

Miles, Christopher. Review. *Artforum* (January 2000), p. 118.

ALEXIS SMITH

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

"Words to Live By," the title of Alexis Smith's recent exhibition, is an apt designation for the texts adorning the fourteen collages, all from 1999, in the show. In an eponymous work that appears to be an airbrushed painting of Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra, Smith has affixed a lavender sleeping mask and the dust jacket from Amy Vanderbilt's *Everyday Etiquette*, all packaged in a gilded frame, behind glass painted with the words "Never fear being vulgar, just boring." *Words to Live By* exemplified the sense of humor running through the show (Smith's first solo gallery effort in five years), seemingly capable of both critiquing and enjoying the culture from which it gathers raw fuel. While previously Smith has seemed to rely on the nostalgia that comes with the flea-market finds that make up most of her material, in her new work she eschews trips to a kooky yesteryear in favor of dissolving the comfort of distance between then and now.

Exploring the connections between image, consumption, culture, taste, and vanity, the work in this exhibition included admonitions, advice, and reminders of life's comedy. *Mirage* layers an image of an ice-cream cone, a packet of cactus seed, and a paint chip stamped with the color name "Las Vegas" on top of a desert landscape complete with circling buzzards; the whole assemblage bears the legend "What sells is hope." Is this an acknowledgment of what makes us tick? Advice for getting ahead? A more strategic suggestion comes in the words "Give 'em what they never knew they wanted," illustrated by an amalgam of a black-velvet Elvis painting, a Christmas stocking, an ad for a nose-hair clipper, and a sign reading "PRICED TO SELL."

Gamine provides a more explicit warning, pairing the photograph of a dolled-up, passé-looking woman with a tiny Day of the Dead diorama of a skeleton staring into a vanity mirror, both framed behind glass inscribed with the words "The greatest vulgarity is any imitation of youth." Smith shows her cleverness by taking a 1947 *Vogue* cover featuring a blurry photograph of a woman and altering the title to read "Vague," and she gets disturbingly cryptic with *No Wonder*, which combines advertisement photos of buttered Wonder dinner rolls with romanticized images of young womanhood and the words "PEOPLE WHO EAT WHITE BREAD/HAVE NO DREAMS."

To relish Smith's work requires a certain letting-go of seriousness and perhaps even of good taste. The artist seems to grant her viewers permission to do so in a piece entitled *Big Splash*, which includes images of a vintage surfboard and a Rolling Stones tongue logo in front of a mural-size enlargement of a Japanese print depicting a cresting wave, emblazoned with the assertion, "We all need a splash of bad taste . . . No taste is what I'm against." If viewers find all this slightly confusing, Smith offers some consolation (and perhaps a light mix of self-advertising and self-effacement) with *Je ne sais quoi*, which presents a 1958 magazine-cover image of an elegantly dressed young woman standing before a wall hung salon-style with modernist paintings, to which Smith has added the words: "We want to buy the stuff, but we don't necessarily know what it is."



Alexis Smith, *Words to Live By*, 1999, mixed-media collage, 32½ x 34½ x 2½".