

From Beyond

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A new exhibition of awe-inspiring photos from the first 50 years of planetary exploration.

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After half a century exploring the solar system with robot spacecraft, we may not have discovered life, but we have found beauty. That was not the original intent, of course. The first spacecraft dispatched to the outer solar system, Pioneers 10 and 11, didn't even carry proper cameras. But if aesthetics was never our purpose, all of us have benefited from the remarkable pictures returned by the likes of Mariner, Viking, Voyager, and Cassini.

In his handsome 2003 book, *Beyond*, New York-based writer, filmmaker, and photographer Michael Benson showcased some of the best of these images, which will be on display in a year-long exhibition opening this month at the National Air and Space Museum. Called "Beyond: Visions of Our Solar System," the exhibit features 148 high-resolution planetary photographs, many of them assembled from individual frames into large mosaics for the first time.

Benson sifted through thousands of photographs dating back to the 1960s, looking for scenes of grandeur and intricate detail, from the rings of Saturn to the dunes of Mars. Aside from their visual appeal, the selection serves as a good guide to the past 50 years of planetary exploration. See the gallery at right for a sample of images from the exhibit, which opens May 26.

Pictured: Part of South America and Antarctica are sunlit in a crescent Earth photographed by Rosetta during a November 12, 2009 flyby.

Note: Michael Benson will be signing copies of his books at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. on May 29.