

The Ephemeral Fragments of Harry Smith's Faith

Smith's collections of folk music, Indigenous art, and occult ephemera inspired generations of artists.



Albert Mobilio November 15, 2023

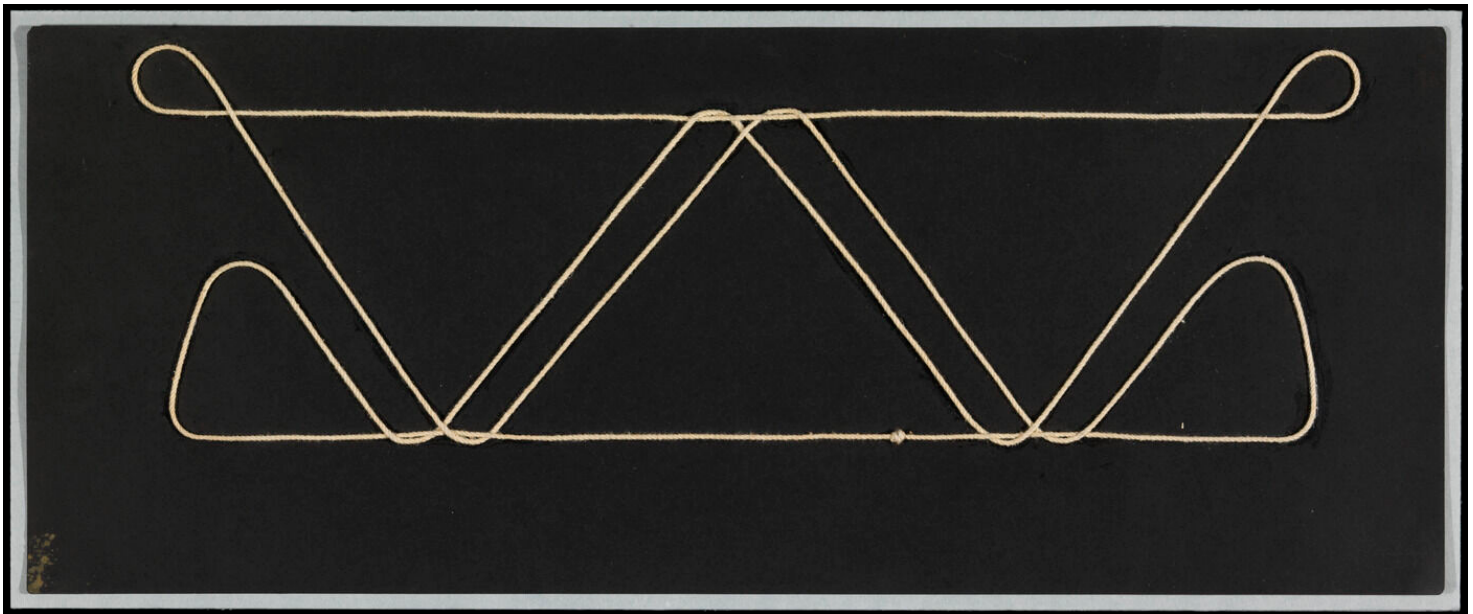


Harry Smith, still from "Film No. 11: Mirror Animations" (c. 1957), 16mm film, color, sound, 3:35 min; sound from The Thelonious Monk Quartet, B-side of *Misterioso* (Blue Note Records, 1949), 78 rpm (courtesy Blue Note under license from Universal Music Enterprises; image courtesy Anthology Film Archives, New York, © Anthology Film Archives. All other images courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art unless otherwise noted)

There's something appropriately jumbled about the Harry Smith show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. After all, it's titled *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* and the piecemeal nature of the exhibition is all too evident. A legendary figure among downtown New York artists, Smith was the underground's underground bard. A filmmaker, folklorist, archivist, and scholar of mysticism, he appeared to live on air and alcohol for decades in lower Manhattan, where he accumulated vast stores of records and books, Native American and occult ephemera. Much of this material is now housed at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Behind this acquisitional mania was a desire to produce a grand anthropological catalogue that would range across Indigenous cultures and reveal their underlying universal themes, something he never finished and evidence of which cannot be found. These curatorial

obsessions did yield one instance of significant success: his 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a collection of recordings from the 1920s and '30s, became a cultural touchstone for an entire musical era. When Smith died in 1991 he left behind archives as large as they were disorganized.

One way the show's curators attempt to establish a context for Smith's energetic but unwieldy collecting, as well as his filmmaking and painting, is by designating areas of the exhibition space The Zig-Zag and The Pinwheel — terms suggestive of the artist's mercurial methods. Organized chronologically, materials in the former include facsimile slides of objects and ceremonies from the Lummi and Salish people of the Pacific Northwest. Smith was born and raised in that part of the country and began documenting these Native cultures as a teenager. Of particular interest were string figures, often intricate three-dimensional compositions that were more performances than objects meant to be preserved. A 1942 photo titled "String figure made by Joe Billy, Swinomish" shows a practitioner at work. Smith learned the art and later made his own and glued the finished designs on black poster board; several are on display. As the Joe Billy photo indicates, string figures exist in an elusive moment; any hand movement alters the configuration. That this "sculpture" cannot be preserved without losing this quality may well have played a role in Smith's attraction to the art form, as well as its necessarily problematic documentation.



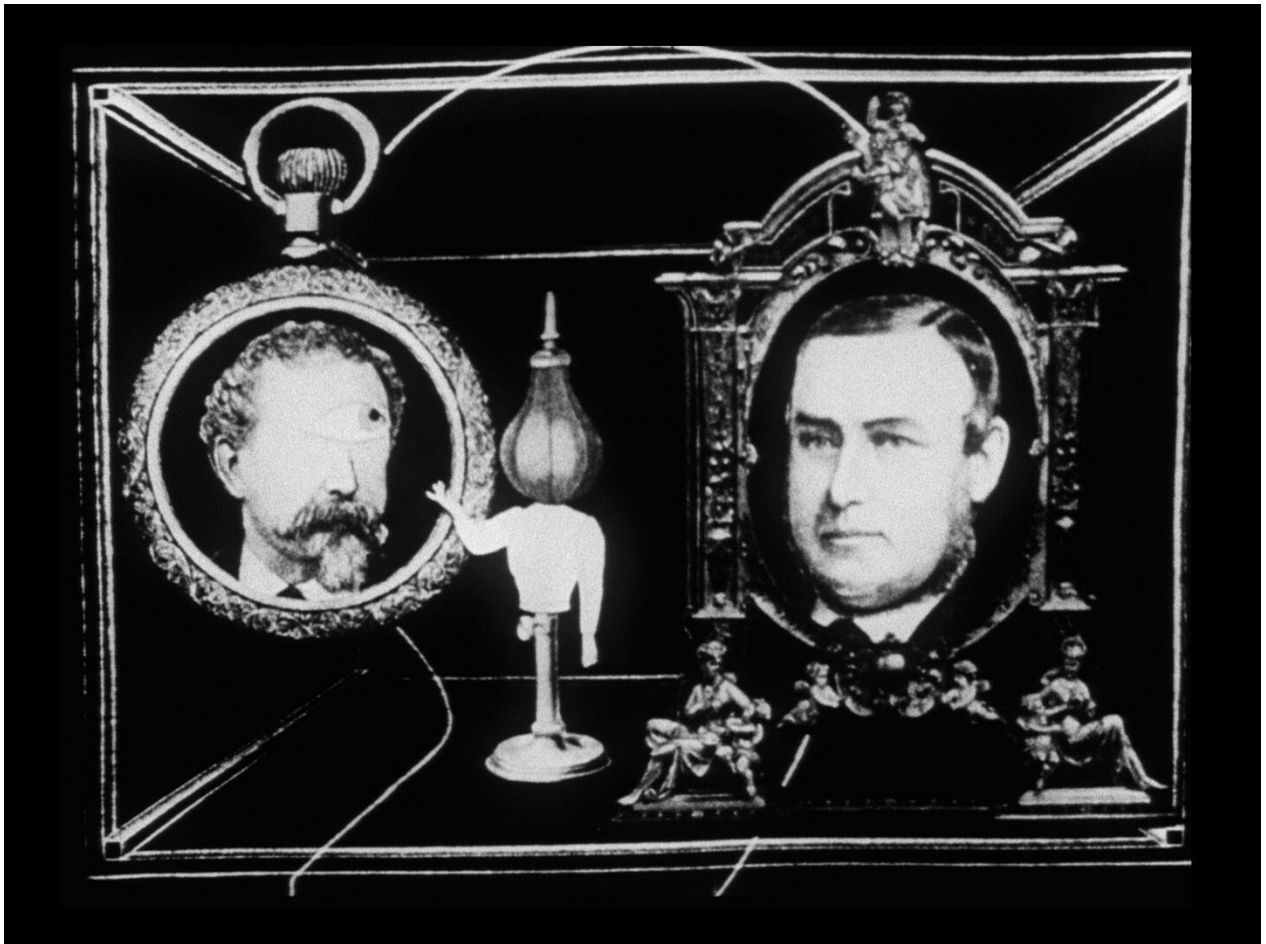
Harry Smith, String figure (1960), string, glue, and poster board, 8 x 20 inches; Collection of Rufus Cohen

Among the varied objects in the Pinwheel section, Smith's jazz paintings inspired by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker recordings stand out as similar efforts to capture improvisation's dynamic nature in permanent form. Alas, we can only view lightbox transparencies made from slides as the original paintings are lost. Still, with its kinetic and biomorphic shapes, "Manteca" (1948–49) evokes Gillespie's propulsive composition; "Ko-Ko," based on a Parker recording, employs many of the same sinuous shapes, but Smith has boxed them into geometric forms, perhaps suggesting a tension between the original tune, titled "Cherokee," and the saxophonist's elaborations on its chord changes. It's hard to say whether these works are enhanced or diminished by the presentation — displayed as backlit images in a darkened room.

Among the odder items Smith collected are paper airplanes. Found on streets or fished out of wastebaskets, these fragile objects exemplify Smith's devotion to preserving what would otherwise be discarded. Like string figures,

these are handmade artifacts produced for momentary use. As many of these airplanes were made from printed materials, Smith presents them as found poems: “Many Smokes and Spring Seasonings” (1967) was fashioned from a flyer for a Central Park demonstration to end the Vietnam War, Smith’s title lifted from the announcement text. Another example, devised from a page torn out of a Broadway theater directory, demonstrates how these bits of ephemera can conjure the past with impossibly delicate specificity.

A good deal of the show is dedicated to Smith’s films. The two-hour-long “Film No. 18: Mahagonny” (1970–80) is a four-screen translation of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s satiric opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and features the casual doings of Smith pals like Allen Ginsberg, Jonas Mekas, and Patti Smith in and around the Chelsea Hotel, where Smith lived for many years. Interspersed with New York City scenes and kaleidoscopic imagery, these somewhat mundane appearances are set in marked contrast to the soaring Weill score. The overall effect, especially the juxtapositions achieved among four films, is often poetic, sometimes amusing, but it wears thin after a while. During my visit, very few museum-goers stayed more than 15 minutes.



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

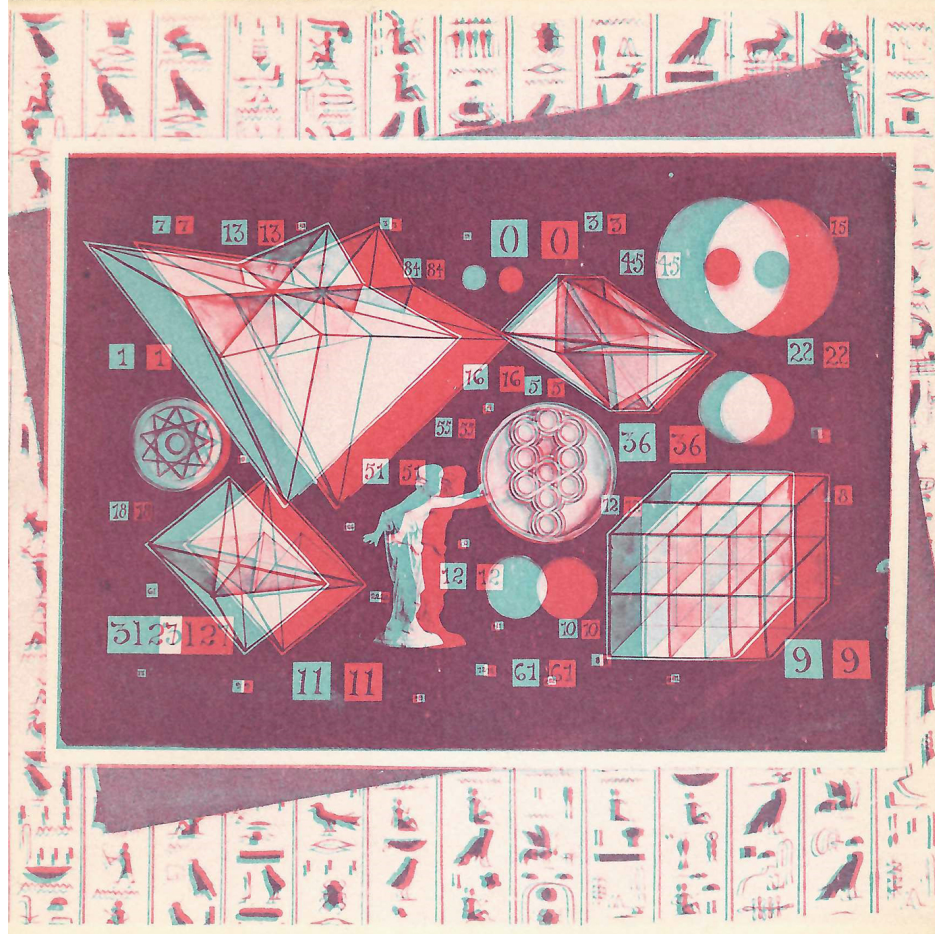
Far more compelling is “Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic Feature” (1957–62), for which Smith animated figures and forms from 19th-century books and department store catalogues. Mannequins erupt from mechanical contraptions, Victorian ladies sprout shrunken heads, skeletons prance with umbrellas, and mustachioed gents wield huge hypodermic needles. Artifacts of a forgotten past are energized by constant metamorphosis. The consequent imagery is Surrealist but lightly so. Smith brings a deft comic touch to these improbable doings (Monty Python’s

Terry Gilliam was undoubtedly influenced). Even with the film's hour-plus runtime, the gallery's small black box theater remained crowded with mesmerized viewers.

Many other paintings, films, and objects (e.g., typewriter art, watercolors, films of Seminole patchwork patterns, 78-rpm records, stereo card drawings, recordings of rabbinical chanting) reflect Smith's voraciously varied appetite for creative and curatorial projects. The very heterogeneity of the array — both in form and thematic content — lends the exhibition a pleasantly chaotic character more akin to visiting an erudite flea market than an art show. (The Henry Taylor retrospective on the same floor, featuring that artist's singular vision, makes too pointed a contrast.) Taken together, Smith's multiple passions and protean scholarship lack the apparent consistency and evolutionary progression typically associated with artists and academics — but, of course, he was anything but typical. A completist who left so much incomplete, his career zig-zagged, pinwheeled, and often crashed. Some radiant fragments have been gathered at the Whitney for your own wanderings.



Harry Smith, "Untitled" (c. 1951), watercolor on paper, 15 x 12 inches; Estate of Jordan Belson



Harry Smith, "Untitled 3-D Greeting Card ('are you looking for the third dimension?') " (1953), silkscreened ink on paper, 5 3/4 x 5 3/4 inches; Estate of Jordan Belson



Harry Smith, "Untitled" (c. 1952), watercolor and ink on paper, 9 x 6 inches; Lionel Ziprin Archive, New York

AMERICAN Folk Music

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BALLADS
FP 251

VOLUME TWO
SOCIAL MUSIC

VOLUME THREE
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EDITED BY HARRY SMITH

THIS HANDBOOK CONTAINS:

- I - NUMERICAL LISTING OF SELECTIONS IN VOLUMES ONE, TWO, AND THREE (NOS. 1 TO 84), WITH INFORMATION ON ORIGINAL ISSUES, CONDENSATIONS OF TEXTS, NOTES ON RECORDINGS, AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND DISCOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES.
- II - ALPHABETICAL INDEX TO TITLES, ARTISTS, FIRST LINES, SUBJECTS, AND INSTRUMENTATION OF ITEMS NO 1 TO 84.
- III - CONSOLIDATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF IMPORTANT REFERENCES TO SELECTIONS FOUND IN THIS SET.

"ALL PLEASE SOUND."

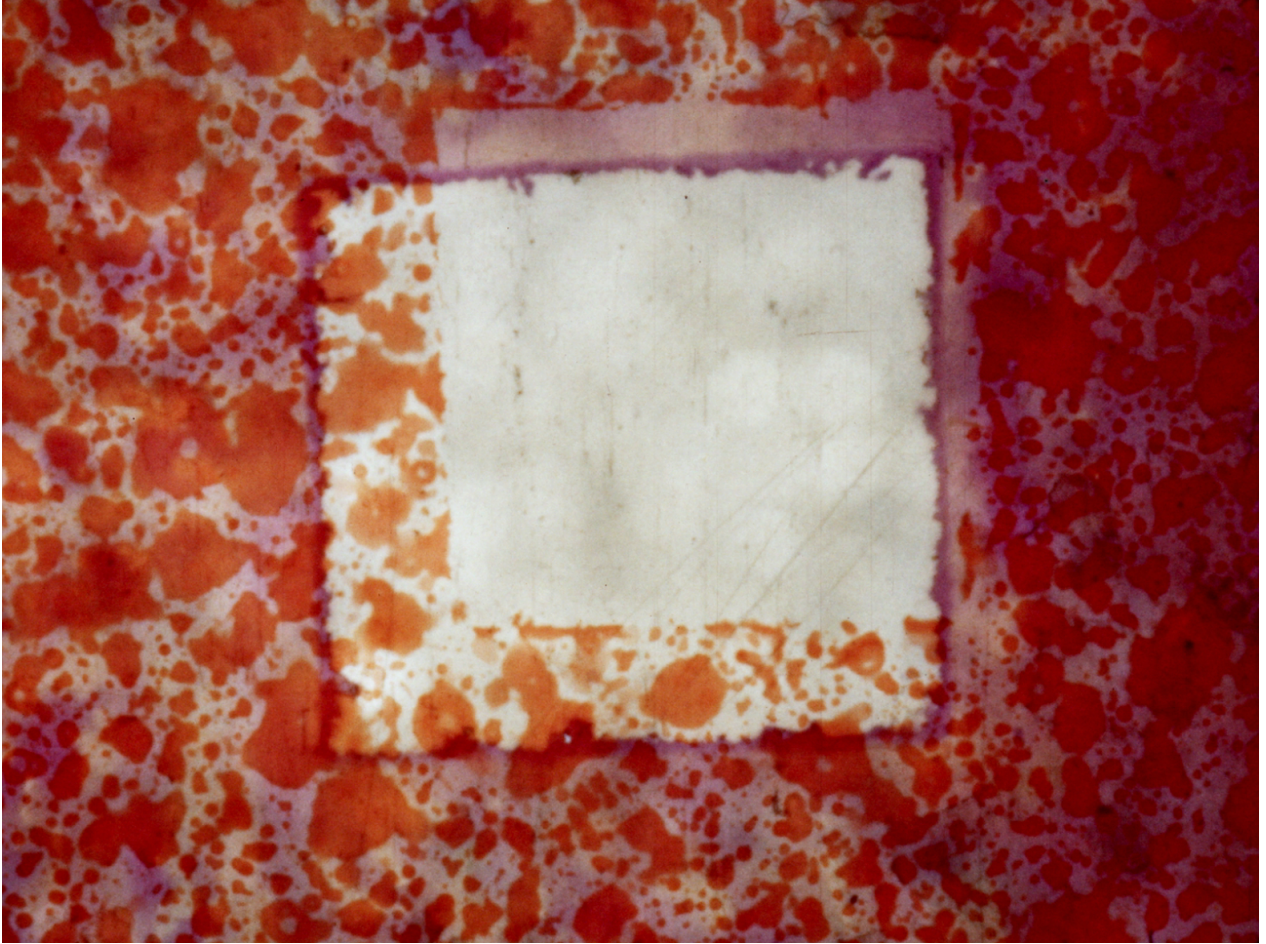
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Harry Smith, ed., Booklet for *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkways Records, 1952). Booklet, 10 1/2 × 8 1/4 inches; Smithsonian Folkways, Washington, DC



Harry Smith, still from "Film No. 1: A Strange Dream" (c. 1946–48), 16mm film transferred to digital video, color, silent, 3 min. (courtesy Anthology Film Archives, New York, © Anthology Film Archives)



Harry Smith, "Manteca (Jazz Painting)" (c. 1948–49), lightbox projection from 35mm slide of lost original painting, 27 3/5 x 21 7/8 inches; Estate of Jordan Belson

Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through January 28. The exhibition was curated by Carol Bove; Dan Byers; Rani Singh, director of the Harry Smith Archives at the GRI; and Elisabeth Sussman; with Kelly Long and McClain Groff.