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Hiroshi Sugimoto, *English Channel, Fecamp*, 1989, gelatin silver print. Purchased through a gift from the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation; PH.994.38.1.

CHECKLIST

Abelardo Morell, American, born 1948
Camera Obscura Image of La Giraldilla de la Habana in Room under Construction (Camera Obscura Image of La Giraldilla de la Habana in Room with Broken Wall), 2002, gelatin silver print
(mounted on aluminum support)
Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker 1958 Acquisition Fund, the Contemporary Art Fund, the William S. Rubin Fund, and the Fund for Contemporary Photography; PH.2003.71

Matthew Pillsbury, American, born 1973
George Spencer, Seducing the Babysitter, Tuesday, April 1, 2003, 11–12 am, negative: April 1, 2003 (11–12 AM), print: 2005, pigment ink print
Gift of Maggie Hunt, Class of 1978; 2005.10

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Japanese, born 1948
English Channel, Fecamp, 1989, gelatin silver print
Purchased through a gift from the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation; PH.994.38.1

Hiroshi Sugimoto, Japanese, born 1948
Marmara Sea, Silivli, 1991, gelatin silver print
Purchased through a gift from the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation; PH.994.38.2

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Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of La Giraldilla de la Habana in Room under Construction (Camera Obscura Image of La Giraldilla de la Habana in room with Broken Wall)*, 2002, gelatin silver print. Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker 1958 Acquisition Fund, the Contemporary Art Fund, the William S. Rubin Fund, and the Fund for Contemporary Photography; PH.2003.71.

ESCAPING THE MOMENT Seeing Time in Photography



Matthew Pillsbury, *George Spencer, Seducing the Babysitter, Tuesday, April 1, 2003, 11–12 am*, negative April 1, 2003 (11–12 a.m.), print 2005, pigment ink print. Gift of Maggie Hunt, Class of 1978; 2005.10.

According to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, it was behind the cages of the Salpêtrière insane asylum in the late nineteenth century that photography was instrumentalized as a truth machine *and* a time machine. He writes that the mad patients, once captured on film, become manifest in

a certainty, which in the always intersubjective moment of sight, emerges only as a theft, and as anticipated; this is to say that it also *denies the time that engenders it, denies memory and threat*, inventing itself as a victory over time . . . *It invents itself as an instantaneity and efficiency of seeing*, although seeing has a terrible duration, a single moment of hesitation in efficiency. (27)

The weakness of human sight—its flickering hesitation and intermittent inattentiveness—gives way to the verity of the apparatus's machinic capture. *Photo-graphia*: one writes the light of reality, burning it into film. With

these qualities, photography is still often said to be about holding on to lost moments. Photographic perception thus teaches the viewer to see the world through such “moments of arrival and departure, moments to remember, moments to experience” (Sutton 71). Arguably it is through this kind of rhetoric that the lived and remembered experience of modernity is constructed, with an emphasis on the “now” that holds the potential to become part of photography's archival memory of moments.

Contemporary conceptual photography often challenges these assumptions. Rather than presenting an idea of linear and homogenous time from which the moment can be extracted, these works show multiple flows of time itself. They remind the viewer that photography's “timelessness”—time embalmed on a surface—does not negate its ability to carry forth a sense of duration and memory. Time itself can be seen in the photographs, as they reveal the complexities and different intensities of temporal experience in relation to themes of memory, technology, and nature.

Abelardo Morell's *Camera Obscura Image of La Giraldilla de la Habana in Room Under Construction* (2003) appears to stage a genealogical return to the early photographic apparatus known as the camera obscura. An upside-down view of the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, produced by a small stream of light entering through a small hole on the opposite side of the box, is shown projected onto a wall. This idea of the dark room as camera obscura recalls how it was used for philosophers like René Descartes and scientists like Isaac Newton, for whom it proved how empirical observation, aided by technology, can lead to truthful inferences about the world (Crary 3). Yet Morell subverts this expectation by showing the strangeness of it all. Indeed, the camera does not lie, but the vision that it produces is anything but human. To achieve focus and clarity, the large-format film he used had to be exposed for over ten hours (Morell 105). Such is the fundamental incommensurability of time lost and time regained in producing a photograph, where the culminating moment of truth at the end conceals the long process of its coming-to-light. One is led to forget ten silent hours spent in the dark, as the photographer waits for vision to make its appearance.

The play of temporality and memory metaphorizes Morell's own negotiations with the history depicted in the photograph. A native of Cuba, Morell and his family fled for New York during Fidel Castro's purges of 1962. Upon his return to Havana for the first time in 1999, Morell recalled grappling with feelings of both pride and indignation, as he slowly came to terms with the formation of his hybrid cultural identity. In the shadow of this traumatic personal and social history, Morell's photograph appears as a meditation on the meanings of the past layered upon the present image of Cuba: an impossible coming together of the legacy of old Cuba (symbolized by the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, the oldest surviving stone fortress in the Americas), the fraught construction of the modern Cuban state (symbolized by the broken wall), and Morell himself as a contemporary “Cuban” emigrant.

The flatness of the wall and photographic surface is made to signify an implicit temporal depth. Only by waiting “in light” of some three decades was Morrell finally able to return to Cuba to “contemplate new realities under the half-light of things remembered.” And only with time and distance—time spent in exile, and distance from home—was Morrell able to crystallize this broken image of the past.

Where the photographic apparatus allows Morell to explore the time of remembrance and reconstruction, it reveals a time of forgetting for Matthew Pillsbury in *George Spencer, Seducing the Babysitter, Tuesday, April 1, 2003, 11–12 am* (2003). Unlike photographs that isolate a frame of the televised moving image to lend impact to the frozen moment, Spencer instead shows the incessant flow of visual information through the light on the television screen, which, over an hour, dissolves into a homogenous white light. Information itself becomes the dominating presence in the photograph, while the man's presence is seen only in a blur. Such is the condition of today's media age. Spectatorial viewing allows one to not be fully “in time” but instead lapse into a sleepiness that dissolves the background flicker of the television into light. Pillsbury's photograph visualizes this mediated temporality of man and machine, where time flows on homogeneously without intensities of attention or affective experience.

The tension between photographic stasis, temporality, and lived experience explored in the context of the contemporary by Morell and Pillsbury is taken to a more fundamental level in Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs. Sugimoto has said that the image of the sea is “an early example of a human naming something outside the world inside himself” (Brouger). His photographs return the viewer to the origin of a scopic desire to compress the infinite expanse and flow of water into discrete images—cropped and framed—that allow their naming and recognition. In this process, the abstract sea becomes fixed to a certain time and place, and the photograph is made into a representation of a name. But at the same time, taken as a series, Sugimoto's photographs thwart this movement toward localization: time flows among them and allows them to be read cinematically, as the story of a timeless sea that has been liberated from the photographic moment.

Together, these photographs stage the fragmentation of the “moment” into multiple temporalities. They can help remind us that a photograph need not represent truth about a certain time or place but can reveal to us experiential truths about the nature of time itself.

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