

The first artist to space, finds his Outer Space in Shanghai: Interview with Michael Najjar

by Taoule Zhu for artnet, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com>, 16 October, 2019

In late September, BANK gallery presented German artist Michael Najjar's first solo exhibition in China, as well as his debut at the 6th Photofair Shanghai. At the fair, the gallery brought one single work *Ignition*, 2019 and it sparked heated conversations among fair goers. The work captured the exact moment the Soyuz launcher from Europe's Spaceport in French Guiana leaves its launching pad. Together with its unimaginable vantage point, high resolution image quality, the artwork gives a simultaneous contradictory impression of powerful acceleration and motionless standstill, and an insecurity of success and failure in one precise second. When the gallery staff further introduced Michael as the first artist to travel to space, it grabbed attention and curiosity from more audiences.

The solo show at BANK gallery's space at An Fu Road presents Michael Najjar's latest series *outer space* in manifolds, with mostly photographic works and two videos. The series reflect the latest development in international space exploration and take a complex critical look at the technological forces shaping and drastically transforming the early 21st century.

Walking down the stairs leading to the spacious gallery, the opening piece is a gorgeous triptych of the lunar landscape with Apollo astronauts conducting scientific research. When I visited for the interview, Michael happens to be standing next to the artwork and taking installation shots for the show with his Hasselblad camera, just as serious as the astronauts in the artwork.

During his walkthrough for the show, Michael introduces the project into five themes: the human body in space, space vehicles and shuttles, sustainable energies in space, astronomy, and terraforming. In each theme, he strives to unleash the potential of images by reconstructing time and space in the images. And in each image, he creates the visions and utopias of our future possibilities on Earth, in outer space and other planets.

Worthnoting, all the silent and still photographs create a dialogue perfectly in sync with the immersive sound coming out from the video piece *orbital cascade_57-46* (2013), and give lots of imagination for viewers to place themselves into the future space. When exiting the gallery to the ground level and standing in the sun, one still hears the echoes from the immersive environment, and can't help but expect more from Michael Najjar's space trip next year.

How did the series *outer space* start?

I'm intrigued by the impact of new technologies and the way how they shape and transform the 21st century. In my artwork, I'm trying to create visions, utopias, of future infrastructure emerging out of these new technologies. When I started the series in 2011, I realized something significant will change in the field of space exploration. It was in July 2011, when I went to see the last launch of Atlantis in U.S. It was my first time seeing a rocket launch.

Different from previous series, you put yourself in the work this time. Your body becomes the new medium.

There was a lot of physical work behind the images I made, before I made the "Outer Space". This is a new change in this work. Up to today, about only 550 people were able to get to outer space since Yuri Gagarin. It's clear that it's a very abstract and theoretic topic. As an artist, I'd like to do something different. I need to have my own experience, what it means to climb outside, what it means to train as an astronaut, and going through all the process. Then this Virgin Atlantic opportunity comes to me, with the help of three collectors co-financing me. It must require lots of physical training for your body to fit for the space. First, the Zero-G training. I've experienced the loss of color vision and consciousness. What it means to overcome gravity, the key force of the universe, yet we are unaware of it on the daily basis? Then there is the 10000 meter halo jump, a two-minute free fall. HALO stands for High Altitude Low Opening. Our brain which works like pattern recognition, does not know what to do with this first time experience, and that experience and the physical challenge makes this work very unique.

This unique experience and your image sensibility produce a sense of unreal for me, where do you find balance between reality and representation in your work?

I'm interested in the construction of reality. I try to create works that oscillate on the thin line between reality and simulation, so that there is a sense of insecurity when you are looking at the photos. The rocket launch photo has very small digital alteration, but the whole setting and production with the camera so close to the rocket, create a weightless point of view. Even though it's a very realistic shot, one feels it's simulated because you're not used to this strange perspective and wonder where you are. It challenges some conventional thinking. In your early study, Vilem Flusser is a huge influencer. I was blown away by the precision of his words in understanding the image and photography. I had an incredible privilege to have a three-day workshop with him at the university, about one year before he died. At the time before internet existed, he predicted all the development in photography and the role of image in the world with massive connectivity. He coined a term: a "zero-dimensional" world of images and photographs where they can be at any location, anywhere, at any moment, and that's what we have today with our network and social media. He's such a visionary and influence on my theoretical thinking. Same as other philosophers at the time such as Jean Baudrillard, on simulation and simulacrum, and Paul Virilio, on acceleration. So interconnectivity, the question on the role of simulation, and acceleration are the key ideas in the work.

Does the idea of acceleration scare you?

Yes, I have to say. When I as younger, it's more like fascination. Within the last 20 years, we are all fascinated about everything getting faster, quicker and more accessible, but I think we've reached a tipping point where certain directions are dangerous because everything is too accelerated, and we are overwhelmed by the speed. We've lost the ability to focus on the now, because you are always somewhere. In China, it seems everyone is more addicted to cellphones. Nobody is really mentally present in the physical environment, and always ready to go somewhere else. It's very Flusser kind of thinking, an interesting development that may be not so healthy.

Can we talk about the photo of the radio telescope in China?

The telescope is in Guizhou province. I've done a lot of astronomy work in Chile, where they have the most advanced telescopes in the world. Then I saw the news that China is building the biggest radio telescope on the planet. I tried to get permission, but there was no official permission possible. so at the end of the day, i travelled there with an assistant and spent several days there talking to the authorities. We were lucky to get a half day to climb the mountains. I was able to take that shot at the vantage point. I already knew I couldn't take a digital photo because no cellphone signals are allowed within 5 kilo meter radius of the telescope for interference prevention. I brought my old Hasselblad film camera and got a couple hours to shoot that. I was the first one to get that photo, and as a foreigner in China, that's certainly not easy. The photograph was also shown in UCCA's show titled "Civilization", and it gets huge attraction. I'm so fascinated by this: a huge technical apparatus placed in a Chinese landscape of forests. intrigued by the main goal that is to find ET communication n signals. to be the first. A quite ambitious goal. A bit surreal concept.

Showing this body of work in China, a country of rapid and mass development using technology, what's some of the most interesting and unexpected feedback you've received?

To be honest, it shocks me that Chinese people know so little about their own space exploration project. Because i can see people getting so fascinated by the work, but nobody seems to be aware that China has very ambitious and advanced space programs. I'd really like to gain access and photograph Chinese programs in Hainan, spaceship port, etc. As long as it's under military umbrella, it's not possible. Maybe this body of work can shed light on the topic of space exploration in China. Would you be interested in living in another planet in the future? As an artist and adventurer, definitely. As a husband and father of 8-year old boy, I'd say no. But for me, as the first artist to go into space, it's already an extreme experience. It's definitely realistic in the future. My son will live in a totally different world when he grows up. For him, reaching the moon, live and work there or on space stations, that's absolutely realistic scenarios.