

Galleries *By Edith Newhall*

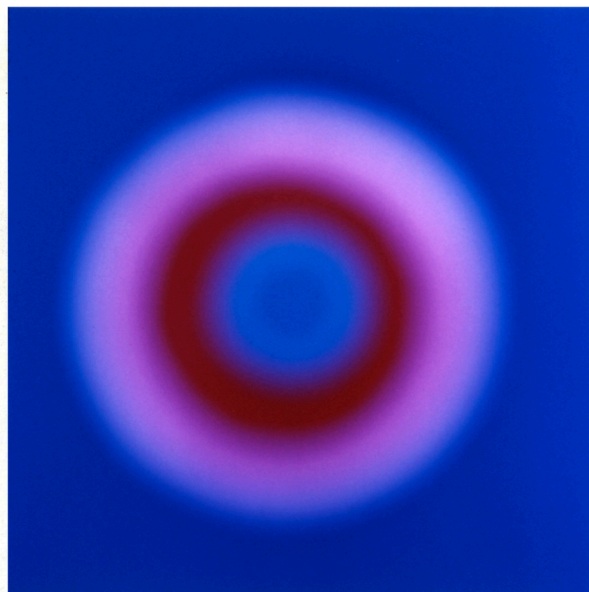
Something to meditate on:

Mandalas in photographs

The Hindu or Buddhist mandala, traditionally a painting used to achieve a meditative state, has been reinvented. No longer the square royal palace of the gods set within a circle surrounded by concentric rings and featuring the requisite deities in their appropriate spots, it now can be any kind of chart or pattern that represents the cosmos, including a photograph.

"Photo Mandalas: Bill Armstrong and Milan Fano Blatny," an exhibition in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Julien Levy Gallery, pairs two contemporary photographers who create mandalalike constructions in very different ways but achieve similarly contemplative results. And neither uses a computer to make his pictures — a fact that some viewers, especially younger ones, will find hard to believe.

Armstrong, who is based in New York, began his ongoing Infinity series in 1997. He cuts colored paper into circles of different sizes, arranges them concentrically in collages, then photographs them with his camera's focusing ring set on infinity to create an intentional blurring. In each print, the pulsing, soft rings of different colors can suggest planets, eyes, flowers, and Kenneth Noland's target paintings. Whether they help you access a progressively deeper sense of oneness with the cosmos, I'm not sure, but they are mysteriously



"Mandala 454, negative 2003, print 2008," by Bill Armstrong, is in a show in the Art Museum's Julien Levy Gallery.

lovely, absorbing images.

There is no explanation of Blatny's process in the press release accompanying this show, except to say that he does not rely on a computer to make the complex images in his Photo-Mandala series, which depict repetitions of one view of an architectural space arranged in circles. (At first glance, his photographs look like the work of avant-garde Czech photographers from the 1930s or 1940s, and Blatny, a Czech who lives in Brno, clearly has been influenced by his country's experi-

mental photographers from that period).

The photographs themselves are silver gelatin prints and give the impression of being photographs of collages assembled from several identical photographs, or of exposures of the same negative made by rotating the photographic paper under the enlarger. Blatny names his pieces after the places where he took his photographs — Buenos Aires, Argentina; Kyoto, Japan; Sudan; and Wolfsburg, Germany, among others — and manag-

es to distill an essence of each site through just one repeated image. He calls each piece "a record of one real moment from my life," and that is precisely the spiraling experience he elicits.

Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Perelman Building, Julien Levy
Gallery, Fairmount and
Pennsylvania Avenues, 10 a.m. to
5 p.m. Tuesdays through
Sundays. www.philamuseum.org
or 215-763-8100. Through Feb. 1.