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Tom Sachs's Chawans Are Pre-Relics of Our Society

ART
by Brienne Walsh
05.02.2018

The artist's take on traditional Japanese tea will leave you asking for a second cup. Photography by Hannah Whitaker

It was guilt that compelled Tom Sachs to create his own *chawan*, a ritual bowl used for preparing and serving tea in traditional Japanese tea ceremonies. He had failed to do so for *Space Program: Mars*, a 2012 installation at the Park Avenue Armory in which he created an actual Japanese tearoom, but not the *chawan* itself. The omission haunted him.

To allay his guilt, Sachs intensively studied ceramics for two years in order to create the ideal *chawan* with his own hands. Formerly shown at Salon 94 and the Noguchi Museum, among other institutions, an exhibition of Sachs's *chawan* will open at Greenwich House Pottery on May 3, 2018.



Photo by Hannah Whitaker

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The *chawan* originated in China and was imported to Japan in the 13th century, where it became an integral part of Japanese culture. Historically, the vessel comes in many forms, from the Seto-made Tenmoku *chawan*, which has a tapered shape, to the blue and white Annan ware that originated as rice bowls in Vietnam.

For his *chawan*, Sachs eschewed the pottery wheel, choosing instead to mold vessels that bear the imprint of his fingers. He did this to resist what he calls the “digitization of the creative process.” The resulting imperfections betray the humanity of the person—in this case, Sachs—who made the object. “I do my best to make these works round, but every fingerprint, crack, or dent says that I was here,” he explains.



Photo by Hannah Whitaker

The mark of the hand is important to Sachs’s practice. He is known for creating objects such as boom boxes, lunar landing modules, and furniture made out of objects that look like they were culled from the post-apocalyptic landfill from the animated movie *WALL-E*, including plywood, tape, antennas, and rearview mirrors. This unique style of bricolage has led to collaborations with Frank Ocean, among other artists.



Photo by Hannah Whitaker

In his creation of *chawan*, Sachs has proven himself to be a formidable student of ceramics. It's easy to imagine someone digging up one of his *chawan* a thousand years from now and creating a completely absurd—yet magical—ceremony based around it. Something involving space exploration, imbibing weird substances, and the crude rituals of a culture lost through the advances of technology.