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REVIEWS & PRESS

Jack Smith. *The Beautiful Book*. Granary Books, 2001.

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Pouncey, Edwin. "Print Run: New Books: Music and Beyond." *The Wire* 78.

The writing and images in these three books resurrect the work of three major underground artists—film maker, writer and artist Jack Smith, poet and publisher Piero Heliczer, and calligraphic/light artist Marian Zazeela—whose separate and combined vision was directed straight at the palpating heart of the 60s New York underground movement and is only now being fully recognized. The late Jack Smith is today mainly remembered for his epic of "Baudelairean cinema". *Flaming Creatures*, a film which, at the time of its release, was praised by the likes of Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, together with fellow film makers Andy Warhol, Ron Rice and Film Culture magazine editor Jonas Mekas, but branded obscene by the authorities who were scandalized after witnessing the scenes of soft focus genitalia and blurred transsexual bohemian romping. "It was hot enough to burn up the screen," was what one cop who raided a screening of Smith's film would later tell the press.

The star of *Flaming Creatures* was originally intended to have been Marian Zazeela. By the time Smith got round to shooting the film, however, Zazeela had met La Monte Young and her commitment to both her partner and the embryonic Theater Of Eternal Music meant that she would hand over the leading role of Delicious Dolores to Sheila Bick, another member of Smith's Warhol-style Cinemaroc society. Zazeela's main contribution to *Flaming Creatures* was to design the titles for the film, but her early influence as one of Smith's photographic models is seared into the celluloid of his creation. Underground film enthusiast and Village Voice film critic Hoberman's fascinating, meticulously researched account of the making of *Flaming Creatures* and Smith's other, equally extraordinary Cinemaroc productions is an illuminating piece of cinematic scholarship which reveals yet another side of 60s avant-garde New York and ushers in a host of colourful and curious characters who were instrumental in making it happen. Illustrated with stills from the films, and a hitherto unpublished portfolio of revealing photos by Norman Solomon, taken while *Flaming Creatures* was in production, Hoberman's book will remain the last word on Smith's magical masterwork.

At the same time as he was piecing together his *Flaming Creatures* movie, Smith was also experimenting with still photography as a medium to bring his Byzantine New York fantasies to life. His tiny studio would be transformed into a scene from the *Arabian Nights*: he would arrange various members of his coterie to form "plastique" portraits that were both sensual and psychedelic. Smith's main model for these sessions was the young Marian Zazeela who, posing mostly nude or semi-nude, resembles some unattainable siren of mythical legend on the finished contact prints. Smith's other models included Frank Di Giovanni (aka Francis Francine), Joel Markman, Rene Rivera (aka the notorious Mario Montez) and Arnold Rockwood, all of whom would appear in *Flaming Creatures*. Although the authorities screamed pornography, Smith's photographic and cinematic studies were reaching towards an intense level of consciousness rather than mere titillation.

In 1962 Smith and Zazeela put together a selection of these prints, titled them *16 Immortal Photographs* and offered them for publication to Film Culture. The idea was to produce "an abstract visual poem" within the pages of the magazine. When Mekas declined the offer, they approached poet, publisher and film maker Piero Heliczer, who agreed to publish 19 of Smith's original photographs tipped into an artist's book, titled *The Beautiful Book*, with a cover design based on a drawing by Zazeela. 200 copies of the original *Beautiful Book* were handcrafted by Heliczer's dead language press (although due to the technical intricacies involved in its production, fewer were probably produced) and it has since attained a legendary status amongst Jack Smith admirers and collectors of 60s counterculture art. Copies of Heliczer's dead language edition of *The Beautiful Book* rarely come up for sale; a pirate edition with only eight of the 19 photographs present briefly surfaced, but even this inferior version is now scarce. This latest reproduction is a labour of love that goes back to the original negatives and uses an original copy (from La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's archive) as its template. The end result is an astonishingly accurate facsimile that has also been printed in an edition of 200 copies. 140 of them are for sale. Despite the hefty price tag (a bargain compared to the thousands of dollars an original would cost) this wondrous glimpse into the secret fantasy world of Jack Smith is irresistible.

The Beautiful Book's publisher, Piero Heliczer, was another intriguing and, until now, relatively unknown member of the New York underground. His independently run dead language press was a vehicle for publishing his own poetry, as well as important work by such fellow literary visionaries as Angus MacLise, Gregory Corso and Anselm Hollo, who co-edited this collection of Heliczer's writings with poet and former Factory employee Gerard Malanga. *A Purchase In The White Bohemia* gathers together all of his dead language press poetry collections, together with his long poem "The Soap Opera", which was published in London in 1969. Heliczer's poems are liberally sprinkled with dreamlike images that wantonly abandon all accepted poetical conventions (much to the annoyance of such old school writers as Robert Graves) to produce the literary equivalent of a primal blast of feedback from The Velvet Underground.