Cracker Jack

A downtown artist mixed mediums and metaphors

February 1, 1998 By Stephen Greco

Christmas and Thanksgiving haven't changed all that much since they were Norman Rockwell-ized in the 1950s. Halloween, on the other hand, has come a long way. Last year, on the eve of All Saints' Day, New York City was illuminated by an even more brilliant display of self-expression than previously, as were communities across the nation. Prancing through the streets were pashas, glamour-babes, goblins and aliens. For the one moment of the year when they are encouraged to do so, people had taken time away from work and school to swathe themselves in exotic fabrics, don elaborate headgear, deploy newly liberated postures, gestures and identities—to live, that is, like characters out of Jack Smith's cinematic rhapsody, *Flaming Creatures*.

It's astonishing to think how far beyond Halloween this attitude has spread since 1962, when *Flaming Creatures* was released. We are all living so much more...*fancily* nowadays, in touch with the imaginative possibilities of life. Smith did so automatically. That was his biggest gift. Born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1932, raised in Texas and the Midwest, Smith came to New York City in 1953, where he took up residence in the East Village and SoHo, long before those neighborhoods arrived onstage in the artsy costumes they currently wear. A filmmaker, photographer and theater artist, he was a member of that pantheon of self-permissiongivers who came to maturity in the '50s, whose choices changed everything. Like Allen Ginsberg and Harry Hay, Smith saw nothing in the Eisenhower years to sway him from looking the way he wanted to look, saying what he wanted to say. During the '60s, '70s and '80s, there was a continuity between his bohemian life and his creations: Messy-but-visionary films, photographs and performance-art spectacles. Smith thought that every day should be mythical, fantastical, ecstatic. And the world followed, as it often follows revolutionaries who work from the heart more than the mind.

But changing the world was all that a holy innocent like Smith could manage. Building a career was for commercialists. *Flaming Creatures* —and its confiscation by the authorities in 1964—might have made Smith famous in art circles, but by the time he died, of AIDS in 1989, his genius was still unacknowledged by the world at large.

"Burn everything," he said over and over. "I've lived my life in obscurity, now I'm dying in obscurity."

This quote is from his death scene, movingly recounted in a memoir by the performer Penny Arcade in *Jack Smith: Flaming Creature, His Amazing Life and Times*, recently published by Serpent's Tail. The book was published on the occasion of curator Ed Leffingwell's eye-filling exhibition on Smith's life and work on view until March 1 at the newly renovated PS1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York (and, after that, the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the Berkeley Art Museum and the Kunstwerke Berlin). Arcade was among those who helped Smith see, in the end, how important it all was. The exhibition is a wealth of sketches, notes, photographs (both of Smith himself—always looking like a matinee idol—and of his idols, chief among them, Lola Montez), artifacts, tchotchkes and baubles. And, of course, there are many of the glorious costumes Smith built stitch by stitch. To see such loot conserved and lovingly presented after death—rather than tossed onto a Village sidewalk by unappreciative relatives—is every art queen's wet dream. To know that doing so helps describe the historical debt owed Smith by people like Andy Warhol (in whose film *Batman/Dracula* Smith appeared as an actor in 1964) and Robert Wilson (in whose theater piece *Deafman Glance* Smith appeared in 1971) is gratifying.

Go see Jack Smith. Dress up, so you feel worthy once you get there. Walking through, you really get a sense of the joy Smith felt in looking and in being a lot to look *at*. His was an art of generosity, not so much of ideas but of sensual pleasure. The way to respond is to give back.

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