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# GALLERIES

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## ART REVIEWS

By David Pagel

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**Recycling:** In a new batch of collages at Margo Leavin Gallery, Alexis Smith continues to recycle clichés and stereotypes with the wit, whimsy and wisdom that have characterized her art for the past two decades. Her generously open-ended, mini-narratives are some of the most accessible and resonant being made today. They use common, modest materials to find, in worn-out forms, unexpected poignancy and charm.

"Soap" efficiently maps the territory in which Smith's pun-filled art operates. This simple piece consists of a typewritten letter from one sister to another concerning their sick mother, a newspaper summary of an action-packed soap opera, and a wrapper from a name-brand bar of soap.

Smith juxtaposes these elements not to mock the family tragedy, nor to ridicule the silliness of daytime TV, but to show that what gives any art its power are the associations its viewers bring to it.

In her radically democratic approach to meaning, each viewer's recollections and expectations play a pivotal, central role. Smith's collages are really abstract, one-act story-boards that leave plenty of room for any viewer to mobilize their own fantasies, improvising and ad-libbing as they please.

"Cryptic Message" goes even further, suggesting that our identities are not private, unfathomable entities, but ad hoc patchworks temporarily pieced together from common cultural leftovers. What initially looks like two neat rows of trinkets—including a sea horse, a matchbook and a jigsaw-puzzle piece—actually spells out Smith's name.

Her inviting works begin with the knowledge that stereotypes are only empty abstractions until we bend and manipulate their formulas, reinventing ourselves as we go along.

■ *Alexis Smith at Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through April 17. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*