

Kurcfeld, Michael. "The Artist As Sleuth." *LA Weekly*, 27 January-2 February 1989, p. 75, 89.

## QUINTESSENTIAL ANGELENOS

THE ARTIST  
AS SLEUTH

MICHAEL KURCFELD



ALEXIS SMITH

**A**lexis Smith is a woman with a past. In fact, her art is plastered with decals of business trips down memory lane. But for Smith, nostalgia isn't the cheap perfume of the mind. It's a means of nabbing that fugitive, fish-in-white-water experience of living in the most fickle, transient culture in history. Not that her trademark text-image-and-object collages (and super-graphic-scale, zoomed-up installations) are exclusively about culture. But the tougher personal mythology that's ciphered into them is subtly entangled with the hard-sell patois of the 20th century, of the '50s of Smith's childhood, and of the Los Angeles of most of her life. Getting pure

bio out of the brew is like unbraiding DNA. However, getting pure L.A. is very much part of the game.

Collage, Smith will be the first to admit, has been around at least since Picasso stuck chair-cane-printed olecloth to one of his still-lives. And it's been around L.A., along with its cousin assemblages, at least since the glory days of Ferus Gallery (and resident junkmeisters like George Herms and Ed Kienholz). What makes Smith's manufacture so emblematic of L.A. lately is its Pop-flavored blend of smartass irony and obsolescent romance. It's a thirtysomething blend, full of cues best grabbed by fellow children of paradise, TV-bred brats raised not on media so much as on attitudes

about media.

Like camp. Twenty-five years ago, Susan Sontag rapped on camp ("It is a love of the unnatural . . . the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not . . .") and nailed down a name for the way a generation now looks at the world: in quotation marks, with a passion for impersonating the passionate. Culture in America, of which L.A. has become ground zero, continues to dissolve into a blur of recombinant stylizations. We are immersed in re-hash, travesty and disposable ruin. But for Smith, yesterday's *tchotchkes* are more than dumb puzzle parts. When shuffled just so, they have the power of talismans. While camp converts the sentimentally serious into the frivolous, Alexis Smith transmutes the frivolous into art.

Into Smith's conceptual soup is tossed the tackier souvenirs of recent Zeitgeist: vintage postcards and magazine ads, weathered signage, bits of kitsch-infected art, chamber-of-commerce doggerel, film noir posters, garage-sale bric-a-brac, auto parts, cheesecake calendars, ransacked textbooks, Freud-enriched plastic toys — and ad-crisp (often typeset) lines of just plain words. Smith has a transcendent knack for finding the perfect captions for her image sandwiches. They're usually gnomish, singsong fragments rich in lingo and mined from favorite authors: Kerouac, Borges, Whitman, and the L.A. trinity of Chandler, West and Didion.

"The piece is somewhere between the word and the image," says Smith. "Somehow, when you take them both in, they kind of explode together on some level. The work isn't the object; the work is really in your head." In fact, the pleasure of Smith's art lies in its user-friendly challenge to decipher it in non-formalist terms. To unlock the riddle of each piece, one must render the colliding clichés and odd-ball salvage into some private wisdom, not always intended.

Which is not to discount the artist's own songs of experience. In a show at Margo Leavin Gallery a few years back — titled "Jane" — 30 collages probed the evolution of female stereotypes via a litany of generic janes: Jane Doe, Dick and Jane, Jayne Mansfield, Jane Eyre, Calamity Jane, et al.

Aside from incidentally supplying an inspired twist to feminist rhetoric, the series is a classic example of Smith's hit-and-run anthropological spadework on the American psyche. And that, as usual, wasn't all. "I started drawing parallels," she said in an interview with the *Herald Examiner* at the time, "between the lives of these women who had a tough time. I was at a point in my life where I could see that you had these aspirations, and then you wake up one morning and realize that your life isn't going to work out quite the way you imagined. To connect that experience with the lives of these prototypical fantasy women we all grew up with turned out to be a good combination, I think."

It was also a characteristically witty one. In *Me Tarzan, You Jane*, Smith affixed a pamphlet on Evolution vs. Creation. "There's one thing I like about my work — it's not pedantic. After a million years of teaching, I think the way you get into people's creativity is by letting them play . . . I use humor because a little bit of sugar helps the medicine go down." It's humor home-grown in Southern California, although not in typical fashion. Smith, 39, actually grew up on the grounds of a mental institution — Metropolitan State Hospital in Norwalk — because her father was a psychiatrist/superintendent there.

This early exposure to skewed perceptions — and the relativity of reality — may have taught her the first tricks of deconstruction. Now she routinely takes decades apart to see what makes them tick. "There are very few places that have as radically changing sets of events as we have here, where you can see the difference between 1980 and 1970. There's a huge difference, not only in terms of style, but in terms of what people think and the kind of art that's produced. It's very tempting to play around with that. The thing that makes L.A. unique is . . . it continues to be supplanted on an ongoing basis. You can see what was 1920, 1930, 1950. They exist as independent styles and architectural vignettes as you drive along the boulevard. The enormous differences in patterns . . . are quickly manifest in the popular culture. We produce all of these clashing images of what we think."

Naturally, local illusionism is part of Smith's palette. She's currently reading Joseph Campbell, and understands the power of movie-star masks. "Movie stars become both gods and embodiments of cultural characters. It's like Greek mythology. And movies are the closest thing we have to dreams. You sit in a darkened room and share a dream with other people — rather, culturally derived, dreamlike experiences."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 89

## SMITH

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 75

In person, Smith is strong-willed, highly opinionated and charmingly wry. It's clear that she's well informed and holds unshakeable political views. But these rarely appear overtly in her work. "Living and art are different. You can't live and not be political. I am a feminist . . . I had a career and didn't get married. I deal with architects, and I'm not intimidated by scale and by options not open to women in the past. But my work is something different. It's about stories . . . I think that when you take a political position [in art], you confine yourself to a very temporal position. But when you just say, 'This is the way it was,' you contain both its positive and negative qualities, and you sort of embalm it with both. Then people in the present and the future can draw their own conclusions."

After 20 years of artmaking, Smith's reputation is solid enough to earn her a com-

**F**or Alexis Smith, yesterday's *tchotchkes* are more than dumb puzzle parts. When shuffled just so, they have the power of talismans.

fortable life. She has several long-range architectural projects in the works, including a large terrazzo floor for the L.A. Convention Center expansion, and she is relatively sanguine about the art world. "While there's a danger of corruption at the level of media hype and investment that affects the *Vanity Fair* crowd, there's another level of people who are intellectual, devoted and hard-working — professionals in the business of serious art. We know who those people are." Still, she finds the free-market arithmetic a bit inscrutable. "Assuming we can't really tell who the seminal artists are within five or 10 years of the making of the artwork, the difference between two reasonably well-thought-of artists — one worth \$10,000 and the other \$200,000 — strikes me as a market-based inequity that would be very hard to justify to an alien from another planet." How to keep it straight? "It's better to be underrated than overrated. You sleep better." ■