

She Was Paying Attention: Remembering Alexis Smith

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Alexis Smith, "Your Name Here," 1975. Courtesy of the Estate of Alexis Smith and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

Satisfaction (2000) by the artist Alexis Smith is a collage that features a shabby reproduction of Hokusai's *The Great Wave* placed within a glitzy gold frame. On one side of the canvas, the Rolling Stone's ubiquitous cherry-red Hot Lips logo is reproduced over the print and, on the other, a sterling-silver plate cover is affixed. Above sits an unattributed quote (from the fashion editor Diana Vreeland's 1984 autobiography) that reads: "We all need a splash of bad taste . . . no taste is what I'm against." This piece is in many ways typical of Smith: the punning of the words *splash* and *taste* with the image of the wave, the tongue hanging out of the open mouth, and the plate cover; the permission given to the cliché and ersatz and the placement of these elements within a more gnomic, philosophical scope; the secondhand sentiment that seems at once universal, as well as particularly targeted toward American anxieties of worth, value, and discernment.

This winter, *Satisfaction* was featured in a group show at the gallery Bel Ami in Los Angeles titled *Tell Me What You Want*. A couple other of Smith's collages also appeared alongside work by her slightly older contemporaries Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari, as well as artists born many decades after her, like Martine Syms and Zoe Barcza. The generational convergence provided the opportunity to view Smith's mordant sense of humor, enigmatic object-making, and collagist repurposing of images and ephemera—her "ongoing, complicated entanglement with the American dream," as the gallery's di-

rector Lee Foley put it to me—in a much wider context. The show distended the category of California Conceptualism, in which Smith is usually placed, to evince how much the animating force of her work—which is the reconfiguring of everyday objects, including language, in a way that reflects on the culture that produced them—continues to inform and undergird current art practices. That Smith died a few weeks after the exhibition opened, on January 2, 2024, at age 74 from complications of Alzheimer’s disease, made this all the more poignant. In light of her passing, it proved a testament to how her work might live on after her.



Alexis Smith, *Satisfaction*, 2000. Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy the estate of the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles.

Smith was hardly an obscure artist. Born in 1949 in Los Angeles, her first retrospective took place at the Whitney Museum in 1991. But when I wrote to people who were either close to her, or admirers, to ask about her legacy, a few commented that she had not quite received the canonization she deserves. Erin Calla Watson, who began to assist Smith periodically in her studio over a decade ago when it became clear she was ill (she was officially diagnosed in 2015) replied that when she first started working for her, Smith “wasn’t very “Google-able.” Watson noted that Smith received wide critical and commercial attention in the 1980s and 1990s: “When I talked to her peers, like Paul McCarthy for example, they would say that at the time she was the biggest female artist in California. And at that time, they wouldn’t have thought that her recognition could possibly fade. But . . . people have very short-term memory in the art world.” Perhaps this short memory is why thirty years passed before Smith’s second retrospective, *The American Way*, which opened in 2022 at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MOCA). The exhibition seems like the first step in a revival of work by an artist who is due for wider rediscovery.

Never reaching the zenith of Ruscha or Baldessari and less fashionable than Picture Generation corollaries such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, Smith still holds a distinctive space within the history of Conceptual art. She appeared on its ground floor, studying under Robert Irwin and Vija Celmins at a nascent UC Irvine in the late 1960s, at the school’s most experimental, freewheeling hilt. Her classmates included graduate students like Chris Burden, with whom she later had a relationship. Her decision to remain in Los Angeles after graduation has likely contributed to the understanding of her work mainly through its relationship to the West and its references to Hollywood. Much repeated is how, while still in college, she decided to discard her given name, Patricia Anne Smith, and adopt that of the film star Alexis Smith. She never legally changed her name (as she stated in a 2014 oral history,



Alexis Smith portrait by Pauline Stella Sanchez, 2017.

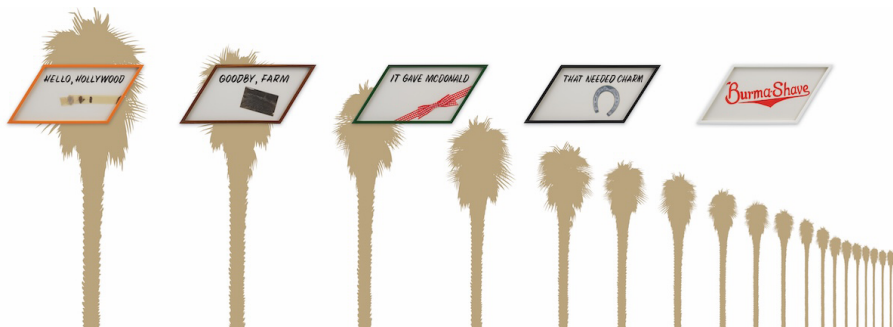
even her checks read “Patricia Anne Smith, known as Alexis Smith”) but, especially in the beginning of her career, she mined the association often. The work *Your Name Here* (1975), a director’s chair emblazoned with her chosen pseudonym, recalls Alexis Smith the actress and the general yearning for stardom. *The Red Shoes* (1975) is a multi-panel collage that includes Smith the actress on the cover of *Time*, dressed in head-to-toe crimson, kicking out her leg in celebration of her turn on Broadway. For Smith the artist, the confusion was clearly generative—not only because it suggested fluidity of identity, but even more so for the way it layered references and narratives on top of one another. In the collage *Wild Horses* (2012), she includes an EP of Patti Smith’s *Set Free* over a Western scene of galloping mares. The inclusion invokes her real name, Patricia Smith, plays upon the title of the EP, and creates an instant association with another Patti Smith album, *Horses*.



Alexis Smith, *Wild Horses*, 2012. Courtesy of the Estate of Alexis Smith and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

More than Hollywood and movies, though, Smith's deepest source was literature. In an interview with MOCA, she called herself "a writer who makes art instead." The first objects she produced were artists' books, and early on, she staged performances that placed her in the role of a storyteller or medium. Nearly all her work includes narrative, to which she was dedicated. She siphoned the words of Jorge Luis Borges, Walt Whitman, and Raymond Chandler, along with words of pulp novelists, musical lyricists, and copywriters, and delivered them in fragments resonant with an eerie and poetic logic. After achieving recognition in the 1970s, when she was still in her twenties, she began to embark on more complex installations, as well as public projects, in the following decade. Like her discrete collages, these, too, call on literature. Her installation of terrazzo tiles at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles bears quotations from Chandler, and one of her most ambitious projects, the 560-foot-long mosaic serpent she titled *Snake Path* (1992), is derived from Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. *Snake Path* careens from an Edenic garden through the grounds of UC San Diego, ending in exile at the library.

Smith's overall methodology was also of a poetic variety, rather than literal or didactic. Her main target was perhaps the belief in American progress through consumer capitalism and Western expansion. The thrift-store objects and popular imagery she repurposed speak for themselves as the spoils of this conquest (so much so that at times I find her assemblages verging on the tacky, which I don't think is completely unintended). But her indeterminant approach never presses the matter. Instead she relies on an almost Surrealist sense of a collective unconscious, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions from golf pegs strewn over a newspaper headline of bombers taking off for Korea, a rusty sprinkler head stuck in the middle of a cheap ocean landscape, a toy revolver and a pack of Marlboros. Always, Smith allows room for the harm and emptiness of the last century to seep through, along with some of the beauty.



Alexis Smith, *Hello Hollywood*, 1980. Courtesy of the Estate of Alexis Smith and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

"I see her influence kind of like a ghost. People don't quite know who the ghost is, but they're just in the air somehow," the artist Patrick Jackson, who was introduced to Smith's work through Watson, his partner, wrote to me. He stressed how much the kinds of installations Smith made—which often included wall painting, and everything from sand on the gallery floor to a host of readymade objects like hay bales, flowerpots, shopping carts, trophies, and brooms—have become common in LA (and one could argue, internationally). "She was the artist that was influencing a lot of people, maybe even including myself, without [me] even knowing it." John Tain, a curator who formerly worked at the Getty, told me that "Smith's work was always just there as part of the LA culture-scape, whether it was as part of permanent collection displays at MoCA, or as part of the décor." He cited Smith's installation *Taste* (1997) at the Getty Center's restaurant, which wryly conflates classical notions of aesthetics with culinary elements on wall-length murals hung with terracotta plates, as well as the terrazzo floor pieces she made for the Los Angeles Convention Center.

If Smith's reach has an amorphous quality, felt but not always recognized, Watson has sought to make the connection more explicit by bringing her work into conversation with contemporary artists who, knowingly or not, bear the mark of her influence. For an event tied to the release of the catalogue for *American Way*, Watson staged a discussion about Smith with the curator of the show, Anthony Graham, and the artist Frances Stark—someone who, like Smith, has played with persona in her work, centers

text, uses collage, and touches on feminist issues in idiosyncratic, personal ways. “I like that Alexis had such a varied practice,” Watson said. “Her work is bold and unapologetic and enigmatic. I’m still learning from her because her work is so studied down to the tiniest detail of text and sequin.”



Alexis Smith, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, 2000 (installation view, Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles). Image courtesy Honor Fraser Gallery.

Others that recognized Smith’s impact as indelible spoke to the permission her formal construction, visual acumen, and sly wit gave them. The artist Marnie Weber, who is known for her uncanny and highly narrative sculptures and videos, studied with Smith at UCLA in the early 1980s. She wrote, “I wouldn’t have gone into collage without Alexis. Before I saw her work I wasn’t aware of the psychological expression that could be brought forth through the juxtaposing of images. Every piece holds drama, intrigue, and mystery. I really saw the theatricality in her work and it inspired me to think of my own collages as moments in a theatrical production.” The poet Amy Gerstler began to collaborate with Smith in the mid-1980s, eventually writing the texts that appear on the wall in the large-scale installations *Past Lives* (1989), which examined childhood, and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* (2000), a consideration of women’s work and the magical ideas that surround it. The two became close friends. Gerstler has poignant memories of the person Smith was, both strong and kind, and someone who practiced friendship as a true art. When she first saw Smith’s work, in a magazine, it made her think of poetry: “Her work was a watershed discovery for me. ... [it] wasn’t afraid of squeezing meaning out of humble, quotidian materials pulled from cultural detritus. The work elevated these wildly varied materials (billboards, thrift store paintings, bullet casings, swizzle sticks, matchbooks, palm reader pamphlets, trophy antlers, girl scout badges, etc.) from junk into something complex, eloquent, magical, that talked about cults of fame and success, wanderlust, gender roles, myths, and fantasies about America.”



Alexis Smith, *Past Lives* (installation view, Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles), 1989. Courtesy of the Estate of Alexis Smith and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

Over a half-century after Smith began working as an artist, it's dizzying how much the American myths and fantasies that she was speaking to persist intact. A late collage, *Patriot* (2015), is uncharacteristically stark, and especially chilling given the current embrace of neofascism in the US. It shows what looks like a blown-up magazine photograph of a boy staring down an armored military vehicle, a faded little flag placed in his hand. Like an antique shop in a Philip K. Dick novel, Smith's art sorted the future by way of the past. And as with the science-fiction writer, despite being apposite, she wasn't exactly prescient as much as she was just paying attention. She retained a gallows humor throughout. One of my favorite works by Smith is a lithograph that I would happily put on my tombstone, called *Montage of Disasters* (1996). A pun on the title of the magazine *Life*, it's full of war-soaked images ostensibly taken from the publication's pages. "That's why they call it Life," says the tag above the bloody pictures. And below: "They don't call it Heaven."