Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis

Artists Space, New York
June 22 - September 16, 2018

Entering Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis—the recent survey of Jack Smith’s work at Artists Space curated by Jay Sanders and Jamie Stevens—one is greeted by Smith’s iconic hollow-throated voice reading one of his many diatribes about the plight of artists against art’s institutions (and their scions). On the wall are a series of Smith’s headshots hung in pyramidal formation. They form something of an altar—like the many Smith made to the “Technicolor Goddess” Maria Montez, his muse, whose star quality Smith's work attempted to embody, eventually in his later years casting a stuffed penguin named Yolanda La Penguina in Montez's place. But the images also memorialize Jack Smith, who died in 1989 of AIDS-related illness—a strange gesture given the artists unceasing demands that neither he nor his art should be “cemented into a museum treasure.” Split between these charming photos and the sounds of an aggressive speech—the tension of this first moment marks the (ir)rational logic one must adopt in order to enter the world Smith created for and out of his art, surfing as it does with a desire to unearth the contradictions we tend to conceal from ourselves. “Struggle though we may to keep all this out,” he writes, “it is in our own rooms, in our walls that the plaster of religion, the cement of the courts and the icing of art meet—in those very pie crust walls…It is as difficult as the art of Andy Warhol to be critical of—because it surrounds us.”

Jack Smith is best known for Flaming Creatures (1963), but Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis attends to his lesser known artworks of the 1970s and 80s when his efforts were largely in performance. Much of this work began at The Plaster Foundation, a two-story live/work loft at 89 Greene Street (not
five blocks from Artists Spaces former location), which Smith transformed into a landscape of detritus, filled with remnants of New York's deindustrialization, against which he performed “midnight lobster pageants” for nearly two years until he was evicted in 1972 owing to the rising rent. Rent begins Art Crust as well—next to the Smithian alter is a slideshow of color-saturated images showing the artist sending, writing, receiving, delivering rent checks in various found locations throughout New York City. Trespassing on demolitions sites or simply performing in the street, these works mark a period in of Smith’s color photography when he would coordinate the shoot but insist on performing for the camera. These works are about the literal demands to pay rent, as well as about broader renter economy (what Smith called “landlordism”) and its ramifying effect of creating sinkholes, cites of debt, in which not only money, but art’s political imaginary and capacity is trapped. The results of these photo shoots were rarely prints, but rather an archive of thousands of slides used in Smith’s theatrical slideshow performances—ephemeral actions which, though they were suffused with props, costumes and concepts, attempted to avoid leaving any property behind. No prints to be sold, or official films to be circulated, only the sprawling array of art/ephemera/trash—categorical divisions that Smith’s art seems to intentionally leave opaque.

The rest of Art Crust unfurls with the brilliant chaos one has come to expect of a Jack Smith production. Instead of boiling down Smith’s legacy to certain quintessential objects, or reducing his trajectory to a more traditional chronology, Sanders and Stevens organized an overwhelming array of drawings, writing, photographs, videos, and other materials into palimpsests that highlight the recursive, obsessive, thoughts that animate Smith’s practice. Walls and vitrines are filled with materials which repeat the same critique, each time repeated slightly differently, of a world gripped by capitalism and normalcy. Crustacean metaphors abound across this period of Smith’s work, most notably in the figure of the lobster, at once a culinary delicacy and oceanic bottom-dweller. Lobster drawings, writing and references suffuse the walls and vitrines of the first floor. Among them, drafts of letter to some unspecified “John” read: “Why is it that theaters and auditoriums of schools are closed tight as clams at 3:00? … for the same reasons museums and galleries close at 5:00pm.” Is this a (bad) joke? A riddle? A “Dear John” letter that complains about the daytime-only hours of theaters and museum? Maybe, especially if one considers to whom those hours cater and what it means for art’s accessibility to be circumscribed to the working day. Smith’s work never failed to critique the ever-tightening grip of both cultural and capitalist institutions. Alongside the letter, a drawing suggests the nightmare of this lobster city—a parking lot
and cocktail lounges are marked on an otherwise generic outline of a skyline. A single high-rise reaches its spire impossibly up into the clouds above; where its vertical line also serves to illustrate the antennae of lobster looming overhead, its monstrous claw plucking the moon from an otherwise starry sky.

More than a critique of Art’s prevailing institutions, Smith sought to build them otherwise. The Plaster Foundation is one example; but Art Crusts collects others featuring, for instance, drawings for an imaginary “Brassiere Museum.” Designed as a museum without walls (no plaster allowed) it nonetheless has an arched doorway; on the threshold of which stands an ambiguous figure carved out of negative space. Creating the surreal effect of a portal within a portal, Smith drawing transports the viewer through an impossible passageway. Illuminating moments of queerness long before today’s queer theorists, throwing a wrench in idealized fantasies of gay liberation. The world needs its queers, he would say, to love and hate. An index card near the photo reads, “What is more fairy like than normals with their spirituality of miracles and supernaturalism?” Rolodex Cards were Smith’s preferred method for cataloguing such aphoristic insights, particularly about normalcy. Kept in an actual Rolodex, one can hardly think of a better way to frame the subtlety often missed in Smith’s work, his way of not merely overthrowing but undoing, the scaffolding of the brassiere world and nation boundaries.

outrageousness of his actions hampered by the fact that, as his character muses, “rent remains rent—the builder of the building can be dead and the building paid for a thousand and one times but that rent can never be paid must be paid—long after anyone remembers why. I think it must be to pay the taxes that support the scaffolding of the brassiere world and nation boundaries. Otherwise people would be traveling around the world freely and wouldn’t be staying home to support—the rent.” Smith travelled a fair amount, especially after he began to insist that any request to screen Flaming Creatures involve flying the artist along with his film. Through the 1980s he continued to perform, rebuilding old themes, and working towards one final masterpiece, the never-completed filmwork Seashed In The Rented World.

Perhaps it’s true that Jack Smith never completed another work after Flaming Creatures (1963), leaving his art unfinished in an attempt to avoid its commodification. But there is another story buried in Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis, in an audio recording from 1984 that fills the basement gallery. Addressing the notion that his aesthetic was premised on not giving museums or galleries something they could steal, he doesn’t cite a desire to make unfinished work. In fact, he says, “we live in a world of mostly half finished things . . . but in the process of doing anything completely is where anything can become art. No matter even if it does take an awful lot of time.” Smith’s works look unfinished because the world isn’t finished with the revolution his art tried to foment, a world of socialist impulses in which “everything could be free and it could begin with art!” The “stairway to socialism” he tried to climb as he was building it remains blocked, and we just kept putting art crust on top of art crust, picking apart the present from the past by covering things over in layers of plaster. Will we get to see Smith’s work when the crust crumbles, when all those layers of plaster come tumbling down? Maybe not, but in another corner of the gallery Yolanda La Penguins is perched. She’s the stuffed penguin, put to death in a number of Smith’s performances from the 1980s, and a star who will undoubtedly outlive us all.

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