

Naples Daily News

Moon 'museum' masterpieces: Chip-sized gallery smuggled on Apollo

By Harriet Howard Heithaus
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The Kapton foil blanket around the landing gear secretly held the museum chip inside. Photo courtesy NASA

Step outside tonight and look up at the sliver of moon in Florida's sky. You are gazing at igneous rock, some basalt dust — and artworks by 20th century masters such as Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenberg. They're up there.

Actually, so are photos of children and grandchildren of NASA engineers and contractors, who squirreled them away in landing gear that was left behind after U.S. lunar landing missions.

None of this is official. The sub rosa galactic gallery, reduced to a computer chip size, was among those items tucked inside the landing gear's temperature-shield blanket without NASA approval before the Apollo 12 mission. (NASA did not respond to a request for comment.)

Its legacy lives, however. The paper-thick, three-fourths by a half-inch-square microchip, bearing reduced versions of 8- by 10-inch drawings made especially for the lunar mission, is part of an exhibition "The Moon Museum (1969): Apollo XII's Secret Art Mission." Jade Dellinger, director of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College in Fort Myers and curator of the exhibition, brings it here this weekend for a monthlong stay.

One of the eight known existing duplicates of the chip, also containing works by Forrest (Frosty) Myers, David Novros and John Chamberlain, is part of it. The chip, which fits easily into the standard ring box holding it, came from Bell Laboratories, a research leader in aerospace materials at the time. The creators had been working in a group with Rauschenberg known as Experiments in Art and Technology.

Dellinger has interviewed Frosty Myers, the only one of the artists still alive, and loves to tell the story of its birth at a New York bar, where the artists and engineers gathered to tip a few occasionally.

"Frosty sort of showed up on the night everyone was celebrating the Apollo 11 landing on the moon. In the midst of this, some time in the evening, Frosty told the group, 'We have accomplished something that changes everything here, but as an artist, I have another question to pose: As artists, what have we left behind — instead of just leaving detritus — on the moon?'

"Immediately, the mood shifted," Dellinger said, recalling Myers' story.

The group determined to send art to the moon, but there was only a three-month window before the next landing. Whatever was to be done had to be created quickly and reduced to a featherweight, miniature-size attachment.

Further, NASA wheels, the engineers warned them, moved exceedingly slowly in granting permissions for any additional component.

At first, the group tried.

Myers, recalling the challenge, told Dellinger that, "Everyone I spoke to at NASA was friendly and supportive, but no one was willing to take responsibility or sign off on it. Despite substantial efforts, they all seemed to pass the buck and we never managed to

get approval from officials at NASA.”

One of the engineers at EAT prevailed upon a friendly Grumman contractor, who was aware he would lose security clearance.

But did the chip make it onboard? Myers received a telegram just before the spacecraft lifted, telling him it was “A-OK, all systems go,” with the pseudonym of John F. echoing the first two initials of the U.S. president who had encouraged American participation in the space race.

The exhibition at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery isn’t a large one. Still, visitors who come will find themselves in an immersion of space travel. A loop-fed screen shows footage of the Apollo 12 astronauts, bouncing lazily around the lunar surface; other cabinets hold photos taken from the second landing, 45 years ago on Nov. 14. Another 15-minute documentary details the Apollo missions of that year. Three of the walls are painted in a gentle sunset amethyst, and Brian Eno’s “Apollo: Atmospheres & Soundtracks” further swaddles the visitor in ambient sound.

In the far corner is the chip itself, with the six miniaturized drawings on it. Their interpretations are as interesting as the drawings, and the trifold handout introducing the exhibition will explain some — and probably raise more questions about several.

The exhibition, which came to the National Gallery of Georgia in Tbilisi before its visit here, was paired with a show of Georgian artists’ work themed around space exploration; several slides of their creations accompany this story.

It had a surprising impact in the former Soviet satellite republic, Dellinger said.

“They had 70,000 people turn out for the exhibition.

“It was phenomenal over there,” he said.

IF YOU GO

What: “The Moon Museum (1969): Apollo XII’s Secret Art Mission”

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, 8099 College Parkway Fort Myers

When: Reception 6-8 p.m. Friday; hours 10 a.m. — 4 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday through Sept. 27;

Information: 239-489-9313

Admission: Free

Something else: Economical viewers will visit around noon Saturday, when they can talk with Dellinger and stay for an unrelated 1 p.m. talk by Keith Edmier, whose realist-fantasy sculptures are making the rounds from Berlin’s Neugerriemschneider to the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, Netherlands. Edmier’s work juxtaposes fantasy lives — Janis Joplin is pictured as his mother in publicity posters — and vulnerability.