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Culture

Artifacts | Man on a Mission



A piece of Tom Sachs's "Space Program: Mars" installation, "Extravehicular Mobility Unit," 2007-2012. Josh White

By LINDA YABLONSKY

With its space shuttle in retirement, NASA is now preparing to land humans on Mars. The other Mars, that is.

To set foot on a more down-to-earth model, all anyone needs is a slight suspension of disbelief. On arrival, Tom Sachs will be waiting — by the espresso machine.

A sculptor best known for his duct tape, foamcore and construction-barrier reproductions of Modernist furniture and buildings, guns, Hello Kitty dolls and even Nazi death camps, Sachs is now leading visitors to the Park Avenue Armory around his own private Red Planet. Temporarily ensconced within the armory's vast Wade Thompson Drill Hall, it has a beer cooler, a hot peanuts dispensary and the aforementioned espresso machine, all stripped of polish and ready to rocket.

Definitely bring the kids. "Space Program: Mars," a collaboration between Sachs, Creative Time and the armory, is an inner-space playground for the whole family. It's also a serious artwork.

Sachs, 44, has been developing his own space program since at least 2006, when his full-scale, plywood Lunar Landing Module set down at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. The same structure, newly outfitted with a functioning bar, toilet, "fecal stimulant" and command center, now sits on a launch pad at the center of the space, surrounded by red plywood berms that stand in for the Mars terrain, lit by a "sun" of bright lights mounted on a large, tripod-supported disc.

Under "Colonel" Sachs's command, a crew of 20 highly trained technicians carries out its exploration and survival mission with a precision that would be the envy of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Their tasks include ritualized routines that involve dispensing food (the aforementioned foil-wrapped hot peanuts), collecting scientific samples, testing rockets, running a daily exercise regimen, churning out a hand-stitched 'zine documenting the mission every week and exploring the space in a working replica of a NASA rover.

Visitors who want to do more than just look around must first undergo "indoctrination" in Sachs's dictatorial work ethic before they can join the team and enter the capsule. That means performing menial tasks (sweeping floors, sorting nails), watching a series of instructional films in a screening room and stamping brown paper bags for popcorn with the mission logo. Also on view is that part of the American psyche that subscribes to Manifest Destiny, where no frontier is out of reach of the imagination — ground zero for an artist.

For Sachs, whose code name for the moment is Tango Sierra, science is the only true religion and "Space Program: Mars" is his D.I.Y. temple to it, and the culmination of all of his work since his first show in New York, in 1995, when he introduced the products he branded as "Cultural Prosthetics" — guns made of discarded hardware and cut-up Con Ed barriers, monochromatic duct-tape paintings and Hello Kitty icons, and taped foamcore Knoll furniture.

At the armory, his ultimate goal is to answer the age-old cosmic question “Are we alone?” Because his show is really about life on Earth, the answer is a conclusive no. “Exploring other planets,” he said at a preview on Tuesday, “is a way of studying Earth and understanding how precious life is right here.”

Also how fun. Personally, I had a great time exploring this Mars. First, I watched an utterly realistic demonstration of a rocket launch displayed on the bank of monitors that make up Sachs’s Mission Control center. Later I discovered the rocket was actually a foot-long, handmade model contained within a tool cabinet.

Going to another planet, Sachs had said, also means considering how we interact with it, especially when we try to colonize it. That usually means bringing the comforts of home to it. To that end, the Sachs studio has imported the culture of the handmade object, something increasingly precious in a society that worships packaging and branding.

One import is a domed, tatami-matted teahouse made of Sachs’s signature Con Ed barriers. On a separate platform, friendly crew members, all dressed in white pants, ties and shirts with Mars mission pocket protectors, roasted tasty peanuts under the heat of a clamp light, and then sent them down a conveyor belt for collection in a bathtub wheelbarrow. Others dispensed ice-cold vodka and beer from a black refrigerator as tall as Darth Vader and topped with the character’s helmet. Another station was a galley kitchen serving rice and beans.

What looked like a pinball machine was in fact the “rescue” station, where a crew member manipulated a plastic yellow helicopter that picked up a space capsule that had just splashed down at sea and moved it to a model aircraft carrier. Beside it, in a Winnebago where astronauts suited up in a quarantined area, was a red phone on which successful astronauts could talk to the president — Nixon, in this case, who delivers an actual speech (written by William Safire) that was prepared in case real-life astronauts were stranded on the moon.

The best part of this experience was going into the air-conditioned landing module and examining (though not trying) the toilet and looking through the library, where there were copies of “Ulysses,” “Origin of the Species,” “Remembrance of Things Past” and other bibles of Sachs’s religion. Though it weighs 22,000 pounds, it takes only four casters of compressed air to lift it a few inches off the floor, which will happen at the end of the “mission.” All I know is that I was so comfortable up there, I didn’t want to leave.

But “Space Program: Mars” isn’t all fun and games. The basic idea is to demonstrate how much labor is actually involved in mundane activities, and that there is life in every product, even if it’s Mars.

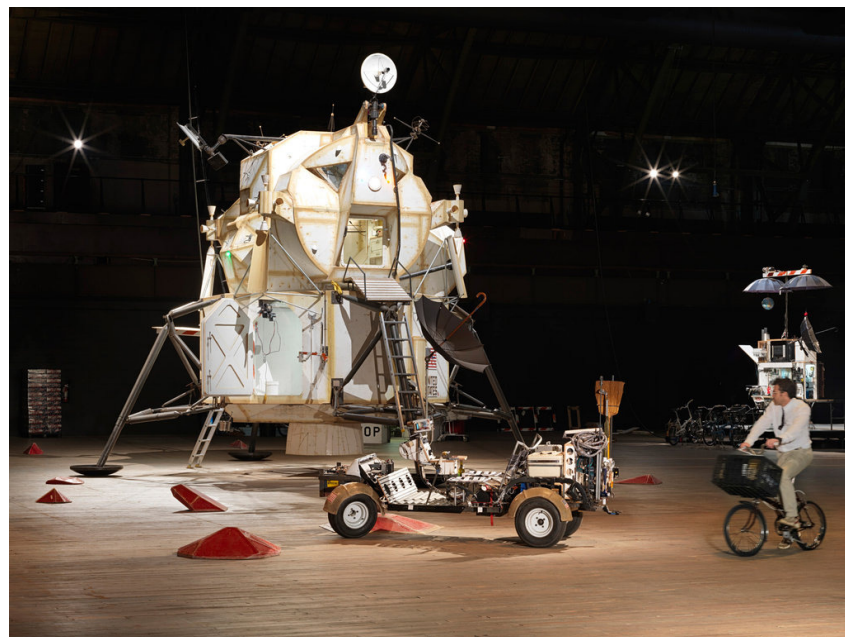
This may strike some as sheer folly, a waste of time and foamcore. But all inventions seem like the outpourings of the mad, whether they work or not. Sachs is fetishizing the whole process and doing what sculptors always do — mold objects that change our perception of space.

And there's more to come. When the show closes, Sachs and his team of specialists will embark on a new mission: to Europa, Jupiter's moon. Speaking into a microphone that carried his voice over the program's P.A. system, Sachs said, "Tango Sierra in ascent."

Tom Sachs's "Space Program: Mars" continues through June 17 at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, New York. The crew performs demonstrations for the public every Thursday from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.



- Installation view of "Mobile Quarantine Facility (MQF)." James Ewing



- "Landing Excursion Module (LEM)" Genevieve Henson, NYC



- Nick Doyle and Pat McCarthy at "Mission Control Center (MCC)." Genevieve Hanson, NYC