

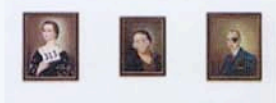
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Print Article



"Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life,"  
 installation view at Margo Leavin Gallery,  
 Los Angeles



Alexis Smith  
 Family Values  
 2009  
 "Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
 Margo Leavin Gallery  
 photo by Brian Forrest



Alexis Smith  
 Family Values (detail)  
 2009  
 "Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
 Margo Leavin Gallery



Alexis Smith  
 Formerly Known as Prince  
 2009  
 "Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
 Margo Leavin Gallery  
 photo by Brian Forrest

## AN ALEXIS SMITH REVIVAL

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

For 30 years, the Los Angeles artist Alexis Smith produced collages and installations in her rented Venice studio. A few years ago, the building was sold at the top of the California real estate boom and Smith had to move. A crisis for any artist perhaps but Smith's studio was her palette: a warehouse filled with tables, shelves and cartons of the flotsam and jetsam that she collected to use in her eccentric collages and assemblages. As a result of the move and the resultant trauma, the veteran artist didn't show for six years.

Her return deserves some sort of fanfare. Mature works from between 1999 and 2009 are on view at the Margo Leavin Gallery in the drollly titled "Imitation of Life," a reference to the Douglas Sirk film about two mothers and their daughters, one of whom is black but passes as white. Larger assemblage pieces as well as collages are installed at Thomas Solomon's Cottage Home gallery in "Play It as It Lays," the title of Joan Dideon's elliptical 1972 novel about Hollywood's social dysfunction. Both shows remain on view till May 23, 2009.

Smith's career as a discerning connoisseur of the found object was recognized in a retrospective at the Whitney back in 1991, and she has produced a number of enormous public art projects. However, her recent hiatus from production seems to have simplified and strengthened her approach. At the Leavin Gallery, the focus is on portraits and still-lives -- hence, "Imitation of Life." She gathered amateur painted portraits of anonymous people and helped them along with additional painting, an attached bibelot or a decorative frame. With minimal intervention, these renovated portraits rise to fresh meanings.

*Family Values* (2009) consists of a trio of portraits. Smith attached a black eye patch and military insignia to the portrait of a severe-looking man, a lacy doily over the face of a plump older woman, an item number from a Christie's auction on the raised hand of a rosy cheeked young lady. Is she for sale? Are the eyes of mother and father covered for a reason? Is this family participating in their own "Imitation of Life?"

Double entendre is Smith's stock in trade. Often words and objects have more than one meaning, and puns abound. For example, Smith mounted the stuffed green head of a crown-wearing frog onto the shoulders of a needlepoint rendering of Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy*. The deep frame bears a gold title plate: "Formerly known as Prince." Such loony irreverence wouldn't suffice on its own, but the potency of the objects carries the day.

Selection is key to the success of any collage artist and Smith's esthetic remains specifically pre-internet. She has always incorporated bits and pieces reminiscent of the Southern California of her childhood, then redolent of orange groves and rife with movie stars. Yet, what used to be swap-meet kitsch has taken on an aura of rarity with passing time.

Earlier pieces in the show recall a period when she was concerned with displaced dreams and promises. Two framed 1950s advertisements for dinner rolls are covered with Plexiglas silkscreened with the red, blue and yellow dots of a Wonderbread wrapper and the text, "People Who Eat White Bread Have No Dreams." The title of the 1999 piece is *No Wonder*.



Alexis Smith  
Medium is the Message  
2009  
"Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
Margo Leavin Gallery  
photo by Joshua White



Alexis Smith  
Devil in a Blue Dress  
2009  
"Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
Margo Leavin Gallery  
photo by Joshua White



Alexis Smith  
No Wonder  
1999  
"Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life"  
Margo Leavin Gallery  
photo by Brian Forrest



Alexis Smith  
Passion and Technicolor  
2009  
"Alexis Smith: Play It as It Lays"  
Cottage Home, Los Angeles

In the amusing and significant new book of interviews with art world personalities by Richard Hertz, *The Beat and the Buzz: Inside the L.A. Art World*, Smith recounts her early friendship with dealer Holly Solomon who showed her work in the 1970s and '80s. Solomon's young son Tommy was at boarding school then so Smith slept in his twin bed surrounded by Warhols when she visited New York.

The grown up Thomas Solomon's Chinatown gallery offers a rough open space and potentially introduces the work to a young audience. The first collage on view, *Passion and Technicolor* features an upended advertisement for a movie starring the actress Alexis Smith, from whom the artist appropriated her name some four decades ago, integrating Hollywood mythology into her art.

The highlight of the show is *Piano (Burma Shave #2)* (2001) an upright piano without a front cover so that its hammers and rods are exposed. A brass horn rests above the keys with a bunch of colorful silk flowers in its mouth while above the piano hangs a framed advertisement of a grand piano on a lovely but deserted beach. A thought bubble from a New Yorker cartoon reveals that the piano is dreaming of the Victorian furnishings in a posh living room. The gold lettering below the keyboard proclaims: "If harmony is what you crave, then get a tuba. Burma-Shave."

The show includes more of her altered portraits, as well as a wall text with an inverted candy box heart and a rusted and broken toy drum titled "The Medium is the Message." This is the gist of Smith's art.

Throughout the large space, Smith's works are interspersed with vintage shop signs and a group of colored bowling bowls imported from her studio. They are not works of art per se but the vernacular from which her art is made. Their inclusion implies that such stuff is the medium and out of it Smith has a message. Smith's ongoing ability to conjure poignant narrative and meaning from her own collection of humble and hopeful sources as its own message. As the fortune cookie says, "Good things come to those who wait."

"Alexis Smith: Imitation of Life," Apr. 25-May 23, 2009, at Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 North Robertson Boulevard, Los Angeles, Ca. 90069

"Alexis Smith: Play It as It Lays," Apr. 25-May 23, 2009, at Thomas Solomon Gallery @ Cottage Home, 410 Cottage Home Street, Chinatown, Los Angeles, Ca. 90012

**HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP** writes about contemporary art in Los Angeles.



Alexis Smith  
The Piano (Burma-Shave #2)  
2001  
"Alexis Smith: Play It as It Lays"  
Cottage Home, Los Angeles



"Alexis Smith: Play It as It Lays,"  
Installation view at Cottage Home, Los Angeles



Alexis Smith  
Golden Glow  
1995  
"Alexis Smith: Play It as It Lays"  
Cottage Home, Los Angeles