FRAGMENTSOFA FAITH

By Mark Feeney

FRAGMENTOS SA FAITH
FORGOTTEN
The Art of Harry Smith
At Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the show includes films, paintings, two greeting cards designed by Smith, string figures, drawings, two thick binders of documents (they make for absorbing reading). A browsing station accesses Smith's most famous and enduring achievement, the 1952 compilation "Anthology of American Folk Music." It's not yet what there is to see but also to listen to. Depending on where you are on the third floor you can hear the luminous Monk's "Misterioso," accompanied by a short film Smith made inspired by it, and Daisy Gillett's "Mambo," which inspired a Smith painting. That painting really does convey the record's swirling, joyous energy.

"Fragments," which runs through Dec. 1, was jointly organized by the Carpenter Center and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. It ran at the Whitney last fall.

There's so much going on it's easy to miss a video monitor on the first floor, beyond the "Anthology" listening station and the large screen on which you can call up the original liner notes. These notes, with Smith's typography and illustrations and layout mattering as much as his text, are as much evocation as information—which is to say very Harry Smith.

Playing on the monitor is a silent black-and-white film of Smith (1923-91). Andy Warhol shot it in 1944. It's shown twice here, the second more than four minutes. Perhaps nothing else in "Fragments" offers a clearer window on a unique personality. Smith holds up a string figur, but mostly just paces at the camera and looks around. He seems remote and manically intimate, and has a, well, inward smile. (The quality of a smile can tell you a lot about a person.) Even if Smith's work didn't make plain what a visionary and one-of-a-kind he was, those four minutes would.

One-of-a-kind has also aligned with other artistic ones-of-a-kind: in spirit and temperament, in various aesthetic involutions, in hermetic secrecy. A provisional list might include William Blake, Kurt Schwitters, Paul Klee, Joseph Cornell, Harry Partch, Mark Tobey, Sun Ra, his friends Monk and Allen Ginsberg (Smith wasn't a Beat, but he was Beat indebted). There's also the importance of Kandinsky. Abstraction fascinated Smith when young, and his early paintings very much bear Kandinsky's mark. They also shared a profoundly mystical bent. The point of citing these names, though, isn't to locate Smith. That is impossible. Mystica doesn't situate. The point is to give a name, however spectral, to the many and various territories Smith moved in not at all.

Self-taught, self-guided, and, in more ways than one, Smith was a Renaissance man for whom the actual Renaissance was not a moment in human history but the modern condition of Western art—"Western music, too—simply didn't matter to him. He once wrote in a note to himself"Pipe Art"—the equivalent of Hu-mannism as it was understood in the 16th century!" By Pop Art, Smith didn't mean Warhol and Lichtonstein and Rauschenstain. He meant a popular art that was deeper and wider and richer and in no way canonical. It ranged from the music of the Indigenous peoples he studied as a budding anthropologist in his native Pacific Northwest to the ho-bos he fell in love with after World War II when he moved to the Bay Area to the "hobbyists" and "race" records he collected and included in the "Anthology" as assembled after he moved to New York. There's a marvellous memoirism to Smith's sensibilities. Forget about situating a mystical, try situating a magpie. This was a man who collected not just obscurities but Ukrainian Easter eggs and paper airplanes and Seminole textiles. If there's a line dividing curiosity and hoarding, Smith was unanswerable.

The way his sensibilities drew on acquisitiveness and curiosity combined comes most clearly, perhaps, in his cinematic magnum opus, the 66-minute "Film No. 12: Heaven and Earth Magic Feature" (above); and "Mambo [Jazz Painting]" (circa 1948-49), a show at Harvard's Carpenter Center celebrates Harry Smith, an artistic visionary and true one-of-a-kind

ART REVIEW

Harry Smith's "Film No.11: Mirror Animations," circa 1927 (above); and "Mambo [Jazz Painting]," circa 1948-49 (right).

Shades of Kandinsky

Smith made this effect—music part of a noble past, thus helping shape a dynamic cultural future. The "Anthology" filmed just one place. Classical Ashley and Doug Briggs and Macon Hargroed, but this was a past that inspired. There's a kinship interested Smith. He mentioned the anar-chist Crowley in the "Anthology" notes. That "Anthology" fired up the folk revival of the'50 and'sixties, including the ones we hated. It's hard to exaggerate the impact of those 84 tracks, sold as three two-LP sets. (They're now available as a magnificent three-CD boxed set from the Smithsonian.) The "Anthology" fired up and fueled the folk revival of the early '60s. "Shake no more: there was no folk" comes before Smith wed the guitarist John Fahey once wrote. Describing the effect the "Anthology" had, the singer Don Van Ronk said, "We all knew every word of every song, including the ones we hated.

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A few months before his death, his friends Monk and Allen Ginsberg gathered at the Smithsonian. (The quality of a smile can tell you a lot about a person.) Even if Smith's work didn't make plain what a visionary and one-of-a-kind he was, those four minutes would.

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