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Tom Sachs Demystifies Son Obession Suisse

by Max Lakin
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Installation view: Tom Sachs, *The Pack*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2018-2019. © Tom Sachs; Photos by Stefan Altenburger; Courtesy Tom Sachs Studio and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

Why the artist has been infatuated, as his latest show testifies, with Switzerland.

For a brief window last October, as Brexit recriminations puddled into flop sweat and the global migrant crisis reached a desperate pitch, a golden ticket could be had: Tom Sachs's *Swiss Passport Office*, which took up residence in Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac for 24 hours, was ostensibly a performance piece, meant to prod at the arbitrary nature of land borders and the transactional economy of global migration, and the way travel documents can take on the sheen of luxury goods, and forged copies the dun of bootleg Chanel bought on Canal Street. His new exhibition, *The Pack*, which opened in Vito Schnabel's St. Moritz gallery a few days after Christmas, wades a bit deeper into the Zugersee.

"I always wanted to be Swiss, and not just for the Helvetica," Sachs tells me in the block-through wunderkammer of his Centre Street studio, the week before the St. Moritz

show is set to open. "There's a status to it. For those of us who are unhappy with what we've got, there's always something else. The grass is always greener." An assistant bring us coffees in little wabi sabi ceramic cups with the NASA logo lettered in red. Behind us, a five-foot dioramic sculpture of the Matterhorn, planned for a later exhibition, waits for Sachs's attention.

The Pack is less of a punk provocation than Sach's earliest reference to Switzerland, in 1996, when he produced a stack of "Nuke the Swiss" stickers and left them at the reception desk of Jeffrey Deitch Projects. Instead, it's a mostly earnest group of paintings and sculptures that wink at Swiss cultural cliches and excavate the tiny Alpine nation from its utopic myth. "I always think Switzerland is kind of the ultimate illusion," Sachs says. "Like money itself—it doesn't really exist, but it's a totally abstract concept by which we all live and die, it's the true sense of abstraction in that it has no intrinsic value. Like, you can't eat it, but you can use it to eat. You can buy love with it."
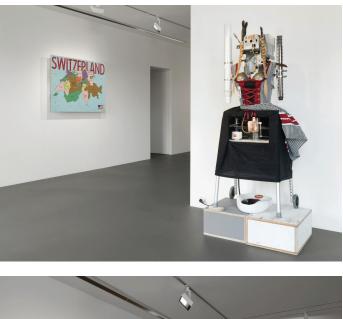
Sachs, who presumably does not share Oscar Wilde's opinion that Switzerland produced nothing but theologians and waiters, speaks rhapsodically about the Swiss's elegant mitigation of nature, the way the 35-mile Gotthard Base Tunnel, the world's longest and deepest, sluices through the Alps after an efficient 14 years of work (by comparison, New York City's endlessly propagandized Second Avenue subway took 45 years of stuttering construction, and barrels through...less than two miles of Second Avenue). "People are always so impressed with how beautifully maintained the Swiss landscape is and it's still something like 80 percent or higher agricultural community," Sachs says. "There's such respect for humanity."

And yet, paradoxes abound: Switzerland is also home to the world's largest particle collider, man's best attempt at controlling nature, and the one which carries a generally agreed upon risk of instigating a doomsday scenario. Similar is the way Switzerland is both the birthplace of the Red Cross—an archetype of humanitarian aid—and also the Pontifical Swiss Guard, an elite fighting force trained to kill a man eighteen ways while wearing flouncy Renaissance fair costumes. "It's the most contradictory place," Sachs says. "The most insular, but it's also very polyglot—when you graduate high school you speak five languages, but none of those languages are African languages."

The show's title piece is based loosely on Joseph Beuys' 1969 installation *The Pack*. "Really loosely," Sachs clarifies. "I'm not even sure what that piece is about." Materially, Beuys' installation is 20 wooden sleds pouring from a Volkswagen bus, each with a rolled-up felt blanket, fat, rope and flashlight. Sachs's update is three dirt bikes, each named for large African cities and fitted with machetes and BB guns. They both have something to do with energy exchange and transformation and redemption. Beuys, whose own redemption story is one of modern art's wildest, was saying something about human obligation and our capacity to survive, an optimistic worldview predicated on our willingness to see each other. Sachs's more obliquely references the Swiss Guard's mercenary roots, and the ways in which we sell our love, perhaps not to the infallible leader of a global religion, but definitely to brands, and how making art can resemble the same transaction. There's a bijou representation of that consumer genuflection here in the shape of a quilted petit four of a Chanel handbag, assembled from plywood and displayed on an eye-level plinth, an altar to bootleg Veblen goods.

In the St. Moritz show, elements from previous cycles

Installation view: Tom Sachs, *The Pack*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, St. Moritz, 2018-2019. © Tom Sachs; Photos by Stefan Altenburger; Courtesy Tom Sachs Studio and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

bleed in, like the searching *Moon*, a roughed surfaced painting on plywood, or the hand-thrown ceramic coffee cup positioned under the landhausmode of a discomfitingly sexualized coffee machine styled like the beloved Alpine orphan Heidi, similar to those that figured into the tea ceremonies, but with the NASA logo supplanted by a small Swiss flag. The iconography of that flag reverberates like the codes of a storied fashion house. Power ranking passports is in many ways tantamount to the way the super rich have gotten into disaster prepping, building fallout bunkers complete with Bordeaux storage, and that's partly the point.

"Any hobby is an expression of wealth," Sachs says. "It means you have enough money to do something else

besides survive." *Swiss Passport Office* is a refraction of global turmoil, but also how turmoil is propped up by self-interest and complacency. Neutrality meant Swiss documents were a coveted lifeline out of Nazi Germany, but also allowed the Nazi horror to proceed unchecked.

The Pack doesn't explicitly confront Switzerland's wartime neutrality as culpability, and, in regard to its role as a receiver of pilfered Jewish wealth, its complicity, but those ideas — redistribution of wealth, the moral vacancy of neutrality and its reckoning — bubble up elsewhere. *Switzerland*, a painting depicting a map of Switzerland's cantons renamed for African countries, is a bit of revisionist history as civic idealism, with a touch of reparations lobbying. "Imagine if every canton had a sister country in Africa and they could exchange culturally, economically," Sachs says. "You have Kinshasa and you have Zurich, and they're both cities, and all the same things happen in both those places in very different ways, but everything's the same."

It would be easy to give into the cliches of Swiss people, Sachs acknowledges, that they're uptight or square or have a thing with milkmaids, but he's not concerned about misunderstanding. "People ask, who do you make your art for, and I always say I make it for me, and my community, which today includes you and your readers, because this is our little world, and the works must communicate to us first, and if they communicate beyond that, that's great, but the strategy is really an African strategy. Not that I'm trying to make my work look like African art, but I definitely want it to work the way African art works, which is things are not made for rich white people, they're made for people in the community. If a work of art is to be successful it isn't just what I intend, it's what you bring to it. If you can see yourself enough in the work and be changed just a little bit by it, that's when it works. If rich white people buy them, that's kind of, whatever. That's a tertiary situation."

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