

Drohojowska, Hunter. "A Cut Above." *Los Angeles Times* (Calendar), 22 March 1992.

CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES • MARCH 22, 1992

E/W

ALEXIS SMITH

"I don't think that I'm specifically interested in Southern California, but I'm a product of it."



She mixes and matches the stuff of popular culture with bits of reality and snippets of fiction to explore the American psyche. A profile of Alexis Smith on the eve of the 19-year retrospective at MOCA. By Hunter Drohojowska.
Page 4



COVER STORY



STEVE DYKES / Los Angeles Times

Alexis Smith in front of her mural "The Promised Land" (1981) at the Museum of Contemporary Art; above right, "Jailbait" (1988) and "Jack" (1990).

A Cut Above

Alexis Smith has expanded collage to monumental proportions, mixing pop culture images with snippets of fiction

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

Having a retrospective is like being janitor to your own statue.

That's the initial impression conveyed by artist Alexis Smith who, at age 42, is having a major museum retrospective opening next Sunday at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. It was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the first retrospective of an L.A.-based artist to be arranged by the Whitney since the 1975 show of Robert Irwin. It is a victorious moment.

"It's so much work," moans Smith. "I get up every morning at 5 a.m. and come home feeling like someone's pummeled me with a rubber hammer all day."

So much for a leisurely life in the arts.

For three weeks before the opening, she has practically been living at the downtown museum to install 19 years of art. Smith has added three monumental installations and additional individual works since the MOCA space is two galleries and then some larger than that of

the Whitney. On a recent afternoon, she stands in a cavernous white room, arms akimbo, gently giving orders to four assistants. Slim as a young girl in her jeans and sweat shirt, her hair a touse of golden curls, like Shirley Temple in "The Little Colonel," Smith lets escape a self-deprecating chuckle and acknowledges the theatricality of the moment. "It's like 'Hey, kids, let's put on a play.' I was that way as a kid and I'm that way as an adult," she admits.

Smith's primary contribution as an artist is in broadening and strengthening the medium of collage, the art of cut and paste. Invented by Picasso and developed by the Cubists, Surrealists and Dadaists of the early 20th Century, collage was a way of incorporating elements of the real world, especially the mass media of newspapers, advertisements and photography, into the realm of fine art. Popular culture as manifested in collage has come to be an increasingly relevant topic for contemporary artists.

Smith has expanded the medium to monumental, sometimes architectural

proportions. Rather than emphasizing a disorienting style, wherein unrelated items are juxtaposed, she has developed a point-counterpoint method of mixing images from popular culture with discrete, or castoff, objects and quotations from primarily fictional sources, such as novels, movie scripts or song lyrics. Series of collages are unified by a period and topic and in the last decade, Smith has systematically explored the American psyche and culture in the 1920s through the 1950s, ensuring her position as one of the most significant artists working today.

In the first gallery, with its pyramid skylight, two young men are painting a mural of giant black piano keys for a 1981 piece about the Gershwin musical "Porgy and Bess," originally conceived for the gallery of Otis/Parsons School of Art and Design and later purchased by MOCA Curator Paul Schimmel when he was at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. The title is "The Promised Land" and, with its tragic theme of dashed expectations, it sets the tone for Smith's art of the last decade.

The rear wall of the last gallery is being painted by Richard Sedivy, an artist who has worked with Smith for so many years that they joke about starting a retirement pension. He is re-creating a 1987 mural of orange groves and mountains, the imaginary Eden of Southern California with a winding road that metamorphoses into a giant snake of temptation: "Same Old Paradise." A giant collage at the base of the painting combines the flotsam and jetsam of the highway with quotes from Jack Kerouac's "On the Road." Although the book was the bible of the Beat Generation, Kerouac captured the spiritual yearning of an entire nation of Americans moving ever westward in the hope of a better life. Smith, long fascinated with this theme, borrowed classic Kerouac, such as: "I suddenly saw the whole country as an oyster for us to open, and the pearl was there, the pearl was there!"

The timeless themes of quest and faith, failure and redemption, hope and disappointment, travel and destiny, recur throughout Smith's work of the 1980s. Yet it can be difficult to read these deeper

'My artwork is about the real world rather than the world of art. It's about tracing familiar underlying memories, stories and myths that make up our culture.'

issues since they are presented in the form of collage, incorporating the stuff of popular culture such as Hollywood memorabilia, tourist paraphernalia, pinups, brochures, advertisements and found objects of bygone eras.

"I don't think that I'm specifically interested in Southern California, but I'm a product of it," Smith says in the exhibition catalogue. "The place in my work is not so much here but everywhere."

Smith deigns to entertain. Snippets of fiction provide the pieces with a voice and a sense of time and place, so the work is both droll and bittersweet. She rejects the common label of "nostalgic."

"It's not about yearning for the past when life was better but seeing where we come from and what forces have made us what we are today," she explains.

"My artwork is about the real world rather than the world of art," she continues. "It's about tracing familiar underlying memories, stories and myths that make up our culture. It's about a spiritual quest, about American history and the idea of manifest destiny. It's about the normal things that have to do with the experience of 20th-Century existence and a separate subtext of looking for meaning in life. You have to read into each piece for

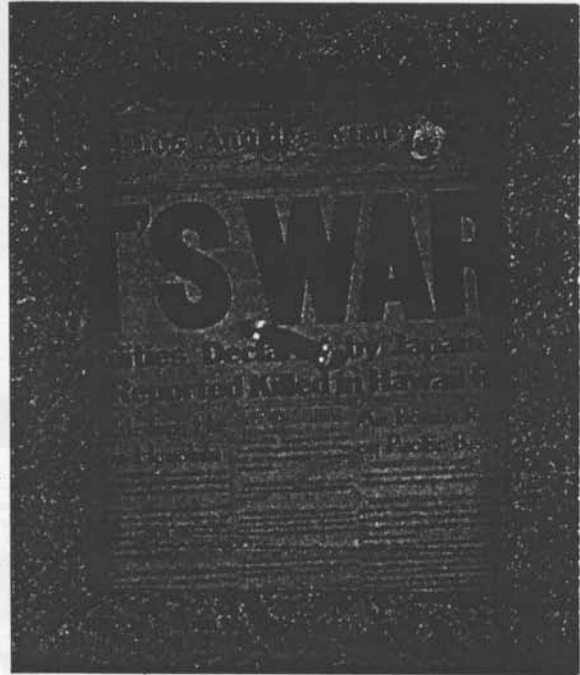
yourself; there is no correct interpretation, no right answer. The art is something that happens in your head."

Richard Armstrong, the Whitney curator who organized the show, says: "It's all about storytelling. Each piece is a call and response. You have to look at Smith's work and make up a story of your own. You're going to be a narrator. The quality of what you have to say has to do with the narrative you can make up."

As a result, the viewer is forced to participate in the quest for meaning that is the substance of the art itself. Viewers may be seduced by the stunning graphic aspects of the show, but Smith's art has its roots in fiction as much as in visual art. Smith notes that her background was in humanities and that many of her friends are fiction writers, such as Benjamin Weissman, Amy Gerstler and Tom Lazarus. She is on the board of the literary center Beyond Baroque.

"I tend to be attracted to things because of their emotional resonance," she says. "That's what makes my work more like fiction. Good painting only covertly seeks to address emotional issues. This is more specific and overt."

"When I first became an artist, I was attracted to quirky American geniuses who reinvented a form out of sheer chutzpah.



"Rocky Road" (1990), below, and "It's Lucky When You Live in America" (1982).



They didn't know better but came up with something really compelling. I'm someone who starts out in fine art and thinks it's not as vital as the real world. So I came up with a fine art that has the vitality of the real world."

An engaging 30-minute videotape on Alexis Smith has been produced by Peter Kirby for the exhibition. In it, art critic Dave Hickey offers: "Many of the artists she reveres are the artists who began from an ostensibly high art position and moved toward popular culture—George and Ira Gershwin, Walt Whitman, Isadora Duncan, Thornton Wilder. All of these people are basically fallen elitists and there's a way that you can look at Alexis's work as seriously fallen elitism."

Walking purposefully to another museum gallery, Smith checks the progress of a thin young woman who is painting a blackboard on the wall of a simulated classroom for Smith's 1990 installation, "Past Lives." This collaboration features texts by Gerstler that chronicle the uncertain and often unpromising futures of children. Aspects of the stories are echoed in Smith's collages. A scatter of small chairs lends the room an aching poignancy.

"Past Lives," one of the most recent works in the show, is an opportunity to glimpse the origins of Smith's present life. Conceived after a visit to her high school reunion and gestated over three years of discussions with Gerstler, it is one of the few pieces that has any overtly autobiographical elements. Smith's work is not her life but it does bear some of the aspects of her personality—elusive and

difficult to characterize in a simple way. Gerstler flagged this problem in her contribution to the retrospective catalogue, a "fictional biography" that collages her observations with random details from *The Times* and a horoscope. "All rhapsodizing aside, available biographical details on Smith are conflicting and sketchy, where they aren't entirely absent or confidential," she writes. "So it's up to us, the viewing public, to satisfy our own curiosity."

Smith is a restless woman, one who idles but rarely parks. She has no children and only two years ago chose marriage to artist Scott Grieger, who is chair of fine arts at Otis/Parsons School of Art and Design. A ruggedly handsome man of 45, Grieger has the laconic wit and wide-ranging intelligence of Smith. He is critically well-regarded for his dark Symbolist style paintings. With great good humor, he has been coping in his recent role as "Mr. Alexis Smith." They had been casual friends for 15 years but got married after a month of dates. He was attracted by Smith's humor; she loved his generosity. The artist divides her present life between the Lincoln Boulevard studio she has occupied since 1972 and the Venice beach bungalow she and Grieger bought after their wedding.

In the honeymoon cottage, the furniture and accessories were selected with an artist's eye for the curious and the exceptional. There are paintings by their friends Lari Pittman and Karen Carson but none of their own work is on the walls. Their dishes and glasses are vintage '50s.

Please see Page 84

Alexis Smith

Continued from Page 5

Smith is a compulsive visitor to the Rose Bowl swap meet. Her second-hand aesthetic has been integrated into all areas of her life. During a recent interview at the Formica kitchen table, Smith was wearing a dark green sweater brightened by an oversize spray of red plastic leaves from a thrift shop, tartan plaid leggings and red socks. Zippy, their 16-year-old gray cat, is curled in her lap. She wants to emphasize that her work is not autobiographical.

She begins with her exotic moniker. At 17, she decided to change her name from Patti Ann to Alex, and later to Alexis. "I wasn't trying to change my name to that of a movie star at the time. It was serendipitous," she says.

Smith has fond memories of early childhood, growing up on the grounds of a mental asylum, Metropolitan State Hospital in Norwalk. Her father was a psychiatrist and assistant superintendent. As an only child, she spent time chopping words and pictures out of magazines and pasting them together as collages, as well as writing and directing plays with the other kids. "I always did what I do now in some form," she recalls.

Her mother enjoyed the domestic arts such as upholstery and sewing and Smith credits her as the model for her artistic instincts. Her mother died when she was 11. She was raised by her father, from whom she gained her affection for storytelling, but she became the woman of the house before she was a teen-ager. When Smith's friends describe her with compliments like capable and perfectionist, they are describing the qualities symptomatic of the child who became an adult too soon. Armstrong, who has known Smith since the late '70s, notes: "Sometimes you're born old. I can recognize that symptom in her. She was never madcap in the time I knew her."

A serious and intelligent girl, she spent part of her last teen-age summers in France. With earnest intentions of becoming a French teacher, in 1966, she enrolled at the newly opened University of California at Irvine. "It was a fateful non-decision," she has said.

Fateful in part because the collages that she gave as gifts caught the attention of an art major friend who encouraged Smith to take some art classes. "As soon as I fell into the art world, I ceased to exist in a vacuum," Smith has admitted.

Paradoxically, a vacuum is precisely the word many might have used to describe UC Irvine in those days. There were no facilities for an art department other than an astonishingly farsighted faculty, now considered to be among Los Angeles' most important artists, including Bruce Nauman, Vija Celmins, and Robert Irwin. It was a laboratory for new ideas and new



Alexis Smith's "Snap Shot" (1982).

forms at a time when the art world seemed to be exploding with possibility. Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art were the dominant movements. Irwin, who is credited as a pioneer of the West Coast movement known as "light and space," remembers her as a student. "I felt the sensibility was there from the beginning. The whole time we were together, we tried to figure out what kind of format there was in the world for her range of her interests. Painting was not, obviously, an option."

"Most students think they are going to learn to manipulate an existing medium," Irwin continues. "They don't realize that if they have an interesting sensibility, they're going to have to invent a medium. Sensibility has to do with a real take in the world and an understanding of what you are, what things intrigue you and being willing to pursue them rather than experiment in a lot of different waters. It's amazing how many people want to be artists and have no idea what makes them unique."

The medium Smith chose to pursue was an extension of what she had been doing her whole life—collage.

Celmins remembers the 19-year-old Smith arriving to class with the announcement that she didn't want to draw. "It was the late '60s," remembers Celmins, "so I told her she could do whatever she wanted."

Instead of pursuing graduate school, Smith went to work as a Girl Friday for a struggling young architect named Frank Gehry. She invented her own graduate school with more diligent reading, transforming fiction into the fact of her art. The early '70s brought the women's movement to L.A. Smith joined a consciousness-raising group that met at Celmins' studio with artists Karen Carson, Ann McCoy, Maria Nordman and curator Barbara Haskell, who gave

Smith her first solo show at the Whitney in 1975.

Celmins remembers: "In the early '70s, there were the Ferris, Nick Wilder and Mizuno galleries and almost all of the artists were men except for me and Maria Nordman. L.A. was a real boys town. All those guys... You could sleep with them if you wanted to, and if you didn't want to there was nothing else happening. So we leaned on each other and supported each other."

Armstrong points out that, compared to New York in the early '70s, L.A. represented great freedom: "She was in a theoretical vacuum so she had the luxury of being as egomaniacal as she pleased. She didn't have to conform to any expectations, any dogma, any kind of group situation. There was nothing for her to be a part of, no movement for her to join. She was in exactly the right place at the right time."

Smith's art during the 1970s was internally motivated, leaning on the writings of Borges and Mann and consumed with the notion of destiny. "I was interested in the idea of destiny when I was young because I accidentally became an artist when I didn't have the intention to do so. I was lucky. It wasn't like I made a plan."

The collages of this decade consist of pages of quotes and small photos or found objects laid out like the sequential pages of a book and framed.

Conceptual artists were presenting text as art in an attempt to circumvent issues of conventional representation. But Smith's texts were less about linguistics and perception than particularly poignant references drawn from literature and film.

In 1978, Smith read the influential Robert Venturi book "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," which addresses the notion of collage as a factor in architecture. The information

helped catapult Smith's work to a more dynamic, seductive dimension. Chandeliers, as Smith called the series of collages begun in 1978, signaled a sea change aided by the sharply visual and frankly entertaining nature of Chandler's writing. "By abandoning literature in favor of pulp, she could more fully exploit the iconic effect of her imagery," writes Armstrong in the catalogue. "Henceforth Smith's art would be unabashedly pop in its sources and realization."

Among the many Chandler inspired works in the retrospective, the 1980 "Golden State" consists of collages made of black sandpaper to resemble the asphalt highway. The wall is painted with neon signs that advertise drinks and hotels. "I smelled Los Angeles before I got to it. It smelled stale and old like a living room that has been closed too long. But the colored lights fooled you. The lights were wonderful. There ought to be a monument to the man who invented neon lights. Fifteen stories high, solid marble. There's a boy who really made something out of nothing."

In the early '80s, Smith began a parallel career in public art where her small framed collages became elements in a larger collage involving wall murals. In 1983, she spent a year completing "The Grand," the transformation of the entrance lobby of a Grand Rapids, Mich., performing arts center, DeVos Hall. Smith discovered her talent for large-scale collaborations.

"People who wind up doing a lot of public art have a sort of missionary quality, the civic spirit of people who would like to upgrade the environment," she explains. "For an artist, it's a vehicle for doing something meaningful."

(She is currently at work on two public art projects: the 500-foot Snake Path to be completed in May at UC San Diego and the 50,000-square-foot floor for the new Los Angeles Convention Center to be completed in 1993.)

Despite her career success, the middle of the decade brought Smith to the point of despair. "In '84 I flamed out. I had to quit smoking and my father had died. I spent most of the year laying on the couch and reading."

Smith hadn't seen much of her father. He had moved to Oregon when she left for college. Yet, there was a strong connection from the years he had raised her after her mother passed away. "He was 43 when I was born, which was pretty weird then," she recalls. "He affected me as a storyteller and as a shrink, being able to explain why people did what they did. But I'm not sure I want to talk about all this family stuff."

Smith speaks rapidly and uncomfortably about her past and her family as though old wounds are being reopened. Though articulate and available, she is simultaneously on guard, wary of interlopers. The optimistic voice of

her art is tempered by skepticism.

It is this voice that characterizes the 1985 exhibition "Jane" at the Margo Leavin Gallery, which established her as a leading artist of her generation. Collages of magazine covers, movie stills and advertisements pertain to famous and infamous Janes, many of whom were real people with real problems—Jane Austin and Jane Russell, Lady Jane and Jayne Mansfield, Calamity Jane and Tarzan's Jane, as well as the Jane and Dick of childhood. Jane is a sort of Everywoman, the heroine who had been a facet of Smith's art since the early '70s when she made a piece about the dancer Isadora Duncan. Smith had frames built of such decorative materials as faux marble, gold leatherette and fake leopard and all of the quotes reveal a schism between appearance and reality.

A framed swatch of needlepoint is accompanied by the quote: "I must not think like this. I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, and swans and roses and snow."

Smith says in the retrospective catalogue: "I started collecting these things and drawing parallels between the lives of these women who had a tough time. I was at a point in my life when you wake up one morning and realize that your life isn't going to work out quite the way you imagined. There's a kind of tension there between the ideal and the real."

As though in response, Smith devoted the late '80s to the themes of spiritual quest and the search for identity in the collages inspired by "On the Road." Kerouac continues to be quoted in all his poetic longing, but the collages have become so visually extravagant, the text has faded in primacy. "I did wordy [pieces]," she explains. "After you have learned to do something, you want to learn what you don't know."

There is an elegiac quality to these last works, as though the artist was looking back even before the advent of her retrospective. For example, a schoolroom map of the United States is screened with the image of a 1950s automobile. A pair of dice is symbolically attached to the rear-view mirror lending even more ominous tone to the simple quote: "Whither Goest Thou America?"

Smith makes it clear that she has to get up early on a Sunday morning to work at the museum. Asked how this career retrospective makes her feel, she says: "I've been through fear and dread, followed by the demoralization that it was going to be such an unbelievable amount of work. But I feel a certain excitement because the show's going to look great at MOCA."

Smith pauses and adds: "I don't want this to sound conceited but I feel proud of what I do. It's how I communicate with the world." □

Hunter Drohowsky is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis/Parsons School of Art and Design.