Beyond ‘Anthology of Folk Music,’ Harry Smith was an artist with styles as varied as a songbook

By Claire Ogden
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Harry Smith art on exhibit at Harvard’s Carpenter Center includes “Ko-Ko [Jazz Painting]."

The beautiful and unexpected “Fragments of a Faith Forgotten” opened Friday at Harvard’s Carpenter Center, a wide-ranging ode to artist-ethnographer Harry Smith — the scrappy and endlessly eccentric man best known for “The Anthology of American Folk Music” released by Smithsonian Folkways in 1952.

The exhibition is in a multitude of mediums, and that’s intentional: It’s a celebration of the artist’s idiosyncratic research practices and divergent thinking. Experimental films are shown alongside light boxes displaying ethnographic picture slides; in one room, there are drawings best viewed through 3D glasses.
Smith’s films are weird, wacky and mesmerizing: Some are abstract, others have image cut-outs and are very “Fantastic Planet”-esque. In stills from “Film No. 9,” there’s a series of shapes in a vivid and eccentric color palette. Concentric circles overlap. Beset with image noise, they seem almost to be buzzing with life.

In “Ko Ko [Jazz Painting],” a mess of endlessly complex loops, dots and curlicues spans the image in a calming blue-green. It’s an illustration of Charlie Parker’s “Ri Bop Boys” – specifically the B-side. The piece is a lightbox transparency of a 35 mm slide of the original painting, which was lost.

“The eclectic range of materials on view is all the more impressive given the facts of Smith’s life: he led a precarious existence, staying in hotels and often living off the generosity of friends. Since he rarely had a stable place to call home, the safety of his objects was precarious, too. In Oklahoma, he got in trouble for not paying his hotel bill. The manager threw his stuff in the dumpster, including a lot of his art. Smith went to the landfill to try and retrieve it, but with limited success.
An “Untitled 3D Greeting Card” by Harry Smith on exhibit at the Carpenter Center.

In these circumstances, Harvard curators had to get creative: Many of the paintings on view were lost, so 35 mm slide versions of them are projected next to album covers and other paraphernalia. Paintings and films are typically not shown together, since they require vastly different lighting.

But “there’s something about showing still images of films,” curator Dan Byer said. The act of retrieval “opened up an opportunity to look at the films with more care.”

The exhibition is on view through Dec. 1.


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