

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW | MARK FEENEY

At the Clark, a photographer pays homage to two great painters

Abelardo Morell conjures up the worlds of Claude Monet and John Constable

By **Mark Feeney** Globe Staff, Updated January 2, 2025, 11:53 a.m.



Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Copper Beech Tree in Hampstead Heath, London, England." 2017. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

WILLIAMSTOWN — “Abelardo Morell: In the Company of Monet and Constable” consists of only 13 photographs, but what photographs. The show, which is at the Clark Art Institute, likely has more beauty per capita than most any art exhibition last year — or this year, too? It runs through Feb. 17.

That these color landscapes, homages to the painters Claude Monet and John Constable, have such aesthetic weight isn't just a function of their appearance, appealing as that appearance is. It also owes something to their scale. The photographs range in size from one that's a “mere” 22½ inches by 30 inches to four behemoths that are 45 inches by 60 inches. The rest are 30 inches by 40 inches, or vice versa. Size isn't always a good thing with photographs. It is here. What's on display at the Clark is overwhelming without being in any way poster-ish.

Morell, who for many years was part of the remarkable photography faculty at Massachusetts College of Art and Design — a batting order that has variously included Laura McPhee, Barbara Bosworth, Nicholas Nixon, and Frank Gohlke, among others — first came to prominence through his work with a camera obscura.

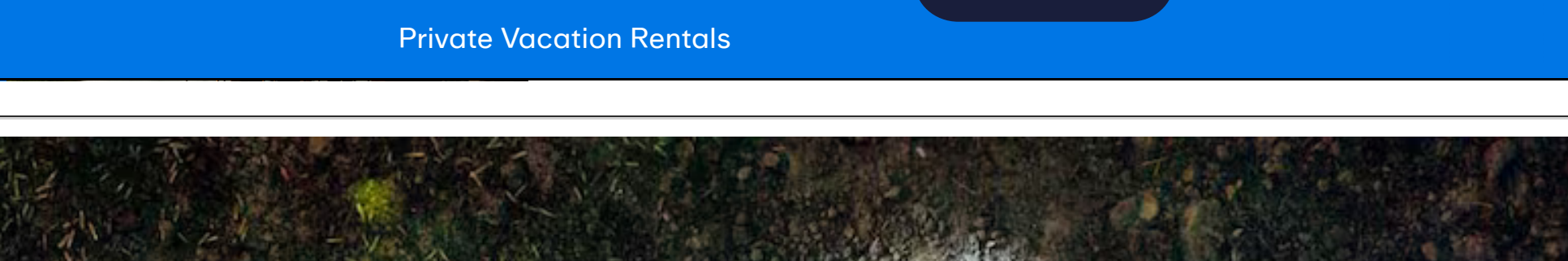


Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Apple Tree, Vetheuil, France." 2023. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

Did you ever make a pinhole camera as a kid? A camera obscura works on the same principle. It projects a reversed, upside-down, sharply detailed image in a darkened space. Covering the windows, Morell would darken a New York hotel room, for example, and [project an image of the Empire State Building on a wall](#) and take a photograph of it with a large-format camera. Simple enough conceptually (if not in execution), Morell's procedure produced results that, visually, were excitingly disorienting.

He took those images indoors, in black and white. For some years, Morell has been working in color, using a related means of his own devising: a tent/camera. He sets up a “tent” of light-proof fabric, at the top of which are a diopter (a 90-degree prism with an attached lens), aimed outside the tent, and a digital camera aimed straight down. This dual arrangement allows Morell to superimpose an image of the ground on to an image of the landscape outside the tent. It's like Morell's earlier photographs, which had the camera obscura image superimposed on a wall and furnishings of the room where he took the photograph.

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Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Water Lilies in Monet's Water Garden, Giverny, France," 2023. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

Morell has a longstanding interest in art history as visual subject — and as occasion for travel, as in [a marvelous camera obscura image](#) of Lacock Abbey, in England, home of W.H. Fox Talbot, one of photography's inventors and early masters. A memorable show at the Krakow Witkin Gallery in 2023, “[Abelardo Morell: In the Footsteps of van Gogh](#),” showed him using the tent/camera to striking effect, photographing landscapes in the south of France associated with the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. The Clark show presents Morell doing something similar with Monet and Constable.

His “After Monet” project, from which eight of the photographs here are drawn, began in the summers of 2015 and '16. The photographer visited Giverny, Rouen, the Normandy coast, and Vetheuil, all locations where the Impressionist painted. Morell isn't imitating Monet canvases, even if a stunning view of Rouen Cathedral chimes with a photograph of it elsewhere in the museum; or the band of red in a Morell poppy field recalls the narrower, interrupted horizontals of red in the Clark's “[Tulip Fields at Sassenheim](#).” Instead, what Morell has done is simultaneously evoke, reimagine, and extend Monet's work. He's managed to make the now deeply familiar landscapes which inhabit the paintings seem both distilled and renewed.

Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Rouen Cathedral in Cloudy Afternoon Light, Rouen, France." 2016. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

Monet is, of course, one of the great colorists. That can actually work to Morell's disadvantage. A close-up view of his garden at Giverny looks almost garish (though that criticism may be more horticultural than artistic). Constable isn't thought of in those terms. As regards color, his great contemporary J.M.W. Turner reigns. Morell now makes you see him otherwise. He extends our view of Monet. He alters our view of Constable. The challenge is all the greater, since there are nearly a dozen Constables hanging in a gallery just a few steps away. Morell meets it.

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Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Rapidly Moving Clouds Over Field, Flatford, England #1." 2017. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

Still evident are Constable's celebrated greenness and grayness. Truly, there are no clouds quite like Constable's and Morell does them justice in “Rapidly Moving Clouds Over Field, Flatford England #1.” But the lavender details in a Hampstead Heath pond or the tessellation of colors in and around a copper beech also on the heath are a revelation. That copper beech, by the way, has counterparts on the Monet side: a yew, an apple, and cypress, each a marvel. His affinity for trees is such Abelardo Morell could justifiably start referring to himself as Arboreal Morell.

Abelardo Morell, "Tent/Camera Image: Pond in Hampstead Heath, London, England." 2017. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

Photography, as a medium, has so much to offer, from verisimilitude to specificity to its unique capacity to transmute light. Texture is very low on the list. One of the things that makes these photographs so ravishing is that Morell's layering together of the ground beneath the tent/camera and the world outside creates a kind of impasto — the term he prefers is “patina” — or even a visual equivalent of terroir. Further, the layering has the effect, at once paradoxical and happy, of drawing in viewers rather than distancing them.

A final note: The exhibition has a soundtrack. A recording of John Cage's “[In a Landscape](#),” performed on the piano by the show's curator, Anne Leonard, plays in the gallery. It was Morell's idea. Gentle and unobtrusive, the music is quite pleasing, though the listening is so subsidiary to the looking as to be superfluous. That's not criticism of Cage (or Leonard). It's praise for Morell.

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ABELARDO MORELL: IN THE COMPANY OF MONET AND CONSTABLE

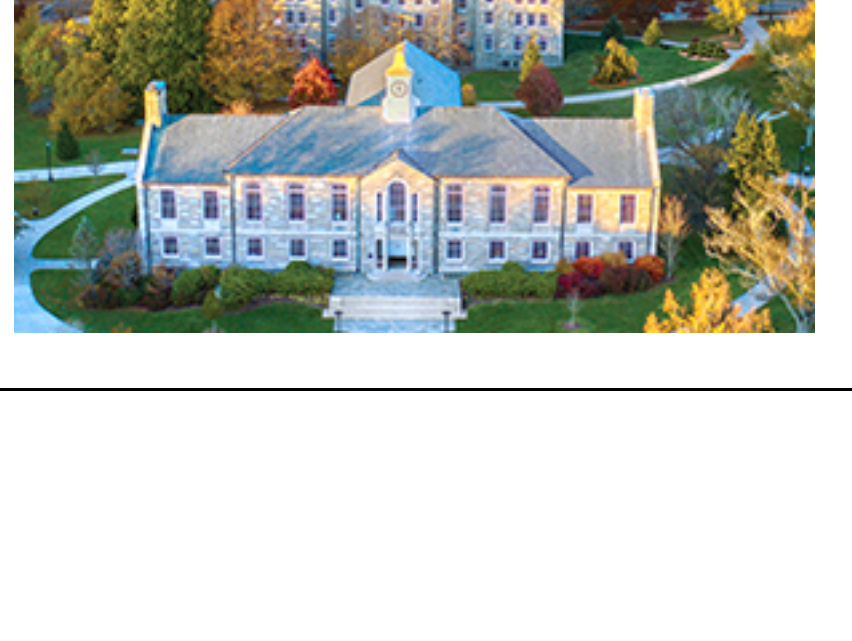
At Clark Art Institute, 225 South St., Williamstown, through Feb. 17. 413-458-2303, www.clarkart.edu

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