Morell said, "so whatever's intense out there is intense inside — focus, color, brightness."

Left: The black cloth Abelardo Morell uses for his tent camera is made by a scientific company that tests lasers in dark spaces. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)
Right: A view from inside the tent. (Marin Driguez/Agence VU for The Washington Post)

Morell and Labelle no longer have to be inside the tent. An orange cord connects the camera to a laptop perched on a stand just outside the teepee. Everything on the camera — exposure time, aperture, ISO (sensitivity to light) — is controlled from the laptop, on which Morell and Labelle can see what the camera is seeing.

Happy with the photograph of the cypresses, Labelle and Morell loaded the equipment into the car and drove down the road to the sunflower field. The previous day, Morell had photographed the sunflowers projected onto a circle of flat, jagged stones. He had noticed them nearby and arranged them into a circle on a nondescript patch of ground beneath the tent-camera.

Now, Morell again walked toward the field, looking out over the flowers and a row of cypresses and vines. “It’s not a view I’d usually photograph,” he said. “It’s picturesque. A bit cliched.” But he saw potential in the way it might interact with the rough, muddy ground underfoot. He pulled up a few small weeds, then picked up some stones and clods of dirt, scattering them beneath the tripod. The next work of art was already coming into focus.

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