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Mind of the beholder



COURTESY PHOTO

"El Vedado, Havana, Looking Northwest, Havana, Cuba," (2002).



COURTESY PHOTO

"Times Square in Hotel Room" (1997) by Abelardo Morell, on view at Southwest School of Art & Craft.

Abelardo Morell finds the universe in a pinhole

ADD THIS

BY ELAINE WOLFF

FotoSeptiembreUSA, the annual month-long celebration of all things aperture organized and curated by SA's own Michael Mehl, causes both excitement and dread each year: Yes, there will be a few exceptional art shows, but many spaces will resort to showing pedestrian photojournalism, which as brilliant as it can be, isn't art. So September can feel like an art diet if you love contemporary work. It's not Mehl's fault; he can't curate everything, and fortunately he has some capable participants at the Southwest School of Art & Craft and at the UTSA Satellite Space (this is not a definitive list; put down the pitchforks, folks).

For this year's Foto Fest, Southwest School, in partnership with the Alturas Foundation, is presenting work by Abelardo Morell, a Cuban-born academic and artist whose output is methodical yet magical. Photographers often develop a signature frame or eye, and/or tricks, and either their way of seeing or their methods come to define their work. Morell apparently has done both: This show, which represents nearly 20 years of photography, reveals a fascination with representation and duplication — the art of image-making itself and how it distorts the original experience — and a signature use of a camera-obscura to project the outdoors inside, a literal take on Plato's cave, in which the photographer is the liberated and liberator.

Morell uses his larger-than-life camera obscura to bring Times Square into a Midtown hotel, the Tetons into a spartan resort, a lush garden into a Tuscan bedroom. His earlier experiments are left upside-down and printed in

beautiful black-and-white; later he introduces color and flips the image upright again. One of these, "Upright Image of the Coliseum Inside Room #20 of the Hotel Gladiatori, Rome, 2007," which casts the famous relic over a romantically dishevelled tourist quarters, becomes a dust-to-dust commentary, a visual "Ozymandias": "... Tell that its sculptor well those passions read/ Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things." In another very recent image of a sunrise over the Atlantic, light streaks across the wall like a revelation and the tide lifts the unadorned wall from its mundane moorings.

But the earlier works are just as enchanting. In "Grand Tetons in Resort Room, 1997," the majestic mountain range protruding from the ceiling emphasizes the sparseness of the room and the simple Adirondack chairs in the meadow grass outside. Is the view really any more transcendent from those multimillionaire mountaintop mansions?

The trick works as well in Cuba, where Havana's decaying cityscape gives context to the chipped veneer of a once-fancy bureau and a stained wall, and in Times Square, whose overwhelming signage is easier to contemplate on a hotel ceiling, separated somehow from its marketing power. And just as you start to feel the gimmick is becoming a little rote, this well-installed show puts it in perspective with a picture of the "eye" at work: a camera obscura made from a Martini Rossi box, projecting its image of a lightbulb inside, a recreation of the camera's origins in diluting the power of a solar eclipse. Most of its aura gone, we can admire the bulb's curve, the twisting filament, the ghostly glass. Which perception of the bulb is more real?

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That question sets us up for a series of images in which Morell plays with the distortions of mirrors and prisms, natural and manmade, and those images in turn prepare us for the next gallery, in which my favorite images contemplate our representation and experience of art. In one, a postcard picture of the Tower of Pisa is compared to the same image in an "Old Travel Scrapbook." The differences are at once miniscule and monumental, and the juxtaposition invites us to imagine those previous viewers and image-makers and the extent to which our experience is mediated by them. A similar piece questions and plays with art's obsession with masters and schools, the transmission of style from student to pupil, and the role of the art historian who tells us which is which. At the same time it subtly challenges photography's assumed position as the most faithful copier.

The least successful works are in this room, too: Images in which Morell plays literally with "framing" by imposing a distractingly plain wood frame over gorgeous natural scenes – plenty to talk about there in an art-theory class, but not much to enjoy. These are more than made up for though by a series of photos composed of illustrated editions of Alice in Wonderland, which introduce the show if you read the galleries clockwise from the main entrance: You're going down a rabbit hole, viewer, and who is madder — you or the Hatter?

File under "gone too soon": Paho Mann's series of photos of repurposed Circle K stores, on view at the UTSA Satellite Space earlier this month, follow in the roadtripping footsteps of his Beat and Modern forebears, while reminding us of the extent to which architectural decisions made today dictate future development and aesthetics, even when the buildings are reclaimed by expedience and necessity. Mann has snapped some 16 images of the mid-century convenience stores throughout the Southwest, some of them still used for that purpose, others now diners, pizza joints, tuxedo-rental shops, and payday-loan centers, all of them still recognizable by their compact rectangular fronts and graceful horizon-line awnings. Fortunately, you can see the images, and track the buildings on a Google map, at pahomann.com/circlekgalleries/circlek.php.



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