

ON SITE

MR. SMITH CAME FROM WASHINGTON

Harry Smith's "Fragments of a Faith Forgotten"

By Sasha Frere-Jones



Harry Smith, *Film No. 1: A Strange Dream*, ca. 1946–48, 16 mm, color, silent, 3 minutes. From *Early Abstractions*, ca. 1965.

“FRAGMENTS OF A FAITH FORGOTTEN,” at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art through January, is the first museum exhibition attempting to corral the work of Harry Smith, and it took five curators—Carol Bove, Dan Byers, Kelly Long, Rani Singh, and Elisabeth Sussman—nine years to get here. It is not surprising that the wait was so long. Smith hated the word

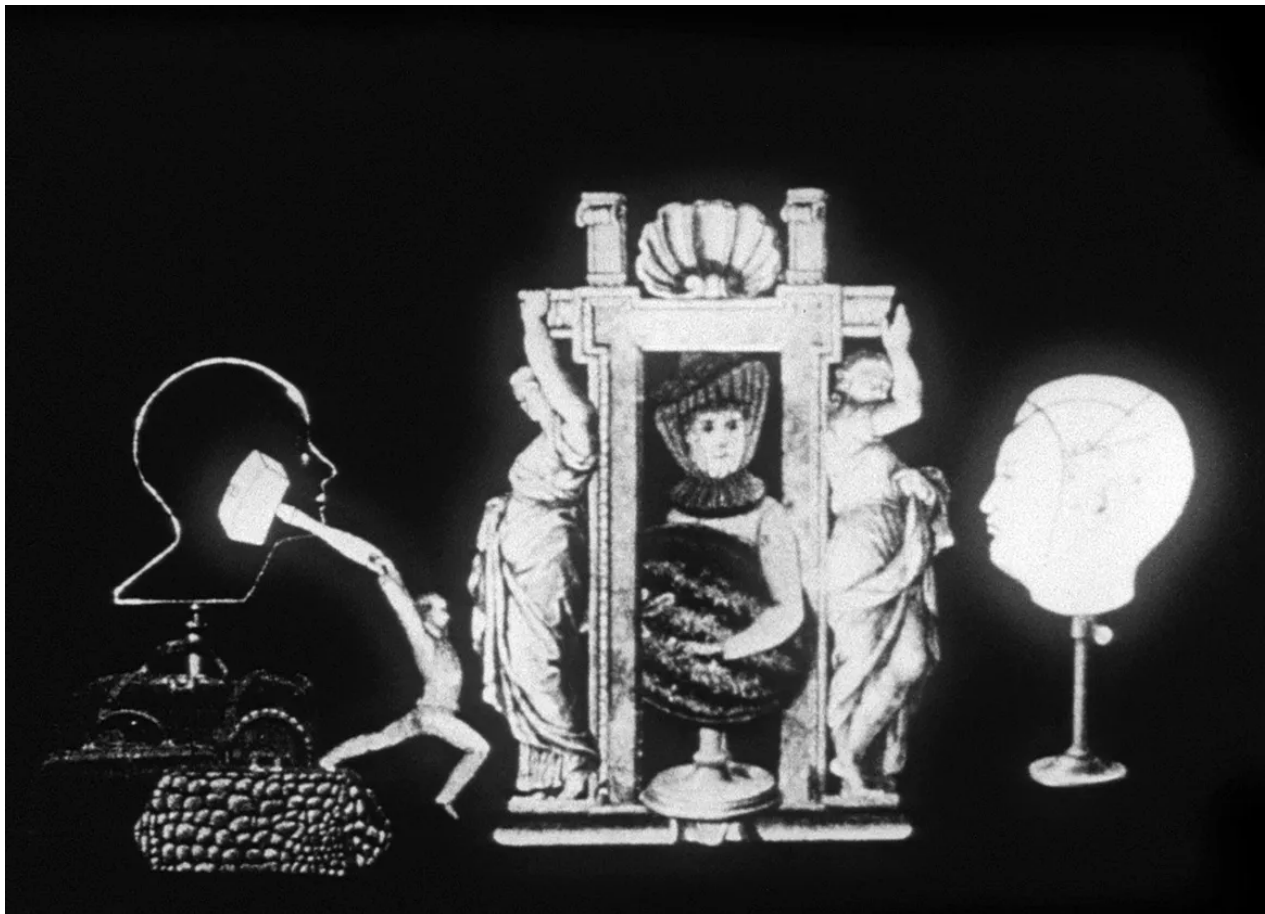
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preservation of his oeuvre, Smith's aversion to paying his rent can be seen as fairly intentional self-sabotage. These days, would Smith be able to live even in farthest Ridgewood? Or in any major city, for that matter?

Smith was born in 1923 and raised in Washington State. He and his family spent time around the Lummi Nation and often lived in sparsely populated towns. Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* is often adduced as a central text of what Greil Marcus calls the "old, weird America," and this may be a result of the plain fact that Smith lived in that America. Smith was, in fact, completely American—he never left the country, not even at the height of his notoriety in the 1960s. As much as he was a collector, one of the most legendary, it is important to remember that his lived experience was unique, especially in the context of the New York avant-garde community he drifted into during the second half of his life. Most teenagers in the '30s were not trying to record the dances and rituals of Native American peoples, to put it mildly.

Smith curated his very first museum show when he was a teen in Anacortes, Washington. As reported in John Szwed's essential new biography of Smith, *Cosmic Scholar*, Smith's father arranged for him to use a one-room house owned by his employer, a cannery company. Young Smith used it to display his collection of skeletons, birds' nests, driftwood, feathers, agates, "sea creatures in formaldehyde, various other beach findings, and some unidentifiable objects." Tours were conducted. Since Smith considered himself an anthropologist as much as a painter or filmmaker, there is a strong case to be made that the purest Smith exhibition of all would be a reconstruction of that self-made museum.

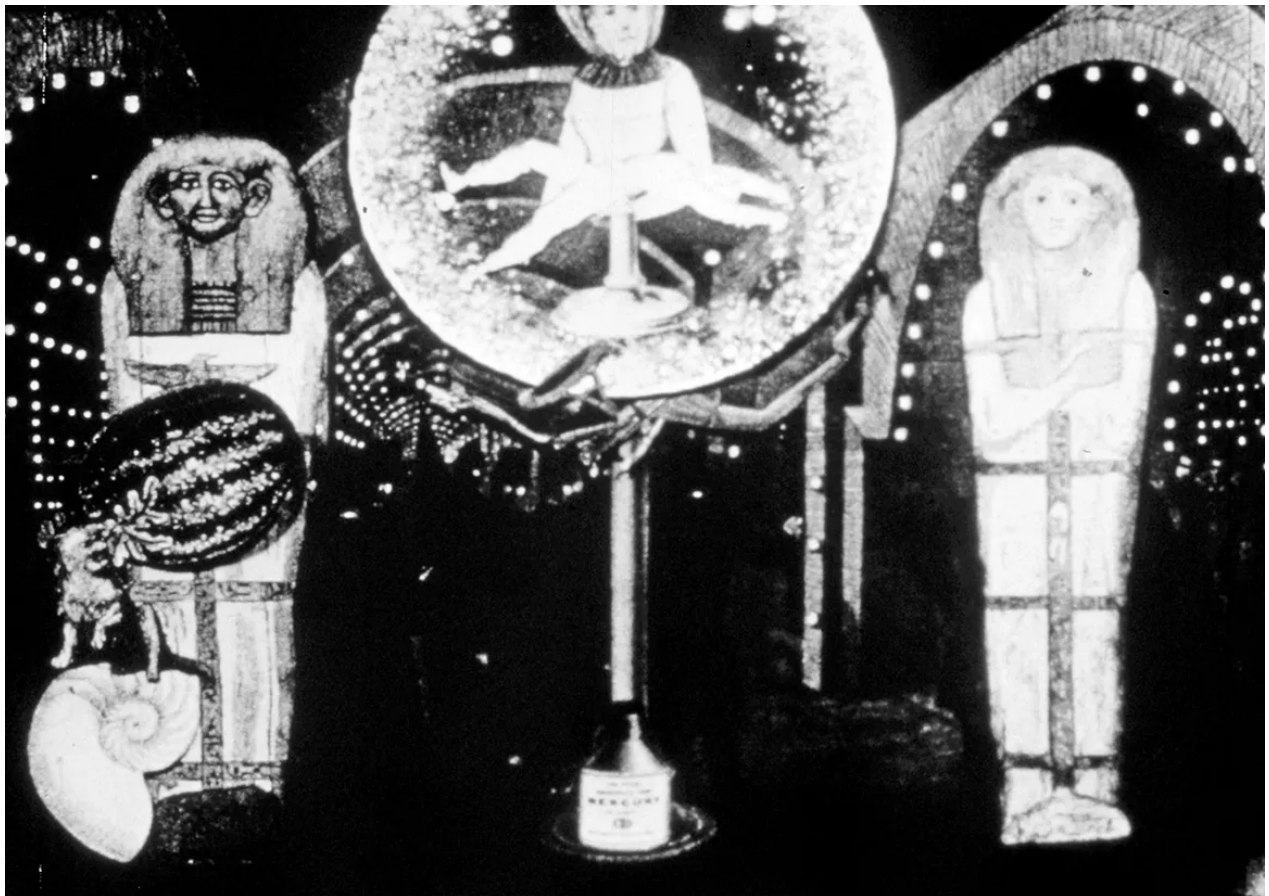
Or maybe it would be a show of the string figures and paper airplanes he collected, as these are what the first two volumes of his catalogue raisonné document. Those books were put together by Anthology Film Archives in New York. Why would a film preservation society get involved in somebody's paper-airplane collection? (It was not sent to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, as one of the many tall tales about Smith would have it.) Because when Allen Ginsberg brought Smith's films to Jonas Mekas in the early '60s, the second half of Smith's career began in earnest. Mekas, like many others, thought Smith was a capital-*G* genius, and his impact on experimental film was not minor.



Harry Smith, *Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic*, ca. 1957–62, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 66 minutes.

Those films are still part of Anthology's "Essential Cinema" series, and they screened on a Sunday night in August. Several of them are in the Whitney show, including *Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic* (ca. 1957–62), the only one of Smith's films for which he created the soundtrack (mostly from sound effects like water running and birds screeching). He cut out animals and people from store catalogues and magazines and produced some delicate, exalted

black-and-white scratchboard drawings. Using stop-motion techniques, Smith shaped a vaguely narrative sixty-six minutes, whose constituent scenes could be described as “Victorian male dances with stiff legs and bonks unidentified symbol with hammer,” followed by “Woman with eyedropper head chases other woman with rifle,” and so on. *Heaven and Earth Magic* contains the seeds of Monty Python interstitials and a hundred psychedelic cut-ups, and it seems like Smith had a very good time making it. Whether or not his alchemical magic transforms viewers, his high spirits must have been crucial to loosening up the avant-garde hierarchy of the early '60s. His own explanation of the film is to be taken as seriously as you think it should be: “The first part depicts the heroine’s toothache consequent to the loss of a very valuable watermelon, her dentistry and transportation to heaven. Next follows an elaborate exposition of the heavenly land in terms of Israel, Montrealand the second part depicts the return to earth from being eaten by Max Müller on the day Edward the Seventh declared the Great Sewer of London.” (I agree that the watermelon does seem important.)

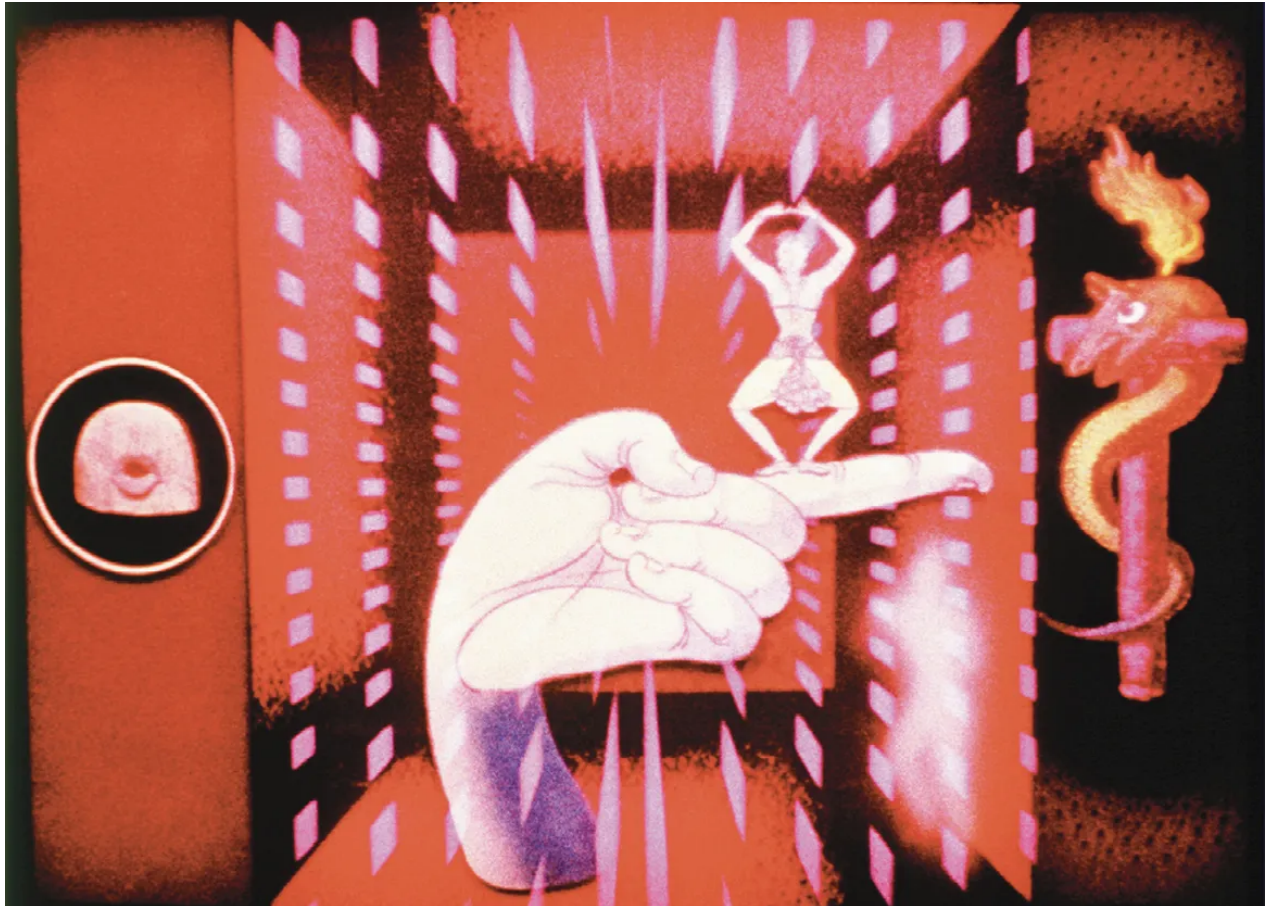


Harry Smith, *Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic*, ca. 1957–62, 16 mm, black-and-white, sound, 66 minutes.

There is a crux here, which permeates the work in "Fragments": If Harry was just fucking around sometimes, would that make his role in the postwar American avant-garde any less important? He drew patterns from his vast bank of esoteric knowledge, putting faith in symmetry and numerical order, even cuing some images to the average human heartbeat and breathing patterns (as he conceived them). I can neither verify nor deny the power of these decisions, but I can confirm that he was also engaged with less gnostic, better-known popular culture. The short films in his *Early Abstractions* compilation (ca. 1965) are set to *Meet the Beatles!*, with only the roughest of coordination—and the first of them, the only one included in the Whitney's presentation, is silent. *Film No. 11: Mirror Animations* (ca. 1957) is synchronized, in lockstep, with Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso." Some of the images are thick and rough color blocks made from dye and Vaseline, like a hundred electronica album covers tumbling past, and others are elegant geometric patterns of color, more like the early interstitials of PBS programming. So much of what Smith did in these films became a part of popular culture, even as he was channeling the complexities of Oskar Fischinger, whom he admired and dedicated a film to. Smith could clearly perceive and anticipate trends, even if he wasn't much concerned with capitalizing on his own good taste. In 1958, he apparently brought William Paley of CBS a reel of animations, including one with a cat cavorting inside the frame. Bassist Percy Heath, a friend from the jazz scene Smith followed closely, reports that Smith never got a gig, but his cat animation showed up on CBS. "He was exploited but he didn't care," Heath recounted. "He said he would be famous when he was dead."

Looking through "Fragments," you'll see things that feel familiar and unremarkable, but together they embody a remarkable set of connections. You're seeing the traces of the person who made the connections first and

brought a riot of dissimilar notions into a single space. Smith recorded the peyote rituals of the Kiowa tribe and collected the quilts of the Seminole people and gathered up string figures—the handmade representations of elements and animals that he found, most often, in communities without written language. Smith used black paper and string to fix (literally) these soft logos, passed down for centuries, and recorded the provenance and meaning of each one.



Harry Smith, *Film No. 11: Mirror Animations*, ca. 1957, 16 mm, color, sound, 3 minutes 35 seconds.

What Smith ended up recording most—and possibly most faithfully, though with what intention it is hard to know—was New York City in the '60s and '70s. *Film No. 14: Late Superimpositions* (1964) is just that, several films layered on top of one another. We see Moe Asch of Folkways Records, a butcher shop, and quite a lot of a handsome young man with a mustache with whom Smith wrestles at one point—this turns out to be Peter Fleishman, a student follower of Smith's who would become known as Peter White Rabbit in his days with the anarchist theater troupe the Diggers in '60s San Francisco. Smith uses the headlights of cars as something of a visual sprocket set, giving the film more cohesion than you'd expect. Smith said, "I honor it the most of my films,

otherwise a not very popular one before 1972." I find it touching and beautiful and easier to watch than his leaping-watermelon animations, though I honor the entire lot.

If Harry was just fucking around sometimes, would that make his role in the postwar American avant-garde any less important?

Late Superimpositions is shown with Brecht and Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930) as the soundtrack, with "no attempt at all to synchronize" the elements, per Smith. This could be a bit confusing, because the most ambitious film being played as part of "Fragments" is *Film No. 18: Mahagonny*, a four-projector film-and-slide presentation completed in 1980 and lasting more than two hours. Shown here in a digital print, it is rarely exhibited and has never been projected as it is in this installation, as Smith once hoped it would be, on the floor of a boxing ring. Unfortunately, the Whitney version does not include the pool tables he also called for.



Harry Smith, *Film No. 18: Mahagonny*, 1970–80, 16 mm, color, sound, 141 minutes. Left: Patti Smith.

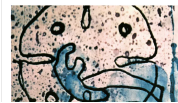
The cast of *Mahagonny* consists of denizens of the Chelsea Hotel—among them Rosebud Feliu-Pettet (briefly Smith's "wife," though that arrangement is hard to pin down), Ginsberg, Robert Mapplethorpe, Mekas, Patti Smith, and others. The action is synchronized with the soundtrack very carefully, though the plot is translated in ways perhaps only Smith could see. According to him, there is a palindromic pattern to the structure of the film, but it's hard to know how many viewings it would take for that pattern to become tangible. When Smith showed it originally, only "a few hundred people" saw it, partly because he was "high on amphetamines" at one screening and broke many of the glass slides. Adventurous souls can now post up at the Whitney and watch *Mahagonny* as many times as they can bear; maybe they'll see if the patterns Smith looked for in everything really do play out beneath all the loops and animals and symbols. Smith turned out to be right, most of the time, even when he wasn't there.

“Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith” will be on view October 4 through January 28, 2024 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; travels to the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, November 2024.

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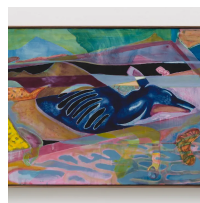


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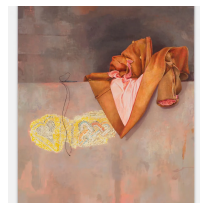
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