

GLADSTONE GALLERY

David Parkinson, "Festivals and Seasons," *Empire*, September, 2011.



Festivals And Seasons by David Parkinson

Covering everything from arthouse and avant-garde to commercial, cult and classic cinema, this is the only detailed guide to film festivals, seasons and tours playing across the UK. Each month, we'll bring you in-depth discussions of the major events, as well as highlighting special screenings that that will appeal to Empire readers - whatever their movie tastes.

Jack Smith: A Feast for Open Eyes

7 September - 18 September

Jack Smith is one of the talismen of the 1960s American avant-garde. Difficult, provocative and far from prolific, he was besotted with the 1940s Queen of Technicolor, Maria Montez, and it's fitting that *A Feast for Open Eyes*, the ICA's retrospective of his little-seen canon, commences on the 60th anniversary of the day that the Dominican-born star drowned in her bath in Paris at the tragically young age of 39.

The programme will make virtually no sense to newcomers unless they first watch Mary Jordan's outstanding documentary *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (2006). Making inspired use of clips from Smith's eclectic oeuvre and recollections from those who either worked with him or count him as a crucial influence, this not only puts the work in a biographical context, but also goes some way to explaining its recurrent themes and motifs. Indeed, so compelling and compassionate is this profile that some may even come to find Smith's art much less interesting than his life.

Sister Mary Sue Slater proves key to unlocking Smith's paranoid and ultimately self-destructive personality by revealing the traumas he suffered as a boy. Born in Columbus, Ohio he lost his father at an early age and despised his mother for marrying twice more and relocating him to Galveston, Texas and Kenosha, Wisconsin. His only solace in this unhappy period was his weekly trip to the movies and it was here he was bewitched by the fantasy teamings of Maria Montez and Jon Hall that kept Universal solvent during the war years. However, his attachment was purely platonic, for, as he explained in a bitter farewell letter to his mother, he was crippled with 'feelings of jealousy, mistrust of women, homosexuality [and] impotence.'

But he quickly found his niche in New York, first as a photographer and then as a performer in such underground landmarks as Ken Jacobs's *Ken Jacobs's Star Spangled to Death* (1956-2004) and *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959-62) and Ron Rice's *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963) and *Chumlum* (1964). Smith had already tried his hand at making films with *Buzzards Over Baghdad* (1952) and he soon reverted behind the camera for shorts like *Scotch Tape* (1959-62) and *Overstimulated* (1959-63). However, he became a counterculture icon with *Flaming Creatures* (1963), which was banned in 22 states and four countries because of its sexual content. Moreover, this calculatingly shocking exercise in baroque bravado led to a feud with influential *Village Voice* critic Jonas Mekas, whom Smith subsequently called 'Uncle Fish Hook' for profiting from the controversy that he had largely caused in bandwagoning the film across the United States.

Smith would never complete another picture, even though *Normal Love* (1963) and *No President* (1967) ran to feature length. Yet, even though *Respectable Creatures* (1950s to 1980s), *The Yellow Sequence* (1963), *Reefers of*

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Technicolor Island (1967), *Song for Rent* (1968-69), *I Was a Male Yvonne De Carlo* (1968-1970s), and *Hot Air Specialists* (1970s) remained works in progress, Smith's habit of editing during projection meant there was never really a definitive version of any of his films.

Determined to retain full possession of his creativity, Smith eventually abandoned film and dedicated himself to performance art, sometimes delivering monologues to empty rooms well into the night. His screen output continued to gather acolytes, however, with Andy Warhol (whose consumerism and obsession with celebrity he detested) and Federico Fellini particularly smitten (as Jordan demonstrates in the latter case with clips from *Juliet of the Spirits* [1965] and *Satyricon* [1969]). Raving against 'landlordism', 'lobsterism' and the ruination of the Atlantean idyll he had cherished from childhood, Smith lived in near-poverty for much of his later years and died of AIDS at the age of 56 in September 1989.

In combination with editor Alex Marquez, Jordan has achieved a slick and remarkably coherent mix of archival footage and talking-head testimony. Among those gushing with genuine affection (in most cases) are actors Holly Woodlawn, Mario Montez, Judith Malina, Mary Woronov, John Vaccaro and Taylor Mead, writers Gary Indiana, Sylvère Lotringer, Ronald Tavel, John Vaccaro and Ira Cohen, film-makers Jonas Mekas, Ari Roussimoff, George Kuchar, Nick Zedd, Ken Jacobs, John Waters, Ela Troyano, Jerry Tartaglia and Uzi Parnes, composers John Zorn and Tony Conrad, photographer Billy Name, artists Nayland Blake, Mike Kelley and Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt, theatre director Richard Foreman and critic Andrew Sarris. But the most mesmerising presence is Smith himself, whose audio recordings capture the tormented soul of a trash aesthete who was as fractious, flawed and fragmented as his films.

As for the films themselves:

SCOTCH TAPE

Shot in 1959 on 100ft of 16mm Kodachrome film during the making of Ken Jacobs's *Star Spangled to Death*, this record of Jacobs, Jerry Sims and Reese Haire dancing around the rubble that would become the Lincoln Center in Manhattan was edited in-camera. Adroitly juxtaposing long shots and close-ups, it contrasts the broken slabs of concrete and tangled masses of cable with the diminutive cavorting figures and had its proposed title of *Revelling in the Dumps* changed when Smith discovered that a piece of cellotape had been wedged inside the gate of the Bell & Howell camera and was, thus, visible in every shot. The soundtrack was added three years later when Smith asked Tony Conrad to adapt Peter Duchin's rumba 'Carinhoso'.

OVERSTIMULATED

Filmed in Smith's Lower East Side apartment - where Bob Fleischner also shot *Blond Cobra* (1963) - this snippet features Fleischner and Jerry Sims wearing dresses and jumping around in front of a flickering television set. Ostensibly, this is a study in light and movement, with the whirl of the skirts and the graininess of the monochrome stock recalling the Kinetoscope dance films recorded in Thomas Edison's Black Maria studio.

Although the camera frequently whip pans to match the frenzied bounding, it also steadies itself to gaze on an antiquarian bust and a Marian statue. But the 'aesthetic of delirium' is paramount and earned the footage a place in his Horror and Fantasy at Midnight live shows and, temporarily, in *No President*. It was restored as an item in its own right in 1995.

FLAMING CREATURES

Opening with a tribute to Maria Montez in the form of a sound bite from Arthur Lubin's *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), this is easily the most notorious of Jack Smith's films. A homage to Josef von Sternberg's *The*

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Shanghai Gesture (1941) helps extend the false start credits, which finally give way to a testily polite encounter in front of an enormous white vase between Frances Francine and Sheila Bick that gives way to a hilarious lipstick sequence, in which Francine and Joel Markman apply cosmetics in the most phallic manner to the accompaniment of Smith's faux commercial patter, which is interrupted by an inquiry about the make-up's indelibility during fellatio.

The question might well have been answered had Markman noticed the penis on his shoulder as he smeared his lips. But a chase between Francine and Bick takes centre stage and culminates in Bick being partially stripped and ravished by several creatures as the first rumblings of an earthquake move her world. She resists the slavering attentions and her screams can be heard on the soundtrack beneath the Japanese ballad 'China Nights' and then in the silence as Arnold Lockwood buries his head between her thighs.

Smith cuts to a Berkeleysque top shot as a scrawny men is pulled into the orgiastic muddle of naked body parts. But the quake halts proceedings and Bick staggers away to the accompaniment of Béla Bartók's 'Concerto for Solo Violin' and collapses into the arms of accommodating stranger Judith Malina. As they kiss, Smith cuts to a coffin lid sliding open to reveal Markman as the Veronica Lake-like transvestite Our Lady of the Docks, who feasts on Francine's neck to the tune of Kitty Wells's 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels' before masturbating.

As Francine and Markman start to foxtrot, the room fills with the bullfight anthem from Von Sternberg Marlene Dietrich vehicle *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935) and an array of creatures that includes a bemused sailor, the black-faced Piero Heliczer and Spanish maiden Mario Montez (Smith's muse). Yet, amidst this movement, Smith pauses for a tableau in which Marian Zazeela has her exposed breast admired by bogus Arabs Angus MacLise, Irving Rosenthal and LaMonte Young. However, bodies begins to writhe again as the film closes on the start of another orgy to the strains of the Everly Brothers's rendition of 'Be-Bop-a-Lula'.

Staged on the roof of New York's oldest movie theatre, the Windsor, this transgressive bacchanal was destined to be known as Pasty Thighs and Moldy Midriffs before its release caused an uproar. Questions were asked in the US Senate and Jonas Mekas was frequently arrested as he toured the print around the country. The imagery is often overexposed and betrays the fact it was shot on cast-off monochrome stock. The acting relies more on posing than performing and yet the louche stylisation fits perfectly with Smith's desire to toss decorum to the winds in allowing pornography to seduce art.

The fleshly poetry may seem flaccidly tame today, while the technique looks decidedly amateurish. But Bick's rape still shocks and not even the showering petals and billowing veils that caress her rescue by Malina can leaven its chauvinist cruelty. Smith avoided such pseudo-sexploitation for the remainder of his career, although he was anything but chastened by either the feminist reaction to the film or the legal battle that followed levelling of obscenity charges against Mekas and three others. Indeed, he was keenly aware of the impact it had on Andy Warhol and the alternative cinema scene, as well as the drag subculture. But it wasn't perhaps as revolutionary as it seems, as it clearly owes debts to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien andalou* (1929) and *L'Age d'or* (1930), as well as to Kenneth Anger, Ken Jacobs and Gregory Markopoulos.

NORMAL LOVE

Known during production as *The Great Pasty Triumph* and *The Pink and Green Horrors*, this is Smith's most heartfelt tribute to Maria Montez. Although much of the action was shot on location in New Jersey, Fire Island and Old Lyme, Connecticut, the Moon Pool homage was staged in an East Village apartment and shows mermaid Mario Montez lighting candles at a shrine to the fiery star of such Universal fantasies as *Arabian Nights* (1942), *Cobra Woman* (1944) and *Siren of Atlantis* (1949). Some see the subsequent picture as a reverie inspired by Maria's Technicolor extravaganzas, but it also works as a colour-coded satire on the predatory nature of male sexuality.

Mario's mermaid is threatened by black spider Naomi Levine, who descends from a giant overhead web. But this pre-credit encounter gives way to a pursuit through a forest, as innocent Diana Baccus has her fun on a swing

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interrupting by the stalking Uncle Pasty (Arnold Rockwood), whose fangs are knocked out of his mouth when she hits him in the face with a custard pie.

Meanwhile, in another part of this grotesque Eden, the mermaid is attacked by a werewolf (Eliot Cukor), who rises from the swamp to ravish her and cover her in mud before offering her a drink of Coca-Cola. As the pair struggle in the slime, the Pink Faery (Frances Francine) plays the violin for a party gathered on a pier by the sea. Among the kooky guests are a mummy having trouble with its bandages (Angus MacLise) and a bald man in a dress holding a skull (David Sachs). They begin to dance to the music and Smith captures the scene with another parody of a Berkeley top shot before resorting to a further nod to Von Sternberg as he strews the screen with branches, smoke, sparklers, confetti and diaphanous gauzes that not only fill the dead space, but also afford the assembled with posing props.

As the mermaid washes in a milky bath and is menaced by a white bat (John Vaccaro), the revellers decamp to the woods, where they are joined by a Watermelon Man (Eddy Howard) for a walk through a field of cows that culminates in a melon feast and a joint-smoking session. Everyone lounges in a decorously decadent manner that seems to spoof Watteau and Manet, including the exotic Cobra Woman (Beverly Grant), who allows her boa constrictor to slither through her hands and across her body in the most perilously seductive manner.

The picture climaxes with chorus cutie Joan Adler and mother to be Diana Di Prima joining a happy band that includes an uncredited Andy Warhol to dance atop a giant cake before an emerald green mummy (Tony Conrad) abducts one of the women and everyone else is gunned down with a machine-gun water pistol by Sachs, who leaps around with insane delight at his deed.

Despite the colour coding of each sequence, *Normal Love* seems pretty haphazard and if any of it has meaning only Smith seemed to know. Joan Adler recalled that the shoot was shrouded in confusion, as the cast cavorted without really understanding the content or context of the scenes, and this mood of muddle even extended to the fact that Tony Conrad never completed the score for which he receives an on-screen credit. Yet Smith is clearly striving to normalise the absurd and expose the fraudulent and this passion for truth characterises his work. Indeed, by exhibiting the footage in its fragmentary state, Smith was almost admitting that this was a project that had eluded him.

THE YELLOW SEQUENCE

Essentially an off-cut from *Normal Love*, this eccentric short centres on the shaven-headed David Sachs as he stogges through mud while wearing a dress and carrying a bunch of yellow flowers. Elsewhere, Tiny Tim sits on an abandoned car and strums his plastic ukulele, while Frances Francine's Pink Faery plays the violin and a pretty girl strikes a pose like the model on the copy of *Vogue* she is reading.

NO PRESIDENT

Newsreel footage of the 1940 Republican convention that confirmed Wendell Willkie as the candidate to challenge President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had appeared in *Overstimulated* before Smith incorporated it into his 1967 programme *Horror and Fantasy at Midnight*. His interest in the Indiana lawyer resurfaced the following year in *Kidnapping and Auctioning of Wendell Willkie by the Love Bandit*, which starred novelist Irving Rosenthal as an infant being abducted by a pirate and sold at a Bagdad slave market. While this show was playing, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not be seeking a second term in the White House and Smith began assembling *No President* in time for the inauguration of Richard Nixon in January 1969.

Opening with footage of a Lowell Thomas-narrated documentary on Sumatra, the action cuts to a couple of drag queens drinking with some nude men, with the buck-toothed 'woman' greedily devouring a penis-stirred cocktail.

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The scene shifts to Rosenthal's infant Willkie lying in a crib surrounded by naked men who masturbate each other as the nurse reading the baby a fairytale slips into sleep.

Intercut with this delirious charade are clips of Willkie addressing the Future Farmers of America and Dinah Shore singing 'A Sunday Kind of Love' on her TV show. As Smith used to project at silent speed during his performance pieces, the sound was slowed down and both Thomas and Willkie sound sluggishly slurred, while Shore isn't heard at all, as alternative music plays over her rendition.

Back at the orgy (which was shot in Smith's Green Street loft), Spanish pirate Doris Desmond bursts in to seize the infant and sweep him away to auction at a market that was modelled on the one in Maria Montez's 1942 vehicle, *Arabian Nights*. But the focus bizarrely shifts to figures wearing animal masks and a bevy of women in odd hats and head-dresses striking indolent poses as various naked men masturbate themselves and each other. Amidst this mutual mayhem, a diplomat is fondled through his gaping fly by one of the lounging women in mockery of America being jerked off by the politicians who have embroiled the nation in the Vietnam War and then lied about its conduct.

With Tally Brown, Jerry Sims, Donna Kerness, Mario Montez, and Charles Henri Ford among the cast, this provocative piece finishes strongly, with footage of the Willkie convention passing into shots of doughboys marching off to the Great War and native warriors prowling through the bush. As if to comment on the madness of the world and perhaps blame an all-seeing divinity for allowing it to happen, Smith closes with a pull-away that climaxes with a view of a model Earth from space.

SONG FOR RENT

Originally presented as taster before *No President*, this satirical short plays out to the strains of Kate Smith singing two different versions of 'God Bless America'. For once, Jack Smith also puts in an appearance in the guise of his drag alter ego Rose Courtyard. Clad in a red satin dress and sporting a large pair of glasses and what looks like tape on her stockings legs, she is wheeled on to a stage beneath a huge Stars and Stripes by a hunky male.

She acknowledges the applause of an unseen audience and sprays her vicinity air freshener. But she struggles to balance on her knee a bunch of dead roses, some corncobs and a scrapbook and a heart-shaped card slips out. She gathers herself, however, and begins turning the pages to reveal news clippings and caricatures of movie stars. As she recalls these fond memories, Rose struggles to her feet to salute and the camera captures in extreme close-up a single tear between the glittery eye make-up and the heavily rouged cheek.

JUNGLE ISLAND

Among the pieces that Smith presented in his *Horror and Fantasy at Midnight* programme were *Marshgas of Flatulandia*, *Scrubwoman of Atlantis*, *Ratdroppings of Uranus*, *The Flake of Soot* and *Reefers of Technicolor Island*. The latter became the basis for *Jungle Island*, which paid its usual homage to Maria Montez in re-imagining the exotic settings for so many of her camp concoctions. However, in true subversive fashion, the foliage he depicts belongs to flourishing marijuana plants, while the shapely siren is none other than Mario Montez in South Sea attire decorated with feathers and pearls.

This is much more a study in colour, form and texture than anything more interpretable. Smith shows many items in their mirror image and uses superimpositions to reinforce the sense of ethereality created by the gliding close-ups of greenery, water, flesh and the shell of a lobster. At once capturing the mystery of Maria Montez's allure, this also riffs on the beauty and integrity that enabled her to overcome her acting limitations and convey the elusive truth that Smith so valued.

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I WAS A MALE YVONNE DE CARLO

Smith started out as a performance artist in the mid-1960s and *I Was a Male Yvonne De Carlo for the Lucky Landlord Underground* became one of his most celebrated pieces in the 1980s. This film version, however, was shot in the late 60s and lay unedited for over a decade and was only screened after its creator's death.

It opens with an out-take from *No President* (jokingly known as 'Marsh Gas of Flatulandia') that shows manhole letting off steam into nocturnal New York streets. The scene then shifts to what seems to be a burlesque dressing-room, as a pair of drag queens are attended by a young male assistant. They drape themselves over the furniture and smoke suggestively. Outside, a woman places a branch against a wall, as though laying a wreath, and hails a cab.

Meanwhile, inside the director's duplex loft on Grand and Greene Street to show a parody of the Warhol Factory, with Smith in a leopard print jump-suit posing and preening with a cup of coffee on a sofa. A fan asks him to autograph a glossy head-shot, while Ondine fusses around him to take more revelatory snaps. A nurse and an Oriental female factotum fuss over him and he takes an eternity brushing his hair and eyebrows in the mirror. Another devotee rushes in to present Smith with a bunch of flowers and a woman not unlike Yvonne De Carlo (who was Maria Montez's exotic rival before becoming better known for playing Lily in *The Munsters*) leaps forward with a twisty-handled dagger to attack the fan and the photographer, only for her to be confronted with a whip by the nurse before Smith finally disarms her.

As calm is restored, the action switches to a bulldozer rolling over the remains of either the Broadway Central hotel or the 14th Street dream palace, with the camera seeming to alight on details within the stone and ironwork that once made it a place of magic and escape. Accompanying much of this satire on false glamour is a teach yourself to tango record, with the musical extracts and the instructor's voice providing an ironic accompaniment to Smith's display of airs and graces stasis.

RESPECTABLE CREATURES

Also known as *Loathsome Kisses of Bagdad*, this was a film in perpetual progress from 1951 to Smith's death in 1989. It incorporates footage a 1966 documentary about Brazilian street kids and shots of Frances Francine, David Sachs and Tiny Tim from *The Yellow Sequence*.

But, most intriguingly, it also includes extant clips from Smith's first venture, *Buzzards Over Bagdad*, which launched his screen fealty to Maria Montez with an Arabian Nights-style melodrama in which a girl promised to the caliph attempts to poison his drink so she can be with her lover. But her intended detects her treachery and feigns death until the couple embrace when he jumps up to exact his pitiless revenge.

Although it was discovered in a tin marked *Respectable Creatures*, it was first shown in 1983 with intercut extracts from *I Was a Male Yvonne De Carlo* under the title *Normal Fantasy*.

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