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Art's Mad Inventor Is All Over New York

Three projects showcase the work of Tom Sachs this spring



Tom Sachs next to a charcoal chopper and in front of the tea room at his upcoming exhibition 'Tom Sachs: Tea Ceremony' at the Noguchi Museum. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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With all of his jury-rigged sculptural re-creations, Tom Sachs has cast himself as the mad inventor of the art world.

Over his two-decade-plus career, projects have included simulated office furniture made of phone books and duct tape, and a faux McDonald's fashioned from plywood and assorted kitchen appliances. In 2012 he ambitiously filled the massive drill hall of the Park Avenue Armory with makeshift contraptions designed for an imaginary Mars space mission.

In "Tom Sachs: Tea Ceremony," opening Wednesday at the Noguchi Museum in Queens,

Mr. Sachs uses his immersive mix of DIY sculpture, storytelling and performance to playfully reimagine the elaborately mannered rituals of traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

It is one of three projects showcasing the 49-year-old artist in New York this spring. “A Space Program,” a new film about his 2012 Mars project, opened on Friday at the Metrograph theater, and starting in April, the Brooklyn Museum will present his exhibition of 18 steampunk-looking assemblages that double as working boomboxes.



A bronze sculpture of a bonsai, created from casts of common bathroom items such as toothbrushes and cotton swabs.

PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In “Tea Ceremony,” Mr. Sachs uses his homespun aesthetic to drain away the ritual’s high refinement and formality, immersing visitors in an ersatz tea-garden world constructed from plywood, foam core, Q-tips cast in bronze, cuttings of orange- and white-striped Con Edison barriers, a repurposed Pez dispenser and other strategically transformed materials.

The installation, which invites guests to leave their shoes at the entrance and to wind through a series of gates to cross into different mind-states, will also include meditative elements: a fish pond, an ultra-high-definition video wall showing Mount Fuji, and a bronze bonsai made of more than 3,600 separately welded parts.

“I’m not a tea master in a traditional sense, though I’m a master in this environment because it’s a clear expression of my history of making stuff,” Mr. Sachs said last week, in the midst of installing the project.

For his surreal tribute to the tradition of frequently long, contemplative tea ceremonies,

Mr. Sachs dreamed up crackpot alternatives to traditional elements. He spun ceramic bowls into unruly shapes. He designed a bizarre lavatory and quirky meditation spots to flush the body and soul.



'Model Thirty-Six,' from the 'Boombbox Retrospective, 1999-2015.' PHOTO: TOM SACHS/SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

He even concocted a space program to bring the earthly pleasures of tea to astronauts on Mars. Indeed, at the end of the “Space Program” film, using footage from the Armory installation, a pair of astronauts fumble through an attempt at taking tea in bulky space suits in the Martian atmosphere.

“Tea ceremony engages all the arts: architecture, poetry, performance, food—it’s everything,” Mr. Sachs said next to the same Martian tea house that serves as a centerpiece of the Noguchi Museum show. “If there was one thing I could bring to another planet to represent culture here on Earth, it would be the tea ceremony—or Lil Wayne.”

Mr. Sachs said his work—like his love of hip-hop jesters—draws on a mix of high reverence for tradition and mischievousness fueled by what he called “a jihad against humor among the gate keepers of the art world.”

Visitors can experience “Tea Ceremony” as a sculpture exhibit or a stage set—or both. During the run of the show through July, Mr. Sachs and artist Johnny Fogg, a trained tea-ceremony aficionado, will host tea ceremonies for small groups of guests who register in advance online.

The rest of the time, Mr. Sachs’s work will be on display in a setting usually used to

showcase the work of late sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi, himself a fan of the deliberately slow and serene ritual, said Dakin Hart, senior curator at the museum.

Mr. Noguchi once performed a ceremony at the California home of the famed midcentury designers Charles and Ray Eames, with a guest list that included Charlie Chaplin, noted Mr. Hart.



A space suit from 'Tea Ceremony.' PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Sachs's tea house features all the gear needed for tea service, as tweaked by the artist's imagination. Charcoal made from burned Con Edison barrier wood is used to boil water, and a

sweet treat to balance out the bitterness of green tea will be distributed from a Yoda Pez dispenser.

"I think a lot of people who study tea ceremony will see what he's doing and hate it or think it's obnoxious," said Mr. Fogg, who will host ceremonies with Mr. Sachs and on his own. "I just think it's fun—an interesting take on something that can be transformative and transcendental but also super-stuffy."

"I appreciate his desire to appear not to take himself too seriously even though he's a very serious artist," said Eugenie Tsai, the Brooklyn Museum curator working on Mr. Sachs's boombox show.

"So much contemporary art can take itself too seriously," she said. "It's refreshing to find art that makes you smile, appreciate the ingenuity of the maker and look at life in a different way."