



From "Beyond: Visions of the Interplanetary Probes"

The art of the spheres: earthrise over the moon, taken by Lunar Orbiter 1 in 1966.

## Abstraction in a Celestial Palette, Courtesy of Robots and Outer Space

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

While images of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn filled a giant screen in the background, speakers ruminated on the topic of interplanetary photography. It resolves specks of distant light into places of astonishing form and beauty, it opens the eyes of science to discovery, but is it art?

Specifically, can pictures taken by spacecraft millions of miles away from their human masters truly be deemed art?

The occasion was a symposium, "Far Out: The Sublime Photographic Legacy of the Interplanetary Space Probes," held on Monday at the American Museum of Natural History and organized by the museum's Hayden Planetarium and the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University.

The inspiration and the pictures on view came from a new book, "Beyond: Visions of the Interplanetary Probes," a visual tour of the solar system from the cameras of robotic craft like the Voyagers, Vikings and Galileo. The book, by the writer and filmmaker Michael Benson, is to be published next month by Abrams.

At the symposium Dr. Arthur C. Danto, a professor of philosophy at Columbia, spoke of Kant and his recognition of the power of "starry heavens above to inspire wonderment and awe."

Dr. Bruce C. Murray, a planetary scientist at the California Institute of Technology, recalled how stunned he was by Voyager's first pictures of Jupiter, in 1979, fanciful swirls and filigrees of atmospheric turbulence and broad, colorful brush strokes of global jet streams. "They looked to me like abstract art," he said.

As much as they sought to circle the issue, the panelists could not resist comparisons of the boldest and strangest pictures to abstract art. They variously brought to mind Georgia O'Keeffe, Salvador Dali or Jackson Pollock. The more they talked, the less they worried about whether pictures by robots could be art.

"Nature is painting these pictures," said Ann Druyan, a writer and producer of television programs on space and the widow of the astronomer Carl Sagan.

Joel Meyerowitz, a photographer, said art should be thought of as an entrance to new experience and insight. "Many times," he said, "I was stopped by the planetary pictures. I had that gasp reflex, and then I allowed my mind to wander in through the entrance."

In his book Mr. Benson, who said he entered the pictures of the solar system through the Internet, wrote that seeing the crescent Neptune reminded him of a work of art "created by a master toward the end of a long career."

"There's wintry virtuosity at play, combined with a palpable absence of any need to show off," he continued. "Gone are the flashy excesses of Jupiter and Saturn. Its haunting, cantaloupe-skinned moon Triton is dark and inscrutable. Yet in spite of its deep-frozen state, activity is noticeable even here: plumes of carbon as black as squid ink emerge from cracks in its surface."

At one point in the evening several voices from the audience shouted for the moderator to move aside. He was blocking their view. The planetary panoramas snapped by machines may or may not be art, but their evocation of nature's profuse diversity inspired awe and wonder. The audience members knew they liked what they saw.