

Jack Smith: 'Thanks for Explaining Me'

Gladstone Gallery
515 West 24th Street
212-206-9300, gladstonegallery.com
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Art

Cobra Woman, My Muse!

María Montez and
the enduring vision
of Jack Smith

BY R.C. BAKER

In this country the blind go to the movies," Jack Smith grouched in a 1963 *Film Culture* essay; the underground director felt Hollywood sacrificed the essential visual experience of film for explanatory dialogue and coherent plots. Smith (1932–89) had little use for either, reveling instead in baroque compositions he fashioned from extravagant fabrics draped over the swooning bodies and writhing limbs of his "creatures"—a motley band of transvestites and game women who cavort through the films, collages, and photographs on display in Gladstone's chockablock survey.

Smith's ravishing visions arose partly from his veneration of María Montez, a second-tier Universal leading lady he

dubbed "The Wonderful One." The attractive Dominican native scored boffo box office in the '40s with such adventure vehicles as *White Savage*, *Cobra Woman*, and *Arabian Nights*, a cheesy oeuvre imprinted on Smith when he worked as an usher during a 1951 memorial retrospective for Montez. (The film festival had been hastily organized after the 39-year-old star suffered a fatal heart attack while soaking in her daily reducing bath.) In his seminal 1962 manifesto, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," Smith rhapsodized that "one of her atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative life and truth."

In his own filmic masterpiece, *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Smith rained plaster dust upon men wearing negligees who grope a half-naked woman, the soundtrack a monster mash of screams, gongs, strings, and disparate pop tunes. Other scenes include bearded mouths being slathered with lipstick and a blond vampire rising from her coffin to feed on an exhausted orgy participant; sated, she lifts her dress to fondle her own penis. Smith shot his movie on outdated film

stock and the images throb with a feverish radiance.

Such lovely serendipity dovetailed with Smith's belief that tidy scripts inhibited the glorious tableaux that characterized great movies, and with his charge that film critics didn't understand the medium because they are "writers and they are hostile and uneasy in the presence of a visual phenomenon." Smith was never uneasy about his own inspirations, though: In a fragmented 1963 essay rejected by the editors of this newspaper, he wrote, "You are led by your bodies, *Village Voice* Readers, whether you know it or not—Most of the terrible tensions of your lives come from the discrepancies between what your bodies ask of you and your crabbed gratifications."

Smith crammed that pleasure gap with all manner of body parts, but, like Montez, he delivered delirious fantasy rather than sex. In a particularly astonishing black-and-white photograph, he insouciantly juxtaposes an entangled biracial trio—one gent flaunts a hairy anus and dangling scrotum—with a bulbous newel post. In a saturated color shot, a skinny "creature" adorned in skull face-paint, corn-silk wig, and lustrous yellow dress stands in a field of sunflowers, encapsulating Smith's genius for infusing ripe pulchritude with decay; a

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**Just another
day among the
sunflowers:
Untitled, c.1958–
1962/2011**

second transvestite brandishes a butterfly net, hilariously skewering the creepy vibe. Smith's preternatural design skills are equally apparent in a ballpoint-pen drawing of a ludicrous harem girl, trumpeted in block lettering as "The Crab Ogress of Capitalism."

When an interviewer once asked, "Do you ever worry about a particular subtlety in your films not being understood?" Smith replied, "How can you not—you know—understand the movements and gestures?"

Then he added, "The appeal is not to the understanding, anyway."