

SHADOW OF THE HOUSE - PHOTOGRAPHER ABELARDO MORELL

A FILM BY ALLIE HUMENUK
RUNNING TIME: 74 MINUTES
USA, COLOR, VIDEO, 4:3
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Laura and Brady in the Shadow of our House, 1994, Abelardo Morell

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SYNOPSIS

“Things are not always what they appear to be,” says Cuban American photographer Abelardo Morell. **Shadow of the House** peers into his past and around the corners of his present to see what normally goes unseen. This film is a rare look into the life of one of America’s renowned photographers. A feature length film, **Shadow of the House** explores how Morell uses his art to make sense of a life up-ended by geographic, cultural, linguistic, and political dislocation. It is an intimate portrayal of how one man’s personal struggle with the themes of loss, exile, and self-determination reflects the ways in which we all work to construct narratives that unite the past with the present and memory with desire. Morell has used this tension to fuel a career as a remarkable artist.

Morell’s life is utterly ordinary on the surface but our understanding of him deepens as layer after layer of the man and the impact of his experiences are revealed: his strange and compelling flight from Castro’s Cuba in the early sixties, his adolescent years in New York City; his life as an American family man and photographer who is more comfortable working at home but whose career increasingly pulls him into the larger world.

Morell’s artistic process is central to the film. The film makes public the often unglamorous work that precedes the beautiful photographs -- the laborious process of finding locations and setting up rooms and the frustration of failed images. The film reveals the all-consuming nature of his drive to make images, despite what may be going on around him.

Morell has gained international acclaim for his elegant, large format, black-and-white camera obscura photographs that turn the world upside down and marry the inside with the outside, and for his photographs of everyday images from his domestic milieu. When Morell creates a photograph, he mirrors back a transformed space: a paper bag becomes a haunting void; the ocean fills a room; Alice crawls out from within the pages of her Wonderland. The results are photographs of objects we think know, presented in ways that make us question what we know.

Working alone, the director of **Shadow of the House** filmed Morell and his family for over 7 years both at home and abroad. During the filming, Morell returns to Cuba for the first time since his escape in 1962. This decision, and the intense anger and fear it arouses in his family, forces him to wrestle with his sense of identity, familial allegiance, and cultural politics. **Shadow of the House** explores the intersection between these issues and Morell’s idiosyncratic artistic vision.

In Morell's words, "A lot of my work tries to disorient you once you get invited in to something that seems normal. I like to suggest that what may be empty is not. When you feel alone there is actually a lot more of the world coming into your space than you think." The film showcases some of Morell’s extensive work and takes the viewer into his private life, uncovering his fascination with the magic of the ordinary.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Shadow of the House is an intimate portrait of photographer Abelardo Morell. I followed Abe for over seven years, uncovering the mystery and method of his artistic process, the role of family in his life and the impact of his background as a Cuban refugee. The narrative skips across time and space to reveal Morell's journey from his early childhood escape from Castro's regime to his status as a world-renowned photographer.

I first learned about Abe in 1991 when I stumbled into one of his lectures. I remember he said something like, "It is amazing how a good picture can make me want to get up in the morning." That resonated for me.

I started making **Shadow of the House** in the summer of 1999. I went to Paris with Abe, his wife, Lisa McElaney, and their son, Brady, planning to produce a short film about Abe's process of making his camera obscura photographs which create an ambiguous marriage between the interior environment and the outside world. Abe had made oceans swim on an attic ceiling and 42nd street invade a hotel bedroom. In Paris he wanted to make a camera obscura photograph with the Eiffel tower.

To create these seeming optical illusions, Abe finds a room with a compelling view and covers the windows with black plastic. He cuts a small hole in the plastic and the view from outside spills onto the wall opposite the window upside down and inverted. Suddenly a busy street is on the wall of a conference room. To capture the scene, Abe leaves his camera in the room and exposes the negative over the course of the day.

I imagined scouting endless numbers of rooms to find the perfect locale in Paris. I wondered if he would find a place -- maybe I didn't even want him to find the room because a failed search could be an interesting metaphor for the artist's struggle to keep moving forward.

But just the opposite happened. In ten days Abe made 6 or 7 images. I felt as though all of us had worked non-stop and I returned home exhausted. But during this trip I developed a deeper understanding of Abe's drive and how he feels most comfortable in the world when he is making art. I recognized that there was a more complicated story that I wanted to tell.

I began to film his daily life -- Abe eating breakfast and reading the newspaper and talking on the phone with his parents. I was in his basement filming his fastidiously organized collection of chemistry bottles. We sat together and waited for the shutter release of a long exposure. I saw him carefully examining tiny details around him. Sometimes he took all day to transform what he saw to make one photograph. I came to understand that these observations were what kept Abe going day after day. It was by watching Abe that I realized that I needed to be patient and let the meaning of moments accumulate in order to make this film. I allowed myself to mirror Abe's process.

In some ways Abe became my "excuse" to film. Because I was filming Abe, I found myself in a gallery in Barcelona watching people walking through the market stalls. But,

I was not looking out the window; I was watching their reflections on one of Abe's framed images. On his still black and white image, I saw color and people moving. I filmed it.

During the period of time that I was making this film, Abe returns to Cuba for the first time since his escape at the age of 14. He visits the house where he grew up. The scale is wrong, the details have changed, but he is finally there to witness what had been "home."

I made a film about an artist whose work and methods I admire and whom I admire as a person. His life story gives rise to important questions about identity, commitment to family, and cultural politics. In **Shadow of the House**, the viewer sees the un-glamorous work behind Morell's elegant images. And for 7 years, I was learning things about myself, framing my way through my own life as an artist, letting time unfold as I crafted my observations into a film.

DIRECTOR'S BIO/CREW

Allie Humenuk -- Director, Producer, Camera

Allie Humenuk is an award-winning filmmaker and Emmy nominated cinematographer whose short films have been seen nationally and internationally at museums, film festivals and on television. She is primarily known for her work as a cinematographer. Her clients include PBS, MTV, National Geographic and the Discovery Channel. For several years she taught film and video production at Harvard University. Currently, she continues to freelance as a cinematographer. She is also the Executive Producer at Vida Health Communications, Inc. where she makes public health videos about women's health and childhood development. "Shadow of the House – Photographer Abelardo Morell" is her first feature length documentary.

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Paul Pridgeon -- Graphic Design

Collaborated, Inc -- Web and Poster Design

ABELARDO MORELL BIOGRAPHY

Abelardo Morell was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948. He immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1962.

He received a BA from Bowdoin College in 1977 and an MFA in Photography from the Yale University School of Art in 1981. In 1997 he received an honorary doctorate from Bowdoin College.

He has received a number of awards and grants, which include a Cintas grant in 1992 a Guggenheim fellowship in 1994 and a Rappaport Prize in 2006.

His work has been collected and shown in many galleries, institutions and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Art Museum in New York, The Chicago Art Institute, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Houston Museum of Art, The Boston Museum of Fine Art, The Victoria & Albert Museum, The Princeton University Art Museum and over forty other museums in the United States and abroad. He is represented by Bonni Benrubi Gallery, New York, NY.

His publications include a photographic illustration of [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland \(1998\)](#) by Dutton Children's Books, [A Camera in a Room \(1995\)](#) by Smithsonian Press, [A Book of Books \(2002\)](#), a publication of Morell's photographs of books, introduced by Nicholson Baker and published by Bulfinch Press. Bulfinch Press has also published, [Camera Obscura \(2004\)](#), featuring sixty of Morell's camera obscura photographs and introduced by Luc Sante. Most recently, Phaidon Press released [Abelardo Morell \(2005\)](#), a retrospective work featuring 105 photographs and introduced by Richard Woodward.

Morell is a professor of art at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, MA .He lives in Brookline, MA, with his wife Lisa McElaney, a filmmaker, and his children Laura and Brady.

More information on his publications, upcoming exhibitions, articles and representation can be viewed at www.abelardomorell.net.