

Neutral territory:
the sculptor Tom
Sachs and his *Swiss
Passport Office*
installation



Discontent provider

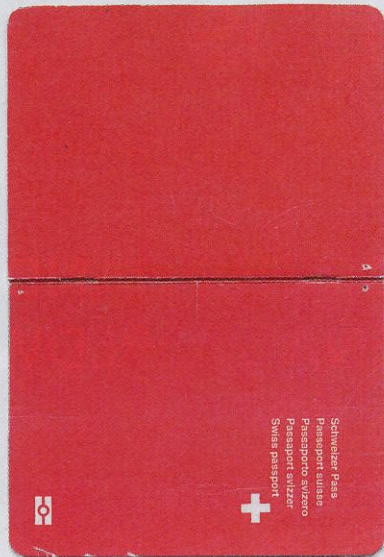
Sculptor Tom Sachs talks Trump, trance states and taking a knee as he shows *Samuel Fishwick* around his pop-up for Frieze

PHOTOGRAPH BY GENEVIEVE HANSON

Tom Sachs insists he doesn't cry in interviews, but is sobbing openly in this one. We've been sitting in Mayfair's Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac for an hour, discussing his playful pop-up *Swiss Passport Office* installation being assembled downstairs, and what he means by it. It has taken us on to Brexit,

borders, Donald Trump — whom he pointedly declines to call by name, instead calling him 'the guy who's in office right now' — and racial tensions in America.

'I'm sorry,' says the New York artist, 52, drying his eyes, his self-designed £150 Nike 'space sneakers' parked under the table (he worked with the brand and former Nasa engineer Tommaso Rivellini to create the



shoes). 'It's just so f***ed up.' He adjusts his wire-frame glasses and ruffles his shock of greying hair like a forlorn, professorial Mark Ruffalo.

Sachs isn't usually easy to ruffle. The sculptor's work has been hailed as cool, sometimes serious, often controversial. Although a secular Jew himself, he once said in *The New York Times Magazine*, before presenting an exhibition in New York's Jewish Museum, that he found the engineering of the Nazi death camps 'amazing'. His installations have featured Prada toilets, guns (one of his art dealers spent a night in jail because Sachs wanted handgun bullets given out to gallery visitors), a Chanel guillotine, a McDonald's food stand, a Nasa space launch, Japanese tea rituals, duct tape, Gucci shoes and condoms. Fans range from Kanye West and Frank Ocean, with whom he has collaborated on music and films, to acclaimed director Werner Herzog. Sachs' works, reinterpretations of 'modern icons', sell for 'more money than I could afford'. (His *Chanel Guillotine* sold at Christie's for \$134,500).

He has been called everything, from the occasionally unprintable to 'the Michael Jordan of bricolage'. But even this master of assembling, disassembling and reassembling finds the pieces of modern life too disparate to put back together. That hasn't stopped him trying. Anyone who visits his *Swiss Passport Office* here will, in exchange for €20 (no Sterling accepted here) get 'the most prestigious passport in the world, arguably'. Switzerland has always been the 'golden ticket, the escape from Nazi Germany pass'

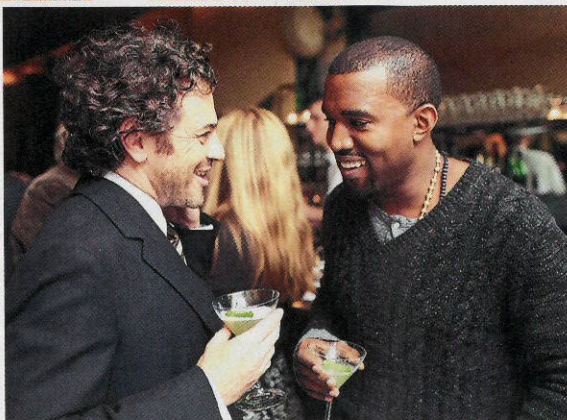
"I make art not about the way the world is, but the way I want it to be"

and the place where 'the good guys and the bad guys all keep their money together'. (Sadly, the Sachs passport won't actually get you anywhere.) It's a transitory installation here in Mayfair: interactive for 24 hours between 6pm on Friday 5 October until 6pm the next day, and on view at the gallery from then until 10 November. A smaller version of the installation was presented in 2016 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York.

'I make art not about the way the world is,



Good form: from top, the 'passports' from the installation; Sachs with style icon Iris Apfel; with Kanye West



but the way I want it to be,' says Sachs. 'Everything great starts with an idea and I believe in a

world without borders.

'With Britain pulling out on one side it's easy to see this thing [the European project] that really was utopian for 30 years disintegrate,' he says. 'And as an American, as a US citizen, we're seeing that political pendulum swing that way at home with things like the Mexican wall, with the xenophobia and intolerance that the current administration is representing.' It's this which has upset Sachs.

Those on the right would argue that what a celebrity or artist has to say about politics and immigration is immaterial. 'No, you've got to stand up, man, right now, especially,' Sachs says. 'I think it's important, first, to recognise that we are divided. And that if you have a side, and you're passionate about it, to represent and stand up.'

He points to the recent Nike ad featuring former National Football League player Colin Kaepernick as an example of something he has 'lost friends over'. He says it's 'the greatest moment', a 'big brand' choosing to be on 'the right side of history' by backing Kaepernick's right to take a knee during the US national anthem in American football games (to draw attention to police brutality). His (now former) friends say Kaepernick is 'narcissistic, a washed-up player anyway'.

Isn't it important to keep talking to these friends, though? To bridge that gap? 'One hun-



“Life can be divided into active or passive. You’re consuming or making. That’s a duality I like”

dred per cent, you’re a better man than I am. I am just pissed off. Every man I know of colour has been pulled over for the colour of their skin. Every single one. And they’ve been harassed and f**ed with their entire lives so much so that some of them can’t even understand it — it’s just part of their, like, DNA, this self-built-in negativity. To overcome that and be successful despite that... This is when he starts to cry — so I focus on those science-lab trainers, which have been through both the Nike and Nasa gamut. ‘They’ve been stress-tested,’ he says.

Sachs was raised in rural Connecticut, an hour from New York. ‘I was a really unsuccessful child,’ he says. ‘I had an unsuccessful childhood. I was a C-minus student. I took ninth grade twice. I was the yearbook photographer in high school, where they put all the kids who had dyslexia and ADHD — although they didn’t have that word then. In fact if it were now, they’d probably have given me Adderall, and I’d have been a speed freak, and wouldn’t have been an artist, but I would have got As.’

His culture, he says, was ‘not religious’, but rather rooted in ‘consumerism’: sitting around the dinner table while his dad, who sold property insurance, ‘talked about a new car’, his mum, an emergency room nurse, a

‘new dress’. His sister was ‘better at art than me’ but Sachs had ‘an insane degree of tenaciousness. ‘I figured out a way of making my cultural experience as a consumer integrated into my art,’ he says. ‘All any artist does is tell their own story of who they are and where they came from.’

Sachs’ parents’ only disciplinary stipulation was that he and his sister attend higher education (‘we could smoke weed if we wanted’). At Bennington College in Vermont he took a sculpture class ‘by accident’ when he found the photography class was oversubscribed, and he thrived. His first job after graduating was as one of three carpentry assistants in Frank Gehry’s studio in Santa Monica, California, constructing a prototype for his bent-plywood chairs. Then he moved to New York and took a job as a janitor. ‘I was reprimanded by my superior for going too quickly and working too hard and making everyone look bad. And I was really cocky but I was like, yeah damn straight I’m going to make these f**ing toilets shine.’

Self-discipline begets disciples. Now, he has dozens of his own assistants who share his passions and philosophies, including ‘knolling’, an

important aesthetic for arranging tools (and furniture) at right angles; a health triangle of ‘diet-rest-exercise’, ‘sympathetic magic’, the idea that if ‘you believe that you will succeed you might, even if not in the way you think’. The theme of contrarian ideas being simultaneously true — that ‘the opposite is equally valid’ — will form the base of a new film, *Paradox Bullets*, starring Werner Herzog and his friend Ed Ruscha. From five to 12 assistants help him at any one time, but his own work rate is manic.

Sachs met his wife, Sarah Sanders Hoover, in 2007, when she was working at the Gagosian Gallery, fresh out of Columbia, where she received a master’s in cultural theory in addition to her bachelor’s in fine arts from NYU (Hoover is 18 years younger than Sachs). They married in 2012 and have a one-year-old son. ‘I have his first drawing back in my hotel room. It’s... abstract’, says Sachs.

Sachs’ work-life balance leaves him ‘destroyed’, it used to be ‘mostly just New York, LA and Paris’, now it can be Indonesia to Shanghai within a week. ‘I get in fights with my wife because I want to stay late [in the studio] until 3am to get into this exhausted, restive... I don’t want to say a trance, but you have to be rested and worn down in the same way.’ Does he get work done on the plane? ‘There’s no way. People don’t make good art on planes,’ he says. ‘Life can be divided into active or passive. You’re either watching TV or your writing a story that could be TV. You’re either eating food or you’re s**ting it out. You’re consuming or making. That’s a duality I like. It’s hard for me to output in those environments. It’s easier to be passive. Because if I start outputting I want to punch a hole in the side of the plane. Which obviously I can’t do. But that would be my instinct. To escape. And that’s death.’

‘Swiss Passport Office’ is interactive from 6pm-6pm on 5-6 Oct. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 37 New Bond Street, W1 (ropac.net)



Arch rival: Nutsy’s McDonald’s installation by Sachs at the Astrup Fearnley Museum