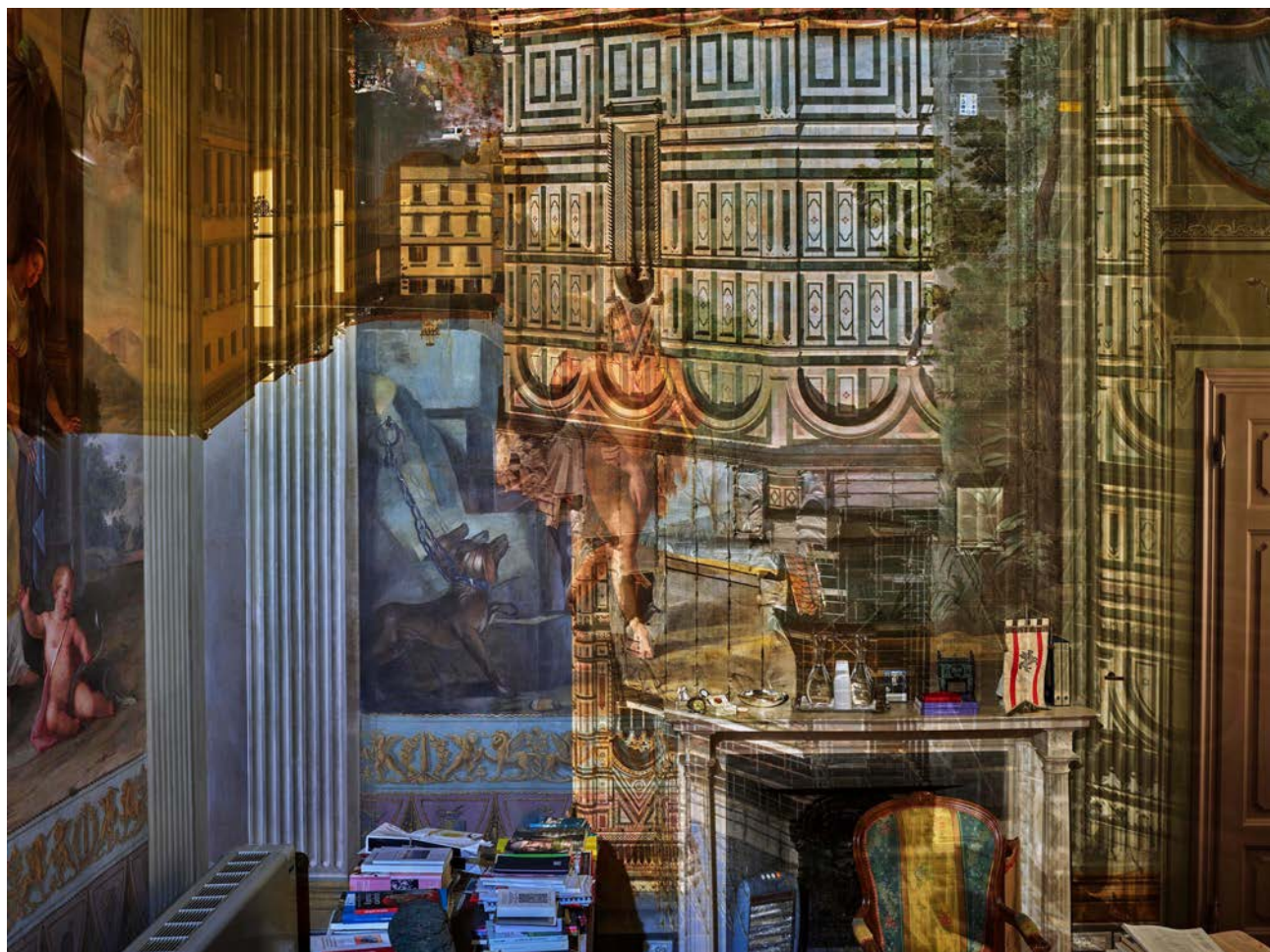


ABELARDO MORELL



LIMINAL SPACES

FOTO RELEVANCE HOUSTON TEXAS

MAY 26 - JULY 8, 2023

ABELARDO MORELL
LIMINAL SPACES

Cover Image: Abelardo Morell, Camera Obscura: View of the Florence Duomo in Tuscany President's Office in Palazzo Strozzi, Sacrali, Italy

Archival pigment print
45 x 60 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP

NOTES ON ABELARDO MORELL'S CAMERA OBSCURA

Liminal Spaces is a solo show from award-winning contemporary photographer Abelardo Morell. The exhibition spotlights Morell's critically acclaimed Camera Obscura works, featuring masterfully layered images of outdoor scenes organically projected onto quiet indoor scenes or intimate patches of nature. Liminal Spaces will be on view at Foto Relevance from May 26 through July 8, 2023.

Each of the 7 works featured in Liminal Spaces are captured using the camera obscura technique, a classic technique in Morell's works. Camera obscura, meaning "dark room" in Latin, can refer to a box-shaped device that operates by letting light in through a small opening on one side and projecting a reversed, inverted image on the other. The basic principle is a natural optical phenomenon where an image on one side of a wall (or screen) is projected through a hole onto a surface opposite the opening.¹

Foundational to the development of photography, camera obscura has been used throughout history as a scientific instrument to experiment with the properties of light. The earliest written record of the camera obscura theory can be found in the studies of Chinese philosopher Mozi (470 to 390 BCE). He recorded that the image in the camera obscura is flipped upside down, because light travels in straight lines from its source.¹ Leonardo da Vinci (1452 to 1519) published the first clear description of the camera obscura in Codex Atlanticus (1502), and suggested that the human eye works a lot like the camera obscura. Both have an opening (pupil), a biconvex lens for refracting light, and a surface where the image is formed (retina).¹ The first published illustration of camera obscura appeared in Gemma Frisius' book "De Radio Astronomica et Geometrica" in 1545.¹

Early camera obscura devices were quite large and consisted of a room or tent, and later, more portable variants were invented, such as wooden boxes with a lens or pinhole that could be moved to provide a focus, and a mirror that rotated images onto a screen where the image was projected- the basis for early photographic cameras.² Given its rich history, Morell's use of the camera obscura technique is inspired by his long fascination with the passage of time and how it can be captured through photographic mechanisms. Morell deftly balances a philosophical approach with a scientific rigor, and honoring a Modernist tradition, he continues to experiment, creating collages, cliché verre on glass, and for his camera obscura works, adapting a tent so that he can take the images outdoors. The effects of these images hark back to

¹ Taggart, Emma. 2022. "The History of Camera Obscura and How It Was Used as a Tool To Create Art in Perfect Perspective." My Modern Met

² Camera Obscura & World of Illusions. 2020. "What is a camera obscura?" Camera Obscura. <https://www.camera-obscura.co.uk/article/what-is-a-camera-obscura>.

Impressionist painting where famous vistas are juxtaposed with unexpected, nontraditional surfaces, a marriage of two outdoor realities.

Morell reimagines scenery by turning entire rooms into camera obscuras, effectively merging interior and exterior spaces and photographing the results, from the Florence Duomo in Italy to his bedroom in Quincy, Massachusetts. Moving beyond the traditional pinhole camera or tent processes, he is able to produce camera obscuras that have been captured in both indoor-indoor, outdoor-outdoor, and indoor-outdoor spaces, and expanding our definitions of the camera box, camera body, and subject. In an interview with SF MOMA, Morell says "Photography, like any other medium, can be an avenue to refreshing the world. I don't want to repeat just the same old views. I'm always trying to figure out new ways to look at stuff. And I think there's some embedded sense of hope in that. If you make the world interesting, if you make a paper bag look interesting, then the world is interesting."³ In Kaja Silverman's *Miracle of Analogy: The History of Photography Part 1*, Morell's work is cited, and Morell describes these interior-exterior encounters in camera obscuras as "couplings." "One of the satisfactions I get from making this imagery," he writes, "comes from my seeing the weird and yet natural marriage of the inside and outside."⁴

Morell's earlier work consisted of black and white camera obscuras, such as *Camera Obscura: The Cloisters at Lacock Abbey, England, 2003*, and *Camera Obscura: Courtyard Building, Lacock Abbey, England, 2003*. In 2005, Morell turned to producing camera obscura works in color and eventually incorporated technical refinements. He began to employ a diopter lens, an optical tool that significantly reduces exposure time and increases the brightness and sharpness of the image. For some pictures, he used a prism to change the orientation of his projections from upside down to right side up.⁵ Always intrigued with optics and how an image is constructed, Morell is known for photographs that transform and transcend the ordinary.⁶ "The spiritual aspect of my work has more to do with the sense that things in the world can be perceived and accepted as being in some respect alive. I try to approach everything that I photograph with this sense of wide-eyed awe."⁷ In Morell's own words, "Life is too big, too radiant and chaotic... Since we cannot afford to see Life directly, we all need a medium to enable us to see it." It is his tool to reveal the secret, and to make visible the invisible.

Long interested in what he calls "symbolic paper"— things like maps, money, and books—Morell became keenly attentive to their material qualities.⁵ The material quality of a map, money, and a book are all the same, given they are all made of paper. It is the contents, or symbols, on the paper that then create their value. The manipulated values of material are represented in his work *Paper Self, 2012*. He is also

³ SFMOMA, dir. 2019. *Abelardo Morell and the magic of camera obscura* - SFMOMA. San Francisco: n.p.

⁴ Silverman, Kaja. 2015. In *The Miracle of Analogy: Or The History of Photography, Part 1*, 1-45. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁵ J.Paul Getty Museum. 2013. "Abelardo Morell: The Universe Next Door (Getty Center Exhibitions)." Getty Museum. <https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/morell/creativity.html>.

⁶ Edwynn Houk Gallery. 2021. "Abelardo Morell: Changing Lanes | 30 November 2021 - 31 January 2022." Edwynn Houk Gallery. https://www.houkgallery.com/exhibitions/87-abelardo-morell-changing-lanes/press_release_text/

⁷ Morell, Abelardo. n.d. "Abelardo Morell Quote: The spiritual aspect of my work ha..." Love Expands

fascinated with photographing everyday objects; experimenting with ways to light them or set them in motion in order to usurp our familiarity with them.⁵

Finding a sense of magic in the mundane, wonder in the familiar has been a strong theme throughout Morell's career. When first experimenting with the camera obscura technique, Morell shared, "It felt like it was a revelation of the process. Keeping magic while showing the trick at the same time."⁵ Of his more recent works, he says "Ultimately, I hope that everything I have made and continue to make is part of an expanding arc where early works from youth show up dressed differently, in a new body, with a new voice."⁸

The capacity to find the beauty in one's home became increasingly relevant during the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As many Americans transitioned to working from home or lost their jobs entirely, new definitions of home and work emerged. Morell's refreshingly optimistic, spirited view on creativity in the home is inspiring. In an interview with curator Elizabeth Seigel from Art Institute Chicago, Morell shares some of his artistic wisdom with us:

Liz: Do you have any advice for people hoping to be creative in constricted circumstances?

Abe: Well, the trick is not to feel confined. My space shrinks and expands according to my mind and picture ideas. But limits are helpful. Think of how many works of art have been made in tiny unheated studios (and often when the artist is hungry)! I find it interesting, when I'm stuck, to put an object such as an apple on a table and then look for a while. I guarantee that activity will start in your brain and eyes.⁸

...

Morell also shares strategies for reimagining "normal" spaces, in response to Seigel's question about how his creative lens changed after the birth of his son, Brady:⁸

Liz: At first, you started trying to imagine how Brady was looking at the world, with the eyes of a child; you saw how the domestic environment could be thrilling or terrifying.

Abe: What touched my imagination radically was discovering how "normal" objects seen from the new perspectives of the ground changed my perception and vision of them. From the floor, for instance, a sofa is not what one thinks of a sofa exactly—it's stranger and monster-like! Imagine what a baby sees! A door becomes alive in countless ways. Typically, adults don't spend time sitting on the ground—it's not that useful or practical, but artistically it's really beneficial and wonderful: I recommend it!

⁸ Siegel, Elizabeth. 2020. "In Conversation: Abelardo Morell Explores the Universe in His Home | The Art Institute of Chicago." Art Institute of Chicago. <https://www.artic.edu/articles/835/in-conversation-abelardo-morell-explores-the-universe-in-his-home>.



Abelardo Morell
Camera Obscura: Courtyard Building, Lacock Abbey, England
Archival pigment print
18 x 22 1/2 " • Edition of 30 + 4 AP



Abelardo Morell
Camera Obscura: The Cloisters at Lacock Abbey, England
Archival pigment print
18 x 22 1/2 " • Edition of 30 + 4 AP



Abelardo Morell

Camera Obscura: Garden with Olive Tree Inside Room with Plants, Outside Florence, Italy

Archival pigment print
48 x 60 " • Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell

Tent-Camera Image on Ground: View of the Golden Gate Bridge from Battery Yates

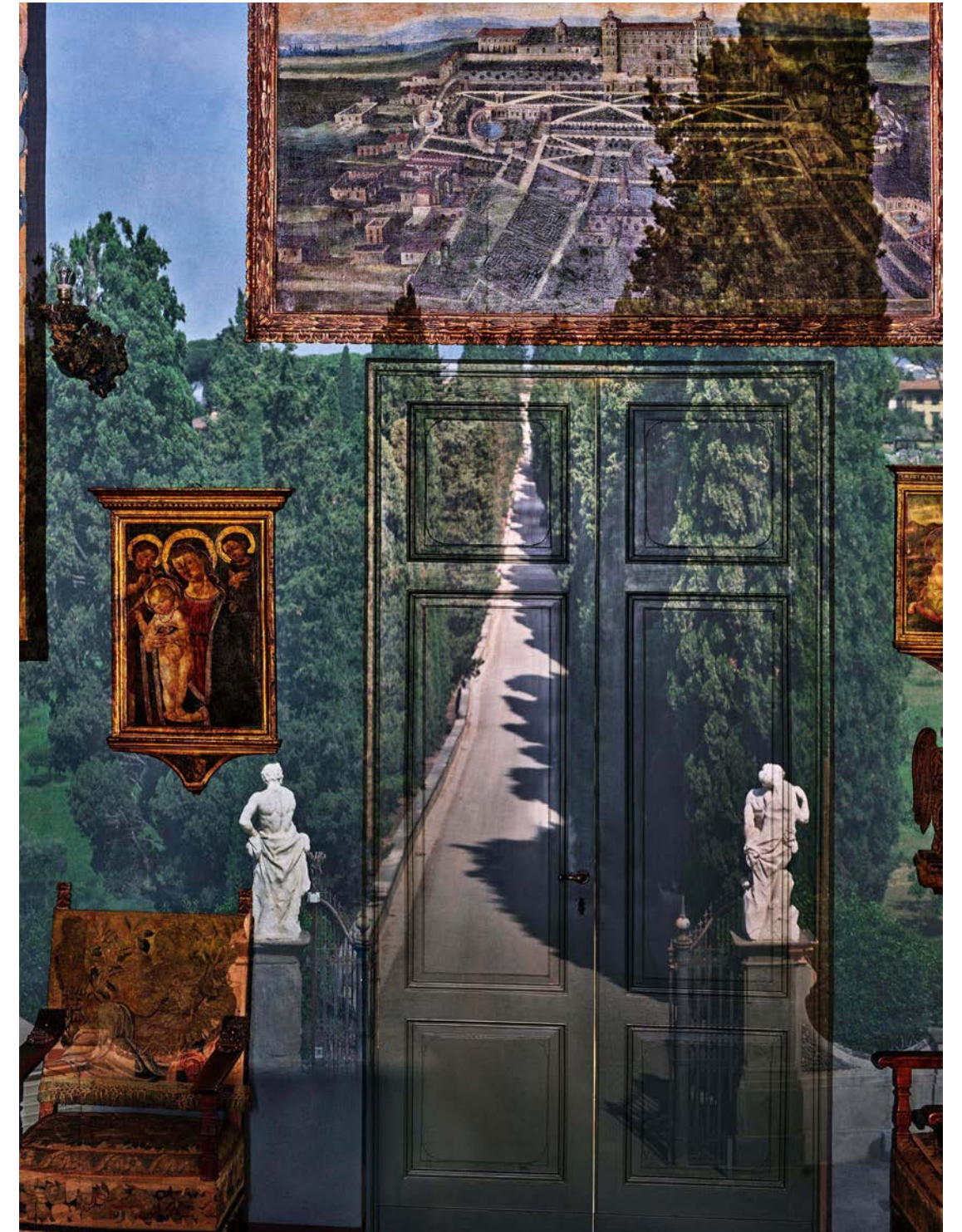
Archival pigment print
45 x 60 " • Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell

Camera Obscura: View of the Florence Duomo in Tuscany President's Office in Palazzo Strozzi, Sacrati, Italy

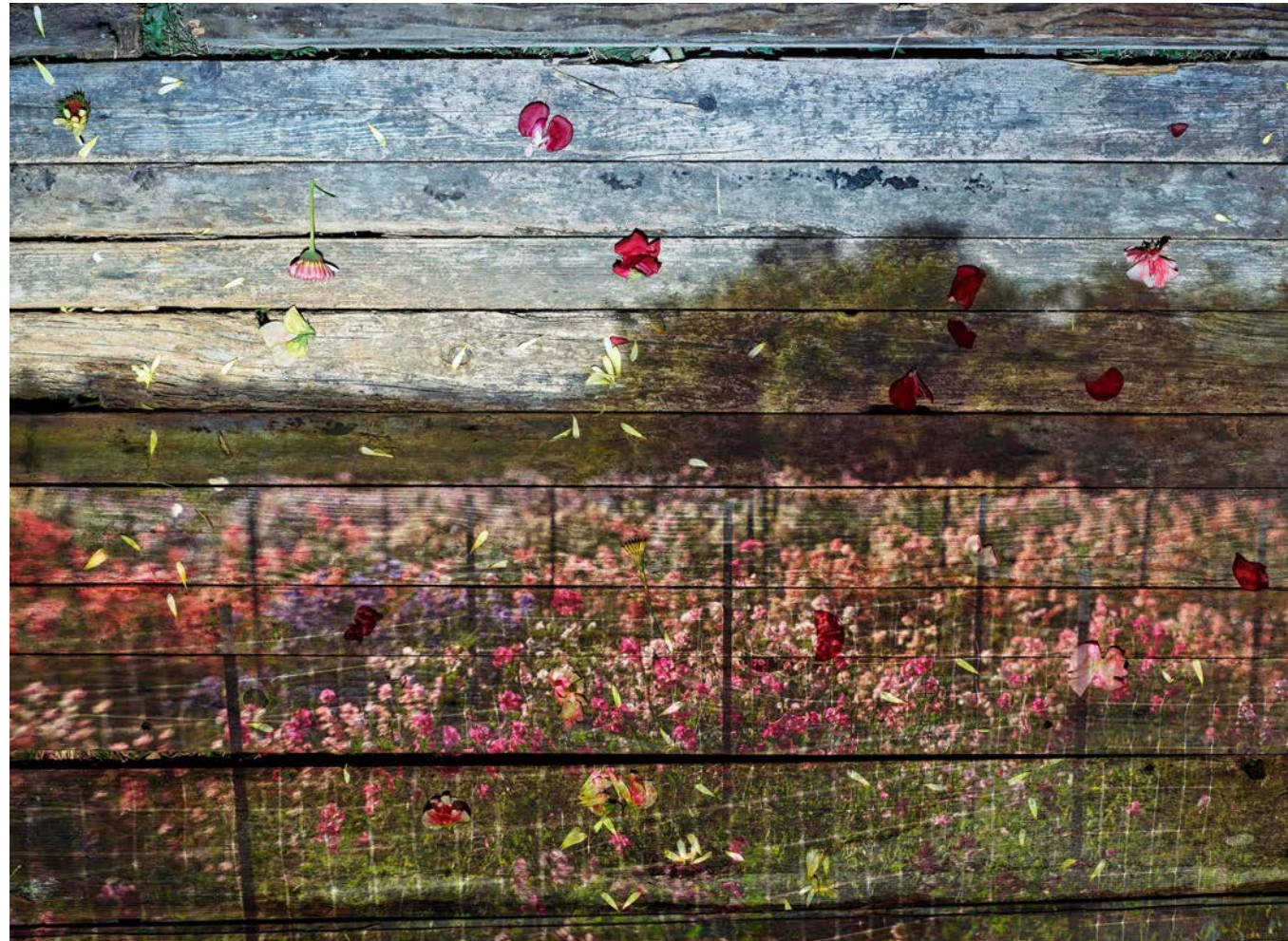
Archival pigment print
45 x 60 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell

Camera Obscura: View of Villa Entrance in Blue Gallery, Villa la Pietra, Florence, Italy

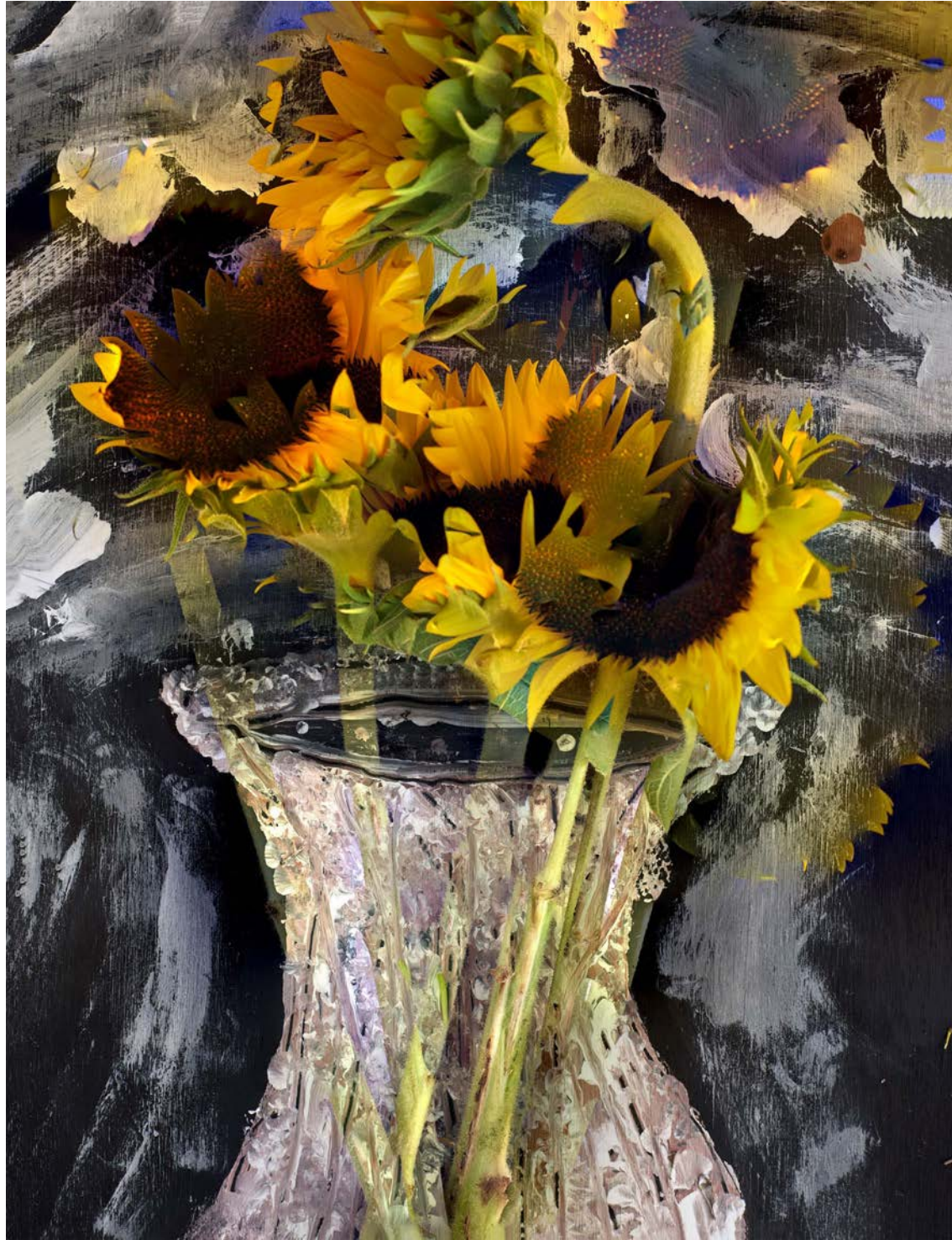
Archival pigment print
60 x 44 1/2 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



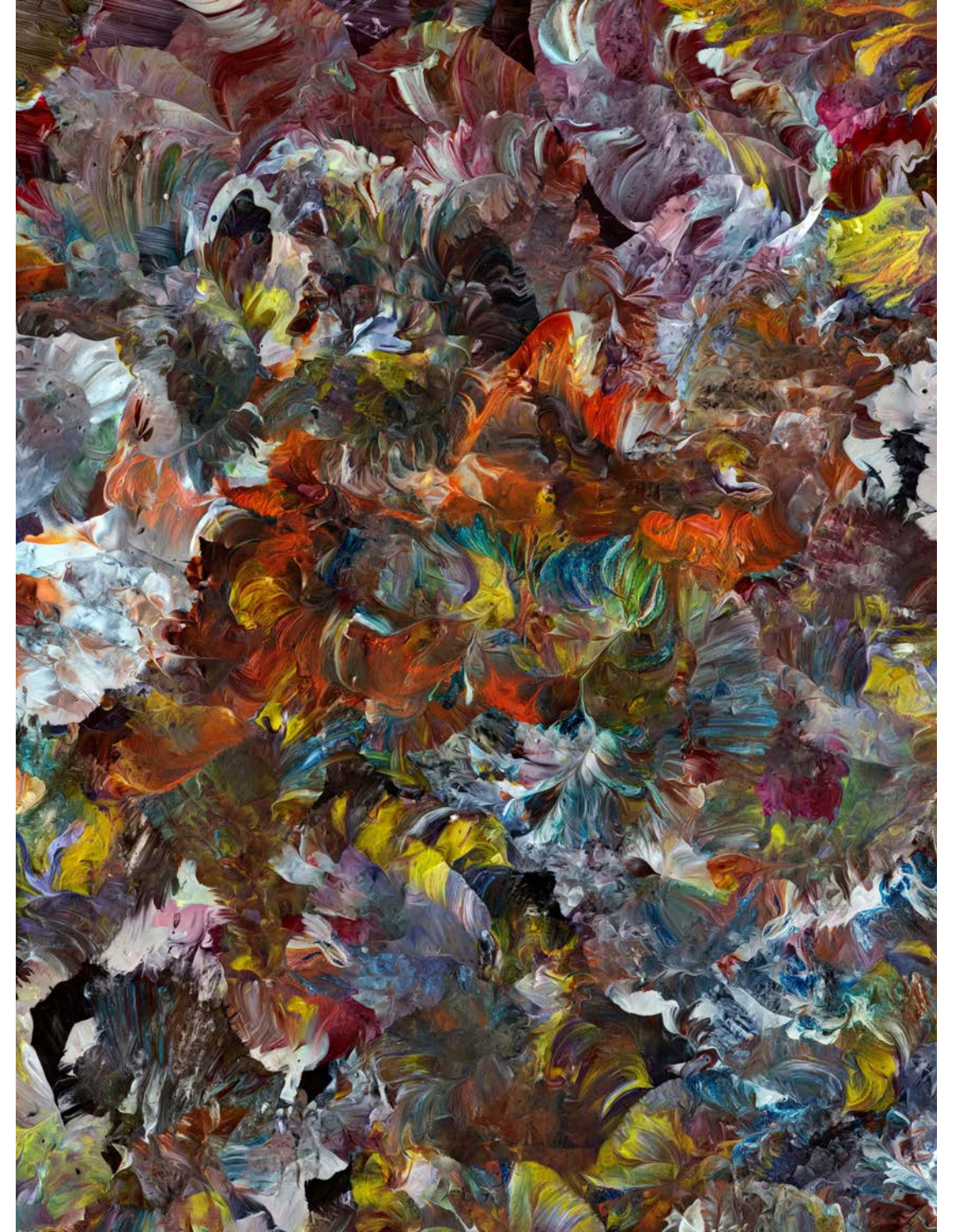
Abelardo Morell
Flowers for Lisa #49 - Tent-Camera Image on Ground: Floret Flower Farm
Archival pigment print
22 1/2 x 30 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



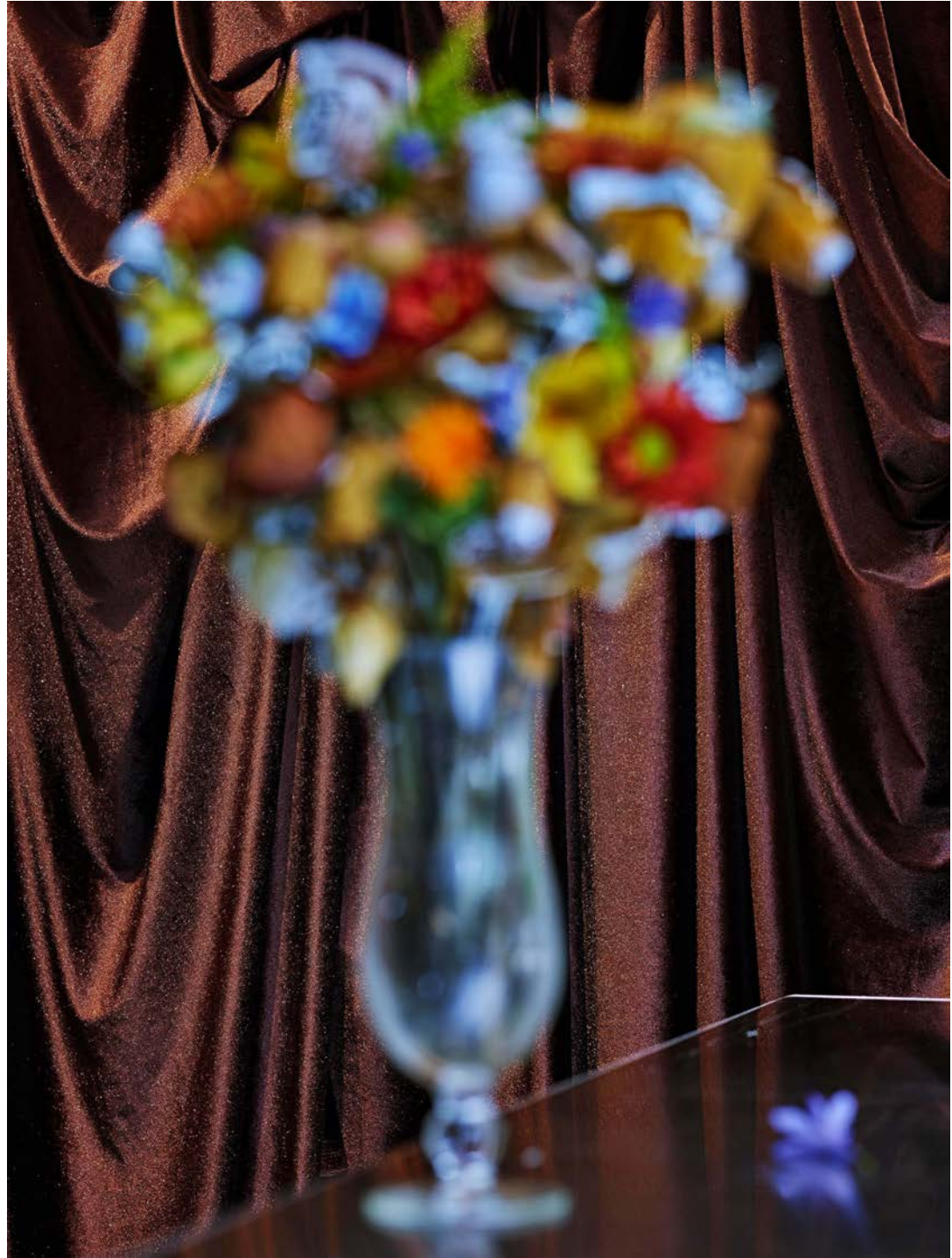
Abelardo Morell
Tent-Camera Image on Ground: View of Monet's Gardens with Wheelbarrow, Giverny, France
Archival pigment print
45 x 60 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Flowers for Lisa #23 - Four Sunflowers
Archival pigment print
40 x 30 5/8" • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Paint #5
Archival pigment print
30 x 22 1/2" • Edition of 5 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Flowers for Lisa #70 - After Douglas Sirk
Archival pigment print
30 x 22 1/2 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



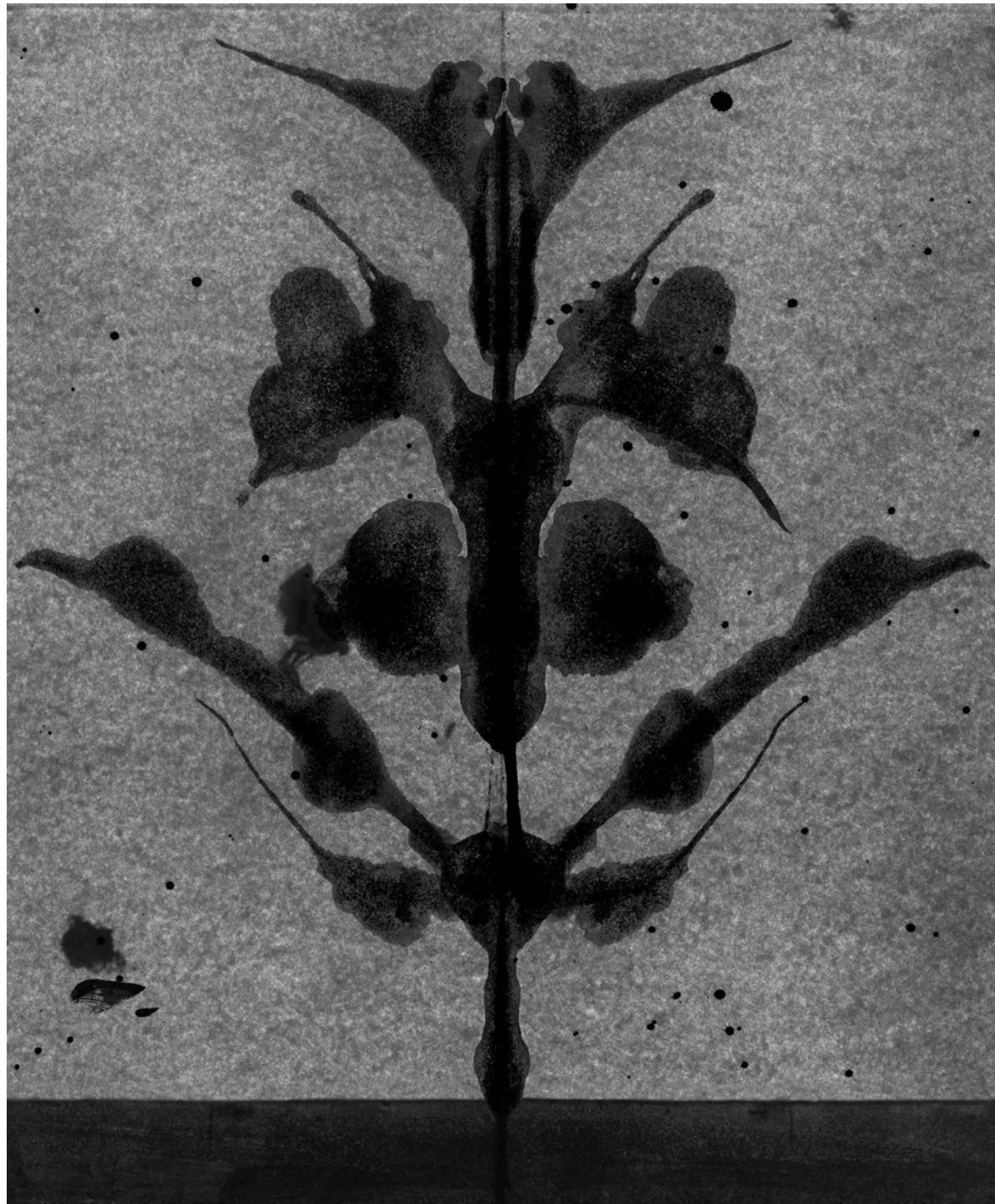
Abelardo Morell
Flowers for Lisa #55
Archival pigment print
30 x 22 1/2 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Camera Obscura: Early Morning View of the East Side of Midtown Manhattan
Archival pigment print
22 1/2 x 30 " • Edition of 5 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Camera Obscura: Late Afternoon View of the East Side of Midtown Manhattan
Archival pigment print
22 1/2 x 30 " • Edition of 5 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Flowers for Lisa #60
Archival pigment print
30 x 24 3/4 " • Edition of 10 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Paper Self
Archival pigment print
60 x 45 " • Edition of 4 + 2 AP



Abelardo Morell
Tent-Camera Image on Ground: Two Paths in Monet's Gardens, Giverny, France

Archival pigment print
16 1/2 x 44 " • Edition of 5 + 2 AP

ABELARDO MORELL

Abelardo Morell was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948. He immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1962. Morell received his undergraduate degree from Bowdoin College and his MFA from The Yale University School of Art. He has received an honorary degree from Bowdoin College in 1997 and from Lesley University in 2014. He was professor of Photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston from 1983 to 2010.

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) and *Camera Obscura* (2004) by Bulfinch Press and *Abelardo Morell* (2005), published by Phaidon Press. *The Universe Next Door* (2013), published by The Art Institute of Chicago. *Tent-Camera* (2018), published by Nazraeli Press. *Flowers for Lisa* (2018), published by Abrams Books.

He has received a number of awards and grants, which include a Guggenheim fellowship in 1994 and an Infinity Award in Art from ICP in 2011. In November 2017, he received a Lucie Award for achievement in fine art. 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 and several other museums in the United States and abroad. A retrospective of his work organized jointly by the Art Institute of Chicago, The Getty in Los Angeles and The High Museum in Atlanta closed in May 2014 after a year of travel. Most recently, his work was included in the exhibition *Ansel Adams in Our Time*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

FOTO RELEVANCE

Since 2016, Foto Relevance cofounders Geoffrey C. Koslov and Bryn Larsen have focused on the exhibition and acquisition of museum quality contemporary fine art photography and photography-based work. Joined by Suzanne Zeller in 2019 who leads the program as Assistant Director, Foto Relevance is dedicated to providing a platform for an innovative selection of American and international photographic artists pushing the boundaries of photography. The gallery has mounted monographic exhibitions as well as group shows to investigate current trends and themes in contemporary art, showcasing a broad range of both darkroom and digital photographic techniques. In addition to promoting the work of artists, Foto Relevance provides guidance, educating individual collectors and corporations in the acquisition and sale of art. Foto Relevance is a member of the Houston Art Gallery Association (HAGA). The gallery is located in the historic Museum District of Houston, Texas.