Tom Sachs's Workshop: Willy Wonka Would Approve

The sculptor and his helpers build an untraditional Japanese garden from whatever materials are available.

By **ARTHUR LUBOW** MARCH 11, 2016

A visitor entering the Tom Sachs Studio is asked to pose for an instant photo, which is then laminated into a fake Swiss passport. The ritual is only one reason a newcomer feels he has entered a foreign country — or a teenage boy's clubhouse.

For 27 years, Mr. Sachs has rented his core space in Lower Manhattan, previously a showroom for industrial equipment; he more recently annexed a sewing machine shop. The entrance passes through a quirky bodega (its hours are as erratic as everything else in Sachs World) that offers for sale such souvenirs as the phony Swiss passport, a deck of Sachs-designed playing cards and assorted zines that the studio puts out. Behind it is a Santa's workshop labyrinth of shelves and cubbyholes, which hold tools and raw materials and sculptures in all stages of completion.

In his three-level work space, Mr. Sachs, 49, indulges the childlike urge to create or refashion something new out of whatever materials are at hand. That bricolage is the foundation of his practice. For Dakin Hart, senior curator of the Noguchi Museum in Queens, this attitude made Mr. Sachs the perfect choice to be the first artist since Isamu Noguchi himself to have a solo show there.

“Tom Sachs: Tea Ceremony” opens on March 23, unsettling the patio of trees and sculptures laid out by Noguchi. Explaining the affinity of the two artists, Mr. Hart said: “They share an approach to cultural hybridity. They share a love of handicraft and an appreciation for the power of industry.”

Mr. Sachs said that in placing his structures, including a teahouse, an outhouse and an artificial pond, in the patio laid out by Noguchi, he regarded the existing sculptures as if they were nature. Noguchi probably would have welcomed the temporary transformation. “Noguchi once told a Japanese interviewer that for him one concept of personal sculpture was a thing he did nothing to,” Mr. Hart said. “He hoped that the things he was making, especially the late basalts” — large stark sculptures out of dark volcanic rock — “would look like they had fallen out of heaven.”

This spring, Mr. Sachs will be popping up with dandelion-like ubiquity. Beginning April 21, the Brooklyn Museum is presenting “Tom Sachs: Boombox Retrospective, 1999-2016,” in which Mr. Sachs, paying tribute to urban street culture and hip-hop music, will display 18 stereo devices, blaring one at a time. Made of unexpected materials, such as plywood or ceramic, the boomboxes also take surprising forms — tribal artifacts, for instance, or lunar modules. That last kinship is understandable, because space missions are a longstanding passion of Mr. Sachs, whose grandest installation to date, “Space Program 2.0: MARS,” colonized the enormous drill hall of the Park Avenue Armory in 2012.

Opening at the new Metrograph Theater in New York on March 18 is the film, “A Space Program,” a documentation of his Armory show. A deadpan simulation of a mission to Mars, it was a collaboration with the filmmaker Van Neistat, who once worked at the Sachs studio.

Mr. Sachs’s first job after graduating from Bennington College in Vermont in 1989 was as the assistant on a three-man team constructing a prototype for Frank Gehry’s bent-plywood chair. He shares the Gehry aesthetic. The Ur-Sachs sculpture is a cinder block that he has built out of plywood and resin. A

humble object transmogrified from one modest material into another, the plywood cinder block is finished with enormous care. Some of the attention, however, goes into making sure that the rough edges of the fabrication process are not completely smoothed away. “It’s perfectly done, but it’s a casual gesture,” Mr. Sachs said.

A compellingly weird recruitment video, “Ten Bullets,” preaches the Sachs Studio dogma: The central precepts for success as a Sachs assistant are an ability to focus on the task and a willingness to abjure personal inspirations in service to the vision of the leader. Some viewers react scornfully. As Mr. Sachs notes, they would probably do badly there.

Three mornings a week, a dozen assistants assemble for a group exercise session. “It’s not a job, it’s a way of life,” Mr. Sachs said. Typically they work for three months as interns and, if everyone is happy, take a position. “We’re very much a family,” said Samantha Ratanarat, who has been there almost five years. “People think we’re a weird cult. We’re just quite disciplined.”

Last month, Ms. Ratanarat was working on the construction of a koi pond for the Noguchi installation, as Mr. Sachs contemplated stocking it with piranhas rather than ornamental carp. Recently, for another Sachs project — a rolling suitcase made of the cardboard box in which it was shipped — Ms. Ratanarat taught herself to weld titanium to devise the retractable handle. “I’ve learned more here in practical terms than I ever learned in art school,” she said.

A teahouse was situated in a corner of the Armory installation of the Mars program. In Mr. Sachs’s worldview, the teahouse is a place where collaborators and rivals can meet in friendship. He sees it as closely allied in spirit to the space mission. “It’s a way of creating an armature for ritualized activity, where we overcome our differences,” he said. “Within the act of preparing and serving a bowl of tea, we have the opening to investigate human relationships and the human condition.”

Mr. Sachs has been studying the tea ceremony for years. “There is a time in every middle-class, middle-aged Jewish man’s life when he comes to the realization that Japan is where it’s at,” he joked. “This project is an expression of that.”

His version of the ceremony will be performed periodically at the Noguchi, not exactly in the manner conducted at the studio (where it creatively includes recreational drugs), but featuring such delicacies as “the brown wave” (peanut butter on a Ritz cracker — Mr. Sachs is resorting to tea-ceremony hyperbole when he claims it took 5,000 attempts to find the perfect way to sculpt it) and the “sun at midnight” (an Oreo cookie). In place of the traditional whisk used to dissolve the powdered tea in hot water, he modified a cappuccino froth-maker with propeller blades by adding a powerful lithium-ion battery. “It is said that you have to whisk 5,000 bowls to make a perfect one,” he commented. “With this device, you get it 80 percent as good as a tea master on your first try. That’s very American, and it’s a beautiful thing.”

Sen no Rikyu, who perfected the tea ceremony in 16th-century Japan, propounded a philosophy that Mr. Sachs takes to heart. “Rikyu cut bamboo and made that into a vase,” Mr. Sachs said. “He said you could use the wrong thing for the right reason.”

Rikyu could well have appreciated Mr. Sachs’s rendition of a samurai helmet, in which a feather duster tops an orange hard hat that has been cut and painstakingly reattached to simulate overlapping armor plates. In Mr. Sachs’s alternate universe, the traditional toro Japanese lantern incorporates a walker as a base and a tennis ball as a finial; Yoda the Jedi master replaces a chrysanthemum on top of a charcoal brazier; and a cast-bronze bonsai is modeled on a construction of hundreds of Q-tips, toothbrushes and tampon tubes. Mr. Sachs is an amalgam of the exalted Rikyu and Pixar’s Wall-E. He presides over a kingdom in which junk becomes treasure without ever ceasing to be junk.

A version of this article appears in print on March 13, 2016, on page AR18 of the New York edition

with the headline: Willy Wonka Would Approve.
