

"Lost in Space: Interview with Michael Najjar"

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Isabelle Hay: Your work, especially in "outer space," balances on a line between fiction and reality. Could you speak about your relationship with that balance between the real and the fictional?

Michael Najjar: The work that I'm doing I call hybrid photography because it's always a fusion of different sources and several picture elements which come together in a composition that usually looks kind of real or realistic, at first glance, but at second glance you notice that it can't be like that; it's a construction of reality. That's what I'm always interested in. I'm not interested in showing reality, I'm interested in the construction of reality. The reconstruction of time and space that's usually what I'm doing when I'm creating these photographic pictures. It's a thin line between reality and simulation, and my artwork is attempting to oscillate on that line. I have not gone into space yet. No one has with Virgin Galactic and they're still not ready. They're still doing test flights. I have done a lot of astronaut and cosmonaut trainings and preparations to prepare for this experience.

IH: How did the training and preparations influence "outer space?"

MN: A very important part of the series is the performative aspect. I'm involved physically, with my own body, in the training sessions. Based on these experiences I'm creating video and photographic artwork. I've undergone a lot of training sessions in the United States, in Russia especially, and Northern Germany. I have done centrifuge training, and space rock training underwater in a cosmonaut suit to simulate zero gravity movements in a space suit. I have flown with a MiG-29 jet fighter into the stratosphere up to 20,000 meters, at almost twice the speed of sound. I have also done a halo jump, which is jumping out of an aircraft at an altitude of 10,000 meters (about 30,000 ft) with 2 minutes of free fall at 200 miles per hour falling down to Earth. So, all of these extreme experiences are done to learn what it means to prepare as a professional astronaut: to cope with the g-forces, to cope with the exhilarations, to see what it means when your own body goes over its limits, and then what happens to perception under these extreme circumstances. The experiences that I had during these extreme situations I tried to transform into artistic expression. The training I am doing is not mandatory for the flight with Virgin Galactic. What is required is much less. But from an artistic point of view, I was interested to learn how professional astronauts have to train to fly to the International Space Station. That's why I stepped into this professional training program. Training with the astronauts and cosmonauts at the maximum professional level, to learn from them, and to see it from an artistic point of view, which is the main interest in doing all of this.

IH: What you are doing is extraordinary, and completely immersive. Is it correct to say that some of the images within the "outer space" series are documenting your training?

MN: Well, the artworks are not documentary. They are all constructed and montage. A lot of documentary footage exists because other photographers and videographers have been with me on these travels and in training. The documentations have been used in a book publication (*outer space*, Distanz, 2014). We have also produced a 45 minute

documentary film, to give an idea of the background of what I've done, and the situations that these artworks have been created from.

IH: As you mentioned, "outer space" has an element of performance art. What was it like for you to become the subject in these images? Did it change your artistic process at all?

MN: The performative aspect has been a part of my work for a long time. But I've never been a part (a subject) of the actual artwork. I've climbed up the highest towers in the major cities around the world. For "high altitude" (2008-10), I climbed up Mount Aconcagua – a 7,000 meter (22,000 ft) high mountain (the highest point in the Western Hemisphere). I've always done these things to create specific situations that allow me to take extraordinary pictures, but I've never integrated myself into the artwork. That has changed now, it is new. This training process and the eventual space flight is very much focused on myself and my body, so it's a logical step to bring myself into the center of the artistic output and artistic creation. In the artworks I never appear as, let's say, a 'normal' individual. I'm always surrounded by a lot of technical stuff and gear. I'm wearing a space suit, helmets, goggles, oxygen tubes, all of these things are around me. That's what I'm interested in: to show how important it is to have all of this technical gear in order to survive in such extreme conditions.

IH: I see an undeniable similarity between your work "outer space" (2011-ongoing) and the recent film Interstellar, even in Ex Machina with your series "bionic angel" (2006-08). How much influence do you take from science fiction films and novels?

MN: Oh, a lot! Since I was a child I've been addicted to and interested in science fiction novels and movies. I would say my strongest influence of all is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It's a key source of inspiration. I've seen it a hundred times. In terms of novels it's William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. And also, of course, the science fiction productions that you mentioned like *Ex Machina*, *Interstellar*, or even *Gravity* which is a fantastic movie. Though, nothing really reaches *2001*. You can see an increase in the production and output in this field, especially in movies at the moment, because the topic is becoming more and more interesting to public.

IH: And more accessible.

MN: That's why. We are entering a new space age. There's a paradigmatic shift in space travel. It has gone from the strictly national agency driven and controlled access to the private companies that are opening access to space, developing new technologies, which will provide much more opportunity. This has strongly influenced in our society.

IH: Are you still in the process of training?

MN: It's an ongoing process. I definitely have to keep fit for the actual space flight. I will continue to do training sessions, especially zero-g training. You absolutely have to stay fit and to learn in order to do this experience. For example, zero-g training for the first time is totally chaotic because you're not used to moving around in zero-g. You don't have any control of your movements, it's very difficult, and even more difficult to photograph and hold the camera. It's something you really have to learn, as well as learning techniques to cope with the extreme g-forces to avoid losing consciousness.

IH: Have you had any doubts or fears in this process?

MN: No. Not at all. I am fascinated by all of this.

IH: Is there a date set for your space travel with Virgin Galactic?

MN: We don't have a date set yet due to the accident that happened in October 2014. A spaceship had crashed during a test flight. It has caused significant setbacks to the project. One person was killed one survived. The spaceship was entirely destroyed. It has been rebuilt now. Four weeks ago Virgin Galactic began their new generation spaceship, and will undergo an intense series of tests flights. At the end of the year, we will have a clearer idea of when the first commercial flight services can begin. Realistically, I will say my flight won't happen until 2018.