



# CONJURING WITH LIGHT:

THE CONTEMPORARY WORKS  
OF ABELARDO MORELL

WORDS | IAN MCKAY





ABELARDO MORELL:

*The Philadelphia Museum of Art East Entrance in Gallery #171 with a de Chirico Painting, 2005*

*Courtesy of the Artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NY*

HERE ARE NO PRIZES for guessing why recently, in the first episode of the internationally-acclaimed British TV series *The Genius of Photography*, the work of contemporary photographer Abelardo Morell was featured alongside that of the fathers of photography, Niépce, Daguerre, and Fox Talbot. Put simply, Morell's work with the *camera obscura* offers a tangible connection between contemporary photography, its invention in the early-19th century, and the fundamentals of optics as they were being first explored as far back as the 11th century by the Persian polymath Ibn al-Haytham (the original inventor of the *camera obscura*). Though the practice of photography may have changed beyond all recognition over recent decades, its core principles identified by al-Haytham do remain the same, and it is these principles that provide Morell with his subject matter.

The *camera obscura*, in its simplest form, comprises a light proof box through which daylight is permitted to enter through a small hole. Pinhole cameras are an obvious example of this 'primitive' technology (the ultimate analogue process in the digital age) though with a pinhole camera, the light is usually projected within the camera onto a strip or sheet of film. With a *camera obscura*, the size of which is often as large as a room, the viewer is very often *inside the box*, witnessing the apparent magic of the outside projected within. This is where Morell comes in.





ABELARDO MORELL: *Grand Canal Looking West Toward the Accademia Bridge in Palazzo Room Under Construction*, 2007 Courtesy of the Artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NY

Having spent hours constructing his *camera obscura* installations in sealed rooms, blacking out all light sources other than the one through which the 'image' will flow, the finished result is a staged photographic record of what occurs. London's Tower Bridge, the Grand Canal of Venice, and the Manhattan skyline, are all subjects that have flowed through the small apertures Morrell and his team create, expanding again as inverted images on the walls of the interiors by the 'magic' of optics known to al-Haytham, Daguerre, and every Victorian photographer from Coney Island to Cape Town, Calais to Capri.

As a tourist attraction, the *camera obscura* has always proved popular for obvious reasons, with important examples still existing across Europe, and in the USA, South Africa, and Cuba. With the coming of cinema, the craze waned somewhat, but that does not mean that there is not still a fascination with the process, even today. In many ways the fascination for some is even greater in a culture of digital manipulation

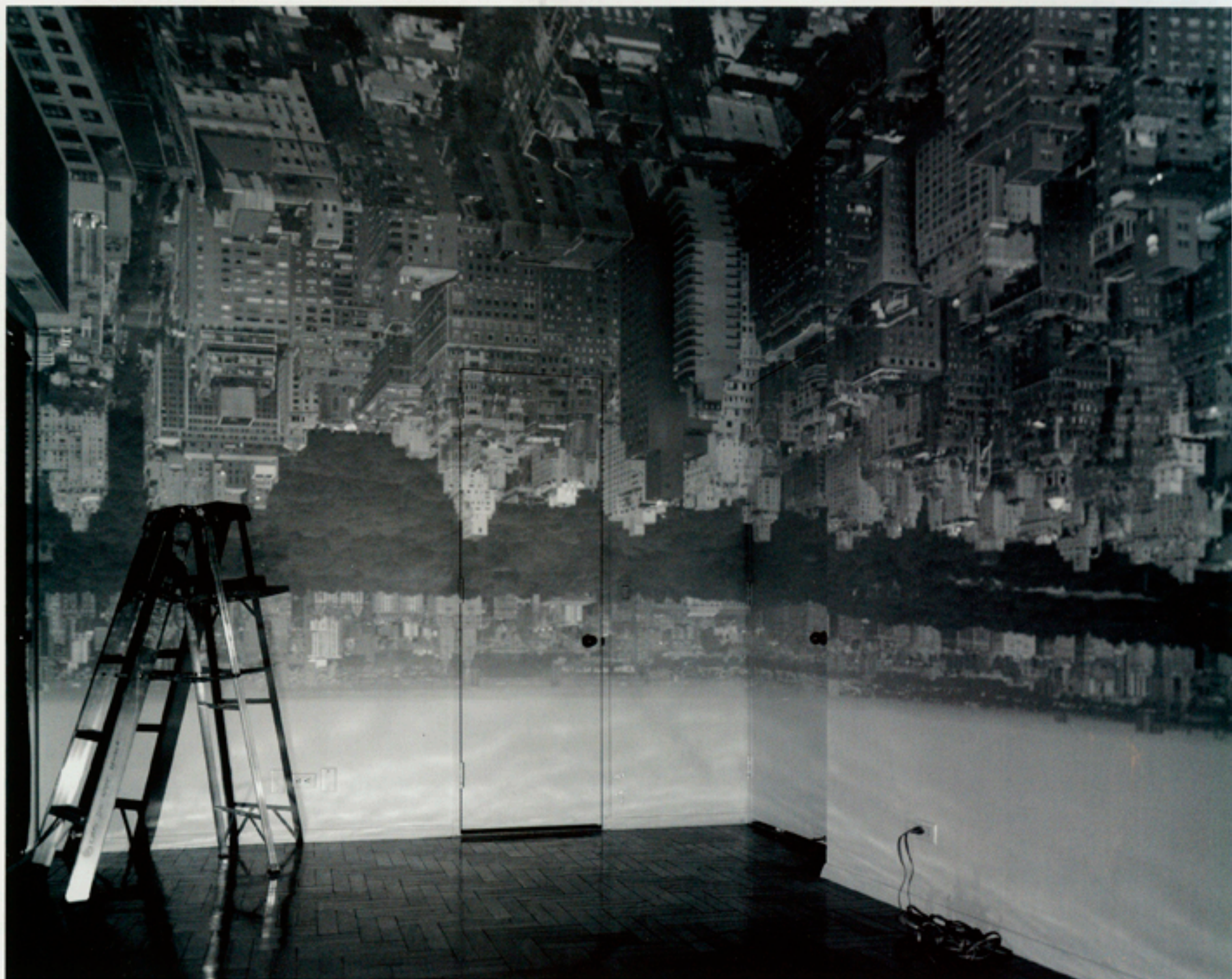
where the adulteration of the photographic image has become commonplace - the *camera obscura* image seems purer, less

*'Lately, I have begun using big diopter lenses to bring images of the outside into darkened rooms.'*

polluted, because what we see is a real time representation of pure light that changes as the scene itself does. Take away the trappings of the digital age and rely solely on the magic of optics and one might get just that little bit closer to the moment of excitement once enjoyed by the first photographers.

To achieve his carefully staged *camera obscura* images, Morell engages in a slight deceit however. These, after all, are images that function in their own right, as photographs - staged constructions, art objects, not just fleeting glimpses. To achieve the lucid, vivid photographs for which he is most celebrated, a mere pinhole will not do, he says: 'Lately, I have begun using big diopter lenses to bring images of the outside into darkened rooms. While a simple small hole will produce a reasonably clear image, a lens lets in a lot more light that's focused at a given distance - all vivid in colour'. It was while working on a photograph in 2005, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that he first witnessed the intensity of colour that could be produced using this method; until then his *camera obscura* works had been made in black and white. In fact, the first of Morell's works that I ever saw was one of his pre-Philadelphia black and white images (*Manhattan View Looking West in Empty Room*, 1996) on an album cover sleeve for pianist Bruce Brubaker's album *Glass Cage*. Morell's





ABELARDO MORELL: *Manhattan View Looking West in Empty Room*, 1996. Courtesy of the Artist and Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NY

Manhattan skyline is an unnerving image for the reasons you might expect (not least, the world inverted) but doubly so because he leaves the stepladder in shot. Gain height via the ladder and you are falling, but leave via either of the doors and you might just be careering into Central Park too. Dark and foreboding, the city hangs over you like a cloudwrack.

A stepladder appears in the other images here too. In *Grand Canal Looking West Toward the Accademia Bridge in Palazzo Room Under Construction* (2007), the ladder offers us access onto a balcony, lending the work a theatricality that is powerfully suggestive - a bridge between the stones of Venice and the 21st century. Similarly in the image that led to Morell's adoption of colour - titled *The Philadelphia Museum of Art East Entrance in Gallery #171 with a de Chirico Painting* (2005) - there is another ladder, but here it appears too short to be useful; rather like the clock which has eleven rather than twelve numbers in de Chirico's proto-surrealist painting. While we might expect

a little surrealist game playing from artists such as de Chirico, it becomes doubly disconcerting when treated with Morell's



*camera obscura* projections. In Morell's interiors we enter a dream world that is as surreal as anything cooked up by de Chirico - perhaps more so for the fact that we appear to be looking upon a scene bathed in the unadulterated light of the 'real world', out there, beyond this room.

What at first seem to be mere technical representations of an optical exercise contain, then, an artistry and subject matter too; a host of ambiguities and questions that engage and intrigue long after the initial novelty has worn off. Unlike conventional *camera obscura* images that show us the world afresh and unadulterated, Morell's images are curiously enigmatic too, appearing to ask us to reflect on reality as we see it. While his work as a photographer encompasses much more than his *camera obscura* output (he's a dab hand with the photogram process too) they are perhaps the nearest that a photographer ever comes to painting with light. The careful staging, the optical theatrics and especially the constructed ambiguities, collectively go to make up a complex and engaging suite of images that, unlike many photographs today, have the power to keep you going back for more, again and again. ■

Links: [www.abelardomorell.net](http://www.abelardomorell.net)