

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Elizabeth Horkley, "A Series Pays Tribute to Jack Smith's Favorite Films," *Hyperallergic*,
November 23, 2015

HYPERALLERGIC

A Series Pays Tribute to Jack Smith's Favorite Films



Jack Smith, 'Normal Love' (1963-65), film still (© Jack Smith Archive, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)

On the recent Friday the 13th, Jack Smith's disembodied voice rattled through Anthology Film Archives. Lamenting the state of the art market in 1974 in his characteristic falsetto, he lambasted a system in which the speculation of the wealthy serves as the arbiter of value.

Anthology is implicated in the tirade: it was founded by Smith's sworn nemesis Jonas Mekas, and so is a perversely apt venue to house the departed filmmaker's rage. Presenter Jerry Tartaglia carried a talisman — a stone plucked from the set of Smith's unfinished masterpiece, *Normal Love* (1963-65) — in his pocket for the ominous occasion.

Tartaglia, a fellow filmmaker and acquaintance of Smith's who's spent the past 20 years painstakingly restoring the fragments of Smith's oeuvre, presented several of Smith's shorts to contextualize what would follow: *Jack Smith Selects (From the Grave)*. True to its title, the program is a collection of Smith's favorite films, the realization of a letter Smith wrote to his friend Peter Gilad in 1971.

But first, we dipped into Smith's universe, a sparkling cornucopia of Hollywood iconography distilled to its colors, textures, and intrigue. Freed from narrative, sequined-clad creatures languish

GLADSTONE GALLERY

in baths, frolic over ruins, and tear through the countryside. All unfolds over a score of lackadaisical island music: the soundtrack to Smith's obsession with exoticism.

Staccato cuts and blinking overlays hint at Smith's propensity to manipulate the film itself, sometimes live in improvisation. The camera flirts with flashing daggers and other plot-thickening devices but doesn't succumb to sequencing. Watching Smith's films is an exercise in presence. He eschews narrative conventions in favor of pure sensory experience.



Luchino Visconti, 'The Leopard' (1963), film still (image courtesy 20th-Century Fox)

Yet for all of Smith's capriciousness as a filmmaker, his favorite films, though varied, are endearingly obvious. His Caribbean wanderlust is evinced in romantic adventures like *White Savage* (1943) and the Cuban-shot *Cry of the Bewitched* (1957). His reverence for ornamentation aspires to the visual decadence of the sumptuous period piece *The Leopard* (1963). And the specter of sadism in his films is on full, nauseating display in the notorious ethnography-cum-shockumentary *Mondo Cane* (1962).

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In addition to these shared themes, Tartaglia recognizes another common virtue: failure. It's there in the inadequacy of Maria Montez's acting abilities and in the fate of the doomed protagonists in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* (1943). In Smith's work, failure manifests similarly in sub-par acting, tawdry sets, and production mistakes, like the eponymous adhesive glued to the frame in his *Scotch Tape* (1963)

But for Smith, failure was more purposeful. During his lifetime, he screened his films in performances Tartaglia calls "Queer Theater." Using footage of his "creatures" as raw material, Smith manipulated the film itself, creating unique experiences that transcended the conventions of cinema of the time (1950s–70s). Entering the projection booth and meddling with raw material, Smith took on a risk that was crucial to his artistic work.

"To be open to failure is to not resist anything in the present," Tartaglia says. "And if you can imagine an artist making the entire creative investment in work and then embracing the possibility of failure, you see that that is a true openness, not a striving toward success or achievement that characterizes commercial art."



Delmer Daves, 'Dark Passage' (1947), film still (image courtesy Warner Bros)

Tartaglia recounts meeting Smith in an incredible convergence of fates. Working at a raw stock supplier in 1977 and pocketing the discards for his own filmic projects, Tartaglia uncovered the original print of Smith's monumental work *Flaming Creatures* (1963), long believed to be lost. Friends cautioned Tartaglia against returning the film to Smith, fearful that he'd "cut it up."

"The creature was sent by Fishhook," Smith hissed upon receiving Tartaglia, referring to Mekas. At

GLADSTONE GALLERY

the time, Smith mistakenly believed Mekas to have stolen the master copy in the hoopla that ensued after it was seized by police for obscenity upon release. With some convincing, Smith warmed to Tartaglia and offered a few pearls of wisdom on queer filmmaking.

Tartaglia recounts some of them in his 2001 essay “The Perfect Queer Appositeness of Jack Smith.” There he writes on the frankness of Smith’s gay sensibility, presented as “a revelation which is seamlessly presented and visibly portrayed. The invisibility of gay sensibility to the heterocentric gaze is shattered in the cinema of Jack Smith.” Free from narrative shackles, Smith allows the entire process of filmmaking to fail, in turn taking the viewer into the “dreamlike world of his own Queer landscape.”

Smith’s films resist conventional viewing, but in our attempts to do so, Tartaglia writes, “We’ll feel the alienation which this Queer artist felt. We’ll begin to understand what it means to be an artist whose aesthetic bars his own work from appreciation and acceptance.”

Joseph Cornell’s “Rose Hobart” (1936) seems an obvious influence on Smith. Cornell, bewitched by the heroine of the 1931 feature *East of Borneo*, reworked the film into a 19-minute surrealist visual ode composed mostly of shots of the actress. He bathed the results in blue by projecting them through a colored piece of glass, and instructed that tracks from Nestor Amaral’s samba album *Holiday in Brazil* be played to accompany it.



Robert Bresson, ‘Les dames du Bois de Boulogne’ (1945), film still (image courtesy Janus Films)

Smith’s filmic work takes this concept of pastiche further. Obsessed with yet ignored by Hollywood cinema and its history, Smith took the practice of moviemaking as a whole and cut, spliced, and rearranged it to suit his purview. In *Jack Smith Selects (From Beyond the Grave)*, his favorite films

GLADSTONE GALLERY

are demonstrated as raw material, sources from which he created the universes of *Normal Love* and *Scotch Tape*.

“What a horrible story!” Smith was said to have exclaimed at his own performances. (“Sorry we charged you for this program here tonight,” series programmer Jed Rapfogel echoed on opening night at Anthology.) Smith’s films revel in their own existence, including their shortcomings, hinting at a filmic transcendence that skirts sublimity.

Jack Smith Selects (From the Grave) *continues at Anthology Film Archives (32 Second Avenue, East Village, Manhattan) through December 1.*