D.C.’s Top 10 Photography Exhibits of the Year

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D.C.’s best photography exhibits of 2014 exuded a strong sense of place—from Mexico to Maine, from early-'60s New York to mid-'70s Los Angeles, from 19th-century Burma to contemporary Ghana, and even a small cameo by Washington, D.C.

Here, in descending order, are my picks for the best photographic exhibits in the D.C. area this year.

1. Alejandro Cartagena at the Art Museum of the Americas

Cartagena, based in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey, achieved the rare trick of combining visual interest, social righteousness, and empathy for his subjects. One of his two series at the Art Museum of the Americas focused on newly constructed housing as it was being carved into the empty landscape. But the more impressive series (above) documented day laborers being transported in the rear of pickup trucks on a highway near Monterrey. The photographs were all taken from directly above the bed of the pickup truck, cropped in near-identical fashion—a repetition that only serves to emphasize the wide array of “cargo” being carried, human and otherwise. Each image offered a poignant slice of blue-collar life in Mexico, a portrayal at once gritty and humane.
2. Lisa Tyson Ennis at Glen Echo's Photoworks

Ennis’ images, curated by Frank Van Riper in Photoworks’ annual documentary photography exhibit, were a dreamy paean to rural Lubec, Maine, a spot near the U.S.-Canada border. Ennis photographed weirs—low-tech but elaborately constructed barriers that have been used by generations of fishermen—echoing the black-and-white artistry of Michael Kenna. The weirs she photographed are largely disused, standing as a symbol of over-fishing and long-term economic distress. But the most stunning images were those of fragile, tumbledown cabins (above) in a settlement abandoned 50 years ago, captured with a narrow depth of field that fuzzed the background and called to mind the images of toy miniatures by the photographer David Levinthal.
3. **Kai Wiedenhöfer at the Goethe-Institut**

Marking the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Goethe-Institut offered an exhibit of population-dividing walls around the world. The exhibit includes a measly four images by the prolific Wiedenhöfer, but even this small sampling offered a compelling vision: a see-through divider on a scenic beach at Tijuana, Mexico; a fenced-in fort perched high above the water in Melilla, a Spanish enclave adjoining Morocco (above); a woman in a chador climbing through a wall in Baghdad; and a ramshackle divider made of stone, brick, wood, and corrugated metal in Cyprus. Wiedenhöfer's approach to documenting his often hotly contested locales is, to his credit, dispassionate, analyzing the visual, architectural, and psychological consequences of human divisions.

4. **“72 Grams per Pixel” at Gallery B**

The exhibit “72 Grams per Pixel” was “presented by” FolioLink, a product for displaying photographs on HD video screens, so the show was even more
commercially oriented than most gallery exhibits. But the art rose above it, with pieces like Raul Jarquin’s moody renderings of Rock Creek Park (above), Laurie Hatch’s images of observatories and the skies that envelop them, Stephen Crowley’s mesmerizing series of everyday objects half-buried in asphalt, and Terri Weifenbach’s minute-and-a-half-long video of a rippling surface of water.

5. **Garry Winogrand at the National Gallery of Art**

The NGA’s major retrospective on Winogrand helped change the image of the photographer as someone who treated his shutter like a machine-gun trigger, sometimes without looking. The exhibit selected from a trove of a quarter-million images left after his death in 1984, largely unsorted and unedited; about half the photographs in the exhibition had never been shown or published before, providing a much broader look at his oeuvre. Whether working in New York or Los Angeles, Winogrand was the quintessential people-watcher, lurking on sidewalks with an antenna sharply attuned to the movements, faces, and oddities swirling around him. While the exhibit’s final third, covering the 1970s and early 1980s, sagged along with the nation’s mood, his work is a reminder of the vital genre of street photography that flourished in an era before suburban isolation and selfies.
6. **Larry McNeil and Will Wilson at the National Museum of the American Indian**

The exhibit “Indelible: The Platinum Photographs of Larry McNeil and Will Wilson” (on view through Jan. 15) poses a provocative question: Can photographic technology serve ideological motives? The exhibit answers yes: Because some of the most prominent photographic documentary efforts involving Native Americans, including that of **Edward S. Curtis**, used platinum printing, some have come to view the platinum print as deeply intertwined with the fate of the American Indian. The exhibit’s case is not entirely convincing—another exhibit this year at the National Gallery of Art demonstrated that platinum prints were used for a much wider variety of purposes—but the reappropriation of the old technique still produces interesting results. For the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the western hemisphere, McNeil produced a “feather” series, including a stunning, ultra-close-up of a lone feather (above). He also reimagined the old Lone Ranger and Tonto television series through a clever series of fake stills that upended stereotypes. Wilson, meanwhile, more directly challenged Curtis-style portrayals, collaborating with contemporary Native Americans and non-indigenous people to make formal portraits.
7. **Linnaeus Tripe at the National Gallery of Art**

More than 150 years after the abrupt end of his brief career, Tripe (1822–1902) is being honored with a retrospective (on view through Jan. 4) featuring his little-known work documenting India and Burma on behalf of the East India Company and the British government. Tripe had to carry heavy cameras, a portable still for water, and tin cans to protect his photosensitive materials while trekking through the hot, humid reaches of South Asia. Tripe’s paper negatives had to be made large enough to communicate intricate details of the pagodas and other buildings he was photographing. He also had to retouch his gold-toned images to capture details his early technologies simply couldn’t register, like clouds in the sky. His mature work was at once rigorously formalistic, showing echoes of his training as a surveyor, and visually pleasing. An accompanying mini-exhibit of roughly contemporary photographers confirms that Tripe’s approach was well ahead of its artistic time.
8. Frank Hallam Day at the Leica Store

The D.C.-based photographer’s 15-image exhibit documenting the small-scale fishing industry along Ghana’s Atlantic coast (on view through January) is at once technically challenging, visually complex, and topically rich. In Day’s telling, the sweaty, romantic, and messy universe is typified by iffy-looking boats with peeling paint and diaphanous nets; back on shore, women hover over pots of boiling water and piles of gutted fish carcasses. His portrayal is at turns hard and soft; in one image, a boy reclines stiffly on the prow of a boat, wearing a red T-shirt that reads, “Boys Rule Fact,” while in another, two girls dance, hovering in mid-air on the beach.
9. **Michael Horsley at DCAC**

Horsley is best known for his documentation of pre-gentrification D.C., but in “At the Crossroad: A Topography of Space, Time and Memory,” he branched out from urban decay, spending quality time in such scenic locales as the Nevada desert, Lake Tahoe, Utah’s Capitol Reef National Park, and the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Horsley’s work was often high-contrast to an extreme, reveling in all-encompassing shadows and sometimes turning so moody that his images could stand in for stills from Robert Rodriguez’s 2005 comic-book-noir movie *Sin City*. In Horsley’s images, the sky was often a near-impenetrable black, while reflective surfaces—from concrete to brick to asphalt—were shiny, verging on white, producing the disorienting sensation of not knowing whether it’s day or night.
10. **Marc Babej at Adamson Gallery**

Babej, the least-known artist in Adamson’s exhibit “Recent Editions,” produced close-up portraits of women, their faces marked up with clusters of X’s as if they were awaiting plastic surgery. It was a nimble turn on 1940s-era Hollywood glamour shots, this time marred by imperfections that, to most observers, would seem inconsequential.
