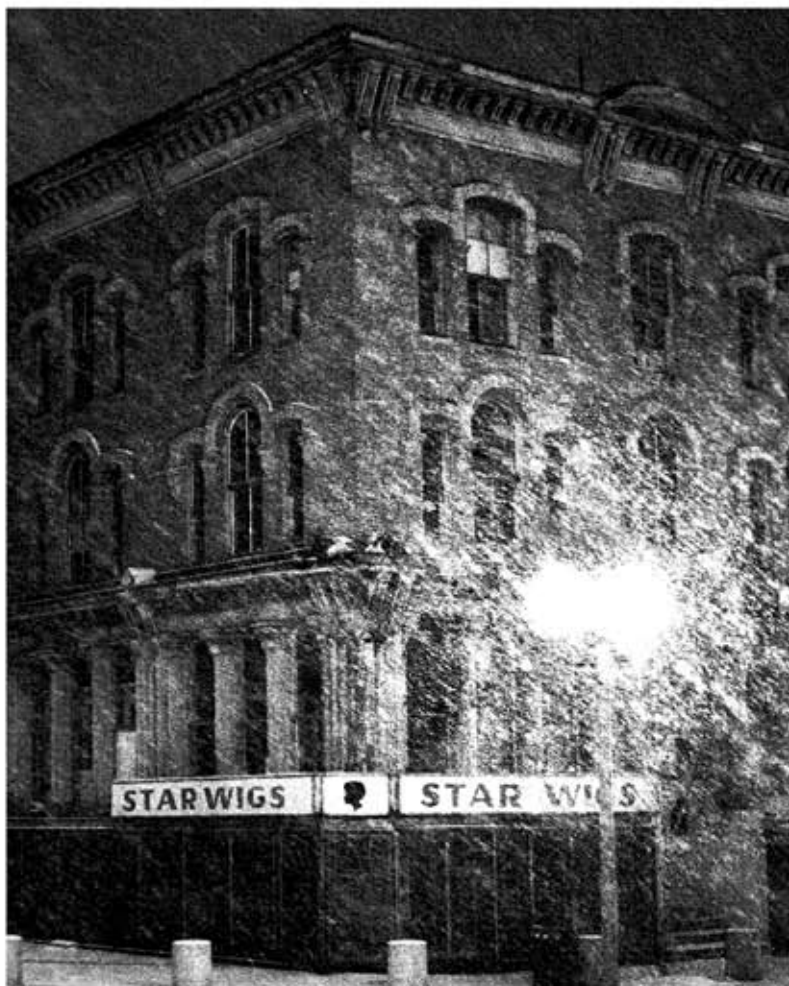


Style/Arts



During a series of solitary treks through snowbound Washington last January, photographer Colin Winterbottom captured scenes like "Star Wigs."

Arts Beat

Snow Man

Blizzard of '96 Inspires D.C. Photographer

By Michael O'Sullivan
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Six months ago to the day, Washington was waking up beneath a blanket of snow at least a foot deep, with more on the way. The so-called "Blizzard of '96" was about to shut down the federal government, paralyze the infrastructure and send the city back to a low-tech lifestyle more reminiscent of the 19th than the 20th century.

To those who are nostalgic for those bygone days, a series of lovely photographs by Colin Winterbottom, shot during the back-to-back storms of January, provide a bracing tonic for this season's wilting weather.

Just as the frigid weather was driving most people indoors, the 29-year-old photographer was stepping out on foot, in search of his subject. "As soon as the first snowflakes descended," he

says, "I was out there, in two sweaters, two jackets, with my camera protected in a Safeway bag, my tripod, and a scarf wrapped 10 times around my head. The few people I encountered probably thought, 'Why is this fool out here?'"

From Arlington Cemetery to the Washington National Cathedral to the Star Wigs shop downtown, in blinding sunlight and the dark of night, the aptly named Winterbottom recorded the transformation of a region, as its architecture and statuary became softened and beautified under a cloak of white. His grainy nighttime images, shot with high-speed film, capture individual flakes backlit by the glare of street lights, and beautifully evoke the hazy, otherworldly calm of an urban snowfall.

He attributes his "particular preference" for shooting buildings and sculpture to the "private, introspective place" to which he retreats when he is in his creative mode. "When I'm in that right-brain frame of mind," Winterbottom explains, "it's hard for me to communicate to a model, 'Do this, do that.' Just the solitary experience of walking through the snow and finding the way the lines converge, a different angle, a different perspective, a trick of light that conveys an emotion—it just does something to me. It just feels right in an instant and it's magical."

This past winter's snowstorm was not the first to capture the artist's imagination. A 1995 photograph of a snow-bedecked Dupont Circle fountain had been made into a popular poster (now available through the gift shop of the National Building Museum). Nor will it be his last blizzard—Winterbottom is about to relocate to Boston, where he will pursue graduate studies in health policy at Harvard University.

He is searching for a publisher for a bound volume of his snow photos, and has just produced a handsome set of note cards, featuring six images from what he calls his "Snowblinded" collection.