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An installation view of the Landing Excursion Module (LEM), Mars Excursion Roving Vehicle (MERV), and Tom Sachs on WAR Bike. Sachs and his team will perform the procedures of the mission in the installation. Photographer: Genevieve Hanson/Park Avenue Armory via Bloomberg

Tom Sachs Lifts Off For Mars Propelled by Booze, Opium





By Zinta Lundborg

Artist Tom Sachs rocketed to fame in the 1990s with sardonic works such as “Hermes Hand Grenade,” “Chanel Guillotine” and “Prada Death Camp.”

In 2007, he launched his sculptural space odyssey at the Gagosian gallery in Beverly Hills with a trip to the moon, complete with sample rocks chiseled from the floor of the gallery.

Now “Space Program” -- a deadpan trip to Mars -- has landed in the 55,000-square-foot Drill Hall of Manhattan’s Park Avenue Armory. It’s a huge installation of sculptures hand-crafted from plywood, foam-core, glue and steel. There’s a mission control, a spacecraft, a launch platform, a roving vehicle and a Darth Vader beer dispenser.

We spoke at a steel desk in front of the video wall.

Lundborg: You’ve been working on this for three years.

Sachs: This iteration for three years. We’ve actually been working on it since 2005.

Lundborg: So are you facing post-Mars depression?

Sachs: We’re going straight into Europa. It’s an icy moon of Jupiter that has a 4-kilometer ice crust and within it is a liquid core.

What we know of earth science, where there is liquid water, there is life. So the scientists in the astrobiology field are looking at Europa as the best chance in our solar system for life.

My Odyssey

Lundborg: How did the Tom Sachs space odyssey start?

Sachs: I’ve been interested in these space themes for many, many years, but I really see it as a scaffold for other issues. To me, the main issue is transparency in construction.

We paint the plywood before we cut it, you see the screws.

Lundborg: Unlike my highly designed iPhone.

Sachs: There is no evidence of its construction -- it's a miraculous object and it really sums up where we are.

But this installation represents where we've been, and shows a transparency of construction and a transparency of use.

As it is, we're destroying our planet. The more you use your iPhone, it only gets worse and weaker, while plywood, leather and other organic materials tend to improve with age.

Lundborg: Isn't it delusional to think we're going to find a nice new planet to mess up?

Sachs: The science of exploring other worlds is useful on Earth: solar power, water and fuel conservation, food, waste management -- all the basic stuff we're struggling with is exploited better in the space program than anywhere else.

Phony Green

Lundborg: Looking at the installation, my first thought wasn't "green."

Sachs: "Green" is kind of a phony buzz word, and people talk about recycling. The real word you want is "re-use."

The reason people are using "green" is to sell more stuff, like beautiful, stainless-steel water bottles.

Lundborg: Many of the artifacts in the D.C. Air and Space Museum look a lot like your handmade sculptures, so in a way it's amazing to consider they could make it into outer space.

Sachs: The Russian space program is even more bricolage, more cobbled together than ours. The Americans spent over \$1 million to test the Fisher space pen. It writes in zero gravity, upside down and under water.

The Russians weren't as well-funded as the Americans so they used pencil.

Lundborg: You developed strong relationships with NASA scientists. What did you learn from them?

Sachs: From an engineering standpoint, the concept of baby fat. You have to design in a little bit of flexibility. Things can't be so rigid, because you have to allow for your mistakes further on.

Lundborg: I'm assuming you're a sci-fi fan?

Sachs: Of course. The thing that was always interesting about "Star Trek" was that it was about life on Earth. Our space program is also about life here.

When you colonize another planet -- or country -- you bring your bacteria to them and screw up their ecosystem, and you bring their bacteria or their gold back with you. If you don't agree with their ethics, maybe you bring a Bible and a shotgun and make them see it your way.

Cocktails on Mars

Lundborg: I notice you're taking opium and bourbon to Mars.

Sachs: One of the big parts of our space program is ritual. Our main ritual is work, but cocktails, coffee and cigarettes are ways people have of connecting to each other.

Ritual, drugs, community -- these are real things that are part of who we are in our society. For us opium is interesting since it represents man's hedonistic nadir.

We're also bringing the Japanese tea ceremony to Mars, which I believe represents man's greatest achievement.

"Space Program: Mars" runs through June 17 at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave. Information: +1-212-616-3930; <http://www.armoryonpark.org>.

(Zinta Lundborg is an editor for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own. This interview was adapted from a longer conversation.)

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