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When a Long Eclipse Yields to Light

By MARTIN FILLER

WHEN the Los Angeles-born artist Alexis Smith was 17 and still called Patti Anne Smith, she rechristened herself after a 1940's Hollywood star in a burst of pop adulation. Taking on the name of an actress was the younger Ms. Smith's first step in forging an independent identity, one that has remained focused despite her ups and downs in the last decade.

Ms. Smith is now 51, and her current show of mixed-media collages of found objects, "An Embarrassment of Riches," is on view at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, at 730 Fifth Avenue, through Saturday. Remarkably, this is her first one-person New York exhibition since her retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art 10 years ago.

The Whitney survey received rave reviews, but rather than cementing Ms. Smith's stature as a leading member of her generation, the show marked the beginning of an extended eclipse, at least as far as the New York art world was concerned. In rapid succession, the curator of her Whitney show, Richard Armstrong, left the museum and deprived her of an institutional advocate in New York, the center of the international art scene.

Her New York dealer, Josh Baer, went out of business after giving her only one show, confounding her earlier move from Holly Solomon, who hadn't mounted a solo exhibition for Ms. Smith since 1981. (Ms. Smith is continuing her longtime relationship with the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles.) And for the last decade, Ms. Smith has been concentrating on a series of large-scale, site-specific installation projects, which have kept her from producing smaller, portable works that could be displayed and sold in galleries.

To be sure, inflated artistic reputations of the 1980's were brought down to size in the 90's. Yet the cautionary case of Alexis Smith illuminates how events can conspire to rob even seemingly well-established figures not only of critical attention but also of public exposure. And it's not as if the issues that Ms. Smith has addressed in her work — gender and sexuality, self and celebrity, myth and mass media, consumerism and its discontents — are out of step with concerns shared by other esteemed artists.

When Ms. Smith came to New York from her home in Los Angeles three weeks ago for the opening of her long-awaited show, she seemed notably philosophical about what a more egotistical or insecure person might view as a Judy Garland-like comeback. "It's great to have a home base in the city again," she said as she relaxed at her new gallery the day after her vernissage. "I may be underexposed by New York standards, but I don't think it's been such a terrible thing for me. My retrospective summed up 20 years of work, and it had a weird sort of finality. Psychologically, you need to find new things to say. And that's not something you can achieve in five minutes.

"Once you don't have a New York show for a long time, it's harder to get one," Ms. Smith continued. "I'm not the kind of person who goes out and hustles. I'm a great believer in waiting for the right thing to turn up. But it's not like I didn't have anything to do."

During her New York dry spell she completed vast terrazzo floors for a sports arena at Ohio State University in Columbus and the Los Angeles Convention Center, a slate-and-concrete walkway at the La Jolla branch of the University of California, San Diego, and a mixed-media mural in the restaurant of the Getty Center in Los Angeles, among other projects.

Those commissions did wonders for her self-confidence at a time of diminished press coverage and market demand. "The tolerance for stress and aggravation that

Alexis Smith, out of New York's sightline for 10 years, offers a solo show of found objects.

you need to do public art changed me," she said. "When you're a woman working on big construction jobs, you really get pushed and either learn to push back or you don't survive."

Like her contemporaries Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, Ms. Smith frequently uses epigrammatic texts in her work. In her new show, the high-low sources range from Emerson ("Things are in the saddle and ride mankind") to Diana Vreeland ("What sells is hope") to Roman Polanski ("Pleasure is a carrot and a stick"). A piece titled "Cachet" juxtaposes a picture of an art gallery from an old issue of *Réalités* with a newspaper quotation in which a nouveau riche consumer laments, "We want to buy the right stuff, but we don't necessarily know what it is."

Expanding on the contemporary cult of materialism, several of Ms. Smith's recent efforts incorporate or simulate covers of *Condé Nast* magazines, including *Gourmet* and a white-wicker-framed, rose-chintz-splashed *House & Garden*. ("Every bird finds its own nest charming.") And luxury logos, like the circled initial of *Hermès*, recur as ironic signifiers of status, as does a thrift-shop amateur still life, which Ms. Smith has brazenly emblazoned with a big, bogus Picasso signature.

Unlike her more politically minded con-

what sells is hope.





Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Alexis Smith at the Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art gallery last month. Left, "Forbidden Fruit," a collage made this year.

temporaries, however, Ms. Smith pursues no social agenda, and her slyly subversive approach has more in common with the contradictions of Pop Art, which simultaneously satirized and glamorized commercial imagery. As she accurately observed of her pieces, which are rich with multiple meanings, "You never know where they're coming down on an issue."

That ambiguity was clear as Ms. Smith stood in front of her collage "Vanity Fair," a photograph of women's legs in seductive high-heels embellished with 1940's fashion jewelry. Two crocheted doilies and a Walt Disney Snow White cookbook overlay the photograph, which is bordered by a ruffled white frame. "When I read in a book of proverbs, 'Every woman would rather be beautiful than good,'" she recalled, "I said to myself, 'Oh, *absolutely!*'"

Ms. Smith's attitudes toward possessions and the arc of her career have evolved since her marriage in 1990 to Scott Grieger, an artist and teacher. "For 20 years I lived in my studio with a hot plate," she said. "Now we have a house and a more traditional domesticity, and some of the ideas in these pieces come from the increased responsibility of owning things and maintaining your life. I started realizing that everybody I knew, no matter how rich or famous, was only comparing themselves with people better off than they were, not with all the people they were better off than. You could go all the way up to the point where only 12 people were better than you, and those 12 people were jealous of each other. Dissatisfaction is just what we do today.

"When you're an artist for a really long time," she continued, "it pays to take the long view. You can't always be relevant or cutting edge. It's a circular thing, where you come in and out of favor depending on what people are thinking and what they are sick of.

"Which artists will be considered seminal 50 or 100 years from now? If you want to be in the running, it pays to make some things that get collected and are available for reconsideration. But beyond that you gradually realize that it pays to be ready on the up cycle and have something to do on the down cycle." □