

Reference

Dedicated to the Memory of Ben Plummer 1968-2004



Dedicated Delinquency Tom Sachs and the pursuit of adolescent bricolage

By Stewart Oksenhorn
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For a 14-year-old with certain habits and tastes, stepping into Tom Sachs' "The Delinquency Chamber" is akin to walking through the gates of heaven. Inside the chamber - equipped with a door and lock, to keep out snooping parents - is a full-size refrigerator stocked with Budweiser and vodka, a bong with lighter and, most prominent, a large-screen video display hooked up to the ultraviolet, supersuccessful video game "Grand Theft Auto."

"This is a delinquent experience," said Sachs, whose "Delinquency Chamber" is part of the exhibit "Dedicated to the Memory of Joe Ben Plummer 1968-2004," showing at the Baldwin Gallery. "It's smoking pot and drinking beer and playing this basically delinquent game. These all can be delinquent experiences."

But Sachs is no delinquent, or at least not the juvenile variety. The Connecticut-born, New York-based - artist? tinkerer? corrupter? - is a ripe 38. And Sachs has added touches to the chamber that most teenagers would have overlooked: ashtray, fire extinguisher, waste receptacle and even a vacuum to eliminate smoke. To its creator, "The Delinquency Chamber" takes youth pleasures into the adult sphere.

"Part of what I do is accelerate the indulgence of adolescence to a profession," says Tom Sachs, standing in front of his giant "Toyans Jr." boombox. His exhibit, "Dedicated to the Memory of Joe Ben Plummer 1968-2004," is now at the Baldwin Gallery along with Jennifer Bartlett, "October, Amagansett: New Pastels"; and Timothy Cahill: "New Work."

"I'm interested in enhancing that delinquent part of the experience," said Sachs. "Part of what I do is accelerate the indulgence of adolescence to a profession."

Sachs can certainly indulge. Interviewing him inside the chamber, which seemed at first a great idea - there's plenty of room for two inside - turns out to be a different experience than the typical question-and-answer session. I ask Sachs about the underpinnings of his work, notions of violence, decadence, humor. And he responds by getting deep into the intricacies of "Grand Theft Auto," a bloody and profane urban shoot-'em-up featuring a man battling cops and gangs.

Between gang confrontations and police standoffs, Sachs points out the details that separate "The Delinquency Chamber" from video arcade experience. There's the \$1,000 worth of fine felt that lines the inside walls. The ordinary-looking trash hole is lined on the inside with a resin that ensures a fresh-smelling chamber experience. Sachs could have just cut a hole in the refrigerator door to snake some wires through - but that would have caused cold air to seep out. So Sachs went to lengths to make a plug to minimize the leakage.

Elsewhere in the exhibit are structures of a similar scale that demonstrate Sachs' desire to take indulgence to a professional extreme. "Toyans Jr." is a boombox that you'll never see hoisted up to someone's ear. The music system is some 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide, and its potential for volume, with 7,000 watts, is frightening. "Ice Boat" is a full-size vessel, built for ice sailing, that Sachs would like to try out on some local frozen surface.

"The thing that's most interesting to me isn't all this political stuff, about adolescence and consumerism. What I'm interested in is bricolage, building stuff," says Tom Sachs, whose work is on display at Baldwin Gallery.

Poke around and play with Sachs' adult toys, and conceptual issues emerge. For one, there is the idea of violence, in the use of "Grand Theft Auto" and the several functioning shotgun pieces in the exhibit. Much of that has to do with the titular Ben Plumm, the friend and fellow artist who taught Sachs the technique of wood-burning, known as pyrography.

"All this work is kind of destructive - the black asphalt painting ["4:3," which describes the work's dimensional ratio], the guns," said Sachs, a graduate of Vermont's Bennington College. "It's all about rage and heartbreak this past year. Losing Ben sucks; losing someone else, too."

Counterbalancing the destructive forces is the crudely rendered "Scotch Tape," a straightforward painting of the familiar Scotch tape label. "The Scotch tape represents mending," said Sachs. "Everything else is black-and-white, or devoid of color. And the Scotch tape is a foundation of bricolage. It's also the foundation of repair."

Sachs' work seems designed to make people question the nature of art. Sachs might even deny that what he makes is art; the word never even comes up in our conversation. But he does find "Grand Theft Auto" - designed by some of his West Village neighbors - to be not just a piece of art, but "the work of art of our time."

"I think it's crazy people have an Andreas Gursky, but not a \$50 copy of 'Grand Theft Auto,'" he says. "For better or worse, it represents where we're at, in a lot of ways. It represents, culturally, where art is at from a popular perspective. It's a game about carjacking."

For all its violence and high concepts, Sachs doesn't overlook the humor factor in his work. Both "Toyans Jr." and "The Delinquency Chamber" come equipped with heavy-duty axes - "in case you need to get out," he says in the case of "The Delinquency Chamber" - with the wood-burnt inscription, "Jack Torrance Pro Model," in reference to Jack Nicholson's ax-wielding character in "The Shining."

Finally, there is Sachs' apparent interest in the juxtaposition of hi-tech and retro technique. Alongside his irony-free admiration for the digital detail of "Grand Theft Auto," all of Sachs' pieces possess an old-school feel and look.

"Toyans Jr." is primarily rigged up to play cassette tapes (though there is a CD player hidden in back). Sachs' music of choice is vintage Jamaican ska, by the likes of the Heptones, where you can hear the tape hiss and pop. "The Delinquency Chamber" features a black plastic ashtray that might have come from a time capsule. One of the smaller, and odder, pieces consists primarily of an ancient McDonald's french fry scoop.

This retro quality is tied to what Sachs finds most significant in his work. Beyond any commentary - on the nature of contemporary art, or our violent society, or his own loss-filled year - Sachs says he is most interested in the problem-solving aspect of building things. For instance, how to affix a bong to a door so the water won't spill. These are the issues that Sachs wrestles with more than, say, the sociopolitical implications of "Grand Theft Auto" being the biggest-selling video game ever.

"The thing that's most interesting to me isn't all this political stuff, about adolescence and consumerism," said Sachs, who spent yearlong apprenticeship with a carpenter sanding one 2-inch strip of wood. "What I'm interested in is bricolage, building stuff."

"We live in a time where" - and he picks up the remote control for "Grand Theft Auto" - "we have no knowledge of how these things are put together. It's just plastic and screws and metal."

Sachs sees his assemblages, where the bolts and wires are in plain view, as a rebellion against the current mystery that surrounds our gizmos. "The Delinquency Chamber" carries a price tag of \$225,000, but someone with just a modest amount of know-how could duplicate it for a fraction of that.

"There's something almost anachronistic, almost Luddite about the work," said Sachs. "I have a disdain for nonuser interface panels, that the consumer is not supposed to touch. Everything I make is consumer-serviceable. An intelligent person could do someone who's not afraid."

Sachs concludes that, in the music world, he admires Lee "Scratch" Perry. It is fitting: Perry is known for making the "dub" style reggae, a production-heavy sound that mixes different bits of music and is the forerunner of modern hip-hop. But the aged Perry music would now be considered archaic, far from the slick, smooth sounds currently favored.

"You can hear what he's doing," said Sachs. "I like things that show their seams."