OUT OF THIS WORLD

Space travel has become an obsession among contemporary artists who are re-enacting journeys to Mars, making replicates of astronaut gear, even training with NASA.

BY ANN LANDI

Tom Sachs’s studio team prepares for his reenactment of a trip to Mars at the Park Avenue Armory.
Nearly 50 years ago, the United States space program was the pride of the nation, a beacon of hope in an otherwise bloody and tumultuous era. NASA, spurred by competition from the Russians, sent astronauts into space and put a man on the moon. The New Frontier seemed to offer limitless opportunities for expansion and exploration, and the possibilities gripped the imagination of a generation. Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey became the cinematic touchstone for a dreamy and apocalyptic vision of space travel, and visual artists as diverse as Robert Rauschenberg and Norman Rockwell celebrated a new age of superheroes and conquest.

Five decades later, even as the space program is winding down, artists continue to look to the heavens for imagery and inspiration. Lee Bontecou, for example, 80 years old and at the peak of her powers, recently showed works described by ARTnews critic Barbara Pollack as a “trio of starships . . . hanging from the gallery’s ceiling.” The German photographer Thomas Ruff has taken photographs of the cosmos since 1989, most recently experimenting with three-dimensional imagery of Mars. Christine Taylor Patten, an artist who lives in a remote corner of New Mexico, has been staring at the heavens even longer, making drawings for three decades that recall the brilliance of desert skies at night. “I’ve been obsessed with a certain kind of movement,” she says, “probably from watching the stars all the time.”
But many artists are less interested in invoking the imagery of galactic phenomena than with restaging their own fantastic voyages and more closely examining the mechanics of how we envision and approach outer space. At New York’s Park Avenue Armory this spring (through June 17), Tom Sachs is staging “Space Program 2.0: Mars,” filling the 55,000-square-foot drill hall with his own reenactment of a trip to Mars. (He previously “journeyed” to the moon, in 2007 at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles.) For the Armory installation, he created a spacecraft, exploratory vehicles, and a Martian landscape, where a crew of studio assistants can rip open the “floor” of the planet and take core samples of soil to be “analyzed” by scientists.

Sachs’s mock trip to the planet whose atmosphere most resembles Earth’s has its comic aspects to be sure, but his underlying aim is partly serious. “The American space program drew to a close last year,” he says. “I take it to be my responsibility personally to hold the mantle high for future generations of American astronauts to look to the stars with the idea that we might someday return.”

Similarly, Brian McCutcheon combined video, photography, and sculpture for his project “Out of This World” at the Indianapolis Museum of Art last fall and winter. It featured an adaptation of an actual space probe, replicas of uniforms worn by astronauts during NASA’s Mercury program, videos of John Glenn’s voyage reenacted by the artist’s son, Angus, and a series of “alien landscapes”—photographs of McCutcheon and Angus in astronaut suits going about everyday tasks in suburban Indianapolis.

“When I was first approached to do a project for the museum,” McCutcheon says, “my son was four years old and interested in space-related imagery. We were reading together about the space programs in the 1960s, and I quickly realized that I was four years old at the same time that Apollo landed on the moon. The work I’d done prior to that has a masculine American theme, and it seemed natural to me to make the connection between the launch of the space program and the risk-taking of tktktk [still getting clarification for quote].”

Kansas-based artist Randy Regier has also riffed on macho themes in his works, particularly in a series of “toys” that show superheroes stripped to their Skivvies or goofy astronauts looking helpless and overloaded in comical spacesuits. As an art student in his mid-30s, Regier constructed a spaceship made from found objects, including a sea-mine casing from World War II and parts of a grain elevator. (The piece was later exhibited, along with a fanciful astronaut’s suit that seemed to have been fashioned from flea-market finds, in the 2010 Biennial at the deCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts.)

“I wanted to create a spaceship that was so believable I myself could believe in it,” Regier says. If it looks like something the Soviets might have produced, that’s because Regier studied one of the premier collections of Russian spacecraft at the Cosmosphere and Space Center in Hutchinson, Kansas. Right now he is creating a new body of work about satellites, with narratives taken from texts in popular-science magazines from the 1950s and ’60s.

**A CERTAIN HUMOR** and playfulness about outer space have also imbued the work of Mariko Mori, a Japanese artist now living in New York. In *Subway* (1994), Mori had herself photographed in a metallic costume, a kind of demure Barbarella getup that included a headset and push buttons on her forearm. For *Play with Me*, from the same year, she posed as a sexy cyborg in long blue pigtails and silver armor, standing outside a Tokyo department store. One of her most ambitious projects was *Wave UFO* (2003), a shimmering fiberglass capsule shaped like an outsize space-age teardrop, which visitors entered to hook themselves up to computers that analyzed their brain waves.

“The UFO is a metaphor for going to another world,” Mori says, an idea that has fascinated her since childhood. “When I was growing up in Tokyo, the most popular TV animation was Astro Boy. Unconsciously, I may have been influenced by the show. I was always curious about what the future would be like.”

It’s the ancillary aspects of space travel—telescopes, star maps, unmanned satellites, and the like—that fascinate other artists. “To better understand the universe, I started becoming...”
interested in what I call the architecture of science,” says Leah Beeferman, whose largely abstract drawings and animations find inspiration in “structures and instruments” rather than in human space flight. “Satellites, telescopes, and the spacecraft we send out are the only way most humans can actually experience space, and we need to have some kind of relationship with them in order to know what all of this means,” she says.

**AT THE CORE** of many artists’ forays into outer space is an underlying narrative. Regier, for instance, calls himself “a storyteller at heart,” while British-born photographers Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick, who collaborate as Kahn & Selesnick, construct fantastical journeys to the moon and Mars. In *The Apollo Prophecies* (2002–6) the artists were “trying to do our own version of the Apollo launch,” says Selesnick, “and so we recreated the moon in our studio and photographed panoramas”—which included an armored elephant pulling a rocket, spongy-looking meteors, and lunar explorers wearing heavy fur coats.

**OPPOSITE** Visitors entered Mariko Mori’s *Wave UFO*, 2003, to have their brain waves analyzed by computers (top). Leah Beeferman’s installation *Journeys into the Unknown...* (detail), 2010, was inspired by “structures and instruments” rather than human space flight (bottom).

**RIGHT** Kahn & Selesnick, *Earthrise*, 2010, from the series *Mars: Adrift on the Hourglass Sea*, in which two female explorers find the planet littered with Stone Age monuments and high-tech devices.

“We had this notion that the Edwardians settled there and prophesized the coming of the NASA astronauts,” he continues. “We used that as a starting point to construct our own mythology.” The viewer could follow them as they touched down in a settlement on the moon and were greeted as gods before returning to Earth with canisters of “Moon Paste.”

For their latest series of photos, “Mars: Adrift on the Hourglass Sea,” the artists sent two female protagonists to the Red Planet, where they discovered Stone Age monuments and high-tech devices littering a landscape crafted from NASA’s high-resolution photomosaics and shots taken in the Southwest. “The underlying message is a little dark,” says Selesnick, “but there’s some optimism that human ingenuity allows us to explore these places.”

The “dark” side of space travel is critical to California artist Trevor Paglen, whose photographs of covert satellite missions. As both an investigative journalist and a fine-arts photographer, Paglen has been tracking clandestine military operations, such as ostensibly civilian airplanes that are in fact doing undercover work. “In learning to track airplanes, I found out about some people who had developed ways to track spy satellites,” he says. In his series “The Other Night Sky,” stunning skyscapes offer otherworldly glimpses of the craft the government sends up on spy missions.

There are a number of amateur astronomers who follow these satellites “for fun,” he says. “I’ve met a lot of them. I visit them in different places. We e-mail numbers and with those numbers you can model orbits, and when you can model orbits, then you can predict where things are going to be in the sky.” Paglen is not the only artist to collaborate with the scientific community, whether official or amateur “citizen” scientists. Sachs spent a residency at a jet-propulsion laboratory, and the Italian-born installation artist Luca Buvoli has participated in NASA training experiments as part of a long-term project he calls “Running on the Moon.” “I’m more interested in the sense of disorientation and vertigo, and the physiological tests to train astronauts allow me to experience this,” he says. “This vertigo parallels the downfall of the heroic astronaut and is a metaphor for our existential disorientation at a time when major ideologies are collapsing.”

Carrie Paterson, who has been researching outer space for more than a decade as a basis for her art, is working with organic chemist and glassblower Bob Maiden to produce multi-layered glass spheres designed to carry scents that will soothe the homesick space traveler. A few miles from her studio in Pasadena, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory has also served as a source for investigations into the mysteries of space travel.

Just as Paglen works with hobbyist astronomers, curator Tyler Stallings, whose show “Free Enterprise: The Art of Citizen Space Exploration” will be seen next year at the Sweeney Art Gallery at the University of California, Riverside, comments that the “idea of citizen scientists, a burgeoning movement,
shows a shift from scientists informing the public about what's good for them to research often done by amateurs."

His show touches on the implications of civilian space travel, as exploration of the heavens moves away from government-sponsored agencies toward a free-market, private-enterprise model. One of the artists in the show, photographer Connie Samaras, has been documenting the building of the Spaceport in southern New Mexico, the world's first commercial hub for sending ordinary travelers into the stratosphere.

“A lot of my work is about imaginary futures,” Samaras says. “I’m more interested in taking photographs that exist in that space between fiction and the real world.”

And if regular trips to outer space are a possibility within our lifetime, surely lunar real-estate ventures can’t be far behind. The artists Franziska Lamprecht and Hajoe Moderegger, who call their collaboration eteam, are developing a project for Stallings’s show that explores access to “private property” on the moon, playing off real huckster sites like Lunar Real Estate and the Moon Shop. “Suppose you owned a piece of land that you could never set foot on,” says Lamprecht. “Is that place existent or nonexistent? What makes you the owner? Can you exploit it or not?”

Like many of the artists intrigued by outer space, Lamprecht and Moderegger can recall the excitement of the early NASA ventures. “I remember the moment when Apollo landed,” says Moderegger. “We all gathered around the TV and were totally mesmerized. The scenes were grainy and noisy, but they were happening in real time. Someone was getting out of the spacecraft and walking on the moon!”

Lamprecht, who grew up in East Germany, says, “I was super-fascinated with the Russian space program and proud that they were the first ones to go out there. This was one of the great heroic moments for Communist countries.”

Kahn and Selesnick felt the same wonder. “For both Nicholas and me, one of our earliest memories was of astronauts landing on the moon,” says Selesnick. “We would have been about four or five. It seemed like an incredible uniting event. It’s hard to think of anything since that has been the equivalent of that. Those events inspired us to go back to those memories and rethink those stories.”

**BUT FOR OTHER ARTISTS,** the affinity goes even deeper. “Why am I so interested in outer space?” asks Carrie Paterson. “From a personal perspective, this is the best metaphor that I have to describe those relatives who escaped the Holocaust and became detached from their original culture. The astronaut is the perfect analogue for the diasporic person who’s suspended in space and time. . . . Alienation is a significant part of the work I do.”

Samaras, also, connects her interest in alien landscapes to her childhood. “Growing up in a Greek immigrant community during the Cold War, especially in New Mexico, I felt that the culture was really not part of the U.S., but off the planet,” she says. “And then there was the hush-hush military atmosphere of the region,” which is not far from Los Alamos, where classified work on nuclear weapons first took place.

Whatever the reasons for their enthrallment with space, and in spite of a waning interest in its possibilities among the general public, many artists remain optimistic about the prospect of finding brave new worlds. Jina Brenneman, curator of the University of New Mexico’s Harwood Museum of Art, in Taos, first became fascinated with pulling together a show about artists and the cosmos when she heard about the Tate in Space program, in 2002, when Tate Modern announced that its next outpost will be in outer space, in the form of a module that will dock at the International Space Station as its cultural component.

Brenneman, whose exhibition at the Harwood, “Machine Wilderness (in Zero Gravity),” opens in October, says, “The main thing for me is that I don’t want to be with the post-apocalyptic camp. I got enough of that in Mad Max. I’m more interested in showing those artists who want us to end up in a good place, one where we are using space and technology and science to make our world better.”

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**LEFT** Luca Buvoli, *Day 41: Vertical Oscillator (Study for Poster)* (detail), 2011–12. He has participated in NASA training experiments.
