

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

Jack Smith

Through Sept. 9. Artists Space, 55 Walker Street, Manhattan; 212-226-3970, artistspace.org.

Martha Schwendener

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A lobster costume with various works from the 1983 performance "I Danced With a Penguin," in the show "Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis." Credit: Daniel Pérez.

For several decades, Andy Warhol was the patron saint of artists obsessed with mass media and celebrity culture, a fixation he expressed to the mainstream in a deadpan, affectless demeanor. For the current generation, that title may be shifting to the underground filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smith (1932-89). Mr. Smith is best known for the films "Flaming Creatures" (1962-63) and "Normal Love" (1963-65), which gained immediate notoriety because of the obscenity charges leveled against them. "Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis," at Artists Space, expands that view beyond the 1960s with work made from the '70s until his death, of AIDS-related causes, in 1989.

Some of the photographs and ephemera here relate to the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis, a loft on Greene Street to which Mr. Smith moved in 1969, and which he turned into a kind of theater, with performances every Saturday at midnight. "Third critic-free week!" one flier boasts. Other drawings and posters include barbs against landlords and the market-driven art world (Mr. Smith was later evicted from that loft for not paying rent); there's also a hand-scrawled syllabus revealing his deep knowledge of film.

Creatures like lobsters, cockroaches and sharks serve as alter egos and characters in his work. Material relating to the performance "It Could Begin With Art" (1974) includes photographs and German television footage of Mr. Smith in the role of an eagle named Ronald De Carlo, walking around the zoo in Cologne, Germany, collecting "rent" from the animals. "In Search of Sinbad," an unfinished epic film project started in the late '70s, features costume designs that imagine Sinbad morphing into a leopard.

A poster for the performance "I Danced With a Penguin" (1983) describes Mr. Smith as an "exotic theatrical genius," which feels surprisingly accurate. He was also very camp, a sensibility Susan Sontag (a fan of Mr. Smith's) detailed in her famous essay "Notes on Camp" (1964). In Sontag's view, camp is exemplified by the exaggerated and artificial and is important because it "neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness." Our era is all about the exaggerated and artificial: hyper-posed selfies, hybrid identities, drag-queen reality shows. And suddenly Mr. Smith's playful excess, once deemed obscene, feels prescient and perfect.