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## ALEXIS SMITH: LOST IN AMERICA



### *An Artist Maps Out the High-Speed Dreams and Yearnings of Our Times*

If she were so inclined, Alexis Smith could hang a shingle outside the frosted-glass storefront of her studio on Lincoln Boulevard in Venice. Perhaps it would read "Archaeologist of the American Dream," for that's been the thrust of much of her recent work. Consider her show at the Margo

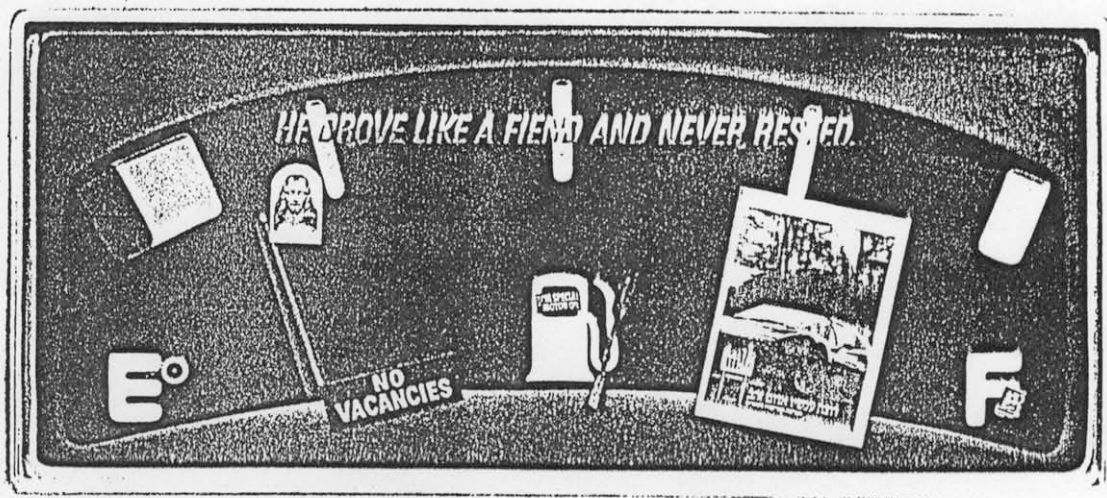
Leavin Gallery this spring. Entitled "Eldorado (On the Road Part II)," it was Smith's second round of multi-

media ruminations on Jack Kerouac's questing, westward-bound fifties classic. As in earlier works based on themes and texts wrested from the first half of this century, Smith has juxtaposed snippets from the Kerouac book and artifacts of our castaway culture. In the wry collaged tableau *Blue Denim*, for instance, the sentence "She was only fifteen and wearing jeans and waiting for

someone to pick her up" was superimposed on vintage posters from two torrid teen movies. So were the silk-screened outline of a 1957 Chevy, a pair of baby's two-tone saddle shoes, some rusted and entwined jumper cables, a white plastic AM radio, the cover of the paperback *High School Confidential*, and a single, unfastened dress snap. The piece oozed associations of being young and wild and reckless in a more innocent America.

For more than twenty years now, Smith has played on such material allusions, orchestrating everyday relics—the kind that are at best half-glimpsed by most of us—into evocative narrative medleys that can pack the bittersweet punch of Proust's madeleine. With a résumé whose roster

**Above:** Alexis Smith combines wry humor with road-dusty romance in her visions of America. **Below:** In *Running on Empty*, 1988, scattered icons from a marathon car trip suggest a state of mind and a sweep of history—from dirt lanes and roadsters to today's turbo-charged highways.

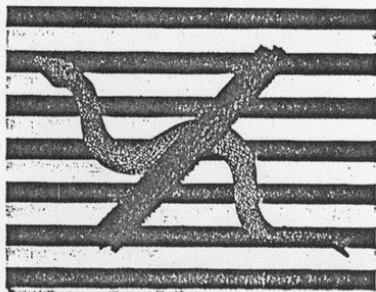


Douglas M. Priner Studio, courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery/Bass Kenton

## Sight Specific

of exhibitions, commissions, reviews, and teaching sprints (most recently at UCLA) stretches to seventeen pages, Smith is one of the small fistful of California artists with national clout. Critics have seen traces of surrealism and dada in her oeuvre—it has even been labeled a type of “synaptic cubism.” She also fits into the strain of narrative, humorous California conceptual art, although her work has a complex emotional edge to it. “I have a particular interest,” Smith says, “in the underlying mythological, metaphorical base of culture—in all the things we take for granted and project out to our culture and its imagery.”

Given the mostly found materials of her art, Smith’s studio seems surprisingly uncluttered, if not exactly spare. The telling cultural detritus she has collected is stashed away—according to size—in shoe boxes, in clear plastic drawers, in three gunmetal cabinets, in cardboard crates stacked under tables or countertops. Smith is not one of those people who knew she wanted to be an artist since the age of five. But even as a child, she acknowledges, she was doing a less sophisticated version of what she does now: always cutting things out, pasting them together, coming up with plays and grandiose schemes. She grew up in Los Angeles, the daughter of a doctor two generations older than she (her mother died when she was eleven),



The Union Jack, a ragged tire tread, and the spirit of Kerouac’s *On the Road* come together in *Jack*, 1990, a mixed-media collage from Smith’s *Eldorado* series.

who regaled her with first-person tales of the Utah frontier, Prohibition, and the depression. “Through his life story,” she says, “he told me the story of the century.” He also lent her a sense of history that has unconsciously pervaded her work. “I guess I’ve kind of worked my way up from 1900 to the present,” she says.

Smith traces her decision to become an artist to her enrollment at the University of California at Irvine during a very free and open-ended time in the sixties. She entered college with the vague ambition of becoming a French teacher, but before long, an art-major friend familiar with the one-of-a-kind books and collages Smith made as gifts steered her toward art courses. Smith felt she had little aptitude as a painter (and to this day, some of her painted backdrops are done in collaboration with others), but studying under artists such as Ed Moses, Vija Celmins, and especially Robert Irwin, her ideas changed about what art is and what an artist does. “It’s hard to describe,” she says, “but he [Irwin] had an idea that art was an interactive perceptual process—that the artist causes other people to see things they wouldn’t see otherwise.”

What Smith will turn her eye—and ours—on next remains to be seen. She feels she may be through exploring American culture; she’s finding she’s drawn to more universal cultural themes. Still, her future steps she will entrust to Kismet. “That’s one of my operative principles, one of the things I trust,” she explains. “It’s how I find things. I’ve realized belatedly that not only can I use it in working but I can use it in anything—I can let it deposit people and events and projects at my doorstep. I always accept the authority of what happens over what I expect to happen.”

—LISBET NILSON

*Alexis Smith is represented by the Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Boulevard, West Hollywood; 213-273-0603.*