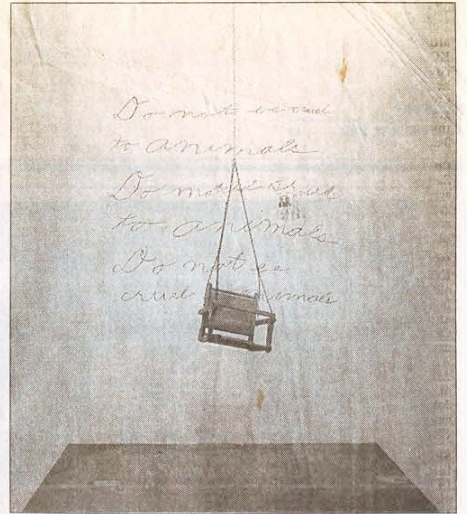


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DAVID FAMILJAN

Writer Amy Gerstler and artist Alexis Smith transform Santa Monica Museum of Art gallery into a 3-D collage evocative of elementary school.

ART REVIEW

'Past Lives' Explores the Terrors and Perils of Childhood

By KRISTINE MCKENNA

Ghosts have taken over the Santa Monica Museum of Art with the installation of "Past Lives," a mixed-media collaboration on view through Dec. 31 by writer Amy Gerstler and artist Alexis Smith.

Inspired by Smith's collection of children's chairs, this rather painful piece is rooted in the idea that objects become freighted with the essence of the people who use them; past lives live on in the chairs Smith has accumulated over the years, and ghosts rise from their battered little seats.

This is the first collaboration by Gerstler and Smith and the pairing is a perfect match, as their sensibilities are remarkably similar. There's something dainty and prim yet darkly disturbed about the work by both these women.

Converting a scavenger's instinct into an aesthetic, Smith first made a name for herself in the early '70s with collages that combined toys and small objects with passages from literary works. In the tradition of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, Gerstler is a poet and writer whose central motifs have been saints, martyrdom, physical and emotional illness, and the pleasures and aggressive release of masochism. There's something tremulously fragile, cloistered and sealed off about Smith and Gerstler's previous work, and their interests and creative approaches

dovetail neatly in this haunting work.

The two artists have elaborated their theme of the animated object by converting the main gallery into a three-dimensional collage evocative of an elementary school classroom. The alphabet is stenciled across the top of one wall, and a schoolroom blackboard is painted on another. Cardboard clocks of the sort used to teach children to tell time adorn another wall, while various souvenirs of youth—graduation certificates, homework and schoolbooks—enhance the mood further.

Central to the piece are Smith's oddly heartbreaking little chairs—each unique and arranged in loosely symmetrical rows—and Gerstler's text, which is essentially a litany of facts of the sort one might hear about a vaguely remembered schoolmate. "He lost his hand in a boating accident"; "She lived out her days in an iron lung"; "She died in a fire in the prison infirmary." Appearing at a glance like a cheerful little schoolroom, "Past Lives" is in fact a brooding meditation on the idealized fantasy of childhood and the brutality that stains the early years of many children.

Various terrors and perils of childhood come up for scrutiny as one moves through the exhibition. We see a large photograph of children crouched under their desks during an air raid drill (anyone who participated in this civil defense drill as a child will no

doubt testify that it was a deeply frightening experience), and a large, Dick & Jane-style illustration of a child falling over a basket of leaves while exclaiming "oh, oh, oh." A plexiglass box encases five

teeth in an ornate jewel box positioned on a satin pillow draped with a ribbon bearing the words "Her teeth were knocked out by her tormentors." The tableau is completed by a class photo of a

little boy smiling a savage, toothy grin. The chilling undercurrent of cruelty and fear reaches a crescendo in a small, separate gallery that shivers with the sinister vibe of a torture chamber. A dramatically lit chair from a weathered swing set is suspended from the ceiling by rusting chains, while the words "Do not be cruel to animals" are stenciled on the rear wall. The creepy hush that envelops cemeteries and crime scenes hangs like a poisoned fog over this room—over the entire exhibition, in fact. Though the artists never spell it out explicitly, one comes away from "Past Lives" having clearly gotten their message: Life is fraught with danger, and never more so than during the years when one is stumbling away from the cradle.