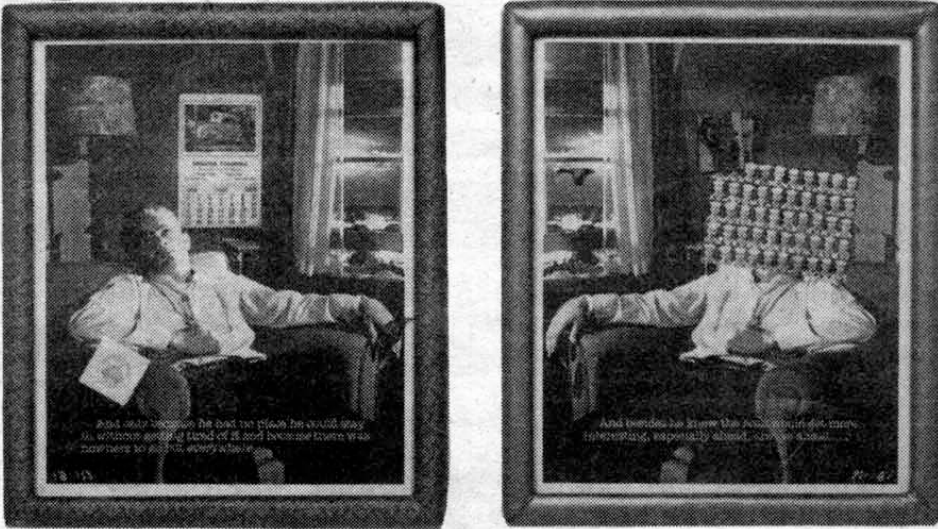


Weisman, Benjamin. "Pick of the Week." *LA Weekly*, 22-28 April 1988, p. 123.

ART

PICK OF THE WEEK



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Mercury, 1987.

Alexis Smith, one of the great visual artists of American literature, read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, collected debris of the period as if art-directing the novel, and hung it all together inside a variety of eccentrically appropriate frames. There's the A-word again, used here as an adjective but, as a verb, so beloved by the art world of late: to appropriate. At a time when appropriation is as common as respiration, Alexis Smith — who for the past decade and a half has been quoting up a storm, entirely without any pretentious reliance on French mumbo jumbo — continues to cite and quote with her customary poetic grace and sense of responsibility to the story. She is interested in actual experience, not mere simulation, and even in emotional response. She has worked off Cocteau, Gershwin, Chandler, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Wilder, Nathanael West. Her leaning, clearly, is toward American fiction writers, male, rough-trade, kinda romantic, dead. But she's also dealt with a parade of Janes: Austen, Bowles, Mansfield, Russell, Calamity, Dick &. Smith's work is haunted by nostalgia, taking you back, making you stop and reconsider the supposedly outmoded writing. Here, she reawakens Kerouac's words with her compiled images (newspaper clippings referring to road trips and Pontiacs superimposed with religious icons and apparitions of James Dean). Over the years her work has moved from minimal to maximal, from ephemeral delicacy to dense visual and referential complexity. The phrases Smith illumines, irrespective of their sources, have an uncanny similarity to one another, a sharpness of sound and meaning. She seems to make the words resonate with ironic tenderness, pain and humor; they become roomfuls of big elusive feelings, stylized yet truthful. Smith's "On the Road" show argues for what is valuable and enchanting, not just about the book, but — as Kerouac did — about being alive. At Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 Robertson Blvd., W. Hlywd.; thru April 23. (213) 273-0603.

—Benjamin Weissman