

frieze

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JACK SMITH

The Modern Institute, Glasgow

I arrived at The Modern Institute's Jack Smith show filled with anticipation – the exhibition was the first in the UK to present more than just the artist's films – and trepidation. I couldn't help but call to mind the words of Smith's interview with Sylvère Lotringer in the 'Schizo-Culture' issue of *Semiotext(e)* (1978), in which he vociferously – and not entirely consistently – attacks art criticism and the very notion of art as property. For many like me, Smith's art is something vastly more often read about than experienced. His pioneering ad hoc presentations at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis – the SoHo loft space that he occupied at the end of the 1960s – have been mostly lost to history, despite the generative place in the family tree of Manhattan performance art allocated to them by the 2012–13 exhibition 'Rituals of Rented Island' at the Whitney Museum of Art.

Smith's most famous work, the film *Flaming Creatures* (1963), was championed by Susan Sontag and Jonas Mekas, much to the artist's disdain (in their analysis, he claimed, it was reduced to 'a magazine sex issue') and he later turned increasingly to live work. It was not included in The Modern Institute show, which focused instead on four clusters of performances – Smith would adapt and reiterate individual works over time, rather than fixing definitive versions of them – presenting a mixture of photographs and (sparse) filmic documentation, props, pages of scripts and posters.

One of the most striking impressions produced by this display was of Smith's wider practice as one in which performance itself came as something of an afterthought, or an afterglow. At points, it is as though, for Smith, the thrill and the spark came from dreaming up stage directions like 'Lobster Moon of Atlantis pops out of Violet Volcano' (from *Claptalism of Palmola Economic Spectacle*, c.1970–77, a version of the performance *Brassieres of Atlantis*, c.1970, scripts and performance stills of which were displayed here), and cementing them in scripts and fluid illustrations. (Smith sometimes drew like a psychedelic Cocteau.) The scrawled-over scripts almost seem to matter to Smith in inverse proportion to the possibility of their actually taking shape on stage; pages bear innumerable corrections and revisions to the point of being illegible, if not impossible. An 'old Polish woman' who appears in the script to *Irrational Landlordism of Baghdad* (1977), for example, is amended to 'a RUINED Polish woman' (gaining 'A LARGE ROUND ASS' into the bargain). As Smith declared to Lotringer: a title is '50 percent of the work' anyway.

If these pages still seem like scraps from an unseen banquet it's perhaps because Smith himself seems so drawn to the discarded. An annotated set drawing for *Claptalism* ... locates a 'pile of garbage' centre stage; a beautiful collage (*Untitled*, c.1977) features a slice of bread held up by Smith like the veil of Veronica, with a dark moulding patch picked out in thick green



1
Jack Smith, *Theater and Performance Works*, 2015, installation view

2
Alasdair Gray
Cowcaddens Streetscape in the Fifties, 1964, oil on board, 1.2 x 2.2 m

3
Alasdair Gray
Juliet in Red Trousers, 1976, framed oil on paper mounted on wood, 99 x 50 cm

glitter. It's as if it's only through decay that what Smith calls 'the insane waste' of capitalism can come under scrutiny; things get interesting once the rot sets in.

There's plenty more glitter on the table that displays the elaborately sculpted brassieres which featured in *Irrational Landlordism* ... most upholstered in gaudy, boudoir-y patterned fabrics. Ornate and absurd, few are fit for human anatomy – some distended cones, some tiny cylinders, like tin cans, some looking like the sort of thing that would pop off Barbara Windsor's bosom in a *Carry On* film as imagined by Mike Kuchar. One white and gold set, mock-aureoles picked out in pink beading, almost resemble a pair of decorative jelly moulds. Which, in some crude sense, they are.

It's a bracing reminder of the place of sheer silliness in Smith's sensibility: I don't think it was mere contrariness that led him to describe *Flaming Creatures* to Lotringer as 'a comedy about everything that I thought was funny. The puerile element in the work – an almost childlike grasp of the ludicrousness of bodies and the things we make them do – seems inseparable, to me, from Smith's approach to 'gender and sexuality' as

'malleable subjects for play, ambiguity and transgression' (as film curator Isla Leaver-Yap puts it in the show's accompanying essay). Sporting a bra during the original performance of *Irrational Landlordism* ... at Cologne Art Fair in 1977 – the year that saw one codification of queer sartorial presentation emerge via Hal Fischer's 'Gay Semiotics' – Smith appears content to pass for a pantomime Widow Twanky. But one of the interesting things about the slideshow documenting *Landlordism* on display here – apart from the touching casualness of the staging, littered with paper coffee-cups and cigarettes – is how relatively disinterested in costume Smith seems: how rarely the bras are worn and how often they are simply strewn about the tables, or held up by Smith in mock-abhorrence, like a surgically removed growth. Indeed, what makes them unsettling as objects is their weirdly organic quality. One dark green pair's elongated straps extend like the tendrils of a carnivorous plant. Smith seems fascinated by the place where human product becomes plant life, where trash meets mulch.

Getting a glimpse – however sketchy, distant and partial – of Smith's work is illuminating and gratifying: the relative sparsity of the display at The Modern Institute felt somehow in keeping with the scrappiness of Smith's endeavours and his work's attention to disintegration and defeat. That his cosmically strange ideas left pretty shabby physical traces doesn't, in the end, diminish them. The biggest philosophy might consist in the smallest of material changes – as Smith said to Lotringer: 'I can think of billions of ways for the world to be completely different. I wish they would invent a scalp brush. Do you realize that there is nothing on earth that you can brush your scalp with?'

MATTHEW MCLEAN