



Harry Smith, *Film No. 1: A Strange Dream* (still), ca. 1946–48. 16mm film transferred to digital video, color, silent; 3 minutes. Courtesy Anthology Film Archives, New York. © Anthology Film Archives.

On View

The Whitney Museum Of American Art

Fragments of a Faith Forgotten

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New York

Harry Smith lives on as a spirit through his yearly film showings at Anthology Film Archive. As hierophant, he reminded his devotees there were alternative paths outside the prevailing critical discourse, the museums, and the commercial art world. This was not so much a “faith forgotten,” as about keeping the flames of secret teachings burning. Smith was an encyclopedist, hermetic scholar, experimental filmmaker, anthropologist, collector, naturalist, archivist, ethnomusicologist, Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica Bishop, and genius with a capital G. Like a will-o’-the-wisp he lit up haunts like Weiser Antiquarian Books, the Chelsea Hotel, the Naropa Institute in Boulder, back-room jazz clubs, and obscure record shops. His catalogued collection was exhibited in an assortment of small hotel rooms, packed ceiling to floor with Ukrainian Easter eggs, Seminole textiles, obscure records, books, and film and recording equipment. Visitors might be required to remove their shoes so as not to awaken a sleeping prostitute next door or alert a landlord demanding back rent. Many of Smith’s collections, like his Ukrainian eggs, have been lost, and he

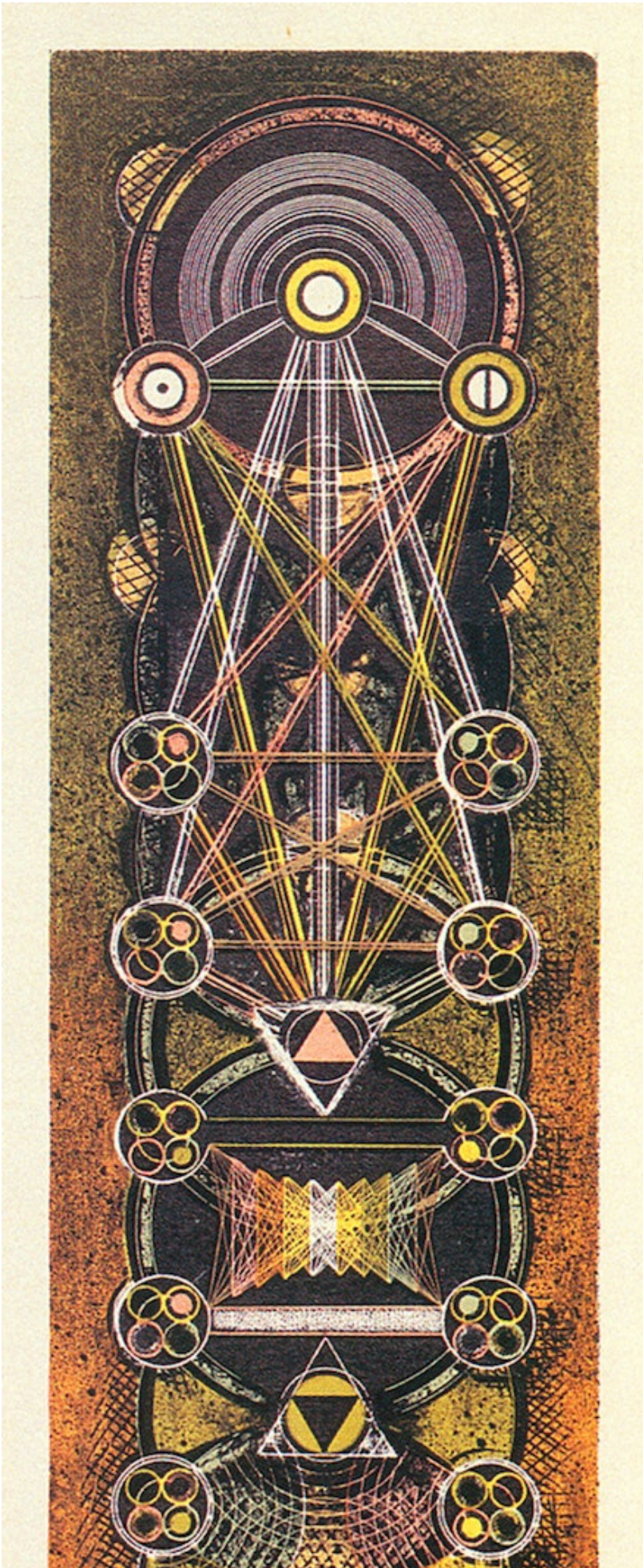
was known to rummage through dumpsters after an eviction to rescue precious objects. His alchemical and esoteric book library was legendary, as was his record collection. He inhabited his own magical universe, relying on the help of others, and after the age of twenty-two never held a job.

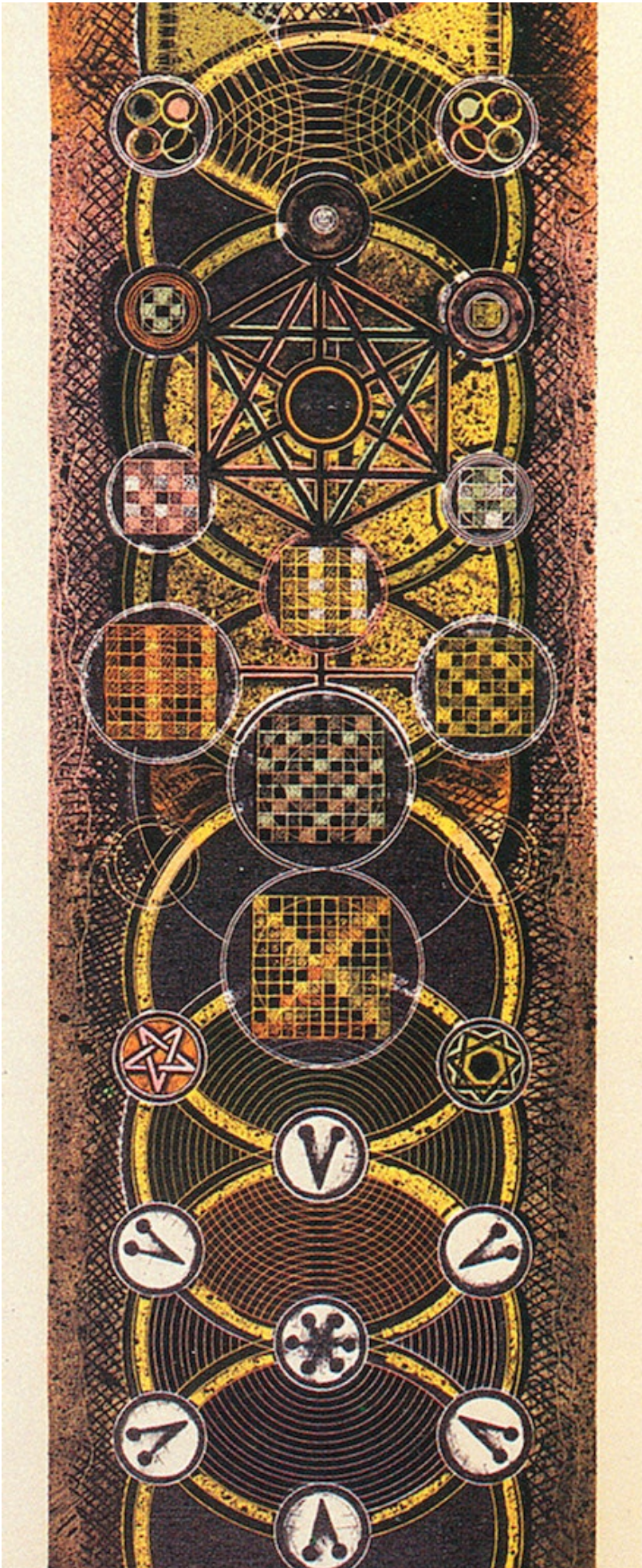


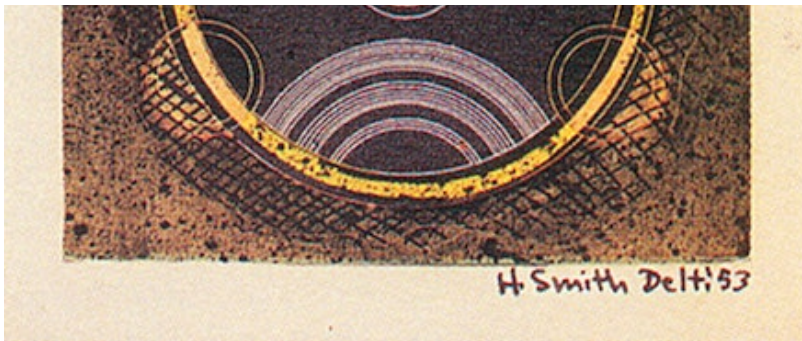
Harry Smith, *Untitled*, c. 1950–51. Casein and paint on board, 23 1/2 × 22 3/4 inches. Harry Smith Archives, Los Angeles.

An early photograph in the exhibition, *Harry Smith recording a Lummi ceremony* (1942), shows Smith as a teenager in his incarnation as an anthropologist, a title he preferred. These spirit dances in firelit, darkened lodge-houses were where the ancestors, animal deities, and dancers met in sacred rituals. Few white men were allowed to attend, Harry being a trusted exception. His fieldwork and recordings were exceptional for one so young. This was a portal into liminal realms and a key to Smith's later entry into diverse cosmic dimensions, including the peyote Kiowa ritual songs. A small display of Smith's of Northwest Coast ethnographic slides, and a handmade

Musical score: Chief Vincent Jack of Point Grey Musquim, "Clean-up Day," Swinomish reservation smokehouse, February 14-15, 1942, make the viewer long for more material.







Harry Smith, *The Tree of Life in the Four Worlds*, 1953. Black and white collotype with color silkscreens cut by Jordan Belson, 25 x 4 7/8 inches. Harry Smith Archives, Los Angeles.

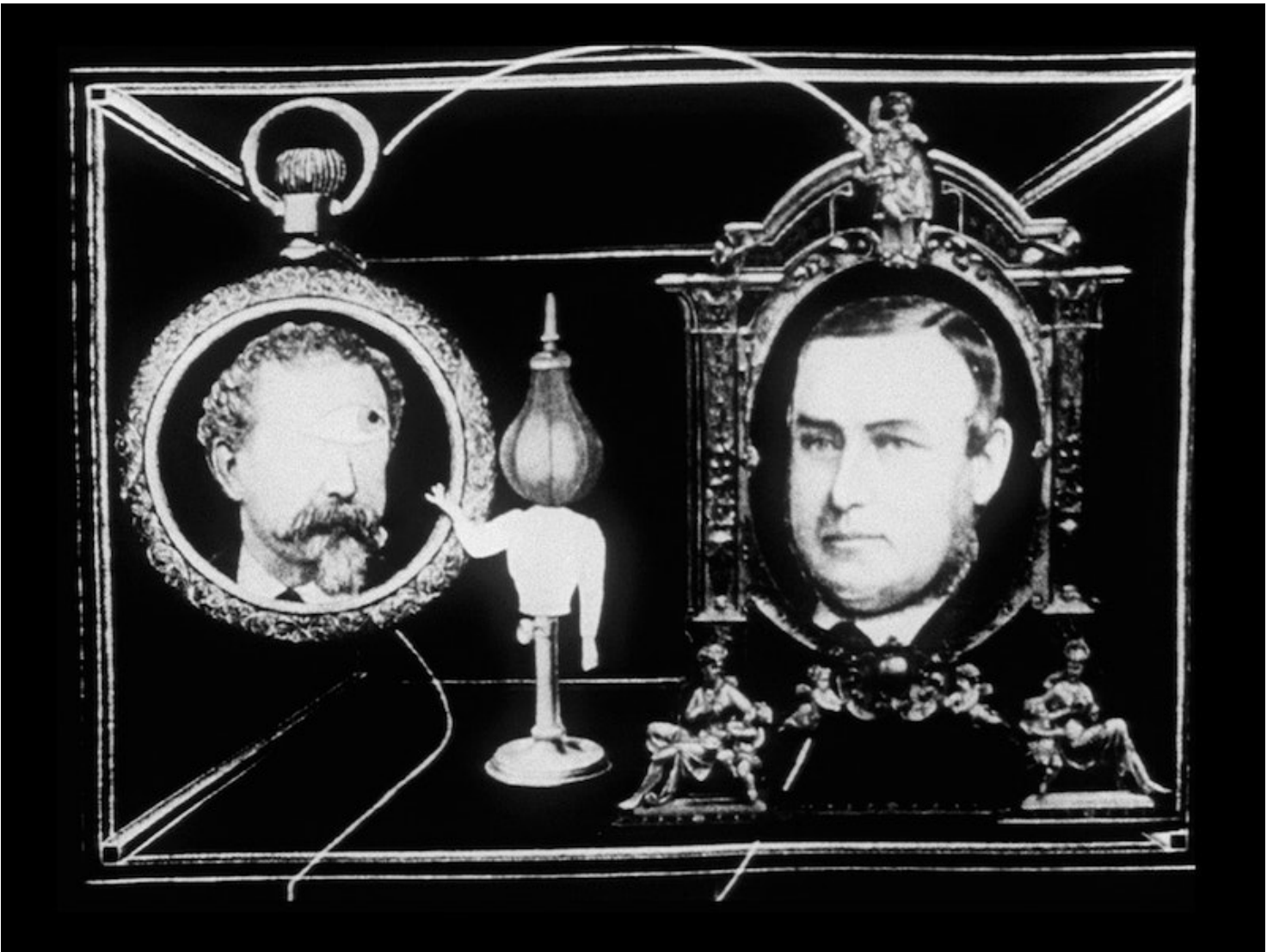
Harry was a polymath whose genius manifested in many areas. His ethnomusicological exploration would expand in his lifetime to jazz, folk music, and an array of obscure musical forms. At just twenty-nine, he compiled his multi-volume *Anthology of American Folk Music*, first released by Folkways Records in 1952. Smith's contributions influenced a generation of musicians, including Bob Dylan. One of the exhibition's high points is a listening room with a loop of the eighty-four songs. Smith created three sets of two LPs, entitled *Ballads*, *Social Music*, and *Songs* compiled between 1927 and 1932, along with his poetic album text. The *Anthology* featured an illustration from a book by the Elizabethan-era alchemist Robert Fludd (1574-1637). Here we see a "celestial monochord," a single-stringed instrument, conceptualized by Pythagoras, and played by a divine hand. Viewers to the exhibition may play a prototype of this instrument on display.

Harry left Oregon in the forties for the Bay Area, home of a vital avant-garde culture. He began hand painting film, frame by frame, to accompany bebop musicians. Each frame is still considered a masterpiece. Here we see *Strange Dream*, one of four hand-painted films that premiered in 1950 at Art in Cinema accompanied by Atlee Chapman's jazz band. These hand-painted "batiked abstractions" would influence later filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Carolee Schneemann. At the Whitney, *Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic* (1957-62) is shown; this collage made of cut-out Victorian imagery was inspired by his immersive alchemical studies. Both works are arranged to heart-beats, respiration patterns, and EEG alpha waves. *Film No. 18: Mahagonny* (1970-80), which Smith considered his magnum opus, is projected in four quadrants. It is named after the 1927 Songspiel Brecht/Weill opera that accompanies it. *Film No. 11: Mirror Animations* (1957), *Film No. 14: Late Superimpositions* (1964), and *Film No 16: Oz: The Tin Woodman's Dream* (1967) are jewels best seen in the Whitney's film showings or at Anthology Film Archives.

Although many have been lost, what remains of Smith's meticulous scratchboard illustrations, drawings, and paintings are stellar. In San Francisco in the 1940s, he began making abstract paintings based on the jazz improvisations of Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and others. A lost work preserved on a slide by Jordan Belson, *Algo Bueno* [Jazz Painting] (c. 1948-49), is an illustration of Dizzy Gillespie and His Orchestra's *Algo Bueno/Ool-Ya-Koo*. Influenced by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater's *Thought Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* (1920), Smith illustrated sound as another psychic dimension. *Untitled [Demonic self-portrait]* (1952) reflects his interest in tarot and Aleister Crowley. *The Tree of Life in the Four Worlds* (1953), a collotype with screen print, reflects an interest in Robert Fludd and in Kabbalah that he shared with Allen Ginsberg, a long-time supporter. *Untitled*, (1950-51) shows Smith's interest in Kandinsky and is on a par with the master. The *Stereo card drawings*, (1949-50) make the viewer long to see them in an old Stereoscopic viewer, popularized lately by William Kentridge. Yes, Smith was his own worst enemy when it comes to the preservation of his work, but hopefully more will be located and someday the full range of his scratch boards will be exhibited.

Last but not least, we have to tackle Smith the collector. His interest in string figures began in the Northwest and led to many cultures and the pages of obsessive notes seen here: *String figures, illustrations, and notes* (1970.) Two hundred fifty of his paper airplanes collected from the street

remain; sadly, we see only a small sampling here. The exhibition makes the viewer want to enter a time machine and be transported back to one of his hotel room collections. There is also something heart-wrenching about this long-awaited exhibition. We think of Smith, impoverished and dying in the Chelsea, living on NyQuil during a period in the art world when many of the minimalists were buying buildings and selling for big prices. The market has rarely embraced the cantankerous outsider, the alchemist, and the shaman, yet in some way Smith may eclipse many of these big-ticket giants as an influence.



Harry Smith, *Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic Feature* (still), ca. 1957–62. 16mm film transferred to digital video, black and white, sound; 1 hour 6 minutes. Courtesy Anthology Film Archives, New York.

We must applaud the decade-long efforts of Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman and her detective work locating scattered material. Rani Singh of the Harry Smith Archives deserves praise for preserving Smith's legacy. Singh's friendship with Smith and her role as a keeper of his flame, along with the role of Anthology Film Archive, are paramount. Sadly, the dark, Brutalist exhibition space designed by the artist Carol Bove is the antithesis of what Harry was about. Harry was a non-materialistic maximalist, and this expensive minimalist installation containing Bove sculptures as "exhibition furniture" feels like an intrusion. In a perfect world, Harry's archival material would have covered every wall, there would have been a series of small theaters for the magical films, his complete paper airplane collection would be shown, and there would be a scholarly catalogue. This exhibition will hopefully act as an introduction to the work, and more comprehensive exhibitions will follow. The events surrounding the exhibition, including a lecture by John Szwed, author of *Cosmic Scholar: The Life and Times of Harry Smith*, and evenings with artists like Bradley Eros who knew Smith, are important resources. The Whitney bookstore will also carry *Cosmographies: The Naropa Lectures 1988-90* in which Smith, in the final years of his life, discussed the secret ceremonies of the Lummi and Kiowa. This long-anticipated exhibition is hopefully the first of many.

Contributor