

VAN DOREN  
WAXTER

ARTFORUM

Alexis Smith

HONOR FRASER

By Natilee Harren November 2013



Alexis Smith, *Golden Glow*(detail), 1995, three mixed-media collages (each 29 x 24"), pair of leather boots, overall dimensions variable.

Art history has had a difficult time knowing what to do with the work of Alexis Smith. Her thingy object collages have long been awkwardly characterized as belonging to a strain of witty, narrative Conceptualism associated with the work of fellow LA artists Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, and Allen Ruppersberg. Ruppersberg may be the most apt comparison, but if his works tend to employ a novelistic structure, Smith's have the allusive impact of short-form poetry. On the other hand, Smith's deep commitment to collage and assemblage—not to mention the esoteric mood of her works as well as their use of Americana—begs comparison to figures such as Joseph Cornell, H. C. Westermann, and George Brecht. But unlike the work of those artists, Smith's collages attain

effects ranging from corny and ironic to deeply critical, even harrowing. They manage to be simultaneously imbued with nostalgia and cynical about it.

Following an exhibition of smart, spare landscapes at Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica this spring, which rejuvenated local interest in Smith's work, her recent exhibition at Honor Fraser focused mainly on collage portraits produced between 1994 and 2012. These were complemented by a reiteration of the room-size installation *Past Lives*, 1989, a collaboration with poet Amy Gerstler that, with its blackboard, wallpaper border of cursive script, and landscape of child-size chairs arranged singly and in duos, mimics a classroom. Chronicling the hopes, regrets, achievements, addictions, afflictions, and deaths of fictional individuals via the pairing of texts and distinct, anthropomorphized objects, *Past Lives* is a kind of collective, speculative portrait.

Admittedly, Smith's intuitive manner of working falls short in some cases, particularly when she stops at obvious associations and hackneyed puns (as in *Dirty Laundry*, 2004, an American flag-patterned sock laid over an image of a cargo jet). But most of Smith's collages successfully take on weighty material. Several of the works in the show delivered antiwar messages and were seemingly produced in response to the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. In *Image War*, 2003, a graffitied copy of Elvis's *G.I. Blues* album cover (featuring the singer in army uniform) is pasted onto a photographic backdrop depicting balaclavaed snipers approaching dusty apartment high-rises along with the question WHO ARE YOU GOING TO BELIEVE, ME OR YOUR OWN EYES? *Don't Feel like the Lone Ranger*, 2003, brings together an illustration of a boy riding a carousel, a toy handgun, a pack of cigarettes, and a statement of wistful jingoism: THINGS WERE SIMPLER THEN. THERE WERE THE GOOD GUYS AND THE BAD GUYS, AND THE GOOD GUYS ALWAYS WON. These war-related collages draw strong parallels to Martha Rosler's "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful" series (from 1967–72 and 2004), which raises a compelling question: Might Smith be received differently if we were to rethink her practice primarily in relation to Rosler and other critical appropriationists such as Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler rather than in her immediate context of California Conceptualism?

Indeed, many of the stronger works in the show were overtly feminist, such as the triptych *Golden Glow*, 1995, in which illustrated advertisements featuring busty, leggy women are mounted in cheerful frames and satirically exaggerated with additions of gold leaf to their teeth. Even more cutting is *Degree of Difficulty*, 2002, which superimposes three female tropes: that of the young pop star (a Pepsi ad featuring Britney Spears), the prostitute (a call girl's calling card), and the brassy old broad (Shirley MacLaine on the cover of *Modern Maturity*). Each woman's image is partly censored by a colored shape. Britney does not return our gaze and MacLaine is silenced, whereas the hooker's sexual orifices are prudishly covered by a green circle that contradictorily seems to say, "Go ahead." Smith's critical strategy is to exaggerate select details of her found materials in order to draw out the brutal undertones of anodyne textual or visual clichés, uniting a collage aesthetic native to California with a feminist discourse, one in which her work might be better understood.