

BERGGRUEN GALLERY

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What if we traveled to a moon of Jupiter? Take your puffy coat



By LEAH GARCHIK | September 18, 2016

If I'd wandered alone through Tom Sachs' "Space Program: Europa" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, I would have been simply awestruck at the installation, which the YBCA program describes as "playful bricolage sculptures" reflecting a "quest to find extraterrestrial life." I'm quoting the program rather than using my own words because upon attending a preview Thursday, Sept. 15, and listening to the flesh-and-blood artist describe his breadth of interests and passions, I'm finding my own words paltry.

(left) Tom Sachs' "Landing Exploration Module"

A group of us walked among models (that word would make Sachs flinch) of equipment that look like NASA's, the artist specifying in serious tones that they're not copies but rather his own handmade versions: a control center, a truck, a landing exploration module and the like. Near the control center is a display of Sachs' handmade bowls (his reverence for craft was obvious as he described his fingerprints on them), and an "antique" Japanese scroll with a picture of Muhammad Ali and the words, in Japanese, "It ain't bragging if you can back it up"; near the LEM is a bronze bonsai sculpture (in an equally serious tone, he said its construction had employed toothbrushes, Q-Tips and "anal douche applicator tips. ... All components are pharmaceutical or synthetic, things that go inside of you."

In his nimble talk, every object — each handmade, a product of human imagination — was as relevant to his excursion from Earth to Europa, a moon of Jupiter. "I'm trying to show the world as I see it," Sachs said during the tour. "I want my own space program, so I'll make it."

This broad focus is clarified by the welcoming message on the outside wall of the show, which says the artist brings out "the best and the worst of us: the Japanese tea ceremony and colonialist hubris ..." But I had trouble rocketing between sincere statements about endeavor and imagination and wry comments about endeavor and imagination. Pondering creativity, for example, I was brought up short to be tickled by the artist, a kind of inverse of a satirist dropping his shtick to say, "but seriously folks ..."

The large gallery that included the display of Sachs' handmade bowls was described in the catalog as a space where "tea and space converge." He talked about the tea ceremony as a medieval Japanese interpretation of a Chinese ritual. Hundreds of years ago, the Japanese realized that "it's cool for rich people to dress like poor people," and in fact, many of the people in the room, he said, were wearing denim. And what did that have to do with space? "The other NASA wouldn't bring this stuff" on a space mission, he said. "But I'm American. We bring the noise. ... We're not only going to another world, but we're going to make it ours."

There were to be demonstrations of liftoff on Friday and Saturday, Sept. 16 and 17, and all through the exhibition (open until mid-January), even after the artist has returned home, assistants will be on hand to talk about these things for visitors. Thursday night's opening was packed; **John Berggruen's** gallery will host a Sachs show next year. I was fascinated, but truthfully, I felt myself tumbling through space.