

‘This Is Mars’ celebrates the art of exploration

By May-Ying Lam, Published: October 14

Bled of their color, many of the landscapes look identical to those on Earth. The Meridiani Planum could easily be mistaken for the crater lakes of Africa’s Albertine Rift. The dunes of the Erg border resemble a mass of seagulls cruising over the Gulf of Mexico. But these are the hills and crests of Mars as seen from the HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment) camera and portrayed in the book “[This Is Mars](#).”

The name of the book is as matter-of-fact as the mission of the HiRISE camera, which piggybacks the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter: to orbit the planet, taking multi-gigabyte photos of landforms to uncover Mars’s geological history and making note of possible future landing sites.

The backbone of the book is correspondingly scientific. Each resulting photo spans 3.7 miles. Xavier Barral, the book’s designer, estimates that he virtually traversed 370,000 miles of Mars to compile it. But when curated, toned and applied with a different label, the photos take on a completely different meaning.

The richly toned black-and-white treatment particularly separates the photos from the most iconic images of Mars. Barral decided not to use the color photos because they are scientifically enhanced and not true to what the eye sees. Black-and-white is associated with history, which counters the futuristic coldness of space imagery. And the lack of color allows the viewer to appreciate the unusual textures and play between light and dark.

But Barral chose many landscapes because they have no parallel landform on Earth. Even the photos that seem abstract become a series of Rorschach tests, laden with organic figures and familiar textures. For example, the cartoonish outlines around bright carbonic ices evoke amoeba in photos of Mars’s south pole. “What surprises me in these images is that they bring us back to our origins. They bring us closer to the remote [in time and in space] and open our imagination,” Barral said.

This sympathetic portrayal of Mars is consistent with the relationship between exploration and art. Rather than objective documentation, it can be a way to divide and conquer, as maps do, but can also be a negotiation of how people see themselves in relation to the new territory. These photos have played both roles.

Despite the inevitable continued pursuit of knowledge about Mars and Barral’s own lifelong affection for space, he humorously notes, “Regarding those who have signed up for a one-way ticket to Mars, I believe there are better things to do.”