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Abelardo Morell travels 'In the Footsteps of van Gogh' at Krakow Witkin Gallery

The Newton photographer brought his camera obscura to the South of France to pay homage to the famous painter — and painting itself.

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 31, 2023



Abelardo Morell's "Sunflower Field on Ground with Broken Tiles, Near Arles, France," 2022. The color photograph will be displayed at the exhibit "Abelardo Morell: In the Footsteps of van Gogh" at Krakow Witkin Gallery through Feb. 25. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

"In the Footsteps of van Gogh," Abelardo Morell's dizzyingly gorgeous photography show at Krakow Witkin Gallery, pays tribute to the iconic post-Impressionist painter, and to the medium of painting.

KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

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The ever-inventive Newton photographer [traveled to the South of France](#) last summer to visit the landscape that inspired [Vincent van Gogh](#). He brought his own invention, a new-fangled [camera obscura](#) that he calls a “tent-camera.” Camera obscuras are ancient optical devices in which a pinhole in a darkened box projects what’s outside inside. In Morell’s version, a black tent blocks the light; a periscope casts the exterior image onto the ground, and a digital camera captures it.



Abelardo Morell's "Lavender Field, Lioux, France," 2022, color photograph. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

The result blends gravel, grass, and dirt with breathtaking expanses of landscape, imbuing sky and field with humming, irregular textures that recall van Gogh’s pointillist or dancing brushstrokes. It’s an unsettling effect: Are we looking at an uneven plane of ground or out into the distance? This new twist on an old painterly tension between the picture plane and the illusion on its surface includes a perpendicular perspectival shift. It feels like Morell is pulling the rug out from under us.

The images in this “Tent-Camera Image” series luxuriate in the tonic of Provence’s summer light. Gravel-speckled blue sky, undulating green horizon line, and lavender-dotted field awaken the eye in “Lavender Field, Lioux, France.” It’s easy to mistake pebbles for jabbing brushstrokes, to take in the distance here and miss the ground underfoot — until a grassy patch comes into focus in the lower right. Suddenly, the world tilts.



Abelardo Morell's "Sunflower Field, Near Arles, France," 2022, color photograph. KRAKOW WITKIN GALLERY

The sky in “Sunflower Field, Near Arles, France,” is clearly made of stones, but in the shadows of a looming tree that stony ground seems bubbly. And “Sunflower Field on Ground with Broken Tiles, Near Arles, France” projects the flowers’ bobbing yellow heads over what looks like a shattered mosaic. The picture of the field is whole, but there’s a ghost of brokenness beneath — or is the broken part real, and the blooming field the ghost?

While this photograph evokes the struggles of van Gogh, who made vibrant [sunflower paintings](#) in Provence in the time leading up to his 1890 death from a gunshot wound (whether it was self-inflicted has been a source of [some debate](#)), the painter is merely a starting point. Wrapping in history, optics, and 21st-century technology, Morell’s reveries don’t mirror van Gogh’s. They are topsy-turvy worlds unto themselves.

ABELARDO MORELL: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF VAN GOGH

At Krakow Witkin Gallery, 10 Newbury St., through Feb. 25. 617-262-4490,
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