

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bradford Nordeen, "Forever Flaming: Jack Smith at MoMA," *thelmagazine.com*, November 22, 2011.

FILM Forever Flaming: Jack Smith at MoMA

Posted by [Bradford Nordeen](#) on Tue, Nov 22, 2011 at 2:39 PM

Bradford Nordeen (curator of the *Dirty Looks* series, spotlighting queer experimental film) was at MoMA this past weekend for the debut of several newly restored films by underground film godhead Jack Smith. Three of the **programs** repeat this week.

A sold-out auditorium, crowded with every age demographic imaginable, though mostly young, in a hushed murmur of anticipation. No, this wasn't the premier of *The Immortals* in glorious 3D, but an afternoon matinee premier of recently restored prints by Jack Smith, including his magnum opus, *Flaming Creatures*. Smith has garnered quite a bit of attention in recent years, first through **the legal debacles surrounding his estate** and then through the resulting exhibition of works by the Barbara Gladstone gallery, who bought it up in 2008. In that show, *Thank you for Explaining Me*, curator Neville Wakefield invited three contemporary artists, all under 40, to respond to Smith's flaming visions and secrets of Cinemaroc.



Jack Smith

Smith was a man ahead of his time and there have been attempts to reintroduce him to the world—most prolifically in the 1997 PS1 exhibition *Flaming Creature*, which yielded a wonderful accompanying catalogue and occasioned the printing, on Serpent's Tail press, of Smith's collected writings, *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*. But, for some reason, that didn't quite go off as well as curators had planned. Now, it seems, is the time.

Surrounding me at the MOMA yesterday were stalwart avant-garde regulars—folks like Views from the Avant-Garde curators Mark McElhattan and Gavin Smith and drag historian Joe E. Jeffreys, as well as original performers like Lola Pashalinski, Augusto Muchado and superstar Mario Montez (the event's special guest). More tellingly, however, were the faces of a younger generation, performance artists and musicians, most of whom were well under 30. They crowded the space as if at vigil. After chatting with numerous acquaintances both before and after the program, I discovered that this MoMA screening was serving as their entrée into Smith's oeuvre. And you could tell by the crowd: the roaring applause that welcomed Montez to the stage; the laughter that broke out amidst cock shots and dervishes; the cat-calling, "BORING" at lesser Smith titles (*Overstimulated*)... But the ovation which met *Flaming Creatures*, the last film on the bill, seemed to mostly come from the older contingent.

"I liked his use of color," one friend explained after the screening, in reference to the first work screened: *Respectable Creatures*, a film which pieces together some of Smith's earliest footage, from a 1950s film called *Buzzards Over Baghdad*, documentation of a carnival in Rio de Janeiro and unused footage from the 1963 filming of *Normal Love*. *Flaming Creatures's* placement, after this film, it seems brought attention away from this lavish restoration to the wily performative gestures, the zany props and eccentric stagings that would emerge from the *Normal Love* shoots.

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This, unsurprisingly, is the work that Gladstone hoisted to the position of fine art in her reprinting of Smith's photography: Pasty creatures spewing pearls and peacock witches feasting on pomegranates in flaming Technicolor, slideshows detailing Smith's inventive use of color in Arabian facades and what could now be interpreted as radical faerie fantasias. This, it seemed, is what folks were picking up on in yesterday's screening, and it's an undeniable facet of Smith's genius. Even later in the night, after many of us had shuffled over to the Museum of the Moving Image for their tribute **Mario Montez, Superstar**, one seasoned artist mused that Smith was not even a good filmmaker, that his contributions were of a more conceptual and aesthetic/political nature.



Jack Smith's NORMAL LOVE

Then what of *Flaming Creatures*? To my surprise, numerous folks still fled during the screening. For me, *Flaming Creatures* is flawless cinema. The film, shot on a rooftop between 1962-63 on grossly outdated film stock with a wardrobe more consistent than its cast, offers a smoldering revision of Modernist aesthetics. Without *Flaming Creatures*, none of this color stuff would have been as rich. Susan Sontag half-bemoaned of the film: "of no sequence is one convinced that it had to last this long, and not longer or shorter." Sontag recognized this gesture as inherent to the film's mastery, its own sensual rigor. If there is tedium in the viewing of *Flaming Creatures*, it seems to stem from the film's own lost-in-its-throes-ness, what J. Hoberman describes as "a world half-consumed in the heat of its own desire."

The film will never look perfect; It was shot on stolen film, overexposed and then the internegative was lost for decades—only to be discovered literally *on the street* by filmmaker Jerry Tartaglia. It's still kind of scratched, there are emulsion bubbles on the surface—but that only adds to the beauty of this image, this postmodern baroque tableau vivant, where pandrogynous revelers build heated scenes of whimsy from their own body accumulations.

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Even for seasoned viewers, this new print teases nuance out of clouded sequences, each moment as clear as it's ever going to be. And each moment, too, could function as a still photograph in its own right. But, more than *Normal Love*, more than *No President*, *Flaming Creatures* is Smith at his most cinematically



FLAMING CREATURES

learned, packing *everything* he found in Maria Montez, Josef Von Sternberg, Busby Berkeley, Dolores Del Rio and Ken Jacobs into that Blakean frame, and piling it high with veils, gauze, tapestries and cocks, dirty, wiggling feet and prosthetic noses, dancing, jiggling, writhing—it's nonsense, but it has a clearly discernable narrative if that's really what you want to ferret out of it. But that's kind of not the point. Not the point of Smith's whole legacy. After the vampire rises from her tomb and feeds on Francis Francine, the cast just embarks on a 20-minute dance party. *That's* the point: the undoing of formal structures for sensual, even hedonistic ones, where pleasure informs an aesthetic more than logic—wrestles the formal drive from the hands of narrative into giddy revelry.

It's a joy to watch a younger generation indulge in these works. But watch them again and again and again and this is what you'll find. This is what comes out of Smith teasing the surface. It's not just the pastel, pasty aesthetic (which is still so sumptuous and thrilling) but this overall political logic built on glee. "Let art continue to be entertaining, escapist, stunning, glamorous, and NATURALISTIC," Smith wrote in the LAICA journal in 1978. "but let it also be loaded with information worked into the vapid plots of, for instance, movies... Thus you would have Tony Curis and Janet Leigh busily making yogurt; Humphrey Bogart struggling to introduce a civil law course into public schools; infants being given to the old in homes for the aged Ginger Rogers... soft, clear plastic bubble cars with hooks that attach to monorails built by Charlton Heston that pass over the Free Paradise of abandoned objects in the center of the city near where the community movie sets would also be; and where Maria Montez and Johnny Weismüller would labour to dissolve all national boundaries and release the prisoners of Uranus. But the stairway to socialism is blocked up by the Yvonne de Carlo Tabernacle Choir waving bloody palm branches and waiting to sing the 'Hymn to the Sun' by Irving Berlin."

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Like this deceptively eloquent text, and all great Baroque art, Smith builds image upon image, layer upon layer, to show a vertiginous world, one where an innate sensual politic is socialist, escapist, crude and glamorous, is dialectic with the landlordism that pervades our world of Capital, our lobster metropolis, converting it into a flaming playground for debris, glee and subversion.