

Photos Reveal Stunning Perspectives of Space

Images taken by manned spacecraft, robotic space probes

Susan Logue Koster | Washington, DC 26 May 2010

For decades, the U.S. space agency, NASA, has been exploring space not only with manned spacecraft, like the shuttle Atlantis, but with robotic space probes like Mars Odyssey and Cassini, which is currently exploring Saturn.

Equipped with powerful cameras, these robots transmit pictures that provide information about the climate and topography of other planets.

They are also works of art.

Especially in the hands of photographer Michael Benson. "Beyond: Visions of Our Solar System," a new exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. features nearly 150 of Benson's transformed photographs.

Space curator

Some images in "Beyond" are immediately recognizable, like Saturn with its rings, the fiery red, orange and yellow ball of the sun, and the rocky red Martian landscape. Others look like magnified microscopic organisms rather than planetary panoramas.

Benson selected the images from five decades of robotic space probe photography, beginning with the lunar orbiters of the 1960s to probes that are still sending images back to Earth today from Saturn and Mars.



NASA; JPL; PIRL; University of Arizona; Kinetikon Pictures
Io, one of Jupiter's moons, is the most volcanic object known to man, with at least 200 constantly erupting volcanoes.

abstraction. I like pictures that subvert expectation a little bit."

Works of art

He turned raw images into gallery-ready prints

The images taken by the space probes are often low-contrast, with some digital glitches that appear as black spots.

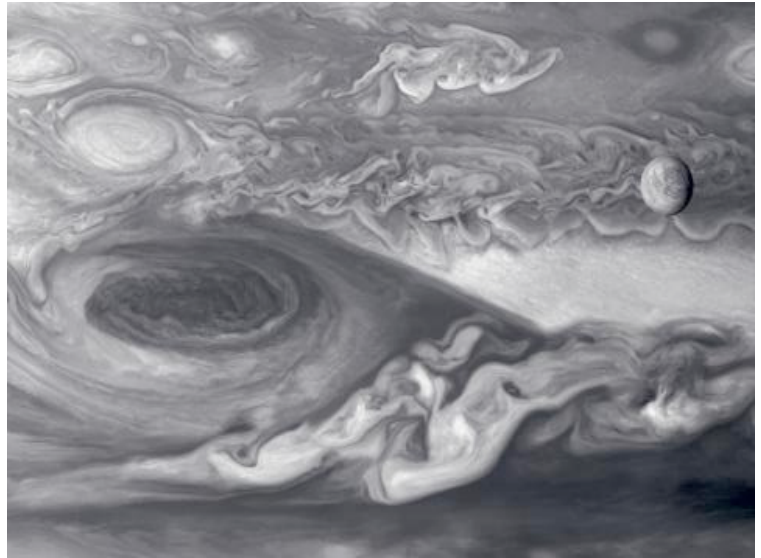


Photo: NASA; JPL; Kinetikon Pictures

Europa (upper right) is one of Jupiter's moons. Jupiter's Great Red Spot (left) is a vast cyclonic storm system about two times the size of Earth.

Benson used graphic software to clean them up and filters to correct the color. Several of the photographs in the exhibit were also pieced together like a mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, including one of a global dust storm on Mars.

"It is comprised of about 90 individual frames from the Viking orbiter of the late 70s, early 80s. And I'm particularly proud of it, because it would not exist in anything like this form if I hadn't found the individual frames as I was going through all of these hundreds of thousands," says Benson.

He is also proud of a black-and-white image made up of 90 frames taken by Voyager I, which began photographing Jupiter in 1979.

On the right hand side, Europa, one of the planet's moons, stands out crisp and clear against impressionistic swirling clouds that are reminiscent of Van Gogh's "Starry Night."

"Europa is one of the most enigmatic places in the solar system," he says. "It is an ice covered ocean. Underneath is liquid water, and it is one of the leading candidates for extraterrestrial life."

Not all of the images are extraterrestrial.

"You can see sand blowing into the Mediterranean from the vast desert in North Africa, the Sahara," says Benson. "You can see smoke from burning forests here in the southern Adriatic sea blowing into the Mediterranean."

Virtual voyager

It's not just the power of the image that appeals to Benson, though. It is knowing that, in this part of the world, the idea of exploration took root.

"You know [Homer's] 'Odyssey,' which is the original expression of our yearning to adventure and travel around, okay, in this case, islands, but it's a precursor of space flight I would say."

Although Benson hasn't traveled into space, he says working on the exhibit was the next best thing. "At times I almost felt like I was on one of these voyages."

While "Beyond: Visions of Our Solar System," will run for a year, NASA's space probes will continue to take photos of our celestial neighbors for many years to come.