

Dirty Looks

Michael ROBINSON Jack SMITH



Wednesday, April 20th, 2011

PROGRAM

JACK SMITH:

No President, 1967 - 70, 16mm, 50 mins.

MICHAEL ROBINSON:

And We All Shine On, 2006, 16mm, 7 mins.

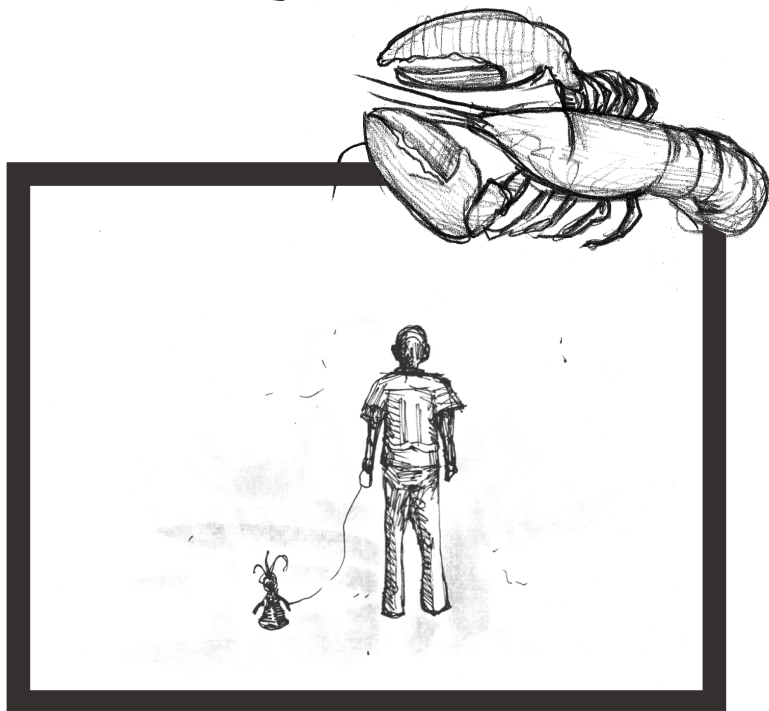
These Hammers Don't Hurt Us, 2010, DV, 13 mins.

All Through The Night, 2008, DV, 4:20 mins.

Victory Over the Sun, 2007, 16mm, 12 mins.

Participant Inc.

What's Underground?



What practical meaning does original have, applied to the imagination. We originate nothing. The origin of all things is outside ourselves. We have only to scratch the icing to find beneath - centuries of icing.

"Ravings" from *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool*

Who was Jack Smith? A question lodged at numerous parties I've recently attended.

Jack was an underground visionary in every sense of the word. Jack poured glitter into everything he made, pasty creatures, plastic fantasias and moldy monsters. He was a performance artist, filmmaker, playwright, photographer, socialist, aesthete, installation artist, scene-stealer, writer, interventionist. He built a theater and movie-studio in his rickety loft out of street debris; an intricate and child-like universe, *Cinemaroc*, was equal parts Baroque and broke. For a constituency of art and theater fags, Jack, as Charles Ludlam once eloquently put it, "is the daddy of us all." And quixotically, the fact that he remains a somewhat underground or *cult* figure, as opposed to canonized creature, attests to his legacy.

Best known as a filmmaker, Jack made wild, indeterminable pictures. *Flaming Creatures* was his first finished film. Well, in truth, it's his only *finished* film, since it ricocheted out of his hands when a trend of underground film raids made his opus a trophy for either side of a decency debate. Seized at the same time as Jean Genet's *Un Chant D'Amour* and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, *Creatures* made it all the way to the Supreme Court, who could detect little value in its over-exposed rumpus of genitalia, transvestism, baroque orgies and dance dervishry. Meanwhile, Susan Sontag and Jonas Mekas heralded the film as high art, hijacking (so Jack saw it) his vehicle to bolster their tastemaker status. So Jack moved forward making movies that couldn't be screened without him. He shot epics and edited them in front of you. *Normal Love, No President, I Was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*. A screening could be ten minutes or four hours, as Jack huddled in the back with the projector, throwing on scarred 78s to make the soundtrack, chopping up and taping together filmstock like it was sculpture.

This was but one of the many ways that Jack restlessly performed. He also hosted theater pieces in his Greene street loft that were both must-sees of the 70s art world and dubious endeavors. He would host an event at midnight and allow the audience to linger for 4, maybe 5 hours before stepping onto the stage. Cause for Jack, life was art, life was theater. There was no distinction, really, between the prelude and the event. Which reflected Jack's status as a fierce anti-capitalist. Waiting became a concentrated practice, as important as the paid-for spectacle. Waiting was participatory. After the irate had fled, Jack would commence. Those who remained were dedicated, not "the scum of Baghdad."

He acquired much of his terminology growing up in the cinemas of the 1940s. Like kindred experimentalists James Bidgood and the Kuchar brothers, Jack clung to the Technicolor fantasies that brewed on exotic deserts and shores. Jack started making art working with color photography, a result of his day-job employ at a commercial portrait studio in the 1950s. His thrilling photos are like film stills, cluttered with performers and creatures, veils, glitter, pearls, paint and plaster. In some ways, he was photographing those childhood movies as he remembered them, as he felt them to be. Jack found something covert there, something burning, excessive and queer that he worked to represent and hone in these photographic studies. *Arabian Nights*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, *White Savage*, *Cobra Woman* (which also screens at Museum of the Moving Image's *Fashion in Film Festival: Birds of Paradise*, preceding Smith's *Flaming Creatures*). God, to Jack, was the Queen of Technicolor, Maria Montez, a conventionally wooden Dominican actress whose narcissism "suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative life and truth."

In the amenable magazine, *Film Culture*, Jack found a likeminded journal to publish his writings, crafting alarmingly acute treatise for his loves: "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," "Belated Appreciation for JVS [Josef Von Sternberg]," (whose *The Devil Is A Woman* also screens at the fest, alongside *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* by Kenneth Anger) "What's Underground About Marshmallows?" and begging the question, "Could Art Ever Be Useful?" Yes, is Jack's answer, but not your typical consumable work that is offered up for the viewer like a bon bon. No, Jack valued a give-and-take with his audience, with his collaborators. Gary Indiana wrote that, in a friendship with Jack, "the world that he lived in had great appeal, and it also had a terrifying lack of boundaries. Within his hermetic realm, Jack was utterly logical and everything he did made perfect sense. Outside that magic kingdom he was quite mad, and though his madness was essentially benign, it could wear you out." Jack lost most of his friends, lovers and collaborators due to this insistence, his absolute impossibility. If you erred for a moment, Jack would lash back at you, by some accounts with an ax, and you were out for good. But the flipside to that manic intensity was an excruciating purity that few artists achieve.

He was an impossible manchild whose distinct, sing-song voice overtook every production he ever wandered into (he first became famous in the New York underground film scene by acting in – and taking over – the films of Ron Rice and Andy Warhol). Recently, I was at a party, reading aloud

from a friend's copy of Jack's bite-size *Historical Treasures* from the Hunaman Books series. It was 3 or so in the morning and I couldn't help but dip into this cadence, his start-and-stop delivery pattern, which inserted indeterminable, theatrically pregnant pauses for the sheer thrill of emphasis, a collaboration with your nerves. It's these exciting moments that make me realize that Jack will never die, how much he contributed to the arts. Though all the books are out of print and the art is now stored under lock and key, it was never about objects, but a kind of inventive spirit that can invade a room.

So, if you don't know of Jack, it's in part because there aren't *really* pieces by Jack Smith. Performance artist Penny Arcade got it and hoped to preserve Jack's loft as an immersive museum to the artist, cause everything there was constructed out of and for his performances, his films, his photographs, his writings. A flaming context was Jack's real work of art. And his imprint is indelible.

BRADFORD NORDEN

Juvenile does not equal shameful and trash is the material of creators. It exists whether one approves or not. You may not approve of the Orient but it's half of the world and it's where spaghetti came from.

The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez



AND WE ALL SHINE ON

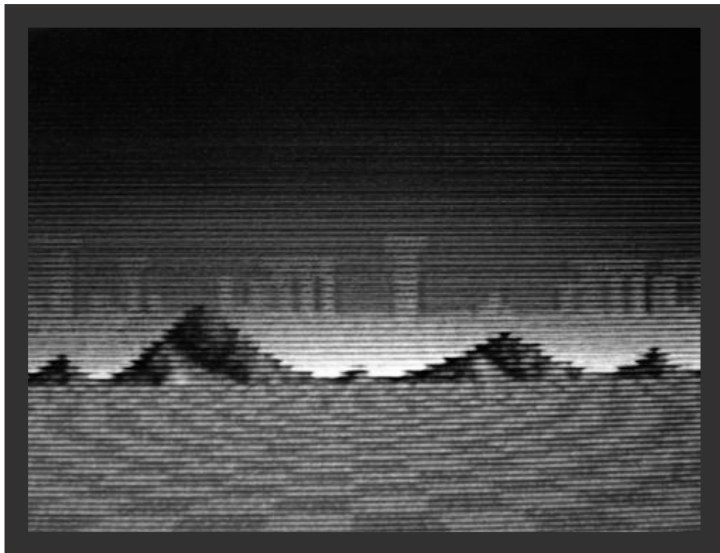
An ill wind is transmitting through the lonely night, spreading deception and myth along its murky path, singing the dangers of the mediated spirit.

THESE HAMMERS DON'T HURT US

Tired of underworld and overworld alike, Isis escorts her favorite sun on their final curtain call down the Nile, leaving a neon wake of shattered tombs and sparkling sarcophagi.

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

A charred visitation with an icy language of control: "there is no room for love". Splinters of Nordic fairy tales and ecological disaster films are ground down into a shimmering prism of contradictions—a hopeful container for hopelessness.



VICTORY OVER THE SUN

Dormant sites of past World's Fairs breed an eruptive struggle between spirit and matter, ego and industry, futurism and failure. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory; nothing lasts forever even cold November rain.

The film takes its title from the 1913 Russian Futurist opera, and incorporates chanted text from Ayn Rand's 1937 novella, *Anthem*, a villainous monologue from the 1987 film, *Masters Of the Universe*, and an orchestral version of Guns N'Roses' 1992 ballad, *November Rain*.



These Hammers Don't Hurt Us



*How strangely awake I feel, as if living
had been just a long dream, someone
else's dream, now finished at last.*

*But that now will begin a dream of my
own, which will never end.*

It began with the question: did Michael Jackson really record a song with the title and refrain of “Keep It In The Closet”? From the bottom of a dusty box of CDs, I excavated my copy of *Dangerous*, and the album played on repeat for the next four months. I became obsessed, watching every music video, interview and live performance I could find. I wanted to see it all, but was particularly fascinated with anything *Dangerous*-era, the pivot point between the unanimously adored, and the dynamically tragic. I had never forgotten about Michael, but somehow the distance between his early 90’s presence and 2008 felt particularly vast and warped. Granted, he would go on to make more hit songs, more music videos, and legions of fans will argue that he continues to make good albums post-mortem, but to my mind, *Dangerous* was the end, and the video for “Remember the Time” was the finale.

Beyond its amazing dance sequence, the video’s Ancient Egyptian setting struck me for its suitably shameless mythologizing of a star whose fame had already assumed impossible proportions. Having gorged on all things Michael via the internet, I began to consider online archiving and viewing as a kind of mummification; the age of MJ and the music video has passed, but it left behind its undead shell to be played and replayed forever, shrouded in digital gauze. I began tinkering with the video in early 2009, slowing things down, adding flicker and reverb as I tend to do, and was not really getting anywhere.

Then he died, embalmed with painkillers, encased in his fortress of solitude. Having spent a somewhat unhealthy amount of time looking at Michael Jackson on my computer, I screamed when that same machine announced his death. Like many, I was startled and confused, not because of the suspicious circumstances or unfortunate timing, but because his dying suggested that he was actually mortal, and that he had actually been alive for the past 50 years. It was easier to understand him as a deity, a specter, or an alien force residing in the airwaves, than to get my head around his humanity.

My thoughts wandered to those who had assumed the roles of his terrestrial companions: Diana Ross, Macaulay Culkin, and of course, Elizabeth Taylor. Among the videos I watched most repeatedly during the months before Michael’s death was an excerpt of a Fox television special, in which Taylor guides him through his first Christmas at Neverland in 1993 (all of the gifts were Super Soakers). In looking for more depictions of the two of them together, Taylor’s online presence was consistently marked by stunning stills from *Cleopatra*, an evident inspiration for the

styling of “Remember the Time”. Servicing their immense celebrity in similarly lavish fashions, *Cleopatra* was, in 1963, the most expensive film ever made, and “Remember the Time” remains among the most costly music videos. In finally watching the film, I could not help but imagine Michael’s adoration of Elizabeth’s performance, and I interpreted her character’s words as directed at him. Cleopatra’s many declarations on love, death and divinity articulated the mess of otherworldly ideals Michael seemed to live by. The project I was about to abandon suddenly had a new star and a new tabloid-ready premise: Taylor Escorts Jackson Into Afterlife by Means of Egyptian Pageantry. I worked on the film for nearly a year, pulling materials from dozens of sources (History Channel documentaries, mummy B-movies, Dutch Ice Capades, *This Is It* DVD bonus features) finishing this past fall.

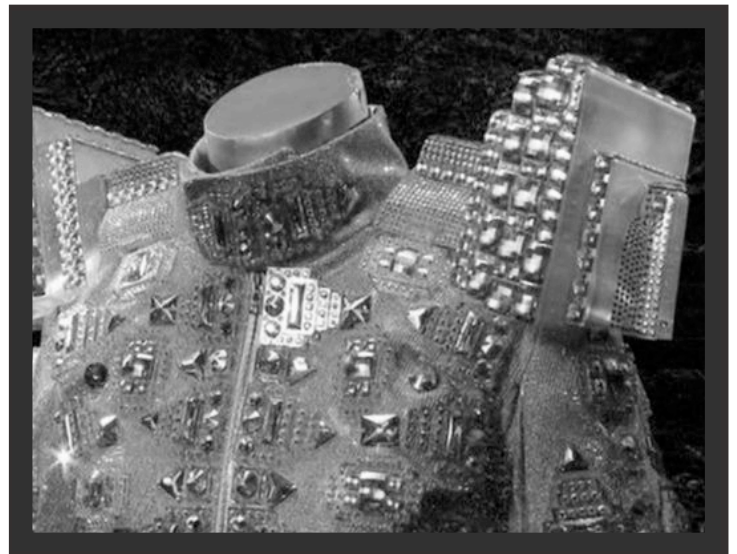
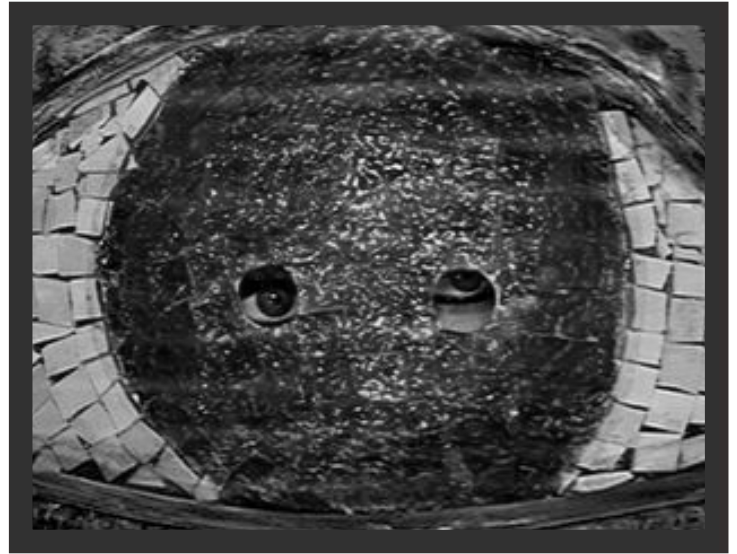
A few weeks ago, I woke early to catch a flight to Michigan for the Ann Arbor Film Festival, where *These Hammers Don’t Hurt Us* was screening that evening. A heavy snow was falling, so I hurried to my computer to check on my flight, and was greeted with the news: “Elizabeth Taylor Dead at 79”, accompanied by a still from *Cleopatra*. Feeling both cursed and charmed, I made my turbulent flight, and the screening was humbling and surreal to say the least. My own experience of my films often changes with time, but this felt like a congenial bitch-slap from the gods.

Yet for all my fascinations, my film is not really about Michael Jackson or Elizabeth Taylor, nor is it about Egypt, revolution, or immortality.

It is all of those things and none of those things, and hopefully something else.

MICHAEL ROBINSON

Without you, this is not a world I want to live in, because for me there would be no love anywhere.



DIRTY LOOKS is a roaming series held on the last Wednesday of the month. Curated by Bradford Nordeen, Dirty Looks is a screening series designed to trace contemporary queer aesthetics through historical works, presenting quintessential GLBT film and video alongside up-and-coming artists and filmmakers. Filling a gap in the regular programming of Queer experimental work in the New York film community, Dirty Looks exhibits a lineage of queer tactics and visual styles for younger artists, casual viewers and seasoned avant-garde film-goers, alike. A salon of influences, Dirty Looks is an open platform for inquiry, discussion and debate.

www.dirtylooksnyc.org

MICHAEL ROBINSON has screened work in both solo and group shows at a variety of festivals, cinematheques and galleries including the International Film Festival Rotterdam, The New York Film Festival, The London Film Festival, Sundance, Media City, Anthology Film Archives, Viennale, Cinematexas, The Wexner Center for the Arts, Tate Modern, MoMA P.S.1, Impakt, Courtisane, The Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Chicago Filmmakers, PDX, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, and the San Francisco, Melbourne, Leeds, and Hong Kong International Film Festivals. Michael was awarded "Most Promising Filmmaker" at the 2007 Ann Arbor Film Festival. His work has been discussed in publications such as Cinema Scope, Art Papers, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Village Voice, Time Out New York, and he was listed as one of the top ten avant garde filmmakers of the 2000's by Film Comment magazine. To view more work please visit: www.poisonberries.net.

JACK SMITH was an avant-garde filmmaker, performance artist, director, photographer, designer and writer. His films, most of which remain intentionally unfinished, include the banned *Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love*, *Overstimulated*, *Scotch Tape*, *No President* and *I Was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*. Smith performed in many other films by prominent underground figures like Andy Warhol, George Kuchar, Ron Rice, Marie Menken and Ken Jacobs. Smith staged theatrical productions in his Greene street loft that blended theater and performance art. Large-scale retrospectives of Smith's work have been mounted by the Museum of Modern Art/PS1, Anthology Film Archives, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Andy Warhol Museum, and the Arsenal, Berlin. Smith is often cited as (re)inventing glitter make-up, installation art, drag culture, Superstars and time.

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