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## EXHIBITIONS

### WATCHING THE MYTH UNFOLD

Los Angeles / **Erika Suderburg**

Alexis Smith's *On the Road* uses Jack Kerouac's "holy text" to snip off an elaborate series of works that contain the myth and the critique of Americans "On the Road." An entire generation of travelers who caught the image and tried to live it populate Smith's photoconstructions in absentia, together with their chrome car parts, rusted barn signs, fuel indicators, yellowed maps and broken souvenirs. Kerouac set himself up as a drifter and far-seeing observer when he asked a woman on a Michigan bus what she does on a slow summer night. Her answer, "I watch cars," illuminates a corner of Smith's textual game. Smith takes the linear progression of the road and explodes each resting place into souvenir fragments of its "moment." There are the car watchers who are doomed to stay (along Kerouac's route) and there are the bus takers who will move along with traffic, longing after the cars below the elevated window. In this current exhibition at Margo Leavin Gallery, Smith seems to belong in both categories.

The installation that spawned the show's main piece, *On the Road* (1988), was originally eight large billboard fragments, framed and hung at the bottom of a wall-sized graphic depicting the California myth: miles of perfect orange groves, purple hills and endless cultivated soil. This fabricated California scene was traversed by a twisted road that ended in a snake's head. The first panel of the piece, *the road was straight as an arrow* holds a billboard showing a barn; to this is affixed a rusted Royal Crown Cola thermometer. Panel three, *I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it*, displays a torso in a jeans jacket with pocket studs.

Panel five, "*I suddenly saw the whole country as an oyster for us to open, and the pearl was there, the pearl was there,*" depicts a billboard ocean with a license plate set adrift. Finally in panel eight, *somewhere along the line there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line, the pearl would be handed to me*, the



Alexis Smith, *Route 66*, 1988, mixed-media collage, 31-1/4" x 21" x 2-1/4", at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

text overlays the shoulder of a man entering a beer-ad door, gripping "a man's beer," entering a man's universe. Kerouac's vision is a man's world, and Smith's travelers signal maleness: studded jackets, lumberjack shirts—the everyman face in the advertisement, billboard cowboys and hard-drinking beats—"real men" fondly

constructed. Panel seven, a bucolic farm-scene print entitled *peace and contentment*, has a real car-door handle attached and bears the superimposed inscription "I looked greedily out the window."

*On The Road* celebrates the myth but, at the same time, drills small holes into it. The billboard panels hold the American myth we've been sold; Kerouac and his quest suggested a new vision of America. Both fabricate something comforting. Smith stands somewhere in between the two. By choosing advertisements to underscore the idea of the man on the road, by attaching objects that allude to a larger reality (car-door handles, clip-on visors, dashboard Jesuses), Smith brings in just enough of the road's tangible souvenirs to suggest the entire experience. The work is comfortably nostalgic, but with an edge that is aware of the cult status of fifties rebels. *Jailbait* (1988), uses a blown-up film still of Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock* with a denim ensemble, his trademark face obscured by that of a safer idol, Eddie Fisher. Kerouac on the "soundtrack" (text below) pants, "Oh man she was only 15, wearing jeans and waiting for someone to pick her up." A working clock is installed, timing the waiting girl. Smith focuses on the road's clichés: the denim, the boys who need a girl on the road (but only until the next town), the souvenir landscapes that appear plastic and, in Smith's archaeological dig, the forks and spoons from the diners visited along Route 66.

In her collector spirit Smith bears a certain resemblance to Kurt Schwitters, who called himself an "urban archaeologist" and traveled his city street with portfolios labeled by color. The blue scraps in one,

the gold in another, bits of painted wood in a third. One can envision him returning home and filing away these bits of the city in drawers labeled: "night blue," "cigarette blue," "burnt wood" and "tarnished silver." Smith's drawers might be labeled: "bits of dashboard trash," "faux wood paneling," "car ads/Life magazine" and "objects found under the floor mat of a 57 Chevy." *Mercury* (1987), a two-panel piece, is framed in tuck-and-roll upholstery. Panel one finds James Dean in a motel room gazing heavenward (the rapture of the road?), a door key, a South Dakota Badlands napkin and a calendar for Virginia Trumbull's auto-truck-fire insurance company pinned to his photograph with the text: "and only because he had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it and because there was nowhere to go but everywhere." In panel two, Dean's image is flipped, an unidentified sailor's portrait obscuring his face, and a plaque reading "God bless this mobile home" pinned to the image. The caption of the photograph reads ". . . and besides he knew the road would get more interesting, especially ahead, always ahead."

Smith has always been fascinated by narrative evocations of Western textures and myths, and her move from Raymond Chandler to Kerouac makes sense. Her version of *On the Road* originally rested on a huge blowup of an orange-crate label, a blowup of a fabricated paradise. Now her paradise is strewn with the fragments that flutter down to earth after the myth has been pulled apart and flung back upon itself. Kerouac closes *On the Road* by "dreaming the immensity" of the road. Smith places signposts alongside it and points to its failures and its hopes. □