

The Best D.C. Photography Exhibits of 2013

Posted by **Louis Jacobson** on Dec. 23, 2013

If you wanted to see good photography in D.C. in 2013, you had lots of options. Sweeping historical surveys? Sure. Tech-forward experiments? Yep. Landscapes, scientific images, personal explorations? Check, check, and check. Here, in descending order, are my picks for the best photographic exhibits in the Washington area this year.

8. “**Understory**” at the U.S. Botanic Garden



Jackie Bailey Labovitz spends hours at a time in the forests of the Shenandoah Valley, seeking out telltale splotches of color lurking just inches above the forest floor. When she finds these delicate and transitory flowers, she photographs them using a long lens and available light, then prints the images on canvas. The most subtly elegant aspect of her work, however, is the recurring background—a dreamy, out-of-focus mélange of green tones that suggest color-field paintings.

1. “Black Box: Gerco de Ruijter” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden



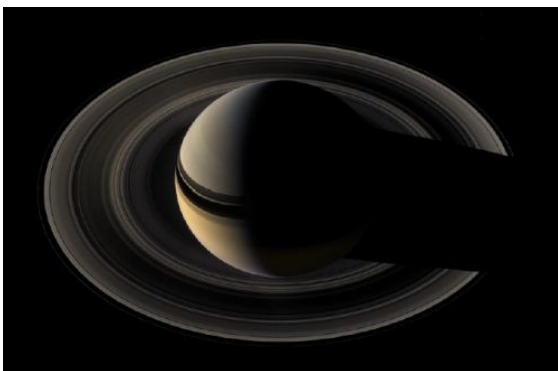
The landscape image is one of photography’s oldest genres, but de Ruijter’s four-minute video in *CROPS*, viewable online at gercoderuijter.com, somehow manages to break new conceptual ground in visually explosive fashion. In *CROPS*, the artist strings together a seemingly endless succession of still images of pivot-agriculture plots obtained from Google Earth, then used video to present them in blazing succession. The pivot plots, always shown at the same size, seem to stack on top of each other, accelerating incrementally in ways that create unexpected pairings and transitions—sometimes humorously, but always circumscribed by the elegant, inescapable, round outline.

2. Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop” at the National Gallery of Art



“Faking It” encapsulates more than 150 years of photographs that were deliberately manipulated—a daunting mission for a photography exhibit, but one executed with aplomb. The examples range from a chilling series of Soviet-era images in which comrades of **Stalin** disappear one by one to feminist works by **Kathy Grove**, who carefully excised women from classic photographs. Collectively, the images in the exhibit demonstrate how the presumed factual accuracy of photography makes manipulation such a kick to the gut.

3. “Planetfall” at the American Association for the Advancement of Science



Michael Benson takes data from interplanetary probes by NASA and the European Space Agency, digitally enhances them, and spins them into photographs that are at turns monumental and delicate, from the gossamer rings of Saturn to Jupiter’s moon Io with its ugly, pitted, rotten-fruit surface. It’s hard for the layman to know how much Benson is juicing his raw material, but the resulting images are so hypnotic that it’s easy not to care.

4. "Gordon Parks: An American Lens" at Adamson Gallery



This modest retrospective of works by Parks, the famed African-American photographer, hits the high points of his long career with the Farm Security Administration and then *Life* magazine, but its moral center comes from Parks' 1956 series on segregation in Mobile, Ala., much of which languished in archival obscurity for more than half a century. The images lay bare the ridiculousness of Jim Crow, such as the windows of a soft-serve joint (pictured) where the same employee serves both races, in windows just inches apart.

5. "A Slower Way of Seeing: Photographs of the American Vernacular" at Hillyer Art Space



While many photographers have made images of "old buildings," **D.B. Stovall's** are a worthy addition to the genre. Stovall's images, taken with a 4-by-5-inch-view camera, are notable for their bold colors—luminous orange walls, for instance, or unusual shades blue exterior paint that almost exactly match the color of the sky.

6. "Women of Vision: National Geographic Photographers on Assignment" at the National Geographic Museum



There's a lot of fine storytelling in this exhibit by women photographers. Sadly, the most notable thread in the exhibit (open through March 9) is the worldwide mistreatment of women. **Jodi Cobb** photographed heavily made-up beauty pageant contestant still young enough to be in diapers and Indian prostitutes penned up in cages, while **Stephanie Sinclair** photographed two child-

bride couples—an image made possible because the husbands think such pairings are so unremarkable that there's no reason to hide from the camera.

7. "Growth: Lauren Henkin" at Vivid Solutions



On their own, the crisp, vacant, urban-landscape images by **Lauren Henkin** would be intriguing enough—spindly tendrils climbing up a warehouse façade that suggests a color-field painting, or a tree that curves gracefully skyward from behind a mess of Dumpsters and recycling bins. But Henkin's meditation on invasiveness asks how we choose whether to extinguish an outsider or let it be—a question that's particularly pressing for Henkin, because it stems from her experience with two major abdominal surgeries.

9. "War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art



Filling most of the museum's second floor galleries, the exhibit covered everything from training to combat to the often grisly aftermath of battle; it featured images stretching from the mid-19th century to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, surveying a vast array of conflicts, from the great-power wars to regional conflicts in such places as Colombia, the Congo, and Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the

exhibit's strengths was its inclusion of extensive work by photographers of various nationalities, including some boldly modernist works by relatively obscure, mid-20th-century Russian photographers. The chilling images pile one on top of the other, risking a viewer's numbness, but the exhibit closes with **Simon Norfolk's** more optimistic series of pastel-hued color photographs of France's D-Day beaches taken in 2004 — a tangible reminder that war can be transitory.

10. “Charles Marville: Photographer of Paris” at the National Gallery of Art



Charles Marville is known for documenting the transformation of Paris from a medieval city to a modern one, through a series of images of old neighborhoods lost due to urban renewal. His images rarely communicate the difficult birth pangs the city experienced, likely because his position as chronicler meant he reported to city planner **Georges-Eugène Baron Haussmann**. But the exhibit expertly fills in the blanks thanks to **Sarah Kennel**’s first-rate curating.