

**“THE HEAVENLY
TREE GROWS
DOWNWARD:
HARRY SMITH/
PHILIP TAAFFE/
FRED TOMASELLI”**

JAMES COHAN
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Harry Smith (1923–91) is today remembered mostly as an avant-garde filmmaker and musicologist. During the 1940s, he made the first frame-by-frame hand-painted films in America, and his later works in cinema are widely accepted as masterpieces of alchemical collage animation, among them his film *Mahagonny*, 1970–80, a four-screen two-hour-and-twenty-one-minute epic based on the Brecht-Weil opera. Three of his many ethnographic collections (Smith called them “encyclopedias of design”)—the Paper Airplane Collection, the Seminole Patchwork Quilt Collection, and the String Figures Collection—are now in the Smithsonian Institution. When Smithsonian Folkways released his *Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952—compiling selected cuts from Smith’s collection of rare 78 rpm recordings of American traditional music from the ‘20s and ‘30s—it inspired the folk revival and exerted a tremendous influence on American popular music from that point on. Accepting a Grammy for its rerelease just before he died, Smith said, “I’m glad to say that my dreams came true. I saw America changed through music.”

But Smith himself always maintained that he was primarily a painter. In 1951 Hilla Rebay, curator of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now the Guggenheim) gave Smith the money to move from San Francisco and set him up in a studio in New York, where he made paintings influenced by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Allen Ginsberg once described the paintings and drawings he saw filling every square inch of Smith’s apartment on East Seventy-seventh Street as “formulaic triangulations or Pythagorean calculations . . . very beautiful.” Unfortunately, most of these got lost along the way. While Smith was in Okla-

homa recording the peyote rituals of the Kiowa Indians in 1964, his landlord threw all of his work out into the street. Smith also pawned paintings when he needed money, gave others away in lieu of debt payments, and destroyed still others in fits of rage.

If “The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward” had done nothing more than bring some of Smith’s extraordinary works back into view, this little show would have been worthwhile. But curator Raymond Foye achieved much more than that. Foye, who previously copublished Hanuman Books with Francesco Clemente and now publishes limited edition collaborations between painters and poets, was only seventeen when he first met Smith in 1974, and was living in the Chelsea Hotel when the artist-collector died there seventeen years later. As he got to know the whole of Smith’s productions, Foye recognized correspondences between the artist’s concerns and those of younger contemporary painters like Philip Taaffe and Fred Tomaselli. In this show, Foye combined Smith pieces dating from 1948 to 1980 with mostly new works by Taaffe and Tomaselli to show the strong visual links between them. Often responding directly to Smith’s works, Taaffe and Tomaselli opened up new areas of exploration in their own. The effect was similar to listening to three highly accomplished musicians jam.

The affinities among these three artists are both formal and conceptual. All three artists have roots in the metaphysical origins of modern abstract art. All three have an attraction to ancient techniques of picturemaking and a concern for pattern and design that is both pre- and postmodern. All three employ the neurological form-constants of visionary experience: tunnels, spirals, webs, and honeycombs (to which Smith added spheres). All three pay attention to rhythm in form-making, draw energy from the tensions between organic and geometric forms, and encourage synesthesia. And all three integrate painting and collage and have a strong sense of skillful facture that does not preclude the “accidents” of chance.

Taaffe’s *Untitled*, 2002, with its marbling of oil pigment on paper, hung above and riffed on Smith’s 1976 improvisation of marbling effects in gouache, watercolor, colored pencil, and pastel. To the right of these two works hung Tomaselli’s *Doppler Effect in Blue*, 2002, with its swirling strings of collaged eyes, ears, mouths, hands, feet, flowers, birds, and insects, all interspersed with actual pills. To the left was Tomaselli’s *Banquet*, 2002, picturing a man’s arm formed entirely from smaller



On wall, clockwise from top left: Philip Taaffe, *Calligram*, 2002, acrylic ink on paper mounted on canvas, 29 1/2 x 22". Fred Tomaselli, *Fungi and Flowers*, 2002, mixed media and resin on wood, 48 x 36". Harry Smith, *Untitled (Oz Drawing)*, ca. 1968, pen and ink with watercolor or colored ink on paper, 23 x 28 1/2".

collaged hands and arms, with flowers, hands, leaves, insects, and white dots radiating out from the fingers.

On another wall, Smith’s *Untitled (Oz Drawing)*, ca. 1968—wherein Toto is kidnapped by a Pan-like figure and the Wizard sits cross-legged on a mushroom throne looking remarkably like a young Harry Smith—is juxtaposed with a wild, fleshy, android/asteroid marbling by Taaffe (*Calligram*, 2002) and Tomaselli’s *Fungi and Flowers*, 2002, picturing a complete man formed mostly from flowers, with mushrooms sprouting from under his left hand and a hallucinatory passionflower emerging from his right hand, while butterflies and stars mingle in the firmament.

The show included two of the mounted string figures that Harry Smith collected all his life (and that rhyme well visually with Tomaselli’s nearby constellation photographs); a vitrine filled with collage elements (featuring a fifteen-inch Krishna next to a cutout Chiquita banana) used in the making of his animated films; and some abstract films from 1946–57 (nos. 1–5, 7, and 10, with the music of the Beatles replacing earlier sound tracks by Dizzy Gillespie and the Fugs) transferred to DVD and showing on a screen in the back room. Also in the back room was the seminal image for this show, Smith’s *Tree of Life*, 1954, a four-color silkscreen image of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, with its ten spheres, or Sephiroth, symbolizing the

divine powers and potencies, connected by twenty-two paths indicating the lines through which all change in the universe takes place, all visualized geometrically. This is the inverted tree of the title, with its roots in the heavens and its branches reaching down into the earth, an image of the origin and structure of the universe that appears in many different cosmologies but is most elaborated in the Indian and Judaic mystical traditions, both of which Smith knew well.

In “The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward” (also the title of an influential book of poems by Gerrit Lansing), Raymond Foye revealed connections between past and present that are too often obscured and also allowed further connections between Taaffe and Tomaselli to be made. Taaffe’s current concentration on organic taxonomy and Tomaselli’s Renaissance-inspired collage transformations are here seen as related attempts to reconstitute the human form in the present environment. Every piece in this show related to every other piece, and these relations exfoliated with prolonged viewing, making it a fitting homage to an artist who spent his whole life tracing the subtle lines of correspondence among seemingly disparate things. □

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