

Pagel, David. "Object Lessons From the Smaller World of Smith." *Los Angeles Times*, 20 October 1999, p. F30.

## Object Lessons From the Smaller World of Smith

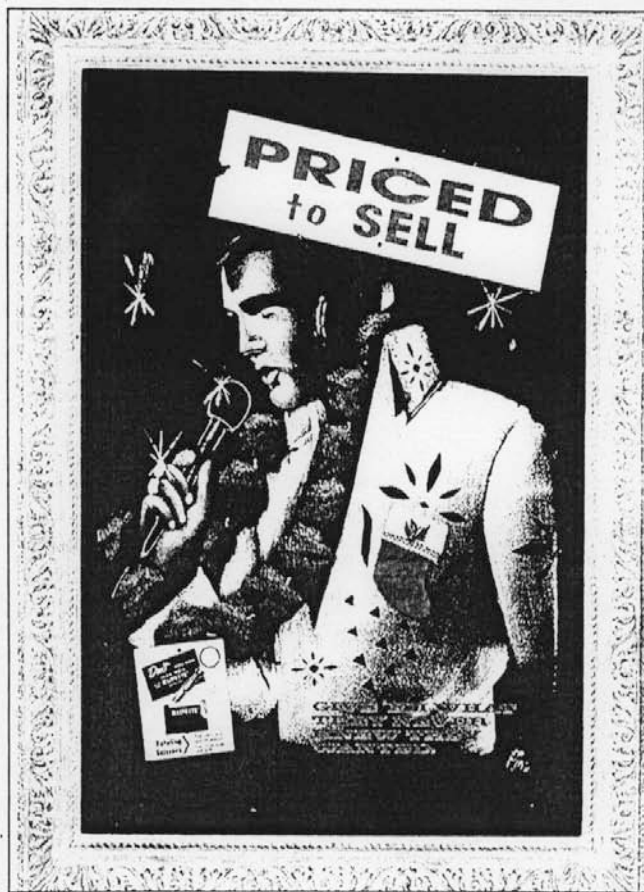
### Art Reviews

By DAVID PAGEL  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**T**itled "Words to Live By," Alexis Smith's first solo show in nearly five years puts individuals before institutions. Although the veteran Los Angeles-based Conceptual Artist has recently completed large public projects for the Getty Center's restaurant and Ohio State University's sports arena, she has not abandoned art's one-on-one intimacy in favor of the faceless authority of institutional sponsorship.

At Margo Leavin Gallery, 13 modestly scaled collages and a mural-size picture demonstrate that it is infinitely more interesting to be a discerning consumer—no matter what your disposable income—than to believe that every commercial exchange is a form of capitalist exploitation. Almost all of Smith's works begin with cheap items she buys at thrift stores and flea markets. Grocery store advertisements, commercially printed images, hand-painted signs and even the fake velvet lining of a display case form the backdrops of her spunky wall-works.

To these castoff byproducts of commercial culture Smith affixes the covers of women's magazines from the 1940s and '50s, a Marlene Dietrich LP and a dust jacket from Amy Vanderbilt's "Everyday Etiquette." Lest viewers mistake the artist's fondness for mid-century manners as simple nostalgia, her sharp-witted pieces include such tacky souvenirs as a rabbit's foot, an emblem from the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, a motel sewing kit, a trophy of a horse's backside and an ad for a nose-hair clipper.



Margo Leavin Gallery

Alexis Smith's "Priced to Sell." The artist comments on consumerism.

Set in recessed frames, Smith's odd constellations of recycled mementos become shallow dioramas whose theatrical flair invites viewer participation. Profoundly optimistic (and classically American), her brand of image-and-text Conceptualism represents the flip side of

Barbara Kruger's, whose intentionally bombastic exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art focuses on the power stereotypes hold over all of us.

In contrast, Smith's willfully idiosyncratic objects insist that stereotypes only go so far, and that

art is most interesting when it gives physical form to details and otherwise indescribable peculiarities. Resonating against the ongoing drama of everyday life, her scrappy works speak the language of desire *and* satisfaction—of not merely longing for something better, but of going out of your way to get it, even if it has to be pieced together from whatever leftovers you can get your hands on.