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‘A Space Program’ is buoyed by the problem-solving spirit of galactic travel

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Photo: Josh White

Somewhere between the romantic absurdity of what a trip to the moon used to inspire, and the reality of the NASA age, lies the low-fi charm of "A Space Program." Director Van Neistat's movie diorama is a conceptual recording of artist (and colleague) Tom Sachs' DIY "Space Program 2.0: MARS," a mixed-media piece exhibited at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2012.

It combined the aesthetics of bricolage — creating out of what's available — and performance art to depict a hand-made galactic journey launching two female astronauts toward the Red Planet. Narrated like an instructional film, it's a deadpan ode to painstaking ingenuity, primarily the properties of plywood, steel, resin and the shipping-envelope material known as Tyvek.

On the warehouse stage, we see Sachs and his white-smocked "scientists" — his real cadre of artists, who built everything — role-playing the engineering triumphs and emotional pitfalls of an interplanetary mission that might just answer that nagging question: Are we alone?

While there's plenty of fun in the old-tech specifics — a mission-approved boombox for flight music, the thermos-and-ice cooling system for the spacesuits, an Atari console that renders the landing — "A Space Program" and its winking resourcefulness are very much a wry nod to the problem-solving spirit that makes humankind's most ambitious ideas real. (Nestled inside the documentary-style elements is a hilarious short film on Sachs' workshop rules called "Ten Bullets.")

Evoking the most immersive playdate with your own most practical yet imaginative childhood friend, "A Space Program" may find cheeky humor in our quest for meaningful science. But it certainly hints that there's something worshipful in the details.