

## WIRED



Photograph by Cait Oppermann

## GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR TOM

Exploring the Sublime Handmade Brilliance (and Deep Space Nerdery) of Artist Tom Sachs

By ADAM SAVAGE | September 2016

TOM SACHS' WORKSHOP in lower Manhattan is a warren of rooms jammed with cabinets, shelves, work tables, and sorting systems—all of them customized. Even the lowly drill press is heavily remade, two machine lamps spidering off its top, a brush on a retracting cord to clean away debris, a chuck key and center punch stuck to magnets on the machine's face. I do the same kind of customizing in my workshop. These kinds of rituals, taken together, represent a shop's philosophy of work.

Sachs is a sculptor, but he calls himself a bricoleur. "It's someone who cobbles together functional contraptions out of received or collected materials," he says. A decade ago, galleries and curators started noticing his provocative works—a cardboard hand grenade in a mock Hermès box, a Glock pistol decorated and branded as Tiffany. Today he and his 12-person team mount exhibits in museums around the world, and art lovers collect his work faithfully. The day I visit, the team is prepping for a large-scale installation at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in September that'll send two "astronauts" (played by assistants) in a plywood mock-spaceship on a simulated mission to the Jovian moon Europa, which scientists think might harbor life. It's the third

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in his series of Space Program pieces. As we tour the studio, Sachs' assistant Sam Ratanarat is trying to stabilize a cart the astronauts will wheel out onto the "surface"—which means she has to weld the titanium rods holding it together.

Sachs tells Ratanarat her first weld looks gorgeous. "Talk about material bragging rights," he says. "Titanium is up there!" But Sachs doesn't like their old MIG welder. The machine is beat up. "Can we get rid of this?"

"We use it," Ratanarat says protectively.

Sachs himself is working on something edgier. "When we went to the moon, Spyderco made us white Delicas," he says. That's a folding knife beloved by the kind of people who love knives; Sachs engraved the Delicas with NASA's groovy 1970s logo.



Sachs & Savage: The artist and the writer, photographed at Sachs' studio in New York's Nolita neighborhood in spring 2016. Photograph by Julia Ward.

Europa demands a different knife. "Europa is a mission about imperialism. We go to another planet, find some Europeans, and abduct them," Sachs says. "So what's the knife of colonialism? A machete!" He's milling his from a Japanese lawn-mower blade.

At this moment, Sachs has three shows in New York, and the Europa landing opens soon at Yerba Buena. At the peak of a two-decade career, Sachs' cobbled-together, rough-edged, joyful contraptions have made him arguably the most famous bricoleur in the world.

SACHS WAS a peculiar kid. He bought clothes at Goodwill and had them tailored. He was a solid D-minus student, unpopular, bad at sports. He repeated the ninth grade.

Somehow he managed to get into Bennington College. That's where he met Babs, a senior who taught him how to weld and introduced him to Brancusi and Richard Serra. He fell in love. "She promptly dumped my ass for a trust-fund kid with dreads," Sachs says. "But she showed me a more complex way of working, to make these objects and talk about them politically, socially, how objects could be used in the rituals of our lives." He nursed his broken heart with an angle grinder.

In 2012 I saw a video of a replica Landing Excursion Module on a mission to a fake Mars. I didn't know what it was, but I sent the link to fellow space geek Tom Hanks (yes, I know how that sounds). Hanks outgeeked me: He not only knew the work, he knew the artist personally. Hanks introduced me to Sachs.

By the time Sachs and I got on the phone, I'd looked at his other work. He'd mounted twoSpace Program exhibitions—the moon (at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills) in 2007 and then Mars (at the Park Avenue Armory in New York) in 2012. There were the blue Tiffany Glock and orange Hermès hand grenade, and also a Chanel chain saw and a Prada toilet. And a foam-core R2-D2, which I'd



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collected pictures of as inspiration for building my own DIY Artoo, a decade before I knew who Sachs was.

Travel Gear: Tom Sach's *Space Program* series of simulated missions includes hand-built gear like a working zip gun and a suit cooled with ice water. Photograph by Brian Finke.

We had a lot in common. We're both obsessive organizers. We both make replicas. And when we're in the shop and can't think of what to work on, we build infrastructure—stands, shelves, benches. Sachs told me he'd cribbed construction ideas from *MythBusters* Now he uses my workshop when he's on the West

Coast, and I use his when I'm back east. Our wives describe our relationship status as "dating."

When I look at Sachs' workshop, what's more familiar to me than the tools are the rituals, the signs of how Sachs turns prosaic objects and materials into art.

My hobby, maybe more of an obsession, is building replicas of objects from movies and TV shows—the pistol from *Blade Runner*, the space suits from *Alien*, the mecha-glove from *Hellboy* When I do it, in some ways I'm talking to my 10-year-old self, building things he'd want but that are real enough to fool the me of today. I pull things from the narratives I love, to get myself into those narratives.

When Sachs replicates something to display or sell in a gallery, I think he's talking to his 10-year-old self too. But he's having a different conversation. He's gifting that kid with all the art supplies anyone could ever ask for and letting him play.

I tell stories with objects. I layer on narrative by adding a patina of age, by thinking about use and wear patterns. I don't know if that's art. Sachs builds narratives into the construction. You can see the edges of his plywood, the screws, the marks made by greasy hands, or a tool that went astray. You always know that the object is made Sachs' pieces are art because his rituals of manufacture tell stories about the artist.

WE'RE AT THE Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, about 20 minutes outside Manhattan, sitting in a teahouse Sachs built of plywood and resin. The group is me and four big-ticket museum donors. Sachs is going to be our tea master.

A workstation at Tom Sachs' studio.  
Photograph by Brian Finke.



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In a classical tea ceremony, guests shed what they won't need—keys, coats, shoes—and put on tabi, traditional Japanese footwear. At Tom Sachs' tea ceremony, we get sneakers cut into sandals. He locks our smartphones and wristwatches into a Faraday cage.

Sachs delivers the ceremony earnestly, frothing the tea powder, pouring the water. But the performance isn't traditional. We smoke from a pipe Sachs made. We drink sake from cups of stacked plywood circles coated in resin. We eat Oreos, then Ritz crackers with peanut butter. "People are into tea for three reasons," Sachs tells me later. "Spirituality, like Zen. Sensuality, like the tea itself, the smell, the charcoal, the caffeine high. The third reason is the architecture—the teahouse, the kimonos, the bowls, the whisks." He pauses. "Obviously, I'm into it for that."

It sounds a lot like Sachs' obsession with NASA. "Some people are into astronomy because they're into navigation. Others are interested in where we come from, where science and religion meet," Sachs says. "And then other people are into it for things that go boom, and space suits and rovers and rockets, and it's all about the hardware."

"It's the ritual," I say.

"I think if I were to be honest with myself, I'm more about the hardware," Sachs says. "But it doesn't mean anything without the ritual."



Bonsai: Sachs welded together 3,500 bronze castings of objects like toilet paper tubes, tampons, and cotton swabs to make this tree for his tea ceremony. Photograph by Brian Finke.

**ASTRONAUTS PRACTICE FOR every eventuality.** After each test, NASA examines its failures—structural, personal, organizational, philosophical—to make sure they don't happen again. If you really think about it, NASA is just a large, ritualized failure-analysis organization.

I'm pretty sure that's why Sachs makes art about space: the ritual and the potential for failure. Like NASA's, Sachs' space missions can go awry in a lot of ways. For Europa, astronauts will start out in a quarantine trailer, then get transferred via scissor lift to the landing module. A model rocket will perform the liftoff, filmed with a miniature camera at the same angle NASA shoots its launches so the video the audience will see looks almost real. The rocket will then fly on a length of yarn to a spinning globe.



Lunch Boxes: Sachs and Savage collaborated on a project: making replicas of the lunch box used by the character Heywood Floyd in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Sachs' version, on the left, is plywood and edgy. Savage's is refined. Both are accurate. Photograph by Brian Finke.

Landing is the hard part. One of the astronauts will play the old Atari game Lunar Lander if she blows it—uses up all her fuel or crashes the module—a TV screen will show a Nixon impersonator reading the speech he would have given had the Apollo astronauts died. The show will end.

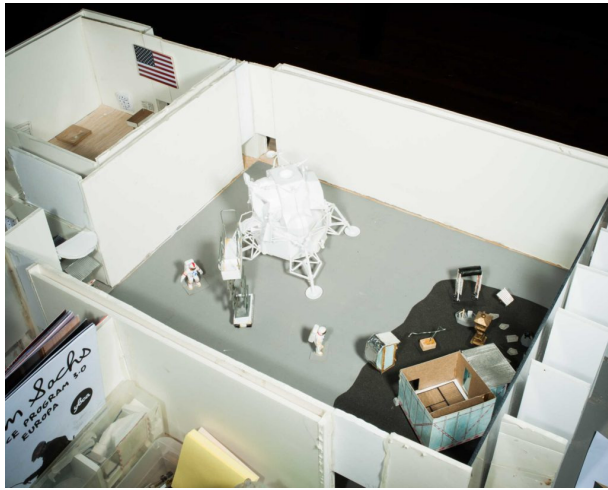


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If she succeeds, the astronauts will leave the lander, suits kept cool with tanks of ice water in their backpacks. They'll shuffle to an ice-covered pool and, under guidance from mission control—for at least one performance, that'll be me—they'll drill through the ice, insert a camera, then capture the “aliens” they find. Sachs hasn't decided what will live on Europa yet. Crawfish? Shrimp? It's a tough question, because he's planning on having the astronauts eat the Europeans. “I'm trying to figure out which fish will get me the least amount of crap from PETA,” he says.

Folks at NASA love these shows. The agency provides reference material and images. Even if his landing vehicles include tequila bars and drug paraphernalia, Sachs cares how space works. “It's always intriguing to go beyond the roughly cut plywood edges and half-worn paint,” says Dave Lavery, a NASA roboticist, “and discover that all the details are technically traceable back to the reality of actual spaceflight hardware.” The missions are fun, but they're not parody.



If it all sounds difficult to set up, that's the point. Sachs' materials are not ideal. The space suits are hard to keep cool. The switches, hatches, and so on can break. It'll take most of August to move all the pieces across the country and assemble them, just for three days of performances. That's all part of Sachs' process. He cares about the Big Questions, he says, the philosophy behind traveling to the stars, but mostly it just feeds his desire to make stuff. “I love getting my hands dirty. I only feel good if I have a cut somewhere,” he says. “If I have a little burn, it means that I'm probably doing something right.”

Model for the Europa mission piece: Foamcore, plywood, mixed media. Photograph by Brian Finke.

THIS PAST YEAR, Sachs and I collaborated on a replica of the lunch box Heywood Floyd carries in 2001: A Space Odyssey I built one from foam core to get a sense of its proportions, then made a pattern from styrene and aluminum. I had that molded and cast in fiberglass, machined the hinges and locks, and insulated it with Mylar bubble wrap I got from NASA. It's not a replica of the prop; it's a replica of Floyd's lunch box, from the story.

Sachs made one too. His was plywood and screws and resin. He left the edges rough. You can see the color of the wood bleeding through the white paint. It is, unquestionably, a Tom Sachs artwork. We both made two, and gave each other one.

Sachs says mine is art too. I tell him I'm not sure I agree.

“Your Blade Runner gun is totally a piece of art,” he says.

“But I couldn't sell it at a gallery,” I say. “I guess I could make another one, but it would kill me to let this one go.”

“It feels like that every single time,” Sachs says. “That's when you know it's good.” If you cobble together found materials into a bricolage of a prosaic object, but it hurts to let it go, you're making art.

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*Adam Savage is a maker and former host and producer of MythBusters. He now runs Tested.com. This article appears in the September 2016 issue.*