



ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Images of the Planets, In Spectacular Detail

An Exhibition of 59 Digitally
Processed Photographs From Four
Decades of Robotic Space Missions

People are endlessly fascinated with space, perhaps because we know so little about it. Seeing the range and beauty of the photographs assembled for "Beyond: Visions of Planetary Landscapes" at the Monmouth Museum will probably serve only to amplify that fascination. There are pictures of golden sand dunes on Mars, gaseous storms swirling on Neptune and fiery eruptions of the sun.

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Each of the 59 photographs making their national touring debut here shows a planet or its moons in our solar system captured using high-magnification zoom cameras. The images, among those collected during four decades of robotic space missions, were selected and digitally processed into large-format photographs by the artist Michael Benson.

A number of the photographs are digitally manipulated or composites of several original images. A photograph may have been colored by the artist, or several images may have been combined to create a panorama. The artist has enhanced the appearance of the photographs, perhaps in an effort to clarify them, or to present their aesthetic beauty.

The original images come primarily from NASA and European Space Agency missions. The artist used planetary databases from these missions for the source material, in particular NASA's Southern Europe Regional Planetary Image Facility, which is in Rome (perhaps an appropriate location, since

"Beyond: Visions of Planetary Landscapes," Monmouth Museum, Brookdale Community College, 765 Newman Springs Road, Lincroft, through May 4. Information: (732) 747-2266 or www.monmouthmuseum.org.



most of the planets in our solar system are named after Roman gods).

Spectacular is a good way to describe these images. Take a photograph from 1999 of a semicircular cross-section of Jupiter's moon, Io. The detail is amazing, so much so that you can see an 80-mile-high volcanic plume of smoke and debris shooting into space somewhere above the Pillan Patera volcano on the moon. Io is one of the more exotic planetary landscapes in our solar system. It is intensely volcanic, the landscape covered with lava flows, lakes, and craters.

The surprises keep on coming, like a close-up view of the Mare Orientale, a 200-mile-wide impact crater on the moon. In another photograph, shot by the rover Spirit on May 19, 2005, an eerie blue-green sunset glows in a wide circle above the rim of the Gusev Crater on Mars. The sky itself is a red-pink color, a celestial phenomenon caused by dust suspended at a high altitude in the planet's atmosphere (and, according to NASA, by the filter combination used).

It is an astonishing sight, like nothing I have ever seen.

An entertaining combination of extreme close-ups of exotic planets and moons and wide-angle views for perspective is evident as you make your way through the show, which reaches its zenith in "Saturn," a photograph captured on Oct. 6, 2004, by the space probe Cassini. It is the most detailed view of Saturn ever seen, showing the planet casting a long shadow over one side of its ethereal rings.

For a satisfying contrast, viewers might compare it with a black-and-white photograph dating from March 3, 1979, taken during the Voyager 1 mission, of Jupiter's Great Red Spot, with the orbiting moon Europa, slightly smaller than Earth's moon, visible to the top right. Jupiter, one of the largest planets in the solar system, appears as a morass of swirling gaseous clouds. It looks wild and dangerous in comparison with Saturn's image of relative tranquillity.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NASA/MICHAEL BENSON/KINETIKON PICTURES

ZOOMING IN

Top left, an ultraviolet image of the sun, from data collected by solar-powered probes; above, the Americas; far left, Saturn casts a shadow over its rings; canyons and volcanoes on Mars.

Golden sand dunes on Mars, gaseous storms swirling on Neptune.

Other images reveal the slightly mechanistic way these images were made, via computer-operated cameras, and mostly for scientific purposes. "Venus," photographed by the Mariner 10 probe on Feb. 5, 1974, is not great art, showing the planet dead center in empty black space with sunlight reflecting off clouds over the surface. But it tells us a lot about the planet's atmosphere.

The exhibition is divided into sections around specific planets, like "Mars," "Jupiter" and "Saturn," and a few themes, like "The Inner Solar System." But the imagery all seems equally

strange and alien, for we are looking at remote, inhospitable places. It's easy to understand why humans have not yet set foot on other planets.

Arthur C. Clarke, probably the pre-eminent science fiction writer of the 20th century, wrote the forward to an accompanying exhibition book, "Beyond: Visions of the Interplanetary Probes." That he died last month at his home in Sri Lanka, at the age of 90, gives this exhibition and its national tour over the next couple of years a memorial quality, for he, more than anyone else, helped usher in the space age as a prolific author of popular science fiction books and creator with the director Stanley Kubrick of the 1968 film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

Mr. Clarke's books paint a compelling portrait of the universe beyond the confines of Earth. The images in this exhibition are more circumspect about what awaits us out there in space, but they are no less inspiring.