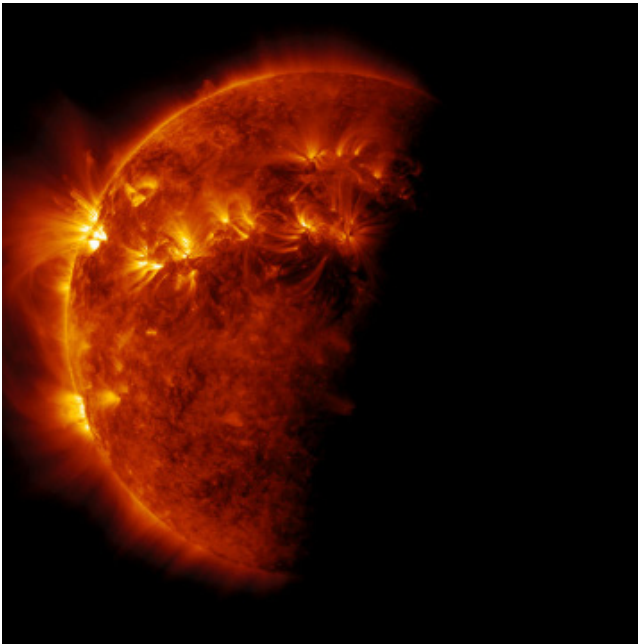


The New York Times

A Scrapbook of Our Relationship With the Universe



In her excellent 2011 collection, “Life on Mars,” the poet Tracy K. Smith writes of “seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on at twilight.” That’s the kind of wonder I felt as Michael Benson’s “Planetfall” carried me away.

Mr. Benson is a filmmaker, writer and photographer who specializes in letting the reader reach escape velocity from the terrestrial comfort of an easy chair. His previous books — both from Abrams — include “Beyond: Visions of the Interplanetary Probes” (2003) and “Far Out: A Space-Time Chronicle” (2009).

His goal in “Planetfall,” he writes, is to present “a retrospective look at the visual legacy of 21st-century space exploration.” Mr. Benson reminds us that it has been just 50 years since the first spacecraft waltzed with another planet, when an American Mariner probe dipped past Venus in December 1962. He then takes us on an interplanetary pleasure cruise that stretches from the Sun to Saturn. All retrospectives, art and otherwise, should shock us awake the way this one does.

In a sense, Mr. Benson has scrapbooked an up-to-date album of our solar system using mostly primary-image data from NASA and European Space Agency missions from 2000 to 2012. And so, among dozens of striking images, we’re privileged to see Earthrise on the Moon and the restless sand seas of Mars; sunspots in bloom and the cryptic moons of Jupiter; and the rings of Saturn looking like the cosmic grooves of a very long-playing album.

Mr. Benson’s first definition of the word planetfall is “the act or instance of sighting a planet after a space voyage.” And one of the delights here is that the reader makes planetfall too, joining the community of camera-bearing, spacefaring robots and their human handlers.

But the dynamics of observing are complex. In these photos we’re not just gazing at lunar barrens and the dunes and lakes of Titan, a moon of Saturn, but also, in a sense, looking at ourselves, turning the solar system into a mirror of human achievement.

The subtext of these images is our guts and intelligence as a species able to secure such photographs, in willing ourselves into outer space. We weren’t invited to the vast celestial prom, but we went anyway. From ancient times, the cosmos have colonized our inner space, but now we can abandon land rovers on Mars, blithely building our very own Martian junkyards.

Getting at that tension, Mr. Benson quotes the theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg to good effect: “We have to remember that what we see is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” In a book full of startling photographs — I gasped at the images of the Sun, the heat rising off the page making me feel as if something inside me were melting — the one that stunned me the most was taken in November 2006 by the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter of frosted southern dunes on Mars in winter.

In a three-page gatefold spread those dunes are as lush as an Edward Weston bodyscape and make me want to shout Cézanne, Picasso, Tanguy all at once. But this abstract and alien Mars-scape is real, not a bug-eyed monster in sight.

“Planetfall” is a book of science through and through, but it also deepens our sense of the miracle and the mystery of the universe, of our eye-blink lives. We’re all bundled in bewilderment on this little blue bungalow between Mars and Venus, but Mr. Benson has given us a cozy front porch, a fine place from which to watch Ms. Smith’s high beams of a million galaxies.