

ART



UCR ARTSblock

"THE MOON GOOSE COLONY" video by Agnes Meyer-Brandis is based on Francis Godwin's 17th century book "The Man in the Moone."

Exhibit is out of this world

The 'Free Enterprise' exhibition explores the work of creators who've set their sights on the final frontier

BY HOLLY MYERS

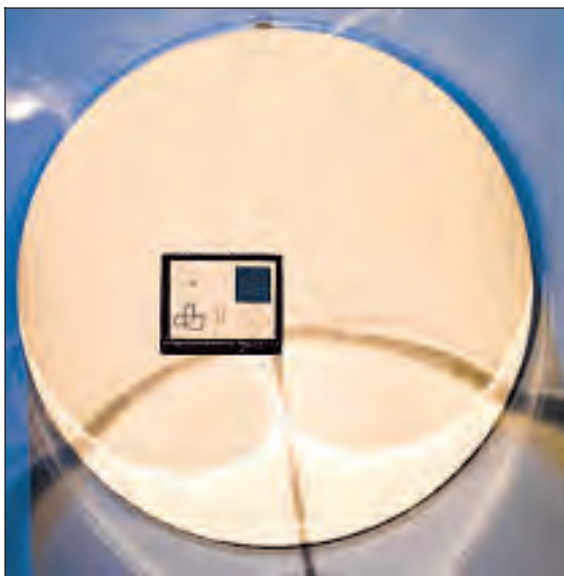
It will come as news to many, no doubt, that there is a Warhol on the moon. And a Rauschenberg and an Oldenburg—a whole "Moon Museum," in fact, containing the work of six artists in all, in the form of drawings inscribed on the surface of a ceramic chip roughly the size of a thumbprint. Conceived by the artist Forrest Myers in 1969, the chip was fabricated in collaboration with scientists at Bell Laboratories and illicitly slipped by a willing engineer between some sheets of insulation on the Apollo 12 lander module. If the word of the anonymous engineer is to be trusted—he sent Myers a telegram two days prior to liftoff reading: "YOUR ON A.O.K. ALL SYSTEMS GO"—it remains on the surface of the moon to this day.

One of the earliest projects featured in "Free Enterprise: The Art of Citizen Space Exploration" at the UC Riverside ARTSblock, the "Moon Museum" is a telling example of the determination with which artists have set about inserting themselves into not only the dream but the functional reality of space exploration. Co-curated by Tyler Stallings, the director of UCR's Sweeney Art Gallery, and Marko Peljhan, a Slovenian-born artist who teaches at UC Santa Barbara, the show explores the work of artists who've set their sights on the final frontier in concrete ways, making work that engages directly with the material conditions of the cosmos: microgravity, orbital motion, space debris and so on.

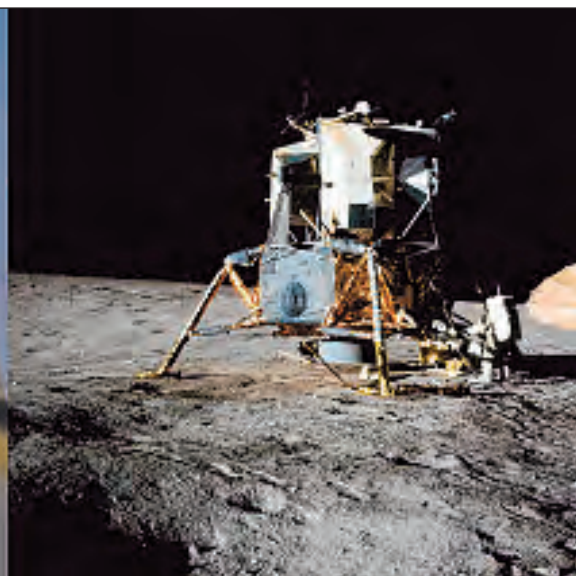
It is not an exhibition of space art, per se. "We have purposefully not included artists who stopped at metaphor and allegory," says Stallings. "There are many artists who are interested in space, but we were looking for those who had a serious desire to connect with the aerospace industry."

It is a desire, the curators emphasize, that has grown more viable in recent decades, as the prospect of space travel evolves from a monopolistic state-sponsored operation, an assertion of national identity, into a field of private enterprise. In the last four years alone—the time it has taken to bring the exhibition to fruition—the world's first commercial spaceport, Spaceport America, was built in southern New Mexico; its anchor tenant, Virgin Galactic, has accumulated more than 500 reservations for its projected suborbital passenger flights (at \$200,000 a pop); and Hawthorne-based SpaceX became the first privately held company to fly a cargo payload to the International Space Station. "Free Enterprise," through May 18, is the first contemporary art exhibition in the U.S. to address the role of the artist in this new era.

"It is important to ensure that as access opens up it isn't available only to for-profit companies who want to go to the moon and mine minerals, for example," says Stallings. "By including culture at the beginning you ask the bigger ethical, moral and philosophical questions. At this point no one owns the moon, no one owns space, but those questions are going to begin to come up. They bring up issues of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, the idea that you just push forward and deal with policy later. The title 'Free Enterprise' is meant



"MOON MUSEUM," left, is a ceramic wafer hidden on the Apollo 12 lander, still on the moon.

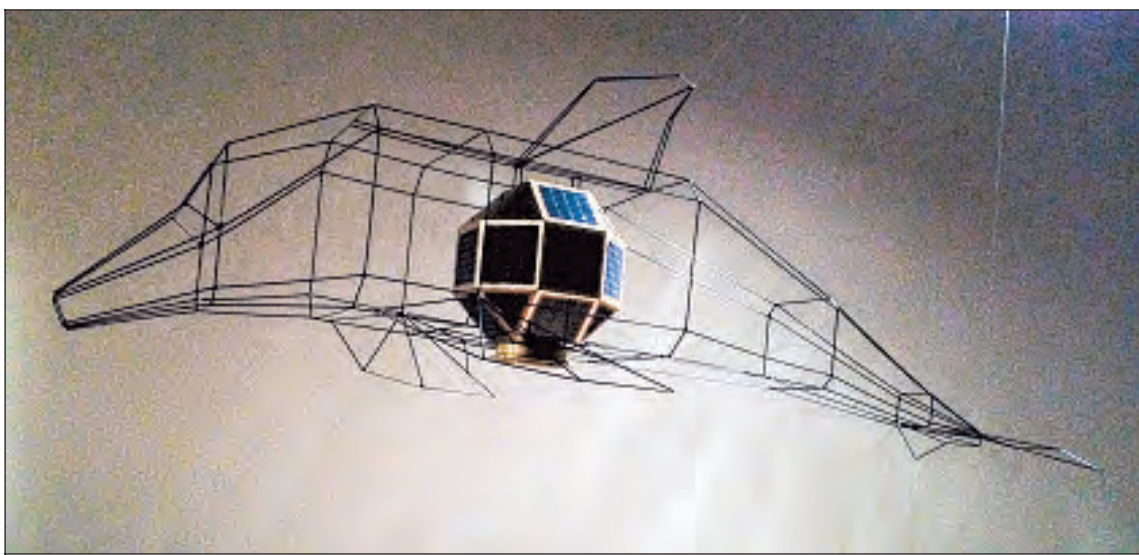


UCR ARTSblock



NOORDUNG Cosmokinetic Cabinet performs its piece in microgravity on a parabolic flight.

MIHA FRAS UCR ARTSblock



"SPACE FLIGHT DOLPHIN" by Richard Clar is a model of a satellite/sculpture meant for orbit.

UCR ARTSblock

to capture all that ambivalence."

With 25 artists, cooperatives and initiatives from the U.S. and Europe, the show presents a strikingly broad array of approaches. There's the playful (San Francisco-based artist Frank Pietronigro's attempt to create an abstract expressionist painting without a canvas, while suspended in a clear plastic sack in a microgravity environment aboard a NASA KC-135 turbojet), the conceptual (the Center for Land Use Interpretation's appropriation of Google Earth satellite images of an otherwise re-

stricted testing ground for military aerial photography on Edwards Air Force Base) and the industrial (low-cost commercial spacesuit technology by Final Frontier Design or a two-passenger suborbital spacecraft by the Mojave-based XCOR Aerospace Inc.).

Eyes on the sky

Several of the projects involve discrete objects intended to be launched directly into space. Richard Clar, who lives in L.A. and Paris, built a dolphin-shaped satellite equipped to issue dolphin signals

as a potential invitation to extraterrestrial communication. The project was conceived in 1982 through a NASA program that was subsequently discontinued, so it was never launched, though Clar continues to investigate alternative avenues.

On a more poetic note, Germany's Agnes Meyer-Brandis established the Moon Goose Colony, a quasi-scientific experiment, presented here in the form of a film, in which she raised a flock of geese with the intention of teaching them to fly to the moon. (The premise is

an allusion to "The Man in the Moone," an early 17th century book by the English bishop Francis Godwin.)

Other projects involve the creation of more comprehensive initiatives. Peljhan has been particularly active in this regard. In the late 1990s, frustrated with the absence of space research in Slovenia, he and several other artists took matters into their own hands. "The only way to do space research is to have a space agency," he says, "otherwise you're not on the map. So if nobody's going to do it, let's do a space agency! We started the initiative for the Slovenian Space Agency. Artists!" He also organized a series of artist-driven parabolic flights—flights in which an aircraft undertakes particular maneuvers to simulate microgravity for periods of 20 to 25 seconds—to allow artists to experiment in weightless conditions.

New moves

One artist who's made extensive use of this environment is theater director and fellow Slovenian Dragan Zivadinov, documentation of whose work "Noordung 1995::2045" occupies a whole room of the exhibition. In a walk-through just before the show's opening, Zivadinov makes a grand case for the project, with a booming voice, a brusque accent and a cheerfully ironic twinkle in his eye.

"What we are doing here is post-gravity art," he announces. "Noordung 1995::2045" is a theater performance with 14 actors, seven men and seven women, held on a parabolic flight. It premiered in 1995, with repeat performances to occur every 10 years for the next 50 years. "If anybody die in interval, we change their body for remote control sign. If woman die, we install in her replica a melody, and if man die, we integrate a rhythm. In 2045, all the actors will be dead, on stage will just be floating substitutions. I won't die. I am theater director." He laughs.

Young Brooklyn-based artist Bradley Pitts is another to have taken advantage of Peljhan's parabolic flight program. His "Singular Oscillations: Playback" is a multi-channel video installation documenting a flight in which he moved through the variable gravity environment naked while blocking his eyes and ears to lose any sense of orientation and experience a completely free floating, unencumbered bodily existence.

Pitts, who was trained as an aerospace engineer and worked for a time at NASA, later recounted the experience to a former astronaut and asked him if he had ever floated naked himself. The astronaut was defensive at first but later admitted, in a letter that is included in the installation, that he had and that the experience had been remarkable.

"I took this as a kind of confession," Pitts recounts, "that things like this are happening and have been happening in the space program—but we're sending humans!—because they always get marginalized and pushed off to the side. That's what I think is exciting about the development of space tours and things like this: The true humanity of the endeavor can rise to the surface and become the mission rather than being a byproduct that is glossed over to get to the data."

calendar@latimes.com