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## Camera Obscura (image of Havanah Looking Southeast in Room with Ladder

RISD Museum

Abelardo Morell

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A: Hi. I'm Abe Morell, and we're looking at a picture of mine that I made in 2002 in Cuba—my first trip back there since I left in '62, after 40 years' exile. So it's an important picture for me in the sense that it's a return to a place. I was actually born in Havana, so this is my home birth area, and I wanted to make some pictures in the style of the camera obscura that I've done before. But there are so many photographs coming out of Cuba now, especially in Havana, and they show a lot of people dancing, and colorful cars—old-style Chevys in the street. To me, there is a certain...it feels a little vulgar, because it's a place that's actually falling apart. People are not exactly really happy about it.

So I wanted to make pictures with a certain kind of darkness—more like an expressionistic feel, like *Caligari* or something. This picture really fits that bill, because it shows a city that's kind of crumbling, yet inside a working-class room, where people actually make a living by improvising in life. That ladder there is to another room, where they actually have staked out more property.

Life in Cuba is very improvised. But I think what I wanted was the feeling of an interior in Havana almost remembering the olden days of Havana.

Q: I'm just wondering, 'cause I saw the film and noted that you scouted out locations to make camera obscura. How did you...whose room is it? I'm curious about it.

A: I had help. There was a scout—an architect—in Havana who is very knowledgeable of places and locales, a good scout. And he had found a dozen places for me to look at, and this is a family that said—yes. It's a funny story, because there are about ten people on the lower floor, waiting for me to finish this picture. There is actually black plastic...you can't quite see it but it's going down the stairs. The whole thing feels like...in Cuba, *Santeria*, but it's witchcraft. The whole thing felt like strange magic going on. But they're all waiting downstairs for me to make this picture. This exposure took about seven hours to make. So essentially I—along with others—had to escape through that black plastic, and then have lunch in Havana and do whatever people do in Havana. Then come back about seven hours later to stop the exposure. So they're unknown to me, these people, but wonderful.

Q: I'm very interested in the experience of returning to a place where you were born and grew, and had such a formative time. And what the return to that place feels like and how this picture captures that personal journey back to a place for you.

A: Well, photography deals with the present. So it's not a very good medium to—like Proust—to talk about the past. It's a difficult medium to channel the past. But at least the way that I make pictures, these camera obscura rooms, they get close to a certain internal feeling rather than a fact. I think it evokes something that may be a psychological state of mind, that I think that I was feeling for sure visiting there: My

memories as a child and coming together with my present artistic sense. Putting those things together was not always easy, but I think my technique of making a room dark and then letting it “see” stuff maybe mimics a bit of what we call memory.

Q: The shadow of the areas and the dark suggests the places in memory that you can’t quite capture fully.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I don’t want to go too far and say that this picture is about memory, but the way the city looks there—upside down and somewhat faded and crumbling—those have, again, a sense of it being something not quite vivid in the brain. Something reminiscent of a certain moment that you had, or when you were a child...something. I grew up in Havana but it was very polluted back then; soon after that, my parents moved to a small beach town, so it was very different. But my memories of Havana still have the sense of pollution and just a very thriving city that wasn’t always pleasant.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about—why this place and this particular angle?

A: Well, I made this picture because it was shown to me, and I liked it right away because of where the city would fall on the wall. But also, there’s a little table on the left—this is a small altar. A lot of Cubans still believe in *Santeria*—it’s this hybrid combination of African religions and Catholicism—so it’s not unusual to have a picture of Fidel and also *Santeria*. It doesn’t make sense—but it makes sense. I really like the idea of that being present in the room. And *Santeria*...when I was a child, I remember hearing a lot of drumming in my neighborhood and people being possessed...very African syncretism going on. And it’s very much part of being Cuban, that dichotomy of living like you did in Africa yet going to church every Sunday.

Q: Would you just be able to describe the neighborhood that we’re in and the exact part of Cuba that we’re looking at?

A: This picture is in what is called Central Havana, the center of Havana. It’s a new name for that area. So it’s very...I was going to say ‘working class’ but everybody is working-class in Cuba except for the chiefs. Very active. There’s just a lot going on, and what was interesting is that this is a tower of a kind. We went to the fifth floor and then that ladder goes to kind of a widow’s peak. But that’s been turned into a room as well, so there are people sleeping there. I like the fact that it’s a record of a life--this is the new reality in Cuba, with the past and the present all at once. And it’s a small obscure joke, but ladders really are important in the history of photography, because Fox Talbot, the British inventor, one of his first pictures had a ladder in it, going up into a haystack. So it’s a small art history joke.

One thing I should say about this photograph is that it was made at a time, in 2002, when I used black and white film, and the camera obscura techniques that I used at the time still relied on just a small hole looking out, which made the exposures fairly long, eight hours long. Over time, I have now used lenses, looking out, that are much brighter and much more sharp, so the imagery is really quite vivid now and bright. Now, I am using color in my work and using a digital camera, so instead of five, six, seven, eight hours' long exposures, I'm doing it in two, three, four minutes. Which has changed the look of the work completely. So this feels like it's my Rococo Period—now, I am in the post-modern period.

This is Abe Morell, and I am speaking about this photograph I made in Cuba, in Havana, in the year 2002. The full title is called Camera Obscura Image of Havana Looking Southeast in Room with Ladder.

Q: Thank you.

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