

ARTS

Seven Standout Photography Exhibits of 2023

Louis Jacobson, City Paper's photography critic, recalls the best, most creative exhibitions of 2023 at area venues both big and small, plus some other noteworthy shows.

by **LOUIS JACOBSON**
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From *This is Britain*: Sunil Gupta, "Untitled #1" from the series "Pretended" Family Relationships, 1988, printed 2020 inkjet print; image: 61 x 91.4 cm (24 x 36 in.), sheet: 63.5 x 94 cm (25 x 37 in.) National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund, 2022.23.1; © Sunil Gupta

Venues both big and small mounted trenchant photography exhibits in 2023. In the big category, the National Gallery of Art, the Phillips Collection, and the American University Museum all offered worthwhile exhibitions of images from decades past, while smaller galleries—including Photoworks, Multiple Exposures Gallery, and Gallery B—opened their venues to works by talented local photographers.

As City Paper's photography critic, I have assembled a list of the top exhibits in the D.C. area on a (mostly) annual basis since 2001. This year, I've selected—and ranked—seven exhibits that merit a place on the list of best photography exhibits of 2023 in the Washington area. I have also included three additional exhibits beyond the bounds of photography that deserve a special mention this year.

1. *This Is Britain* at the National Gallery of Art

Like the punk music scene and the class- and race-based skirmishes of its era, the National Gallery of Art's exhibit *This Is Britain: Photographs from the 1970s and 1980s* packed a punch, leveraging just two modest-size galleries into a collection of works by nearly two dozen photographers united by a sense of unease: **Chris Killip**'s documentary images of people supporting themselves by scavenging cast-off coal; **Gilles Peress**' photographs of Northern Ireland's Troubles; **Graham Smith**'s images of pub denizens in the decaying industrial city of Middlesbrough; **Sunil Gupta**'s semi-fictional conceptual project about the era's discriminatory antigay laws; and **Anna Fox**'s photographs of alienation in the workplace. The downside of the exhibit's impressive reach was that it gave too little wall space to several artists whose oeuvres deserve more sustained attention, notably **Paul Graham**, **Martin Parr**, and **John Davies**.

2. Red Won's *In Syzygy* at Photoworks

Redeat Wondemu, aka **Red Won**, is an Ethiopian-born photographer now based in the D.C. area. In an exhibit at Photoworks in Glen Echo, Wondemu offered three series that were radically different in size and approach. One group consisted of small square images of botanical subjects that ranged from simple abstractions to still lifes. A second consisted of midsize portraits of women holding flowers, made using gelatin silver and platinum-palladium processes. Her most stunning works, though, were in her third series: large-scale digital self-portraits printed in shades of deep blue using the archaic cyanotype process. The photographs captured the central figures in mid-motion, accentuated by swirls of white from a piece of fabric; this fabric, in bright, high-contrast white, sometimes suggested a tightly worn wrap, while at other times it approximated angel wings. Though the prints were monumental in scope, the handmade cyanotype process left small details, such as blue splashes and splotches, that made each artwork unique.

3. Alan Sislen at Multiple Exposures Gallery

Maryland-based photographer **Alan Sislen** mounted an entire exhibit on the quaking aspen, a tree anchored by a silvery, cylindrical trunk and decorated with bright yellow leaves. The exhibit included a few black-and-white images, but the payoff came with his intricately detailed color photographs. In one particularly pleasing example, titled "Zorro Was Here," the aspen canopy seemed to have the texture of velvet.

4. *Lost Europe: On the Edge of Memories* at the American University Museum

Three Czech photographers—**Karel Cudlín**, **Jan Dobrovský**, and **Martin Wágner**—used old-school, unflashy black-and-white to document rural Ukraine between the early 1990s and 2018. While some of the place names have become familiar in the wake of Russia’s invasion in 2022, the trio’s 75 images linger on the regions’ long-standing poverty and remoteness. Viewers saw bridges paved with flimsy wooden boards, desolate rail stations, cramped apartments in prefab, Soviet-era high-rises; run-down horse stables, half-toppled Lenin statues, Jewish cemeteries inhabited by chickens and goats, and black smoke rising from smokestacks. For a project that sometimes verged on **communist ruin porn**, a question that lingered is how representative these images were of contemporary Ukraine. Another urgent question was raised by the wall text:

“Why does more drama take place here than anywhere else?”

5. Frank Stewart at the Phillips Collection and Gallery Neptune & Brown



Frank Stewart, “Smoke and the Lovers, Memphis” (or “Smoke and the Lovers, Hawkins Grill”), 1992 (printed 2009) Gelatin silver print 12 3/8 x 18 1/2 in. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. David H. McAlpin Fund

Frank Stewart, a New York-based photographer who documented everything from Black life to street scenes and jazz greats in action, was feted with two simultaneous exhibits in D.C. this year, both of them notable. The larger of the two, at the Phillips Collection, captured the dizzying breadth of Stewart's work, including urban imagery and race in the U.S., overseas journeys in Africa and the Caribbean, environmental destruction, and forays into pure artiness. Meanwhile, an exhibit at Gallery Neptune & Brown was more focused on Stewart's jazz images, which he produced while traveling with pianist **Ahmad Jamal**, trumpeter **Wynton Marsalis**, and, beginning in 1993, as senior photographer for New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center. Stewart's most poignant work paired a 1980 image of three jazz musicians marching in a funeral line in a New Orleans cemetery with a separate image of three fully robed Klan members walking to a rally in Jackson, Mississippi; their shared human forms contrasted with the eternal divergence of their roles in life, marching steadfastly and eternally in opposite directions.

6. Kee Woo Rhee at Gallery B

Landscape photographer **Kee Woo Rhee**'s exhibit at Bethesda's Gallery B featured images not only from her home country, South Korea, and her adopted country, the United States, but also from Patagonia, New Zealand, Iceland, Scotland, and Canada. The Silver Spring-based photographer displayed a soft spot for the American West, including an image from Utah's Zion National Park with an unreal, candy-colored depiction of a winding road. When she went big, the results were striking: In an image from Iceland, she captured brilliant green auroras, seen both in the sky and in a lake reflection below, while another image from Iceland fruitfully paired a receding wall of striated volcanic cliffs with the smooth, glistening surface of the water.

7. Dorothea Lange: Seeing People at the National Gallery of Art

Few photographers are as closely defined by one image as **Dorothea Lange** is by her Depression-era portrait "Migrant Mother." But that image is only a pivot point for the National Gallery of Art's retrospective of work by Lange (1895-1965). She began developing her socially charged realism in the 1920s, initially through piercing images of Indigenous people. Lange proved skillful at capturing crowds, as well as individuals and small groups with pained faces. While Lange's images largely fit within the era's straightforward documentary approach, a few broke fruitfully with that style, notably a 1935 photograph of three Mexican American farmworkers set against a blinding white sky, decades before this approach was adopted by **Richard Avedon**.

The curators smartly spotlight limitations of Lange's work, particularly in an image of a Southern country store with several White and Black men standing and seated on the porch; the wall caption emphasizes the uncertainty about whether the men's seeming harmony in the image is genuine or simply a show for the camera.



In addition to the above shows, these three nonphotographic exhibits stood out in 2023:

Elizabeth M. Webb at Georgetown University Art Galleries

Charlottesville-based **Elizabeth M. Webb** did not learn that her father had Black ancestry until she was 18. After she did, she interviewed her great aunt **Jane**, the last surviving descendant of her great-grandmother **Paradise**, to find out as much as she could about her Black heritage. Webb proceeded to turn the transcripts of these conversations into porcelain artworks. The wording was hard—indeed, usually impossible—to read, and that was a shortcoming for viewers who would have liked to learn more about what Jane had to say. Still, the shape of the

abstracted words offered visual intrigue; despite being a kiln-fired porcelain artwork, Webb’s art embodied fragility, a useful metaphor given the subject matter. Webb’s works were wafer-thin, with breaks and cracks that crisscrossed their surfaces, leaving some fragments seeming like they could blow away with a stray sneeze. The setting, too, was pitch-perfect: The gallery was darkened, with the individual pieces backlit, suggesting the interior of the Dead Sea Scrolls Museum.

Trevor Young at Addison/Ripley Fine Art



By Trevor Young

Over the years, **Trevor Young**’s spare, lovingly crafted paintings of boring-verging-on-ugly settings have remained compelling. In Young’s most recent exhibit, some of his most impressive works benefited from their sharply horizontal or vertical dimensions, notably the horizontal painting “Wastelands” which, at 34-by-98 inches, offered a sweeping view of an industrial landscape, dotted with tiny flecks of yellow flame; it was reminiscent of **Edward Burtynsky**’s photographs of oil derrick fields in and around Bakersfield, California.

Maria Luz Bravo at Hamiltonian Artists

Maria Luz Bravo’s collection of photographs originated from her daily walks through Northwest D.C. As with anything governed by chance, what Bravo found was hit or miss. But “Untitled 31,” a minimalist video, was a *pièce de résistance*. The video captured a pair of birds sitting on a wire; Bravo recorded the footage through rippling water, fancifully transforming the wire’s straight line into three-dimensional curves and bubbles. In her hands, the spare, monochromatic setting became a grippingly elemental tableau.