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FrontRow Video: Tent Poles of Modernism, With Tom Sachs

'Tea Ceremony' is cultural relativism made manifest. Artist Tom Sachs gives us a tour of his influences in the Nasher's permanent collection.

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Some detail inside Tom Sachs' tea house, fenced with Con-Ed barriers he says are the cultural artifacts of his life as a native New Yorker. "I make my signature legible because I want people to know its me," he says. "Otherwise, why bother?" *CESAR VELASCO*

“Ultimately, everything, even NASA, is DIY,” Tom Sachs explains to me as we walk past a pond full of koi that arrived at the Nasher in 10 water coolers. “They’re doing the best they can with their limited resources. Everyone’s just doing the best they can with what they’ve got, they just have a different scale of operation.”

Operation is a chief interest of the New York artist. The look and feel of doing is itself his aesthetic. He once made shoes with Nike that [amplify stains](#), to augment evidence of action. On the day before the media preview for *Tea Ceremony* at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Sachs and his assistant Sam Ratanarat were still making noise that echoed through the galleries, drilling and dusting to ready the materials in the large-scale installation for guests. A key component of *Tea Ceremony* is an actual performance of the Japanese ritual for which the exhibition is named. Well, Sachs’ interpretation of it.

“Museums are where art goes to die, right, because whether its a sarcophagus or a mask or a fetish, the utility has been removed, because it’s behind glass,” he says. “My priority is the ritual from which the object is derived.”

Playing golf is ritual, he told me. Just showing up for work is ritual, he continued. And just as ritual is relative to the artist, so is the cultural meaning of the objects used for it. Sachs celebrates his New York upbringing by flanking the tea house he made with Con-Edison barriers: “Even when I was pushed in a stroller on the Upper West Side,” he says, “my parents say my first words were ‘Con-Edison’ because it was this noisy, cool, bright thing.”

The lineage of crude construction and the use of found objects is one he traces back to sculptors like Julio González and Barnett Newman, whose work Sachs pulled from the Nasher’s trove for a *Foundations* exhibit that calls to *Tea Ceremony* from the room next door.

DIY isn’t the only legacy Sachs inherited, as his choices for *Foundations* reflect.

“There’s nothing more mystical and magical than a huge cock, as we all know. Barnett Newman’s *Here III* could almost just be a street sign post without the sign ... it could be an obelisk from *2000 Space Odyssey*. The steel road marker, the obelisk, are symbols of power, whether it be sexual power and virility of the phallus, or a sign, or simply a stick in the ground saying *this is mine*, a surveyor’s mark,” Sachs says. “I can’t think of a better collection of modernist power objects than the things that are in this room. Those are the kind of gestures that I’m always looking for because they’re the most reduced. Now, I wish I could be a more reduced artist, I wish I could have that huge ego and cockiness of a Marcel Duchamp who can just put a toilet on a pedestal and say, ‘Yeah, it’s art cause I say so.’ But I feel like I have to put a lot of work behind it. I don’t have that kind of emotional security. I’m a little insecure, I have to show the sweat,” he says.

“How does the cultural aspect of the Japanese tea ceremony interact with that kind of power?,” I asked him.

“You know there are things like that in the tea ceremony,” he says. “There’s a prayer object, but clearly its a phallus; there are swords and other vertical things. And there are the opposite of that. There are vessels, forms that hold liquid. There’s a tea house that you enter. There are clothes that you put around your body. The reason I love this tea ceremony is because it encompasses the entirety of the human

experience. It's the phallic, and the yonic. It's in the in, and the out. It's man and it's nature. People forget that cities like Dallas and New York exist in nature. And its only when we have a hurricane and you see Houston being ravaged that you're like, 'Oh, yeah. Nature is around this city.'"

The sound of water flowing through the koi pond, and the cleansing stations in Sachs' tea garden, contrasts the tinny, unfinished feel of the rest. It feels like watching for nails in the floor of a yoga studio, this charge to be comfortable in the fray. *In the tea demonstrations, though, when you serve guests, I ask, do you share power?*

"I'm not really sure I even understand the question," he says. "All of this modernist stuff is a huge patriarchy. For example—women aren't really represented in this history. And I think thats why there's an initiative at the Nasher to represent women. I don't care about the gender of someone. I only care about the quality of their work. But, um. I think this patriarchy that's very well represented here is arrogant, and I want to smash it, but I also want to be part of it, because its something I've been brought up on, and I also love."

"You know," he continues, "the ceremony really isn't so much about power. It's more about hospitality and tranquility and harmony and respect. Those are some of the main tenets of the ceremony traditionally, and those are things we're trying to deliver in the tea ceremony. So they're a little at odds."

Sachs' Tea Ceremony [is open at the Nasher](#) through January 7.