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Alexis Smith

at MARGO LEAVIN, 24 March–21 April

Sometimes coy, often ironic, and always clever, Alexis Smith's assemblages pilfer mementoes from the past. Lifting lines from Jack Kerouac's Beat novel, *On the Road*, her witty mixed-media constructions seek poignant experiences in the most mundane aspects of American culture. Unpretentious yet reserved, Smith's fragmentary narratives add a sense of history and loss to Kerouac's desperately optimistic saga of youthful recklessness in the face of growing old in a stultifying social order. Where Kerouac's characters frantically scramble to escape the clichés of anonymity, Smith's carefully composed collages preserve this rebelliousness as a delicate balance between naïveté and cynicism, fond sentiment and

indulgent nostalgia. Her best works cast Kerouac's fascination with life's simple experiences as a troubled blend of wide-eyed desire for whatever excitement the future might hold and the depressing knowledge that this youthful exuberance will be destroyed by the requirements of staying alive, crushed under the weight of tedium and facelessness.

If Kerouac's popular novel of irrepresible male restlessness stands as an anthem for a generation of kids who saw the future as a chance to break free from middle-class conventions, Smith's roadside detritus looks to the past to examine why these dreams failed. Made 35 years after *On the Road* was published, her works do not attempt to recapture the crazy aimlessness of Kerouac's intoxicating novel, but function as memorials for a bygone era, whose innocence has been lost and whose beliefs and convictions have themselves become clichés.

While Smith's elegant aestheticized assemblages of highway souvenirs and popular knick-knacks (in stunning, one-of-a-kind frames) accurately measure the distance that separates the late nineteen fifties from the late nineteen eighties, they hide their own profound undercurrent of disillusionment behind a sad mask of what passes as historical or mythical resonance. Despite superficial playfulness and punning conjunctions of alluring keepsakes and postcards, bottle caps and movie posters, Smith's collages are fundamentally melancholic. Aimed at the past, but alienated from its pleasures and protected from its dangers, her colorful works resemble whimsical sociological artifacts. Anthropological in focus, but more concerned with literary fiction and mythical fantasy, Smith's works create a dreamy vision of history that provides an escape from a complex present. In contrast to Kerouac, who embraced the contradictions of contemporary society in a frantic attempt to distill his generation's magic, Smith returns to somebody else's past to make up her own fanciful playground of associations, criticisms and memories.

Replacing Kerouac's obsessive need to hurl his characters toward the future with her own equally obsessive desire to create poetry out of history's discarded scraps, Smith turns *On the Road's* emphasis on the present into a rehashing of the past. In a perverse reversal of Kerouac's achievement, her collages manage to make art out of a novel that explicitly dismisses all art's conventions and attempts to mix its fiction with the drama of real bohemian existence. Too smart to be trapped by an outmoded notion of art, and unwilling to embrace the defensive cynicism that passes as current wisdom, Smith makes objects that waver in a nether world between authenticity and its dismissal.

David Pagel

Alexis Smith
Rocky Road, 1990
 Mixed media collage
 Two panels; 64" x 23" x 3" each
 Photo: Douglas M. Parker