

JACK SMITH: *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*

by Mark Bloch

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Installation view of *Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, June 22 – September 9, 2018. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York.
Photo: Daniel Pérez

One of many arcane hand-drawn posters boasts, “third critic-free week.” Another refers to a Reptilian Theatrical Co. presenting plays of “reptile revulsion.” Notes refer to “shit eating habits of the wealthy of the world,” who surround a “huge white painting with a suspicious brown smirch.” A drawing on torn paper labeled “Cocktail Scum” portends “where cocktail deaths are followed by cocktail funerals.” Another poster promises “clumps of orchids hang rotting from vines” near a giant scrapbook under glass titled “Orchid Rot of Rented Island.”

Had intolerance not been rampant in 1963, the deserved anti-heroic notoriety Jack Smith received when *Flaming Creatures* appeared, following screenings for initiated friends in '62, might have been for fearless dedication to his vision; instead it made him a gay icon. Jack Smith didn't invent gay but he invented “out.” His groundbreaking film *Flaming Creatures* helped put camp on the map. Following macho AbEx and headed toward the instant glamour of the emerging Pop era, Smith—along with, maybe, John Cage—was the readjusting art scene's only superstar, famous downtown before anyone heard of Warhol. Indeed, Andy's first attempt at filmmaking featured Smith shooting his *Flaming Creatures* follow up called *Normal Love* eventually renamed, within Smith's shape-shifting process, *Normal Fantasy*, *Exotic Landlordism of Crab Lagoon*, and *The Great Pasty Triumph*. John Waters later called Smith *the only* underground filmmaker. Smith was daring and busy because in addition to unique cinematic advances, he also had to reinvent “fabulous.”

But Smith wouldn't complete *Normal Love* and Warhol's footage of him creating it disappeared forever into hostile NYPD archives under confiscated prints of *Flaming Creatures*. Smith's unfinished follow-up foreshadowed *Sinbad In the Rented World*, another unrealized master epic he attempted from 1972 to 1984, after the battle over *Flaming Creatures* crawled to the U.S. Supreme Court, into U.S. Congress lore, and back to the tragically still-sequestered LGBTQ community.



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Like another gay icon Truman Capote, who never completed a novel after *In Cold Blood*; like Brian Wilson's Beach Boys album, *Smile*; reminiscent of post-*Catcher in the Rye* J.D. Salinger; Smith battled The Powers That Be as well as inner demons, racing inimitably, purposefully slow-mo, toward potentially finalizing whatever Intermedia masterpiece he might next deliver—with the cognoscenti, gay and straight, poised to receive. Yet, despite countless mini-productions staged in his loft and on European streets, despite truckloads of ephemera left behind, the larger-than-life ur-promise of another *Flaming Creatures* remained elusive. Yet, Smith's scattered oeuvre here evokes completeness, an ever-expanding, quixotic simulacrum as powerful as Charlie Kaufman's massive *Synecdoche, NY*, another grand tale of theater-making of infinite scale.

As this breath-taking show illustrates, the prolific Smith truly possessed genius. Sadly, the ultimate realization of his dreams grievously hovered short of conclusion long enough for the artist to be taken by AIDS-related pneumonia at age 56 in 1989. With focus on his loft-theater, the Plaster Foundation, productions exorcizing the perceived tyranny by Jonas Mekas, photographic and cinematic narratives in Cologne, Rome, and Hamburg, and the unfinished *Sinbad* film, Artists Space presents a magic carpet ride through Smith's brazen mythology in these later years.

This multi-media extravaganza penetrates and engulfs the viewer much like a shoestring budget doppelganger of the Brooklyn Museum's extravagant David Bowie exhibit, lovingly compiled, but with its subject historically marginalized, featuring highlights of dazzling theatrical efforts that seem to have barely happened.

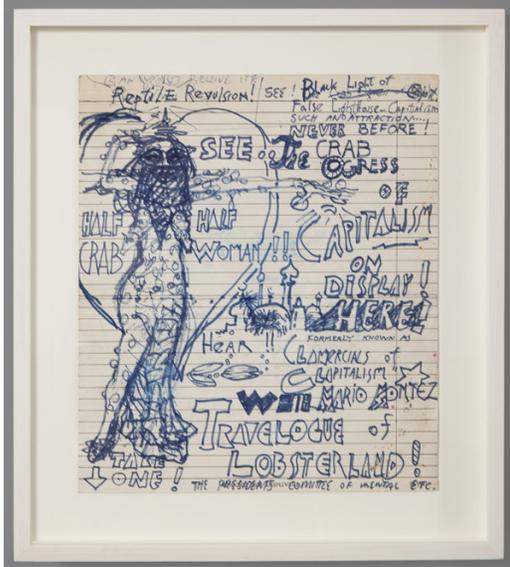
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Salvaged remnants scrawled on tattered notebook paper or stained with rubber cement underline Smith’s immersive commitment—as unconventionally original and combinative as Bowie’s. Weaving through the compelling vitrines, tables, slideshows and monitors of this down-to-earth aesthetic garage sale hurls one out of the basement, where half the show is, into a sibylline trap door to heaven where Smith’s “moldy aesthetic” thrives.



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Still, despite careful note taking and the detailed gallery checklist, one can’t rationally “figure out” Smith’s ultra-fantastic world. Nor is that the point. His posters, scripts and notes superimpose gorgeous, glamorous, grotesque personal imagery onto the traditional language of theater and spectacle resulting in disorientation.



Jack Smith. *Travelogue of Lobsterland!* (Formerly known as *Clamercials of Clapitalism*), c. 1968, Ink and felt-tip pen on paper, 9 1/8 x 8 inches. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Descriptors of “lobsters” representing greedy landlords dominate: “lobster moons of Atlantis popping out of violent volcanoes,” complement “lobsters reeling out of lizard lounges sunsets.” There are *lobster-lucky landlord paradises, moon mixed media spectacles, sunset Christmas pageants, (and gala parties) and lobster moon pageants*. There’s *boiled lobster rainbow-rama color*, and a drawn woman—on a stage set of a stage set—drink in hand, meeting a big lobster resting on a step ladder’s bottom rung. Smith scribbled notes about lobster positioning below.

We also learn of the capitalism lobster of *Atlantis*, another noun with modifiers, where his envelope-chasing landlords perpetuate evil via “the grip of the lobster set in Atlantis.” There’s *Atlantis permissiveness, bubbles, snowflakes, stubborn blood stains and commercials*, even the under-credited

actor, director, and producer of these episodes, "Jack Smith, Shark Bait of *Atlantis*."

Seductresses are plentiful. A "half crab, half woman," *Crab Ogress of Capitalism* appears, as do *Crab Ogress* and *Crab Girl of Mu*, and *Clamille the Crab Woman*. Witness a *Clampact with Clapitalism*, the *Clapitalism of Palmola* ("an economic spectacle") revealing a "black light of false lighthouse capitalism" which is "an attraction never (seen) before" and "the bottom of the pool" where we are asked to meet . . . someone. Elsewhere we're promised the *miracle, commercials*, and *travelogue* of farblonjet (a Yiddish word meaning totally lost or confused.)

I include these word lists because they are breathing evidence from posters, scripts, plays, movies, slideshows, photos and drawings flowing one into the next that Smith used to blur his content barriers, just as Intermedia merged "platforms" in those days. This striking fluidity, rarely as radical as it is in Smith's output, is worthy of new exploration. By internally reimagining tenant-landlord and gay-straight struggles, Smith destroyed home-workplace, script-production, and artist-audience dichotomies exemplifying how content, media, art, and life overlap one other.

Available here is license to be ourselves, as fanciful, ornate, silly and unprofessional as needed to become free, uncensored and playful. Negative emotions are channeled into enchanting whimsy. Via costumes and scenery as ornate as Christmas trees, Smith expertly conveys moods inspired by Hollywood actress Maria Montez, '50s Exotica music and dusty North African movies scenes where variegated assortments of secretive characters mysteriously confront uncertain futures.



Jack Smith. Untitled, c. 1968, Mixed media on paper, 11 x 8 1/2; inches. Courtesy of Artists Space, New York and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



Scanned slide from an untitled photo shoot featuring Smith as the Lobster, c. 1970s - 1980s; Courtesy of Artists Space, New York and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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Other-worldly design drawings are presented formally in the *Sinbad* section, elsewhere in random groupings. Actual costumes survive, including a magnificent three-titted red ensemble with headdress, an entire lobster outfit, a lobster claw, and a penguin doll who served as Smith's dancing alter-ego who he ultimately ceremoniously murdered.

Actions spoke loudly during Jack Smith's post-*Flaming Creatures* years with evidence remaining that is appreciatively displayed at Artists Space.