HARRY SMITH: STRING FIGURES
Organized by Terry Winters
19 September – 3 November 2012
ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

John Cohen is a photographer, filmmaker, and draftsman, as well as a musician and founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers. He is also known for his early research on and collection of Andean textiles.

Philip Ording is assistant professor of mathematics at CUNY’s Medgar Evers College. He received his PhD in 2006 from Columbia University. This summer, he and Helena Kauppila co-curated “Model Theories,” an exhibition at Ford Project, New York, exploring the capacity of artworks to function as models.

Terry Winters is a painter based in New York. His most recent exhibition, “Cricket Music, Tessellation Figures & Notebook,” was held this year at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York.

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Terry Winters
John Cohen
Philip Ording
Rani Singh
Raymond Foye
Andrew Bourne
Jessica Green
Ashley May
John Cohen
Jessica Green
Andrew Bourne
Raymond Foye
Rani Singh
Philip Ording

Featuring exhibitions of both contemporary art and historical and the Orphism Foundation, and the Cabinet Foundation. Cabinet is a non-profit 501(c)3 arts and organization, and this program has been generously supported by the Cabinet Foundation.

ABOUT CABINET

Featuring exhibitions of both contemporary art and historical materials, as well as an eclectic schedule of talks and screenings, Cabinet’s space was inaugurated in the fall of 2008 to extend the magazine’s engagement with art and culture into the public realm. The venue is open Wednesday to Saturday, except October 6th, from 12 to 6 pm, and is wheelchair-accessible. For more information, contact Cabinet at press@cabinetmagazine.org.

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and ten fingers on two hands.

And then what you can do within that is fascinating. I’m leaping around, but I listen to a lot of American fiddle tunes. And there’s a lot of them, thousands. The musicians don’t play from a book, they just make patterns. The same with people who make quilts. Some of them are standard things, and some of them they just invent and put together. Well, that desire to make patterns, and the endless variations on something within a limitation, is really interesting. I find that to be the unifying quality, for fiddle tunes and crocheting and quilts. And maybe string figures, too.

15 June 2012
Putnam Valley, New York

“Harry Smith: String Figures,” an exhibition drawn from the collection of John Cohen and organized by painter Terry Winters, features twenty-two string figures created by Smith (1923–1991), the legendary artist, filmmaker, and ethnomusicologist.

Though perhaps best known to the general public for his groundbreaking research into early twentieth-century American folk music—and the seminal six-album compilation he produced for the Smithsonian Institution in 1952—Smith was also active as an artist and filmmaker in both San Francisco and New York, where he lived from the early 1950s until his death.

A widely curious polymath, Smith was an avid collector of artifacts ranging from Seminole textiles to Ukrainian Easter eggs; he also amassed the world’s largest known collection of paper airplanes, which he later donated to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum. He also was an avid student of string figures. First described in Western anthropological literature by Franz Boas in 1888, these patterns—made by looping or weaving lengths of string into geometric forms or shapes that often evoke familiar objects—have been produced throughout history, both as a secular pastime and as a spiritual practice. When he died, Smith left an unfinished thousand-page manuscript on string figures, along with an extensive collection of figures that he had created. Cabinet’s exhibition brings together a selection of these artifacts, along with a facsimile of portions of Smith’s unpublished manuscript and an accompanying video program.

Also on view will be a limited edition print Strings (for Cabinet) by Terry Winters published on the occasion of the exhibition. Proceeds from sales of the edition will support Cabinet’s activities.
1. Harry Smith “Early Abstractions” (1946–1957); 22 minutes.

No. 1: A Strange Dream (1946).
No. 2: Message from the Sun (1946–1948).
No. 4: Fast Track (1947).
No. 5: Circular Tensions, Homage to Oskar Fischinger (1950).
No. 7: Color Study (1952).
No. 10: Mirror Animations (1957).

2. Harry Smith, Heaven and Earth Magic (ca. 1957–1962); 67 minutes.

3. 1991 Grammy Awards, Chairman’s Merit Award to Harry Smith “Harry Smith Acknowledged” (1991); 2 minutes.


7. The Dust Busters with John Cohen, “My Name is John Smith” (2011); 10 minutes.

8. Alexander Grey, “Jacob’s Ladder String Figure” (2008); 6 minutes.

Harry put them together generates something bigger than the recordings themselves.

Harry was a collector. He made collections of things. He had collections of paper airplanes, collections of these string figures, collections of paper airplane string figures, collections of these string figures, Harry put them together generates something bigger than the recordings themselves.

But let’s go back to the string figures themselves. There are certain limitations that you accept. It wasn’t ever just a straight fact with Harry. He would approach the experts of that field and ask them what the latest thing was. And Harry would do playful things too. He was getting these recordings from record collectors and record collectors of ethnomusicology. So he produced a discography. He was getting these recordings from record collectors and record collectors of ethnomusicology. So he produced a discography.

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STRING FIGURES: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOHN COHEN AND TERRY WINTERS

Terry Winters: You received the string figures as a gift—is that right?

John Cohen: Yes. I went to visit Harry and there was a paper bag with all this material, and he said, “Hey you want these, John?” I thought he gave them to me out of frustration. Maybe he realized he would never get around to the project. To me, the idea that they’re set up on black with white suggests something like animation, but I don’t know how you would animate these. Maybe he realized that also. I think that if you want to animate these figures, you have to show how the fingers move. The piece of cord or string would just start out as a loop, and then you start subdividing it and putting your fingers through to make patterns—that would be interesting to see, but how could he show that?

TW: Maybe that’s his interest, the virtual animations behind each figure. That would connect to his involvement with abstract painting and moviemaking.

JC: These pieces aren’t works of art, or maybe they are—but they are unique objects.

TW: They have an atmosphere or an aura, as well as an order.

JC: I think Harry was very much about that aura. He tried to put his aura on everything that he touched. In other words, it wasn’t enough that the material existed—until he designated an order, they were just facts. He had a huge collection of paper airplanes from schoolyards in New York, and he was setting up a system to analyze them, to give them another meaning.

Many books already exist about string figures, and there are people who know how to make them, and yet those things don’t strike me like these objects. It comes around to the fact that Harry focused on it. What it meant to him becomes just as important as the thing. I don’t know which books he was referencing but his approach is similar to the Folkways Anthology records—those records were available everywhere, but the way

RELATED PROGRAMS

“Patchworks and String Bands”
Thursday, 11 October 2012, 7 pm
A program of film and live music by John Cohen and the Downhill Strugglers. Two short documentaries about banjo player Tommy Jarrell and quilter Mary Jane Holcomb will be followed by a workshop exploring the connecting patterns of ballads, social music, and songs.

“Knots and Unknots”
Thursday, 25 October 2012, 7 pm
A presentation by mathematician Philip Ording on string figures, knot theory, and pictorial topology, followed by discussion between Ording and Terry Winters.
Page from Smith’s unfinished manuscript on string figures. Courtesy Harry Smith Archives.
figures would be geometrical and are consequently named after flowers and stars and things. The techniques developed in these pieces are suitable for such geometric figures, while those of the Eskimos are for realistic animals, birds, and people.

JC: I remember that some of the Eskimo strings act out little dramas, like a house falling down and the man running away.

HS: That occurs everywhere. The reason that there is a lot of drama in the ones from the Eskimos is that it was a carefully made collection. Anywhere that a careful collection is made—which would take a number of years to do in any place—there would always be moving figures. The other oddity is that the string is always the same length, no matter where it is, and that only one person does the string figures. Something similar to the string figure, but not in any way connected, is the cat’s cradle, which is done all over Europe and Asia. The cat’s cradle is a game, while the string figures are essentially pictures of something. They do have many other uses in the cultures concerned. My interest in them was merely as something that a lot of people did who are usually lumped together as being primitive. The distribution of anything else isn’t the same—the bow and arrow, pottery, basketry, or clothing—any kind of conceptions. As far as I know, the string figures are the only universal thing other than singing. But singing may exist universally for the same reason: that a lot of experiences are lumped together as songs which probably aren’t. Like tonal languages, as in Yoruba, lots of things that were identified as songs turned out to be poetry that is at a certain pitch. Or a Seneca book I have here, which is spoken, but because it’s transcribed from a tape recorder, it is possible to indicate what tone each word is sounded on. Because of this possibility of transcriptions from tape recordings it becomes very difficult to determine where speech ended and singing began. It is an artifact of the technical productions of people’s vocal chords that classifies certain things as songs, and it may be the same way with string figures. They may have derived from many different sources.

John Cohen: An involvement of yours which we haven’t yet discussed is the string games.

Harry Smith: Every few years I get interested in string games, but I don’t have all the apparatus for doing it.

Interview by John Cohen

EXCERPT FROM “A RARE INTERVIEW WITH HARRY SMITH”