

Will we soon be floating in endless space?

Technical progress is changing us and making reality of visions that used to belong in the celluloid realm of science fiction. Such is the stuff of Michael Najjar's art. His works whisk us into a future that's more realistic than we'd ever dare think.

What does a man do who wants to go ever higher, ever further? He scales high buildings, skyscrapers, even the world's biggest. He climbs the tallest mountain in the southern hemisphere, 6962 meters high. And then when he's standing on the summit, he asks himself how he can get even higher, up into the sky, up and beyond. With a space ship of course! So Michael Najjar goes and does it.

The astronaut floats down in his slow motion descent, breathing heavily like Darth Vader. He waves his arms languidly as though trying to say, look, I can still move even though wrapped in this monster-sized suit! With a muffled gurgle he hits the ground, through the porthole behind him a fake earth rises. The astronaut is none other than Michael Najjar and the earth is only there because he wants it to be. This is a video of one of his cosmonaut training sessions at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center in Star City, Russia, where he's immersed in a tank of water twelve meters deep. The earth's globe had been digitally retouched. He's already dreaming of real space travel, real zero gravity. Soon he won't need to manipulate.

Fast forward wind to an exceptionally mild October day in the Berlin district of Schöneberg. The sun shines in through the open balcony door of the turn of last century apartment where he now has his studio. Michael Najjar is in a Skype conference about a video work which visualizes all the space junk orbiting the earth. "Apollo 8 was in 1968," he says to the man on the screen. The first manned flight to the moon. "That gave us our very first view of the earth as a globe," he explains later. Space has been at the heart of everything he does ever since he photographed the launch of the last space shuttle Atlantis in summer two years ago. That marked the start of his "outer space" series for which ever since the 46 year old artist has been travelling the world photographing telescopes, space ports, experimental facilities and himself in his numerous preparatory space training sessions. Because the culminating point of all this work will be his own trip in space in early 2015 when he'll be the first artist ever to venture into the great beyond. His ticket which costs a cool €180,000 has been paid for by three of his collectors.

It's privatization of space travel that has made this project possible. Governments are cutting back on their budgets, and NASA, once the very symbol of America's ascendancy as a super power, no longer has its own space shuttles since the Atlantis program was terminated. The field is now open to the richest of the rich who have stepped in and set

up their own space ventures – people like Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen with his “Stratolaunch Systems”, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos with his “Blue Origin” and founder of the Virgin Music Group Richard Branson with his “Virgin Galactic” in whose “SpaceShipTwo” Michael Najjar will fly along with 400 fellow pioneer astronauts. Billionaire Branson already owns his own island and his own airline company and has now discovered space as a novel business opportunity. Higher, faster, further.

“Space technology is now evolving at an exponential rate,” says Michael Najjar. Space travel used to be an ecological disaster “as though you travelled from Berlin to Hamburg in a car then trashed it on arrival.” His picture of the future is built of carbon and hybrid motors and driven by laughing gas and recycled latex. “This means changes in our future way of life. There will be hotels in space, and orbital gliders will shrink the distance from A to B. It will be perfectly normal for my small son to say things like, dad, next weekend I’ll be in orbit.” Michael Najjar is convinced that life on the moon and on Mars and other heavenly bodies will be possible for humans.

He believes in progress, in humankind’s indomitable pioneering spirit. Satellite-controlled agriculture, mining on the moon, moon bases made by 3D printers, life under domes with plants brought from earth, human bodies genetically modified for life in space – Najjar knows only too well that “Most people think all this is just science fiction and light years away” and is sometimes accused of being nothing but a dreamer. But he holds firm to his convictions. And he’s not alone. The idea of using moon dust to print housing on the moon comes from the European Space Agency and star architect Sir Norman Foster. It was Foster who designed the Space Port in New Mexico from which Michael Najjar will soon lift off and which he portrays in his “spaceport” work under an ominous black sky in the middle of which stands the sentinel of an over-dimensional moon. The universe within touching distance.

Najjar sees his work as transforming technical ideas into art. But explaining this to technicians isn’t always easy. Take the Russians, for instance, who really put their foot down about a video of his cosmonaut training. His friend the photographer Thomas Rusch was to film him, but the two of them had to use all their (considerable) powers of persuasion before permission was finally – and grudgingly – granted. And his triple rotation on a flight through the stratosphere drove not only himself but the pilot too to the outer limit of endurance. Such a maneuver put him under sevenfold g force and the pilot was terrified he would pass out. “But I didn’t black out – all I had was a “grey out”, a temporary loss of your sense of color” he explains.

He’s just been on a parabolic flight, a special flight maneuver which gave him ten doses of a good twenty seconds of simulated weightlessness. And he holds up the video on his cell phone. He’s lying there on the floor in the belly of the shaking rattling plane.

Suddenly he rises and spreads his arms for flight. An assistant grabs his legs and spins him round like a game show wheel.

“As an artist it’s important for me to be physically involved in what I do” he says. There’s only one project where he won’t be able to realize this: the project of an exhibition on the moon. What a dream: to exhibit the vision in the very place where it could become reality. To bring the future to the present. But of course he can’t fly to the moon just like that and it’s remote-controlled rovers that will set up the pictures. In Michael Najjar’s world this is no far-fetched abstract game, in his world it’s a very distinct possibility.