

Nick Graham

Fashion Designer and Entrepreneur

Lee Anderson (LA) *One of the things that interests me so much is how the space industry in trying to solve problems might look at other totally external industries. I think fashion plays a role in that, and I think your approach is a big part of why that works. I'm interested to know when space became more a part of the work that you do, like the Bill Nye collaborations and then your work with Buzz Aldrin. How did it evolve from inspirational to a key storytelling aspect of your work?*

Nick Graham (NG) It starts when I had toy rockets as a kid growing up in Canada. Then, with work, it was Joe Boxer around 1998. I read about this guy, Ky Michaelson out of Minneapolis who makes amateur rockets. Every August before Burning Man there is an amateur rocket competition out in the Black Rock desert where Burning Man is. I read that he was going to put his dentures into space, and I thought "oh my god, we should put underwear into space." So we went out there and did it, and it was hysterical. (laughing)

I met Buzz Aldrin with Richard Branson, around 2010. I was working with Richard Branson in 1994 when he did his inaugural flight from London to San Francisco. Everyone

"I love doing it because nobody in the fashion world is in this business. It's me and Northrop Grumman."

had underwear on, dancing in the conga line. (laughing) It was really fun.

Richard and I always kept in touch and when he announced [Virgin] Galactic I did the initial spacesuit designs for Galactic in 2006.

That same year, we put a Virgin Galactic flight for six people with a splashdown week on Necker Island into the Neiman Marcus Christmas catalog, and we sold it. It was amazing.

With my new menswear line, I always do thematic collections. About four years ago, it was 2017, I did a collection called Life on Mars. I'd met Bill Nye a few years prior to that—we work together on this bow tie project. When I told him about the Life on Mars collection, he said, "that sounds great. I'm in." Then I reached out to Buzz through his manager, and Buzz was up for it, and it was amazing.

I had Carter Emmart, who runs all the visuals at the planetarium at the American Natural History Museum, do the show visuals. We put everyone, about 1,800 people,

into this big rectangular white box—a massive white room—and we projected Mars on the walls. Well, we started on Earth and then the whole room flew, virtually. It felt like you were actually lifting off. Bill Nye narrated the flight through space, and then we landed on Mars and the show began. It was great, and at the end Buzz came out, he did his moonwalk, and he and Bill saluted at this one particular moment. It was so beautiful. I also put a soundtrack to Carl Sagan's Pale Blue Dot.

It then evolved into working with the Buzz Aldrin foundation, sponsoring the NASA Apollo Gala

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VIRGIN GALACTIC CHARTER TO SPACE

Price: \$1.7 million

Those who charter a flight aboard Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo will fly about 63 miles above sea level and experience weightlessness firsthand. After returning to Earth, each astronaut and a guest will enjoy luxury accommodations on Necker Island and four nights of all-inclusive festivities on Sir Richard Branson's private island retreat in the British Virgin Islands.



COURTESY: NEIMAN MARCUS

Screenshot from the Neiman Marcus Holiday Catalog, 2006

that following year, culminating in the 50th anniversary event last July where I was one of the big sponsors. I love doing it because nobody in the fashion world is in this business. It's me and Northrop Grumman.

LA *Do you think that space is a marketable theme when it comes to fashion products for the broader market? Does it excite people?*

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The astronauts of the Apollo program went to space as hardened Air Force men and came back as philosophers.

Every one of the Apollo astronauts I have talked to has said the same thing: That seeing the Earth from space changed their perspective on who and where we are in the universe, and they will never be the same because of it.

As Rusty Schweickart, an astronaut on Apollo 9 says, ‘What we saw was a fantastic reality; the unbelievably beautiful home of all the life in our little corner of the Universe. What we realized was our responsibility for doing whatever we can do to extend and continue this amazing evolutionary experiment we call life.’

Excerpt from "The Day Without Yesterday," Nick Graham, The Robin Report



Earthrise, taken on December 24, 1968, by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders. NASA

"That's the reason I love space. It puts where we are, who we are and this place we live into context in a way that we just take for granted."

NG I think NASA is one of the most respected and coolest brands in the market. There are segments of it in terms of marketability. You see NASA shirts everywhere, and space influences even motorcycle jackets, whether it's quilted here and pleated there. People do buy it, but I'm not quite sure how big it can be.

What I always tell people, when they ask, "why are you so into space?" is because we're in it right now. You're standing in space. I mean, that's the thing people forget. They think everything out there is stuff we don't know about and this planet we're standing on is somehow separate or different, that we're different here. But we're not. That's the context I always love to work in. That's the reason I love space. It puts where we are, who we are and this place we live into context in a way that we just take for granted.

There's an article I wrote called "The Day Without Yesterday," and it's all in there. When I was hanging out with the Apollo astronauts, one thing they realized is that they went to space as Air Force tough guys, and then they got up there and they turned around and they saw this amazing blue marble and they became philosophers.

I quote Rusty Schweikart, who was on Apollo nine. Since that moment, his life changed. He's now a great environmental proponent. He wants us to realize how special and valuable this place is.

There's another quote from Bill Nye: Somebody asked him "What's your favorite planet?" And he says "Earth, because it's where all my friends live."

LA In July 2019, Vanessa Friedman quoted you in the title of her *New York Times* article, "Space is the New Black." Do you mean that to be tongue in cheek, or do you actually believe the influence of space on fashion is here to stay?

NG It's kind of tongue in cheek, but I also think it's true. Everyone says, "Why bother going to space? We've got enough problems here." I'm going yeah, you could say that. But at the same time, the amount of money, and it's mostly private money that's going into these projects, so much came out of the Apollo program that we still use today, like solar cells and so much more. But in terms of climate we're pretty screwed. And space can help with serious issues we need to address.

NG I've done a lot, but I think the Apollo 50th anniversary was one of the most special events I've been involved in because of the stories and the conversations with the astronauts. Brian Cox, a physicist from London and a great presenter on the BBC all about science and space, interviewed a lot of astronauts

and my favorite was Michael Collins. He had the most dangerous job of them all.

The whole thing was incredibly dangerous, but here he was flinging around the moon at 3,600 miles an hour. The loneliest man in the world—in the universe, even. And then the two spacecraft have to meet. The orchestration of the whole thing, and his description of it, makes your hair stand on end. And it works. Staggering achievements.

Look at Jeff Bezos and his idea of putting civilizations into space with space stations for billions of people. In his high school valedictorian

The New York Times

'Space Is the New Black'

The Apollo 11 anniversary is going to spur another wave of intergalactic fashion. But this time, we're on the dark side of the moon.



By Vanessa Friedman

July 17, 2019



Headline from The New York Times Style section, July 17, 2019

speech he said that his plan was to get everybody off this planet and put them into space so we can preserve this place. He said that when he was 16. And he has told me, the reason he started Amazon was so he could afford a rocket company.

The vision of that is—think of it in the future when Earth is a galactic Park. Only a certain number of people live here and take care of the planet so it can take care of itself. And then this becomes a tourist destination with a limited amount of people that can visit it. So that's the



Blue Origin vision: get everyone off this planet and preserve it.

LA You are really the only fashion designer, as far as sponsorship of these cool events, and also in your close ties to these figureheads of NASA and commercial space, recognizing its relevance to pop culture and culture in general. And it seems like a thread through your work is connecting the space industry and inspiration from the 60s to what it is today and can lead to tomorrow.

NG When I made the speech at NASA, at the 50th anniversary gala, I got up and thanked the engineers and the scientists and everyone who created the design of the suits and the look and feel of it. It had such an influence on culture. It influenced a lot of designers. So I got up and thanked them for that.

The other designer you should probably look at is Pierre Cardin in the 60s. He made this amazing work and he was the first designer to actually visit Kennedy Space Center in 1968.

LA That space age moment is, in a way, repeating now. But because it's not new anymore, there's a storytelling element that's different now. You can play on the nostalgic aspect of it, and also still point towards futurism. On top of that, the technology is very different.

I wonder if the systems that are necessary for long duration space travel, whether it's in-situ manufacturing, or biodegradable clothing or anything like that actually would be really good for us here too, if that's a different way to look at the opportunities in space, that fashion has particular interest in.

"...so much came out of the Apollo program that we still use today ...in terms of climate we're pretty screwed. And space can help with serious issues we need to address."

NG No, it does. The fashion industry is really wasteful and dirty. Between the dyes, the water and the chemicals used for cotton and oil used for polyesters, it's icky, and it's inefficient. So after all the research, I came to the point where I did this collection that is all 100% recycled polyester.

The idea of the collection is that you can get a sweater, and once you're done with that sweater, you can melt that sweater down, essentially break it down and create a new product out of it. The idea is to really go after that, because in space that would also be very helpful.

I look at recycled polyesters because it's already out of the ground, you might as well use it. Organic cotton is extremely wasteful. A lot of water waste and the yield is much less than the normal cotton in terms of the plants themselves.

I started this brand five or six years ago and I would never use the word

polyester and now it's all I use. Because of the efficiency of it. It's an endless cycle.

I didn't want to look at it like, okay, we're going to make our hang tag out of recycled papers. That's not the point. If you're going to be in it, let's be in it. I look at Patagonia as an example that is far ahead of everybody. Patagonia is a green company, but 80% of their products are made from polyester.

"The Day Without Yesterday" on *The Robin Report* frames my sense of the planet and space, and the context of the two together, which is also in my favorite TV series, *One Strange Rock*. It puts it into context just how special our planet is. Even the axis that the Earth revolves on... so many things had to take place to make this place the way it is. And it's completely random.



LINKS

Nick Graham

"The Day Without Yesterday," *The Robin Report*