

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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© Jack Smith Archive / Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Film Still from Jack Smith's "Normal Love" (1963-65)

by Chloe Wyma

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Jack Smith, "Untitled," c. 1958-1962 / © Jack Smith Archive / Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

When it premiered in 1963, experimental filmmaker **Jack Smith's** black-and-white sexual comedy "Flaming Creatures" ignited cultural fires. The banned film's polymorphous pan-sexuality, scenes of flopping genitalia, and once-shocking references to fellatio-proof lipstick provoked riots, a senate hearing, and sanctified Smith as a cult hero of underground and queer cinema. Less blood has boiled on account of "Normal Love" (1963), Smith's uncompleted Technicolor pastoral, on view at **MoMA PS1** in Long Island City through September 17.

The film is installed in a dark room, where it plays on a loop at regular intervals. In an adjoining gallery, a small selection of

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Smith's photographs and collages dating from between 1958 and 1962 are on display. Curated by **Christopher Lew**, this show is a small link in a recent chain of recuperative exhibitions devoted to Smith, who died in 1989 of AIDS-related pneumonia. It seems as though the time is ripe for a Jack Smith revival.

As others have pointed out, art and pop culture have already digested his aesthetic. See the creepy infantilism of **Mike Kelley**, the all-out weirdness of **David Lynch**, or the anti-essentialist reverse-drag of **Lady Gaga** (who is the spitting image of **Joel Markman's** vampire in "Flaming Creatures").

"Normal Love" is a screwy hybrid of **Busby Berkeley** kitsch and Dionysian pageantry. There is no dialogue. What little there is in the way of plot is difficult to talk about, since the film was never actually finished. Dismayed that

both his censors and his champions had reified "Flaming Creatures" into a "sex issue of the cocktail world," Smith never completed another film. Instead, he occasionally screened "Normal Love" in various permutations (sometimes even re-cutting the film as he screened it) as a mercurial filmic collage. This open structure mirrors the flexibility with which sexuality plays out on screen. In "Normal Love," gender is an orgy of masquerading identities. Smith's creatures seem to dwell in a feminine-androgynous utopia. Men and women are indistinguishable from one another in their bejeweled costumes, pancake makeup, and languid, overwrought gestures.

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Smith's personal mythology of C-list vamps and movie monsters is enacted by '60s counterculture fixtures including **Beverly Grant** as the Cobra Woman, avant-drag performer **Mario Montez** as a mermaid who bathes in milk, falsetto-voiced bizarro ukulelist **Tiny Tim** as a besotted Terpsichorean character known as the "Gilded Hag," and Velvet Underground bassist **Angus MacLise** as a lecherous mummy. **Andy Warhol** superstar **Frances Francine**, "Theater of the Ridiculous" director **John Vaccaro**, Beat poet **Diane DiPrima**, and, for a split second, Warhol himself — flesh out Smith's pantheon of maenads and revelers.

The 120-minute cut on view at MoMA PS1 is a torpid progression of exotic, opulent, and mildly titillating moving images set to delirious soundtrack of Hawaiian hapa haole, "jungle style" jazz, and orientalist film scores. A mermaid-cum-Santaria priestess worships at the alter of 1940s schlock cinema queen (and Smith's personal idol) **Maria Montez**. A man in tights pushes a Gibson girl on a swing. The scene, with its intermittent upskirt glimpses of billowing purple petticoats, is reminiscent of **Fragonard's** notorious painting "The Swing." A fanged werewolf stalks the mermaid, and — in an act of metaphorical rape — besmears her with mud and Coca-Cola. A transvestite harem of lotus-eaters in unconvincing drag basks lethargically on a floating pier, guarded by a marble pseudo-classical goddess statue and the morose-looking Mongolian Child (played by political activist **David Sachs**), who strokes a skull. A party of bohemians and grotesques imbibe, devour a watermelon, and pass around a joint in an Arcadian landscape populated by Holstein cows. In another episode of soft-core sexual violence, a lascivious mummy preys on the gorgeous green-skinned Cobra Woman. While MoMA PS1's brief wall text glosses over these ambiguous rape scenes, calling them instances of "edenic coupling," they are uncharacteristically heteronormative — even misogynist — in spite of the film's overall genderqueer erotics. As scholar **Juan Suarez** puts it in his essay, "Drag, Rubble, and 'Secret Flix': Jack Smith's Avant-Garde against the Lucky Landlord Empire," Smith's films can be "just as prone to aestheticizing violence toward women as more conventional movies."

The film's ostensible climax is a transvestite bacchanalia that takes place on a gigantic three-tiered **Claes Oldenburg**-designed cake. A bevy of "cuties" (including a barely-visible Warhol) clad in seashell bikinis and sarongs dance the hula and the Can-Can to swelling, triumphant music. The mummy circumambulates the giant, sagging pastry, lusting after the scantily clad beauties above. All this insouciant frolicking becomes a massacre when the Mongolian Child enters the frame and shoots up the whole party with a toy machine gun. The deranged Mongoloid hops up and down with psychotic glee as Smith's mythopoeic universe self-annihilates under the weight of its own voluptuousness.

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The meanings of Smith's films are just as promiscuous and unfixable as his lurid transvestite creatures. **Jonas Mekas** framed Smith as a Baudelairean romantic. **Susan Sontag**, who published her defense of "Flaming Creatures" the same year she published "Notes on Camp," straightjacketed Smith as the progenitor of apolitical, aestheticized Camp. Beatniks propped him up as an icon of countercultural libertinage. Later scholars saw his films as incubators for the post-structuralist gender politics of liminal and iterable sexualities. Queer theorists saw him as a father of a gay aesthetic, with its penchant for diva worship and burlesque spectacle.

Suarez suggests that Smith's "fascination with cultural detritus and 'moldy' outmoded popular imagery signifies a resistance to multinational capital expansion and particularly to its aesthetic leanings." Suarez's idea might sound ridiculous in light of today's saleable nostalgia-industrial-complex, but Smith's fascination with tawdry, marginal, and forgotten forms of cultural production did in fact have Marxist implications, albeit of a naïve sort. In fact, what **Walter Benjamin** said of the Surrealists could be said of Smith: He was a true believer in the "revolutionary energies... of the outmoded." In "Normal Love," Smith dumpster dives into the trash-heap of culture, emerging with a broken-down, derelict romanticism diametrically opposed to the slick presentism of Warhol, the Mods, and the positivist ethos that characterized the early '60s, an era Smith equated with rampant "landlordism" and callous entrepreneurship.

Yet, for all its proto-pomo campiness and imagistic exotica, Smith's project was also modernist and medium-specific. As **Antonin Artaud** sought to liberate theatre from the "tyranny" of the text, as **Clement Greenberg** argued for the reduction of painting to color on a flat surface, Smith wanted to distill movies down to their essence — an essence that he believed lay in the seductive rhythm of the moving image, in the imperious gestures of screen queens, in the studied artifice of sets and costumes. In his writings, Smith lambasted "the hypocrisy" of good acting, good plots, and good production values. Story, technique, and characterization only got in the way of film's seductive surface-ness. "Normal Love," gives itself over to the hegemony of the flashy, scintillating image.

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A two-hour pageant of surfaces doesn't necessarily make for thrilling movie-watching. In his book on Smith, **J. Hoberman** calls "Normal Love" "sumptuous but static." Friend and collaborator **Ken Jacobs** once described it as a "grim scuttling" of "wonderful stray-creature apparitions ... all dressed up with nowhere to go." (For the intellectually-curious but time-poor, an abridged version can be found online at [Ubu Web](#)). At MoMA PS1, the glacial procession of chthonic images in "Normal Love" lulls the viewer, like Smith's creatures, into a narcotic stupor. Still, it's a luxurious pleasure to enter Smith's oneiric Never Never Land, if only for a spell.

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