THE INDEPENDENT SUNDAY 04 MAY 2014

Portfolio: Edgar Martins goes behind the scenes of the European Space Agency

ROBERT EPSTEIN | Sunday 04 May 2014

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Born in 1977, Edgar Martins was not a child of the space race. Yet, when he was young, he was "as enthralled by the Apollo missions as those who lived through it. Like many kids in the 1960s, I wanted to become an astronaut."

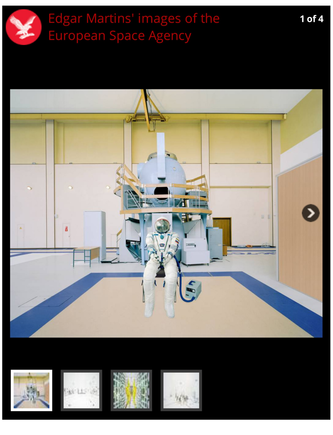
Not, as he admits, an easy task for a European (born in Portugal) growing up in China (in Macau). But that did not stop his recurring dream, in which, he recounts, "I am propelled into space and when I get into Earth's orbit, I look down at the planet for the first time, and am overwhelmed. Then all of a sudden, a mysterious calm takes over."

It is a dream that echoes the experiences of the Apollo astronauts, who spoke of their transcendental experiences – and one that evokes the "Earthrise" photograph of 1968 that spurred the Green movement.

"In short," says the 37-year-old, "I've always been aware of how space has had an immeasurable resonance with our social and individual consciousness."

In 2012, the photographer read that the European Space Agency (ESA) was considering opening itself up to the public – and asked whether it might allow him behind the scenes, documenting environments most of us would never otherwise see.

The ESA agreed, and Martins spent two years shooting the facilities of the organisation and its partner agencies, travelling from Germany to Russia to French Guiana to access – and deconstruct – the mysteries of space travel.



One shot that looks straight out of Tron is actually a mobile gantry used in the launch of the ESA's Vega rockets, photographed from below. The 50m-tall structure, which weighs more than 1,000 tonnes, allows for the vertical mating of the rocket and the upper part housing the spacecraft. Once the rocket is prepared, the gantry is rolled back on rails, clearing the way for take-off.

Two other, aseptic shots are more reminiscent of Kubrick's 2001. The S5 facility is a "payload preparation complex" – a 400sq m area where spacecraft are fuelled and given final checks. "This room, in the Guiana Space Centre, is used mostly for fuelling, which is a highly toxic process," says Martins. "So the only way I could engage with it was to visit at a time at which it wasn't being used." Nevertheless, because the room is kept sterile, "I had to wear the appropriate clothing – from head to toe – sterilise my equipment and wear antistatic devices on my shoes."

The IABG Centre in Germany, meanwhile, houses this Acoustic Test Facility, where the ability of spacecraft to cope with the acoustic fatigue created by lift-off and the atmospheric flight of a rocket is investigated at levels up to 170dB.

And in Star City, Moscow, Martins photographed a Sokol spacesuit by a Soyuz training module (bottom right). "The Sokol suit was introduced in 1973 and is still in use today," he reveals. "It keeps the astronaut alive in the event of an accidental depressurisation of the spacecraft.

"The Soyuz descent module can ferry a crew of up to three – but has a diameter of only 2.2m. It is the most-utilised manned spacecraft."

It is usefulness that fuels Martins' enduring interest in the subject. "Working on this project reasserted my belief that space-exploration programmes are of the utmost importance to the development of science, engineering, education, medicine, inspiring novel spin-off technologies that will have further applications [for us all] in future."

'The Rehearsal of Space and the Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Infinite' is published by La Fabrica/The Moth House. An accompanying exhibition is showing at Wapping Project Bankside, London SE1, to 29 May

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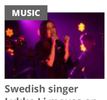

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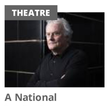

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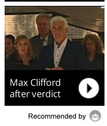

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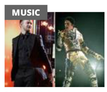

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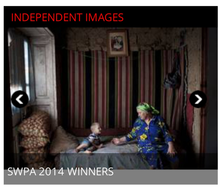

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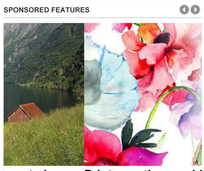

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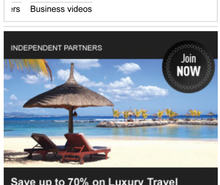

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