

In Terms of Subjects, an Obsession with Switzerland

by Marina U. Fuchs
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Familiar things put into a new context: The artworks by Tom Sachs on display at St. Moritz's Vito Schnabel Gallery play with familiar subjects. Images Stefan Altenburger / Genevieve Hanson; Courtesy Tom Sachs Studio and Vito Schnabel Gallery

For the end of the winter season, the Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz is showing works by Tom Sachs under the title *Helvetiaphilia*. With them, the artist questions Helvetic symbols.

The title of the exhibition *Helvetiaphilia* in St. Moritz is no coincidence. The New York based artist Tom Sachs invented the term to express his enthusiasm for Switzerland. Translated loosely, he admitted during a tour: "It's not just love, it's something like an obsession." This is the fourth time Vito Schnabel Gallery has collaborated with Sachs.

Helvetiaphilia is the third part of a Swiss series by the artist. "I first visited Switzerland in 1984", Sachs said. "For me, it is the most developed country next to Japan - of course under different aspects."

Of appearance and reality

The exhibition deals with the Confederation's legendary romantic image, its geographical mystique, its international reputation as the ultimate model of wealth and economic performance, and its neutrality. In Sachs' work, Switzerland appears as his very own fantastic world, the opacity of

which invites us to discover and evaluate it. He deconstructs the national culture and the social system in order to reassemble it, to give it a contemporary meaning. To do this, he uses his typical "bricolage technique," assembling collected and found materials into objects.

A first glimpse of the exhibition makes you feel like you're in the middle of an idyllic Switzerland with Heidi, Toblerone, Lindt chocolate, the Swiss cross, the Matterhorn and a cuckoo clock. But this impression is deceptive; the idyll is superficial and is questioned by Sachs in many ways. The tourist symbol and natural wonder Matterhorn turns out to be a nightmare on closer inspection. Sachs has hollowed out the mountain, designed it as a safe for storing out-of-print porn magazines as well as gold bars with swastika symbols. In this way he wants to refer to a neutrality that did not prevent financial entanglements with Nazi-Germany. A Märklin model train chugs through the mountain and evokes associations both with the journey to Zermatt and with deportations of Jews during the Holocaust. Glock pistols in a drawer, tequila bottles and classical music complete the scenario.

In *Cuckoo*, the cuckoo clock, Sachs replaces parts of the chalet with a tiger's face. A stereo system *Model Eighty Two*, decorated with blond Heidi braids and hidden swords,

is a reminder of ritualized consumption - after all, visitors can plug in their cell phones directly and play their favorite music.

Reflection is favored

Sachs' new paintings would like to animate viewers to question familiar brands and symbols to which they otherwise have a lasting and trusting connection, without further thought. As the press release puts it, "Unraveling the character, quality, and illusion of Swiss "perfectionism" through his deliberately imperfect, crude, and unruly painterly and sculpted surfaces, Sachs appropriates and alters familiar, trusted commodities and imbues them with new values in his parallel Swiss universe, where anything or anyone can aspire to "be Swiss"." For example, the artist, born in 1966, gives sweet American chocolate bars a new Swiss identity by using the star of a Hollywood classic, reminiscent of Heidi, as an advertising ambassador.

Sachs associates the characteristic Toblerone lettering with a giant bulldozer, with which a man ran amok and was later found dead inside with this very chocolate specialty in his hand. Just as fascinating as thought-provoking are two Swiss crosses on a gold leaf background that speak for themselves.