



## Tom Sachs Is Winning the Space Race, With Merch to Match

by Rachel Tashjian  
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The Tom Sachs installation at Ssense in Montreal. Courtesy of Ssense.

### His latest space exhibition, in Hamburg, arrives with a special collaboration with Ssense.

Over the past few years, the battle to get to space has been fought primarily between two men: Jeff Bezos, the Amazon overlord who hopes to regularly propel civilians into suborbital space with Blue Origin, and Elon Musk, the Tesla baron whose SpaceX hopes to one day colonize Mars. (Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic is in the mix, too.)

But what about Tom Sachs?

The American artist may not own a rocket company, but he has spent over a decade exploring an all-consuming passion for space, starting with the Moon at Gagosian in 2007, and onto Mars at Park Avenue Armory (2012) and Jupiter's moon (2016). In September, he opened *Space Program: Rare Earths*, an experience at Hamburg's Deichtorhallen Museum that leads visitors through a series of tasks mimicking the

mining rare minerals on earth's closest asteroid, which are needed to continue to manufacture iPhones. More recently, he launched a capsule collection with the Canadian retailer Ssense, a sponsor of the Deichtorhallen show. The selection includes mottled ceramic mugs, folding chairs, T-shirts, a Casio watch, and more, and released last week on a microsite that allows visitors to get a sense of the project remotely. Concurrently, the Montreal store is hosting an installation of Sachs's works, and distributing a limited edition zine.



Pictured right: A T-shirt made by Tom Sachs for Ssense. Courtesy of Ssense.

TOM SACHS

A compelling contrast driving Sachs's space projects is that while space exploration is aesthetically defined by technological innovation, Sachs's art is characterized by an obsession with handwork and human imperfection. Those with even a passing interest in fashion and art will recognize his handwriting, which covers his studio, films, and fashion collaborations, and pieces in a recent exhibition are made of materials like foam core, plywood, and hot glue. "The best made thing ever is clearly the thing we're using right now—this phone, the supercomputer that, if it's in the palm of your hand, can do endless things," he said over video chat last week. And yet "the phone has no evidence that it was made"—there's no sign of the hand, no sign of its construction from human work. It is utterly automated. Or, as Sachs put it, "One of its greatest achievements is that it's miraculous. There's no seams. Even the software is designed to make it look like it's there without even knowing it."



Part of Tom Sachs's collection of apparel and home goods for Ssense. Courtesy of Ssense.

Sachs likes to show the seams, which is what separates art from the machine. "Artists have an advantage over industry, in that Apple could never make anything as flawed, and as personal, as my sculpture," he said. "It can't do fonts. [Artificial intelligence] can't do music. It makes noise that sounds like music, but it can't do it. It can't make soul. And the artist has this advantage. The artist can say, I am somebody. I exist. And that's a quality that I'm always trying to amplify in my work."

That quality is further amplified by the pieces created with Ssense, which is known for its unorthodox collaborations but envisions the Sachs project, and its attendant website, as a first-of-its-kind digital counterpart to an art exhibition. "I'm interested in making things that last," Sachs said. "The \$10 T-shirt you wear once is the most expensive T-shirt you could own. And the \$100 T-shirt you wear a thousand times is the best value you could ever make. And I think all the products we made with Ssense have that quality."

Everything, he pointed out, is made in the United States; he's particularly proud of the quality of the shirts. His favorite piece is a Leatherman, the Rolls Royce of pocket knives. "I hope that everyone who gets one uses it," he said, "[and] doesn't have it on a shelf, but they use it and they fuck it up, and if they break it, they fix it."



A Leatherman made by Tom Sachs for Ssense. Courtesy of Ssense.

Does he think the same way about his Nike sneakers, which became instant collectors' items upon their 2017 release? "I know people put them under glass orbs, and I wrote on [the] box that, that those people are posers," he said. "I've given sneakers to friends and I have dinner with them, and like, [the sneakers are] in perfect condition. I'm like, *You're just wearing them because you're seeing me! I don't trust you anymore! And you're not getting the next pair, unless next time I see you, these are filthy from wearing them.* Because I believe that consumerism is destroying the planet. We're over-producing. Make less stuff, make it better, make it last, break it and fix it and build a greater connection with your things."

Sachs's unceasing passion for the interstellar raises the question of whether he will go to space himself. He is now in the final selection process for dearMoon, a lunar tourism mission funded by Japanese entrepreneur Yusaku Maezawa. "I'm seriously considering doing it," he said. "I'm probably uniquely qualified to go. I don't know that I *will* go, because there's a lot of stuff to do here on Earth. I think the reason to go isn't for my body or ego. I think a lot of the storytelling with this billionaire space race is ego-driven. The only reason to go to space is to better understand our resources here on Earth, and to communicate how special life is on Earth." (That exhibition in Hamburg is all about this idea: it requires "an extreme amount of energy to process and make these

**TOM SACHS**

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devices," he said, and the rare minerals required to produce an iPhone are increasingly in short supply.)

And since he already appreciates the singularity of life on Earth, he hopes those space tourist innovators will use their experiences in orbit for good. "I think it's great what they're doing," he said. "I just hope that they use it—they don't squander this communication opportunity and make it about their own small penis competition, and [instead] make it more about reminding people how special and sacred our world is."



A chair! Courtesy of Ssense.