

The Best Photography Exhibits of 2011

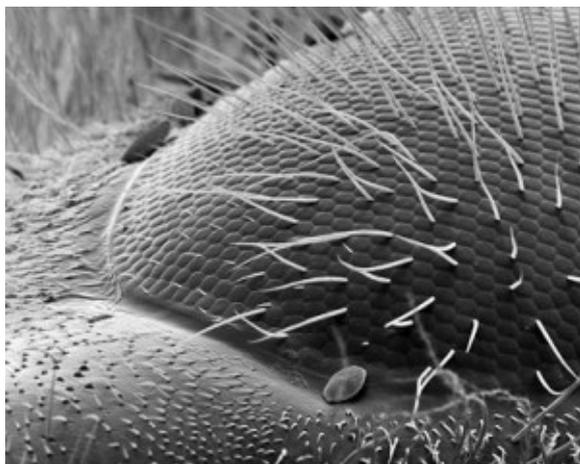
Posted by **Louis Jacobson** on Dec. 15, 2011 at 10:03 am

Locally, the past year has been a good one for two types of photography—landscape work and documentary. It's also been notable for several smart shows at the American University Museum and Goethe-Institut, but the sad closing of a venerable venue of good photography, Bethesda's Fraser Gallery. Here's my list of the 10 best photographic exhibits in the D.C. area in 2011. And check back here later this month for the 10 best single photographic images of the year.

1. Christoph Engel, "Approximate Landscape," Goethe-Institut. The year's best photography exhibit, consisting of 11 mysteriously beautiful aerial images, earns its No. 1 spot not so much for its visuals, which echo the

works of photographers from Emmet Gowin to Maxwell MacKenzie, but for its provocative, forward-thinking technique. Unlike his predecessors, Engel didn't have to leave his computer to

make his images. He used Google Earth to find satellite imagery of locations that interested him, then carefully stitched together hundreds of high-resolution fragments into digital collages. Photographers may be justified in regretting the growing supremacy of desktop surfing to in-the-field experience, but photography has always been deeply intertwined with technological advances. Engel's works demonstrate that the inexorable tide of history cannot be ignored.



2. Rose-Lynn Fisher, "The Landscape of Bees," Cross MacKenzie Gallery. Fisher's images of bees are enlarged hundreds and even thousands of times. When she expands bee antennae 1,100 times or a proboscis 430 times, her subjects look like some of those slowly swaying, bottom-dwelling creatures you see in **Jacques Cousteau** documentaries. Occasionally her skillful and sharp

black-and-white images even have a sensual vibe, with **Georgia O’Keeffe** organic folds punctuated by erect “hairs.” Ultimately, the close-ups are so compelling that they make the lone unenlarged image, of an apiary, seem positively prosaic.

3. Michael Borek, “Effective Immediately,” Multiple Exposures Gallery.

No single image in this exhibit stands head and shoulders above the rest, but collectively, the series offers a wrenching portrait of a community in decline. One Friday, in May 2002, Scranton Lace Co., in Scranton, Pa.,



called its employees together during the middle of their shift to break the news that the factory was closing—“effective immediately.” All factory operations stopped, some looms were left with unfinished lace still in them, and some of the dismissed workers left behind personal belongings. In the years since, the empty factory has been frozen in time; Borek captured it in elegaic fashion, from reams of archaic punch cards to dirt-smeared windows.



4. Leonard Freed, “An American in Deutschland,” German Historical Institute. Freed, an American-born, Jewish documentary photographer who died in 2006, spent almost two decades in Germany, beginning in 1952. Freed’s black-and-white images mostly take a

straightforward, un-showy approach, but it’s his insightful commentary—appended to many of the photographs in the exhibition— that stands out. His words are elegant, poignant, even searing, particularly when he recalls exchanges with his wife, a German refugee who grew up amid deprivation in Poland.

5. “To the Ends of the Earth,” Adamson Gallery.

For the second year in a row, Adamson has offered a visually stunning exhibit of natural landscapes. Last year, it was Renate Aller’s

photographs of the sea and sky off the southern shore of Long Island. This year, it’s a joint showing by four artists. Edward Burtynsky and Robert Polidori document the damage from the BP oil spill and Hurricane Katrina, respectively, while Alfredo de Stefano photographs enigmatic arrangements of natural objects in out-of-place settings. The standout, though, is Camille Seaman, whose images of icebergs and looming storms show nature at its most expansive and raw.



6. “Re-Viewing Documentary: The Photographic Life of Louise Roskam,” American University Museum. Roskam isn’t as well-known as her 1930s and 1940s contemporaries in documentary photography, but this posthumous retrospective revives an unjustly overlooked career. Working largely in black and white, Roskam and her husband,

Edwin, took deep forays into Depression-era America and Puerto Rico, as well as chronicling the education of poor children during the 1960s. Though the couple clearly worked harmoniously for years, a viewer can’t help but notice a strong interest in examining gender equality, most notably in a series about towboat crews.

7. Mads Gamdrup, “Renunciation,” Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Gamdrup’s 16 large-scale photographs of desert landscapes, in hues of beige, drab green, and pale blue, aren’t visually groundbreaking, but their arrangement in a stately gallery at the Corcoran is a triumph. Rather than documenting a specific place, Gamdrup combined desert images



he made in the United States, Morocco, Egypt, and Iceland, teasing visual unity from far-flung geographic diversity. Gamdrup spaced his images equally, and with horizons aligned, enveloping the viewer in the desert's elementalism and heightening his work's emotional, and even spiritual, resonance.



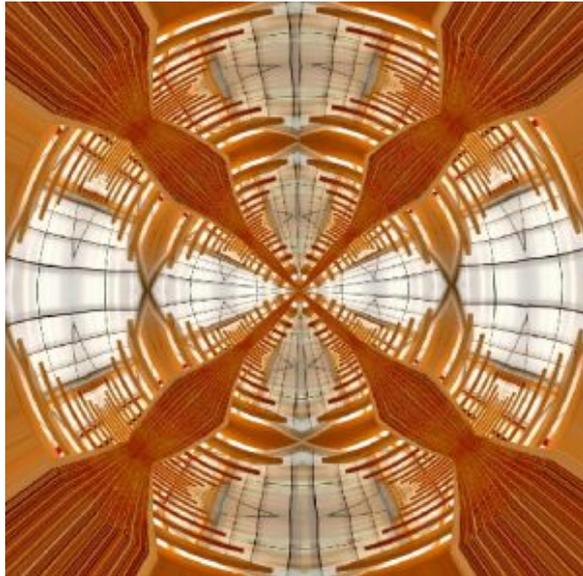
8. “International Photography Competition,” Fraser Gallery. The second-to-last photography exhibit at the now-shuttered Fraser Gallery showcased gallerist Catriona Fraser's keen eye for amateur photographic talent. Standouts were George Borden's photograph of

the transit of the moon as an odd but pleasing sine wave, and Van Chu's "Mushrooms and Trees No. 2," in which the artist dropped colored liquid into water, photographed its vaporous tendrils, then flipped the image upside down, creating a mesmerizing, wide-angle, almost arboreal landscape.

9. Wayne Barrar, “An Expanding Subterra,” American University Museum. Barrar, a New Zealander, has traveled in his home country, Australia, and a variety of American states in search of underground spaces that have been repurposed for such varied purposes as storage, paintball and



office space. Many of his photographs seem utterly mundane, but together, they add up to a compelling portrait of largely invisible frontier.



10. Kenneth M. Wyner at the American Institute of Architects.

When he is not lingering over offices and richly decorated rooms, Wyner offers intriguingly manipulated, kaleidoscopic images of interior and exterior spaces. In one, Wyner turns a skylight with blond wood beams into a circular form that suggests a propeller. In others, he turns the unlikeliest of subjects (the National Archives, or Wolf Trap) into brooding abstractions that suggest movie posters for Batman and X-Men. Wyner's choice of materials is inspired: Some works are printed

on translucent fabric, while many use brushed aluminum. The aluminum offers a stunning base for Wyner's fine-grained images—dreamy cirrus clouds drifting over a local synagogue, or a moody nocturne of Victoria Harbor in Hong Kong, with silky, waterborne reflections of skyscrapers.

Finally, here are three especially impressive works from the non-photographic arts:

“Grande Avenues,” Marisa Baumgartner’s obsessively detailed, mixed-media study of Washington’s traffic circles, staged at the perfect location – the curved walls of the American University Museum, in full view of Ward Circle.

“Site Aperture,” Margaret Boozer’s conceptual work consisting of samples from a subterranean bore of soil and rock from downtown D.C., carefully transported to Flashpoint D.C. and arranged on the floor, accompanied by a winning, how-she-did it video.

Sculptures by Sebastian Martorana at the farewell show for Irvine Contemporary’s 14th St. NW location. Martorana makes soft objects hard, most strikingly a humble bath towel carved from marble, tossed over a rod.