

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Alexis Smith and how she ‘represents the power and potential of self-realization inherent in the American way’



“Men Seldom Make Passes at Girls Who Wear Glasses” by Alexis Smith (c. 1985. Wall painting with two framed mixed-media collages) (Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego)

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SEPT. 18, 2022

Few artists’ works exemplify the SoCal proclivity to merge images with text, found objects and Hollywood memorabilia, as does the oeuvre of Alexis Smith, the subject of a new exhibition, “Alexis Smith: The American Way,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) in La Jolla.

As this show of 50 collages, assemblage pieces and installations from the 1970s to the 2010s demonstrates, Smith has unearthed our cultural touchstones, stories and myths and artistically re-created them. Her collage, “Degree of Difficulty” (2005) juxtaposes a photo of the vibrant Britney Spears from a Pepsi ad, with a picture of the aging Shirley MacLaine from “Modern Maturity,” and a photographic calling card of a female

prostitute. With each image partially concealed by a geometric shape, the piece alludes to the objectification of women — the sexy young thing, the old woman, the sex worker — in contemporary society.

Smith has remarked that her art pieces are “... 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.”

The assemblage “Men Seldom Make Passes at Girls Who Wear Glasses” (1985), also evolving from Smith’s intuitive artistry, takes its title from 20th-century writer Dorothy Parker’s famous two-line poem. The artwork includes a large portrait of Marilyn Monroe, painted directly onto a gallery wall, wearing collaged sunglasses, featuring photos of football players, and the Parker poem. The wildly attractive installation — depicting the movie star making men the focus of her desires, rather than the converse — becomes a magnet for art viewers.

Smith, born in 1949 in Los Angeles, not only transformed and reinvented her own life through her artwork, but her numerous collages and installations have helped advance our understanding of how culture, politics and life intersect. She once said: “I happen to feel affectionately toward popular culture because I am part of it...I think my work is a very weird hybrid of old-time assemblage and a hands-on concern for battered objects that are poignant, mixed with a literacy and a conceptual point of view.”

Smith’s imaginative approach to artmaking was a product of her personal world view, influenced in part by growing up with a psychiatrist father, when she began creating collaged books, and by her four years studying at the then-recently-opened University of California Irvine art school (she graduated in 1970).

In that Orange County outpost, artist instructors, including Tony DeLap, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Vija Celmins and Ed Moses, empowered students to think and behave like professional artists, employed unusual teaching methods such as having them put crayons between their toes, collaborated on performance pieces and even partied with them.

While this New Age educational approach mystified some students, Smith embraced and boldly executed its paradigms, resulting in her ever-expanding artwork being recognized and exhibited by local, national and international art venues.

One of her admirers is Anthony Graham, associate curator at MCASD and curator of this Smith exhibition. He featured her 1980 collage “The American Way” in the

museum's 2016 show, "Selections from the Collection." He realized then that Smith had not had a major museum show in several years.



“Degree of Difficulty” by Alexis Smith (c. 2002) (Brooke and Erik Parker)

“With our strong holdings of her work and her impressive public artwork nearby, we are a fitting institution to showcase her career-long work,” he says. (Two of her public pieces, “Same Old Paradise” (1987), a 62-foot-long mural of a quaint village with rolling hills threatened by an ominous snake, and “Snake Path” (1992), a meandering 560-foot-long walkway, are displayed at University of California San Diego.)

Graham adds: “I visited Alexis’s artist’s studio in 2017 in Venice, California, where I met her, Scott Grieger, her husband, and Erin Calla Watson, her studio manager. We have all worked together to capture the complexity and nuance of her expansive body of work — presenting her early, intimately scaled collages, and recreating several of her large, immersive installations for this current exhibition.”

Smith’s “The American Way” assemblage on aluminum plate — featured in the current MCASD show — contains symbols of Americana, including a Coke bottle, a crossword puzzle, play money and a bra.

“The piece is enigmatic with its combination of text, image, found objects and screen-printed images,” Graham says. “These juxtapositions come together into poetic combinations that capture and amplify the energy of one another, creating individual associations in the heads of the viewers.”

Other artworks in this Alexis Smith retrospective are multi-panel storytelling collages, affixed to scenes painted directly onto the gallery walls. Among these is the re-creation of a group of installations, named “Raymond Chandler’s L.A.,” first shown in a Los Angeles gallery in 1980. Collages from the series, titled “Hello Hollywood,” “Golden State,” “Downtown,” “Sunset” and “Tightrope,” include quotes from Chandler’s novels, which capture the noir aspects of the older Hollywood. He also worked as a movie screenwriter and some of his books were later adapted into film noir movies.

The backdrops to these exhibits include abstracted city skylines, roadside ads and telephone poles of decreasing height, evoking the steadily receding perspective while driving. For fans of the Chandler novels and films, these settings may suggest Detective Philip Marlowe driving through Los Angeles and Hollywood, while ruminating on unsolved cases.

These Chandler-influenced works are complemented by other film inspired collages, including “Easy Rider,” “Midnight Cowboy,” “The Red Shoes” and “The Girl Can’t Help It,” the latter with its title from a 1965 Jayne Mansfield film. The Smith collage, “Madame Butterfly,” references the opera of that name. These ingenious creations contain movie and theater artifacts, along with images and text.

“The American Way” follows MCSAD’s recent “Niki de Saint Phalle in the 1960s” exhibition with work by the spirited female artist from the prior generation. Indeed, both Saint Phalle and Smith have mined their personal life experiences, transforming them into formidable bodies of work, with many of their pieces addressing dilemmas of contemporary women.

“The sense of freedom resonates throughout Alexis Smith’s work, the resistance to convenient art-historical categories, her ability to continue changing and expanding the formal strategies of collage, even the difficulty of situating her work in relationship to her own biography,” Graham says in the exhibit’s catalog. “But ultimately, it represents the power and potential of self-realization inherent in the American way.”

“Alexis Smith: The American Way”

When: Through Feb. 5, 2023

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 700 Prospect St., La Jolla

<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/visual-arts/story/2022-09-18/alexis-smith-and-how-she-represents-the-power-and-potential-of-self-realization-inherent-in-the-american-way>