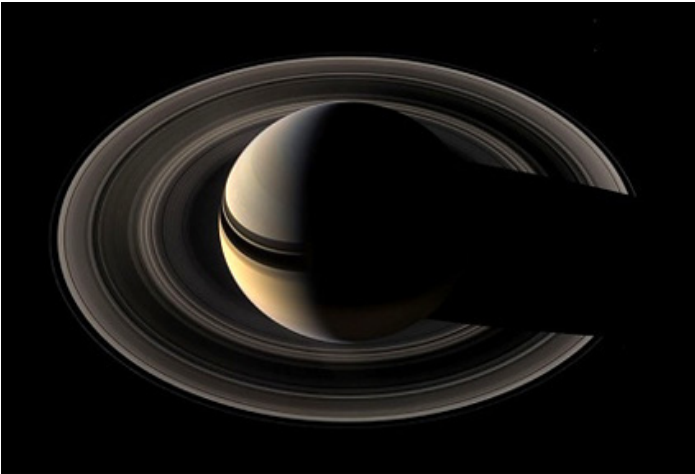


Planetfall



Human imagination has been soaring into the heavens for millions of years, but it wasn't until 1961 that Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin actually left Earth's atmosphere. Between 1969 and 1972 twelve Americans walked on the moon, but that's as far as human bodies ever got. Increasingly, in recent years, space travel has meant virtual ride-alongs on remotely-piloted robotic spacecraft with engineered senses. It is from these otherworldly robots that writer-photographer Michael Benson mined visual data for his powerful exhibit, "Planetfall," at Hasted-Kraeutler.

To show the solar system "...through the lens of art," Benson used raw frames culled from NASA and European Space Station missions from 2000 to 2012 (astonishingly, all spacecraft data is free and stored on the internet.) "It's all online. I browse from home," Benson says of his method. He curated by "...sifting through tens of thousands of raw frames – in effect panning for gold." Next came image processing, compositing and mosaicing to make the final photographs.

It's no surprise that "Planetfall's" images are technically extraordinary. Some of the pictures of Mars, for instance, were made with NASA's HIRISE camera, which has a 19.7-inch aperture, allowing it to render images of one foot per pixel. Such cameras create images that astonish, not only because they really exist but also because they seem impossible (or faked). The show's images of Saturn's rings, for example, have a rigid, abstract geometric precision that makes them appear to be machines. On the other hand, Io, Jupiter's highly volcanic fifth moon, looks like a hunk of pocked and mouldy yellow cheese.

But science is only the beginning here. Without some emotional content most of the pictures in this show would amount to little more than strongly-lit dead rocks or migrating cauldrons of swirling gas. Benson's art is to make the distant, inhospitable places in our solar system seem accessible, if not to human travelers, then at least to a viewer's feelings. One way he does this is to emphasize universal commonalities – shapes, colors, gravitational logic, the behavior of wind, light, fire and so on. We see how alien it is out there — but it's not so alien we can't feel connected.

Benson explains this approach with a quote from theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg: "We have to remember that what we see is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."

In "Eclipse of the Sun by the Earth," for instance, an orangey-red hemisphere of sun emerges from Earth's shadow literally boiling —in fact, half-exploding — with heat. From the writhing gases on the sun's surface, hellish flowers seem to be blooming, their centers blazing with incandescent yellows. A viewer is hard-pressed not to back away from this ferocious image. And this is not just a reaction to its imagined heat. This sun appears to be in a violent rage. We can feel its uncontrolled wrath. There is danger in this wrath – and beauty too. We can glimpse why ancient people gave such strong personalities to their god-planets and stars.

Michael Benson, "Northern View of Saturn and the Darker Side of the Rings, Cassini May 9, 2007, 2012" 2012

It's interesting that Benson finds very different metaphors in his pictures of Earth's nearest sibling, Mars. The planet's red rock and sand deserts, barren valleys and far-off ranges of low hills are not so different from views found on our own planet. Thus Benson's "Sunset on Mars" is weirdly familiar, even with its tiny, distant sun and magenta-tinted atmosphere.

Why, I wondered, is this Martian sunset so much more melancholy than any I've seen on Earth? Perhaps it's because this and the other Martian photographs in the show seem to bear out a mood detectable in our long-standing obsessive fantasies about vanished civilizations on the Red Planet. The NASA photographs are detailed; they show no canals. Yet the Mars in these pictures seems spent, desolated; its time over; its ripeness gone. Something must have happened ...

Here I'm in mythical territory, of course. But perhaps I'm not being whimsical. Could the cautionary feel of the Mars pictures reveal an aspect of Benson's curatorial intentions? Here's a piece of evidence. My favorite picture in "Planetfall," titled "Sun on the Pacific," shows a softly curving Earth horizon pushed up against an inky black crescent of space. When I first gazed at this picture's large-scale print on the wall, I felt oddly weightless, a speck floating dreamlike above blue and pink clouds that framed a golden gleam of sunlight on a peaceful ocean. And then I realized my point of view – Benson's chosen point of view — was a spaceship cruising the last leg of its homeward journey. And the Earth had never looked more beautiful.

More evidence. In a recent interview Michael Benson said the following: "I've looked at thousands of images [of Earth] from space over the last few months, and many images show evidence of planetary distress. For instance you can see smoke filling the air of the entire continent of South America due to the burn off of jungles. My view is that an honest look at the early twenty-first century solar system needs to include visual evidence of climate change here on the third planet.