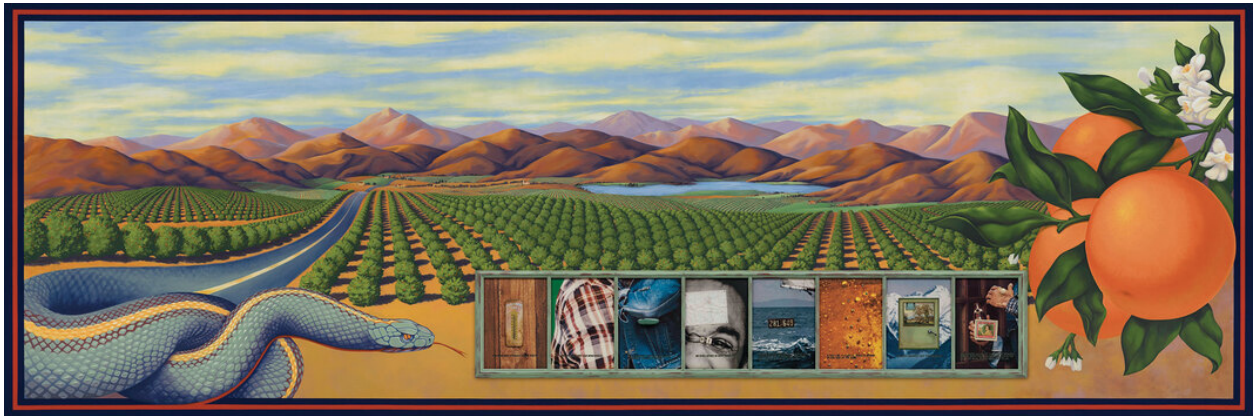


ARTFORUM

CLOSE-UP: GIRLS VISIONS

EVERYTHING

Travis Diehl on Alexis Smith's *Same Old Paradise*, 1987



Alexis Smith, *Same Old Paradise*, 1987, eight mixed-media collages on house paint mural, overall 22 x 62'.

IT TOOK THE MAGIC of two Hollywood scene painters to blow up Alexis Smith's sketch of an orange-crate label to mural size. *Same Old Paradise*, 1987, is a monumental work, monumental like studio films of the iconic valley: twenty-two feet high, sixty-two feet wide, bigger than a billboard. The two-lane blacktop flows straight down the left side of the picture from the lolling hills, then curves into a snake. The solid yellow line morphs into a ridge of bright scales on the serpent's tarmac-gray body. To the right is a row of eight assemblages of found objects, photographs, and texts, framed in flaking sea-foam green like the windows of some Steinbeckian shack. The glass of each panel bears a line from Smith's abridgment of Jack Kerouac's amphetamine opus *On the Road* (1957), the text silk-screened over prints abstracted from what could be ads for cigarettes, denim, and beer. The right edge of the rightmost assemblage nestles against an in-your-face cluster of fruit and blossoms, heavy on the bough and swollen by foreshortening. The orange groves shrink toward the mountains in five-point perspective, and the blurs of speckled branches flick apart into straight dirt rows, the effect like orchards watched from the window of a speeding car.

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Alexis Smith, *Ma-chees-ma*, 1971, paper collage, 14 x 11".

Smith has plied the highways of Americana since the 1970s, sleeplessly splitting the lane between brilliance and cliché. A first act, age seventeen: Born Patti Anne, Smith took the name of a '40s silver-screen actress, a sobriquet both instantly specific and too common to remember. Yes, perfect—she would be Alexis Smith. Her work would eat its own tail. An early collage, *Ma-chees-ma*, 1971, presents a sliced-apart paper cutout of the starlet, the incision hidden by two envelopes, like the box used to saw a showgirl in half. The work appears in the catalogue for her 1991 retrospective with the following attribution: “Collection of the actress Alexis Smith.” The Chandlerisms followed—a long series of paper sheets typewritten with one-liners drawn from Raymond Chandler’s sunshine pulp and punctuated by a trinket or two—a tattered matchbook, a pair of little cocktail glasses. From here on out, her collages grew complex and colorful, like a California roadside, incorporating custom frames and found backgrounds with snatches of literature carefully lettered on the glass. Like profound sleights of hand, her juxtapositions can seem superficial. *Niagara*, 1985, a two-tone granite headstone, is etched with the profile of Marilyn Monroe, her hair cascading into a drawing of the famous falls. It’s almost too obvious. Yes, Monroe starred in a film of that name. She was born Norma Jean. She went over the edge of the American dream. The two or three worried elements of an Alexis Smith, whether text or image, souvenir or toy, open a gulf between them, and the polite horror of the country pours in.



Alexis Smith, *Niagara*, 1985, granite, 44 x 32 x 8".

Smith grasped the cliché that Kerouac would become, already was, unspooling the collective recollection of his manic scroll in a way true to the American dream.

In the '80s, Smith developed room-size installations combining murals, sculpture, and collage. Some of these projects appeared in public: *Starlight*, 1982, at Unity Savings and Loan in Hollywood; *The Grand*, 1983, throughout the lobby of the De Vos Hall performing-arts center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 1993, for the floor of the Los Angeles Convention Center, she designed a terrazzo map of the Pacific Rim. *Same Old Paradise* combines her idioms of elegant assemblage and boldface public art. The Brooklyn Museum commissioned the piece for its airy entryway; it was made in Hollywood, hung in New York, then shipped back west to SoCal, rolled up in a God-long crate. In 2021, after thirty years in storage, the work found a permanent home in the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego, unfurled on the clerestory wall of a new auditorium building. It's the second Smith on campus. *Paradise* inspired the other: *Snake Path*, 1992, a mosaic of slate scales winding downhill through a garden to the Brutalist, brazierlike Geisel Library, its diamond head licking the plaza.

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Alexis Smith, *Snake Path*, 1992, slate tiles, granite, marble, fruit trees. Installation view, University of California, San Diego.

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If Kerouac captured the Beat generation in a few hundred pages, Smith summed up Reaganite gloom in a handful of koans. 'THE ROAD WAS STRAIGHT AS AN ARROW', says the first panel, a picture of weathered boards collaged with a tin thermometer housing that reads ROYAL CROWN COLA. It's an up arrow of rising heat, but it also points forward into the painted land in the way of arrows perpendicular to the ground. Toy arrows protrude from the second panel as if shot there by Hollywood Indians, the heads apparently buried in a photo of a model's preppy plaid-flannel shoulder in what might be an ad for Newports. MOTHS SMASHED OUR WINDSHIELD, reads Smith's line ("Moths began smashing," wrote Kerouac), as the fletched shafts smash into the museum glass. This is Smith at her best: the barb of a pun exquisitely delivered exactly after you expect it. The straight road becomes a weapon.

Same Old Paradise crowns a series of collages that use Kerouac's words as punch lines. Smith's ambivalent celebration of the open road and its muscle-car machismo almost pats Kerouac on the head as it takes the wheel. She makes no mention of Dean Moriarty; the narrator, Sal Paradise, is paid oblique homage in the installation's title. Rather than eulogize two meteoric hipsters, Smith boils down Kerouac's "He and I" to simply "I"—the authorship of the great American novel compounds and erodes like a blue hill. The already thin veil of Kerouac's first-person narrator—we know it was *him* in that car, on that road—blows away. Instead, Smith's voice laminates the author: Kerouac and Smith, riding the white lines through Eden. Smith appreciated an age of simple metaphors. She grasped the cliché that Kerouac would become, already was, unspooling the collective recollection of his manic scroll in a way true to the American dream—the one of today, having recuperated Kerouac's skew path into its many chapters on manifest destiny, on masculine thrust, on pearls and girls for the taking.



Alexis Smith, *Virgin Sacrifice*, 1983, offset lithograph, 24 x 18".

Smith knew a snake when she saw one. For years, the artist kept a talking Trump doll from the ex-president's "Apprentice" days in her studio—"I have no choice but to tell you you're fired!" it says, plus sixteen other phrases—and a framed ticket from his Vegas floor show made its way into a 2013 work. In her art, the snake stands for original sin—not of Eve, the biblical Stacy reaching for enlightenment, but of Adam, turning snakelike himself in his quest to Chad his way back to paradise. In the last days of Reagan's second term, Smith editioned a silver necklace with the tail of a snake and the nose of a locomotive. Elsewhere, a plastic serpent ripples in the corner of *Virgin Sacrifice*, 1983; a snake constricts the buxom target silhouette of *Asphalt Jungle*, 1985; another wriggles down the classifieds in *The Holy Road*, 1988. *Jack*, 1990—as in Kerouac—displays the army-green mascot of the Gadsden flag crossed out by a strip of rubber tire. And the woman at the end of the road in California—is she Alexis Smith?



Alexis Smith, *Jack*, 1990, mixed-media collage, 71 1/2 x 93".

Smith's first retrospective in three decades opened this past month at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Her last major survey, in 1991, traveled east to west, from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, to the Museum of

Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Maybe her quicksand of tchotchkes, quips, and clichés didn't quite gel with the bloodless cool of her Pictures peers, at least not the East Coast mode, though she showed with Margo Leavin until the gallery's end. Smith's acid taste for Hollywood set her apart. Not many people in the '80s—nor today—cared to remember that nobody, not Smith nor you nor I, can wake up from the American dream. Smith chose to love that dream, all its golden light and subtending darkness. The intense orange pasted on fruit crates was an early advertising ploy, conjuring an impossibly saturated bounty that was at once a fantastic lie and an awesome possibility. *Same Old Paradise* pulls off the same trick. The picture is a fake of a fake produced by a professional showmaker, but the result is true. The proverbial road is there, to be taken, beaten, overcome, like the desiccated lands through which the highway slithers—yeah, from one end of this serpentine Eden to the other, the madcap beatitudes hit the ocean and bounce back.

“Alexis Smith: The American Way” is on view through January 29, 2023, at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

Travis Diehl is a writer and critic based in New York. He is a recipient of the Creative Capital Arts Writers Grant and the Rabkin Prize in Visual Arts Journalism and is Online Editor at X-TRA.