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ART PICKS OF THE WEEK



Smith's *Dr. No*, 2003

ALEXIS SMITH, MARTHA ALF

Given the interesting times we live in, the volume of politically engaged art has trebled of late. It's a welcome trend when the work is sufficiently pointed and caustic. But cholera can strangle even the most eloquent of protests, and it is fascinating to watch a veteran commentator like Alexis Smith struggle to maintain her usual finesse. That is to say, Smith's current body of collages, as formally terse and materially economical as ever, brims not just with her characteristic irony, but with a fear and a fury that can freight rather than propel the artworks. We can forgive Smith her rhetorical clunkers, however, because more often these compound images bring us back to the headlines — and the small print — with properly laconic urgency. When she substitutes an American flag for the brick a Palestinian brandishes at an Israeli tank,

or replaces with an action hero doll's bionic limb the arm Saddam Hussein extends to Reagan-administration emissary Donald Rumsfeld, or places the round Target store symbol against a bedroom set in a conjuration of homeland-security paranoia, Smith is reminding us that, in large part, our current troubles are our own chickens coming home to roost. She's not laying blame so much as cautioning — even militating — against further shortsighted policy, reminding us from an artist's unique vantage that, in foreign affairs especially, image *is* meaning.

Given the high voltage of current events, even artists as resolutely nonpolitical as Martha Alf can veer onto a new course. Normally a painter of the world's sparest, quietest still lifes — a single pear or toilet-paper roll functioning as an everyday mandala — Alf has now turned to photography to create a far denser, if no less intimate, imagery. It's still a tabletop universe, but is now melodramatically colored and lit, and is as likely as not to be crowded with stuff — perfume bottles, lustrous bowls, flower-bearing vases, ornate tchotchkes of all kinds. The brittleness of the objects, or their mortality, makes a memento mori of each arrangement. Particular groupings recur in several photos, their elements shifted around as if city planners were playing chess with them. This relatively radical shift in Alf's approach, it is not surprising to hear, was occasioned by the recent, cataclysmic reorder of New York City's skyline.

Alexis Smith at Margo Leavin, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., W. Hlywd.; thru Jan. 3. (310) 273-0603. Martha Alf at Newspace, 5241 Melrose Ave.; thru Jan. 10. (323) 469-9353.

—Peter Frank