

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Taubin, "Creature Feature." *Sight & Sound*, October 2011, 13.

GALLERY

Creature feature

As a season of films by NY maverick Jack Smith arrives in the UK, Amy Taubin celebrates his legacy

The years 1963-64 were a golden age for the beat-romantic strain of American underground movies. In a period of roughly 12 months, Jack Smith's 'Flaming Creatures', Ken Jacobs and Bob Fleischner's 'Blonde Cobra' (starring Jack Smith), Andy Warhol's 'Kiss, Sleep' and 'Haircut', and Barbara Rubin's 'Christmas on Earth' exploded on to the screens of mouldy cinemas (mouldy and pasty were favourite Smith adjectives) in a tumult of high-contrast 16mm black and white. None of them achieved the notoriety of 'Flaming Creatures', which became the subject of an obscenity case that went all the way to the Supreme Court. After the high court refused to hear the case, the film was left in legal limbo, a sabotage that Smith – an ace at self-destruction – could not have bettered.

Although championed for decades by such critics as Jonas Mekas, J. Hoberman (see his 'On Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures" and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc', published in 2001 and long overdue for reprinting) and Susan Sontag (whose landmark essay 'Notes on "Camp"' was largely written in the film's defence), 'Flaming Creatures' was effectively closeted. Smith was unable to benefit financially or artistically from what was then and remains today a subversive masterpiece. He died, impoverished, of Aids in 1989.

After his death, another lengthy court battle was finally settled when the Barbara Gladstone Gallery bought

the rights to all of Smith's work, largely because of the value of the thousands of colour photographs that he'd shot but seldom bothered to print between 1958 and 1962. They depict various 'creatures' whose hairy limbs, saggy bottoms and flaccid dicks peep indecorously from tattered chiffons and velvets Smith had fished from trash bins. Instancing Smith's distinctive aesthetic – pre-Raphaelite crossed with Arte Povera – these photographs are astonishingly prophetic of gender-bending, high/low trends in fashion photography over the past 50 years, and directly influenced the work of such artist/photographers as Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin.

As a result of the Gladstone Gallery's acquisition, Smith's film work is newly available to and promoted by museums and galleries. This is a mixed blessing. 'Flaming Creatures' and the three-minute, perfect remnant of damaged goods 'Scotch Tape' (1959-62) were the only films that Smith ever completed. Smith continued to recut the others, including the feature-length 'Normal Love' (1963-4) and the one-hour 'No President' (1967-70), for the remainder of his life, using them as props for the live performances in which his genius flourished.

My most memorable experience of the lushly coloured tableaux vivants, mad gambols across field and forest, and faux couplings that comprise 'Normal Love' occurred when the take-up mechanism of a projector inadvertently (or not) malfunctioned and an entire 45-minute reel unspooled all over the floor of the makeshift booth, from which issued Smith's keening, nasal, falsetto lament for the unchecked destruction

of his might-have-been masterpiece. Of Smith's performing persona and strategy, Richard Foreman, director of the experimental Ontological-Hysteric Theater, wrote: "To watch Jack Smith perform was to watch human behavior turned into granular stasis, in which every moment of being seemed, somehow, to contain the seed of unthinkable possibility."

Smith doesn't appear in 'Flaming Creatures', although his voice is heard in the spoofed commercial for "indelible heart-shaped lipstick" – the kind that "won't rub-off on a man's cock". The film depicts, in series of drag-show routines that fall apart long before their possible punchlines, a bacchanal that takes place in a crumbling loft space and whose participants are a democratic mix of male transvestites, women and a couple of guys in merchant-marine uniforms who seem to have wandered in by mistake.

As stunningly transgressive today as when it was first shown, 'Flaming Creatures' glories in what is most forbidden in 'serious' art: complete regression to an infantile realm – a limbo where penises are limp, pleasure is polymorphous perverse, and climaxes, dramatic or sexual, never enter the picture. The feigned gang rape of a woman focuses on her breast, which is diddled, poked and nearly devoured by envious overgrown babies. What gives the film its rhythmic shape and variety is the brilliantly collaged score by Tony Conrad, which employs 'exotic' pop tunes from the kind of B movies that were Smith's main inspiration, as well as some Bartók for good nihilistic measure.

'Flaming Creatures' is fashioned entirely of the detritus of respectable society – from the performers to their safety-pinned costumes to the film stock itself. Smith used outdated rolls of 16mm reversal, rescued from 50-cent bins, and the resulting resplendent accidents of light, myriad gradations of grey and chaotic dancing grain have proved indestructible. The Baudelairian beauty of 'Flaming Creatures' is as ravishing in a fourth-generation bootleg print as in the brand-new ones currently doing the rounds. But see it ASAP – before the inevitable happens and 'Flaming Creatures' is consigned to a denatured digital eternity.

■ 'Jack Smith: A Feast for Open Eyes', a season of films, talks and events, runs from 7-18 September at the ICA, London



Flower people: Smith's photographs juxtapose bright fabrics and hairy arms