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Review: Alexis Smith at Margo Leavin and Thomas Solomon galleries

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Two exhibitions by Alexis Smith take visitors on a bittersweet trip down memory lane. By turns melancholic, melodramatic and just plain touching, her recycled thrift-store items remind visitors that meaning is the most fugitive of things, an elusive entity that cannot be collected, preserved or packaged but must be lived in moments beyond anyone's control.

At Margo Leavin Gallery in West Hollywood, "Imitation of Life" turns Oscar Wilde's phrase into a house of mirrors in which old movies, pop songs and advertisements collude and collide with such ideals as freedom, democracy and independence — or life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

A typical piece by Smith consists of a printed, painted or embroidered image to which she has attached one or two bits of kitschy memorabilia. To some, she has added a snippet of folk wisdom or a plain old cliché. All of her cockeyed collages rest in the beat-up frames in which Smith found them or in new and improved versions she designed and had fabricated.

At Thomas Solomon Gallery @ Cottage Home in Chinatown, "Play it as It Lays" turns the title of Joan Didion's 1970 novel into a pragmatic, even ruthlessly efficient survey of the ways naive dreams curdle as they mature.

This half of Smith's double feature is scrappier and nastier than its partner. Its works are leaner and meaner, as if on more intimate terms with despair. It includes some of the stuff Smith has collected over the years, secondhand bowling balls and broken signs that may become parts of pieces but now just gather dust in her cluttered studio.

If California is the place people with pasts go to reinvent themselves, Smith is the poet laureate of the odds and ends they leave behind. There's no substitute for the sharp wit and biting insight she brings to the pedestrian pageantry of American life.

— David Pagel