

Los Angeles Filmforum presents
Abstraction and Eviction: Films by (and about) Harry Smith with live score
Thursday, November 30, 2023, 8:00 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2023 is our 48th year. www.lafilmforum.org

**In person: Musicians Will Epstein, Dave Harrington, Photay, Eli Crews, and Harry Smith
Archives Director Rani Singh**

Los Angeles premiere of Robert Frank's last film!

Dedicated to Bérénice Reynaud

We're in the midst of a revival of attention being paid to Harry Smith, polymath, experimental filmmaker, painter, ethnomusicologist, mystic, expert on the occult, creator of the Anthology of American Folk Music, paper airplane and string figure collector, and more. On October 4, the Whitney Museum opened [Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith](#), collecting an array of paintings, films, and interesting items collected by Smith. A couple of months ago brought the release of [Cosmic Scholar: The Life and Times of Harry Smith](#), the first full biography of Smith by John Szwed, who has previously written biographies of Sun Ra, Jelly Roll Morton, Alan Lomax, Billie Holiday, and more. And in 2022, semiotext(e) and MIT Press printed an updated edition of [Harry Smith: American Magus](#), edited by Paola Iglioni, containing interviews with multiple figures who knew Smith, along with a range of earlier documents.

Filmforum has regularly presented the glorious films by Smith through the years, but last hosted one in 2007. Here's an opportunity to view his *Early Abstractions* and more on a big screen, with live musical accompaniment by Will Epstein, Dave Harrington, and Photay. In addition, we're including the Los Angeles premiere of the last completed film by famed photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank, a portrait of Smith being evicted from the Breslin Hotel in 1984.

“He was an anthropologist, filmmaker, painter, folklorist, mystic, and walking encyclopedia. He taught Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe about the occult, swapped drugs with Timothy Leary, had a front-row seat to a young Thelonious Monk, lived with (and tortured) Allen Ginsberg, was admired by Susan Sontag, and was one of the first artists funded by Guggenheim Foundation. He was always broke, generally intoxicated, compulsively irascible, and unimpeachably authentic. Harry Smith was, in the words of Robert Frank, “the only person I met in my life that transcended everything.”” – Macmillan Publishers

<https://whitney.org/exhibitions/harry-smith>

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374282240/cosmicscholar>

<https://mitpress.mit.edu/9781635901641/harry-smith/>

Special Thanks to Will Epstein, Rani Singh, the Harry Smith Archives, and the Film-makers
Coop

The performers:

Will Epstein is a composer, improviser, and songwriter born in New York City. A fascination with electro-acoustic sound and direct emotional expression pervades his work which spans across many different forms and genres—he has performed internationally, released records of songs and composed music for film, installation, and dance performance. In addition to recently completing scores for the Martha Graham Dance Company and the documentary *Nam June Paik: Moon Is The Oldest TV*, Will has worked on major pieces for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Joyce Theater, and Jacobs Pillow, and collaborated with renowned artists and institutions such as MoMA, Marilyn Minter, and Nicolás Jaar. His albums *Whims* and *Wendy* were released by Fat Possum Records in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

Dave Harrington is a multi-instrumentalist, improviser, composer and producer. Before moving to Los Angeles in 2019, Harrington spent more than a decade in his hometown of New York City working across many different musical communities from downtown improvisation to Brooklyn indie and jambands to warehouse techno, scoring independent films, and producing albums for other artists. He is currently a member of the bands *Taper's Choice* and *DARKSIDE*, and leads his own improvisational groups including *Dave Harrington's Pranksters West*, and various assemblies of improvisers.

As a collaborator, Harrington has recorded or performed with artists including Ilhan Ersahin's *Istanbul Sessions*, Nels Cline, Miho Hatori, Alanis Morissette, John Medeski, Nate Mercereau, Greg Fox, Nick Murphy (aka Chet Faker), Yuka Honda, Joe Russo, Ian Chang, Karina Rykman, Chris Forsyth, Mauro Refosco, Lars Horntveth (*Jaga Jazzist*), Stuart Bogie, Brian Chase (*Yeah Yeah Yeahs*), *The Antlers*, *The Master Musicians of Jajouka*, Kimbra, Patrick Shiroishi, Sophia Brous, *Innov Gnawa*, Spencer Zahn, *Genesis Breyer P-Orridge*, *Marshall Allen & The Sun Ra Arkestra*, *Angel Deradoorian*, and many more.

Photay is the alias of Woodstock, NY-based composer, drummer, DJ, producer and musical polymath Evan Shornstein. As Photay, he has recorded a quartet of albums that organically bring together intricate chamber-pop arrangements, post-techno electronic textures, and a love of polyrhythms. Photay's music is built on positive intentions. Truly.

Eli Crews is a producer, engineer and musician, having been actively engaged in record making since the turn of the century. In the studio he has worked closely with artists such as Laurie Anderson, *Tune-Yards*, Bill Frisell, Gotye, Marc Ribot, Colin Stetson, and Fred Frith. As a live sound engineer he has toured with Sharon van Etten, *Cibo Matto*, Kathleen Hanna, and Yoko Ono, to name just a few of the people he has had the privilege to work with. For this show, he gets to do one of his favorite things: process live musicians while they play, adding to the unique

texture that will only exist ethereally in that space for the duration of the event. Eli currently resides in the Hudson Valley

Rani Singh is the Director of the Harry Smith Archives. Her work focuses on strategic planning and legacy management for artists, estates and foundations. Previously she worked as Director of Special Projects at Gagosian Gallery, and for many years at the Getty Research Institute, in Los Angeles. She is the co-curator of “Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith,” a survey exhibition of Smith’s artwork, films, music collections that is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art until January 28, 2024. She is based in Santa Monica, California.

Screening:

Entry film: The Jazz Paintings of Harry Smith

Digital, color, sound, 18 min.

Early Abstractions, by Harry Smith

1946-1952, 16mm (or 16mm to digital), color, sound, 23 min. at 24fps, but we will be running it at 18 fps.

Early Abstractions is comprised of six films that vary in length from 2 to 5 ½ minutes. The works were produced over a seven-year period from 1946 to 1952. As Jonas Mekas has said, “You can watch them for pure color enjoyment; you can watch them for motion – Harry Smith’s films never stop moving; or you can watch them for hidden symbolic meanings, alchemic signs. There are more levels in Harry Smith’s work than in any other film animator I know.” Inspired by Native American cultures, jazz, the Kabbala, and surrealism, Smith assembled his own cinematic universe of shape, color, light and time. *Early Abstractions* reveals the whimsical, mystical side of experimental animation.

To create *No. 2 Message from the Sun*, a film that Smith said “takes places either inside the sun or in Zurich, Switzerland,” the artist applied round, removable stickers with Vaseline. When the stickers were removed, the circles remained in outline and another layer of paint was applied. Thus, as the film is projected, the circle’s rhythmic patterns seem to travel and grow in intensity through the layering and merging of colors.

“In his first films, the *Early Abstractions*, there is a sense of a man meticulously building his animation practice from the ground up. This series of films documents a movement through technique, and through a growing mastery of camera-less direct to film animation leading to an embrace of cut-out and collage. This image construction moves from the blunt abstraction of form and rudimentary motion of the early pieces to 10’s symbolic dance of Tarot Cards, Buddhist and Cabalistic Totems, highlighting, in the process, the films’ elliptical, surrealistic storytelling and graphic styles, all of which were qualities that made Terry Gilliam such a fan

(and mimic). As [P.Adams] Sitney suggests, “The language of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* has a comparable verticality” to the alchemy and layers of meaning that spin out from these dancing, maneuvering avatars. – Dirk de Bruyn, *Senses of Cinema*, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2005/cteq/early_abstractions/

Harry Smith at the Breslin Hotel 1984, by Robert Frank

© Robert Frank, 2017, distributed by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
2017, color and b&w, 11 min. Los Angeles premiere!

In 1984, upon learning that his friend Harry Smith was being evicted from the Breslin Hotel in New York City, Allen Ginsberg encouraged Robert Frank to document the move on video. The result is a time capsule that captures a touching and unique encounter between two iconoclastic artists. Over a one-week period, Smith shows examples of his abundant collection of art, books, indigenous recordings, and films, many of which were later donated to the Getty Research Institute, the Smithsonian, and Anthology Film Archives. Frank’s video footage remained unedited until 2017, when his longtime editor, Laura Israel, discovered the tapes, had them digitally restored, and worked with Frank to create his first new film in years.

Late Superimpositions, by Harry Smith

1964, color, 16mm, 31 min.

Superimposed photographs of Mr. Fleischman's butcher shop in New York, and the Kiowa around Anadarko, Oklahoma—with Cognate Material. The trip is dark at the beginning and end, light in the middle, and is structured 122333221. I honor it the most of my films, otherwise a not very popular one before 1972.

This program is supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles, and the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming soon:

Dec 3 - So Much I Want To Say: A Glimpse Into Palestinian Erasure - Screening + Lecture , at Human Resources

Dec 8 - Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Chopping Up the Classics, at the UCLA Film & TV Archive

Dec 10 - Hayoun Kwon: Virtually Real, at 2220 Arts + Archives

Memberships available, \$40 Student \$75 Individual, \$125 Dual, or \$225 Silver Nitrate

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