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Tom Sachs' YBCA exhibition discovers new worlds

By CHARLES DESMARAIS | September 16, 2016



There are visual artists who see their role as akin to that of poets, looking for that heady distillate of experience. Tom Sachs is more of a complicator. He has hand-crafted of plywood, epoxy resin, steel and paint a credible reproduction of an ordinary cinder block. Then he extended the thought with a “windowed” version drilled with a pattern of holes.

His elaborate blowout of an exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, “Space Program: Europa,”

is a loose narrative, woven of tight ruminations on aspects of the American space exploration program. It’s a social-historical deconstruction by virtue of painstakingly detailed construction. It is a triumph — and one that is all the more satisfying for proudly revealing all the stumbles along the way, all the seams in the final product.

The exhibition occupies every ground-floor gallery at YBCA, a first for a solo show there, and overflows outdoors. It needs the space, with a checklist of 72 objects ranging from an inches-high handmade tape dispenser to a modified 1972 Winnebago (the “Mobile Quarantine Facility” at the Mission Street entrance) and a full-scale “Landing Excursion Module” topping out at 23 feet.

Grab a copy of the free brochure and follow the prescribed route. Allow at least an hour, not counting a stop at the “Logjam Cafe,” a working establishment with Brooklyn-sourced coffee (the artist’s favorite), alcoholic drinks and snacks. There, you can even be a part of the project’s next phase by sorting screws into their corresponding bins.

An anteroom houses a tongue-in-cheek biographical timeline and a mini-retrospective of Sachs’ career, including some of the luxury-brand knockoffs — like a white-painted plywood Kelly bag, complete with Hermès-branded plywood box — that first brought him wide attention.

The main event is in the larger galleries and outdoor spaces. Between the exhibition brochure and a 32-page newsprint “Pre-Flight Risk Assessment Checklist” — an insert, designed by the artist, in the free art newspaper SFAQ, available at visual art venues around the Bay Area and online at www.sfaq.us — we begin to piece together the complex story told through the exhibition.

In the first big room, we encounter a mission control console straight out of old TV images of manned space shots. In the second, we walk through what is meant to be a settlement on Europa, a moon of Jupiter. Somewhat ominously, it appears to be abandoned or otherwise depopulated.

All through the show, we find what seem incongruous allusions to Japanese culture and its custom of the tea ceremony. Sachs makes a rambling but ultimately convincing case in his “Checklist” for his full-scale

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“Tea House” (2011-16) and the “Tsukubai” (2014), “Daisu” (2013) and other ceremonial objects he has built by hand. It’s about community and faith in traditional values of purity, harmony, tranquility and respect — but all of these on his own terms, and tweaked to suit our time and culture.

Thus, a large sculptural “Bonsai” (2016) reads from a distance like the windswept image of tree-on-hilltop we might expect from the title. Closer inspection, though, reveals the tree’s needles to be cast bronze Q-tip cotton swabs, roughly soldered to a trunk and branches cast from Reach toothbrushes and cardboard tubes. A bronze “Kama” kettle and brazier (2013) is topped with a tiny head of Yoda; a 10-foot-high “Stupa” (2011-16) is cast from a corrugated cardboard original.



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All of the objects in the exhibition are made from the same sort of humble materials, patched together in surprisingly convincing configurations. The huge LEM space vehicle is pieced out of plywood with plastic resin joins. The spacesuits are just Tyvek and tape.

Multifaceted Mars “rocks” in a collection are all built of plywood. So is a large simulated-stone setting for an outdoor landscape of ice — the supposed natural surface of Europa — frozen on-site, temperature maintained by a whining compressor in the corner.

As entertaining as it all is, Sachs’ wry, makeshift Modern take on science and interplanetary travel is more than a game. At a point in the late 1960s, right around the time of Sachs’ early childhood and the U.S. landing on the moon, the early idea of space as a place where human beings interact with a larger universe was co-opted.

No longer a dream for kids and late-night basement tinkerers, space exploration was bureaucratized. Astronauts might be called heroes, but their image shrank to incidental passengers on giant, government-run cargo shuttles.

Sachs’ work returns all that back to human scale, reclaiming ownership of our dreams of exploration, of the very idea of space. He and assistants hand-logo their machines and tools “NASA,” but he makes a careful distinction between those objects and the slick products of “the other NASA.”

Despite that underlying skepticism, the work demonstrates a deep understanding of science and engineering. It’s apparent in the detailed, four-hour “launch” — like the one documented in the 2015 film “A Space Program,” to be shown several times during the course of the exhibition — that will open the exhibition on Saturday, Sept. 17. It’s clear in the solid construction of the Landing Excursion Module, hovering on four legs with no central support, able to carry the weight of several crew members and visitors.

And yet in the end, Sachs’ guided trip to Europa represents a victory of the imagination over brute science, of wonder over cowering awe.

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