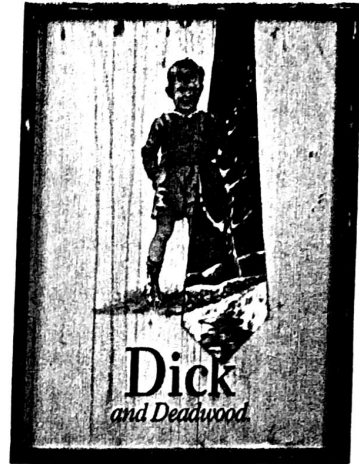


Alexis

Smith



R list

Top: Alexis Smith, *Calamity and Deadwood*, 1985, mixed media, each of two panels 24 1/2 x 18 1/2". Private collection.
 Bottom: Alexis Smith, *Fool's Gold*, 1982, mixed media, 11 x 22". Installation view.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

I'll try to read and I want you to tell me the first thing that pops into your head.

For Alexis Smith, in the beginning was the word, a collection of characters with the power to signify. And her investment in words has resulted in visual verbal returns. For example, there's Jane. In 1985, the allusionary power of these four letters in this sequence led Smith to some 30 collages composed around them. Jane: slang for a woman; a conveyor of Hollywood allure—Jayne Mansfield, Jane Russell; a popular myth, often paired with another—Tarzan and Jane, Dick and Jane, Calamity Jane and Deadwood Dick; a resonance of the proper and literary—Jane Austen, Jane Bowles, Jane Eyre; a symbol of the anonymous, the everywoman—Jane Doe. In Smith's collages, a single word, sentence, or phrase begets a matrix of potential connotations, spinning webs of possibility between the imagination and the material world.

Smith's "Janes," like her other collages, installations, graphics, and sculptures, are synoptic and synactic—her work has been described as a sort of "synaptic Cubism."¹ Their nervy layers of meaning, definition, and dimension seem to snap crackle and pop, eliciting progressively deeper understanding from a viewer. Functioning as found mnemonic devices, these combines of text and image and sometimes object are the triggers of complex responses, or, rather, are the volatile elements in a chain reaction: the addition of each image or object creates fission. This cause-and-effect relationship recalls Jasper Johns' remark about taking an object and doing something to it, then doing something else to it, and so forth.

I just wish they would leave me alone, and let me go to hell by my own route.

These fed-up words, a quotation of the real-life Calamity Jane, are screened in gold across the bottom of an oversized still of actress Frances Farmer playing the role of Calamity Jane in the film *Badlands of Dakota*, 1941. Dressed in a fringed jacket and cowboy hat, her pistol drawn, this Hollywood Jane is ready for any Calamity. In combination with other bits of imagery, including a temperance edict from the Salvation Army that partially obscures Farmer's face, like a veil, the quote becomes unstabilized and the fission begins, releasing the energy of individual interpretations. These interpretations are encouraged by certain clues. For example, the viewer is reminded of Farmer's one-time standing as a symbol of Hollywood decadence by the drug capsules attached to her gun-belt in place of bullets; yet these shells evoke not only excess but also ammunition against the pain of

Farmer's life. The physical resemblance between the capsules and bullets makes this switch formal as well as symbolic. The confusion or mixture of presences in the work—Farmer, Calamity Jane, Smith, and other anonymous identities—are emphasized by the veiling of the face. A label from a cheap bottle of Thunderbird wine, the gold back of a playing card with the logo of a Thunderbird car, the film still's cheap gold-vinyl frame—all these elements drive the work to the place of its title, *Hell on Wheels*. And the combination of words and images keeps fizzing: the name "Thunderbird," the car logo, and the vinyl, for example, reinforce the idea of the automobile as an archetypal American metaphor for psychological movement, for both driving and being driven—driving yourself to distraction, or driving yourself to drink.

Each of the collages in Smith's "Jane" series presents a similarly absorbing puzzle—each is part a trivia quiz, part a deconstruction of language recalling Jacques Derrida. Imbricated with strata of significance, each is time-consuming; that is to say, the artist builds time into the works, so that they offer more to the viewer who spends a while unrid-



Alexis Smith, *The Grand*, 1983. Installation view at DeVos Hall, Grand Center, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Photo: Grant Mudford; courtesy of House & Garden.

dling them, or who returns for a subsequent reading/viewing. "You can look at a painting, more or less, without thinking about it, without being aware of how much time you are spending," Smith says. "In my work, you're immediately faced with a conscious choice. You read it or you don't read it."² Smith is a ventriloquist writer and a ventriloquist artist. She appropriates language and images, dressing them up in juxtapositions for dramatic impact and sending them into the world to perform as her stand-ins. "It's a question of finding people to say what you want to say," she explains. Her art is personal without being biographical, the simulacrum of her many selves.

Things arrived from a thousand different places all at once. By some sort of mysterious magnetism they fell into their right positions.

So Jean Cocteau wrote in his diary, to be quoted by Smith in her *Beauty and the Beast*, 1977. The remark extends far beyond that piece alone in its applications to her art. Smith's earliest visual works are books, which she started constructing in 1969 out of text, collage items, and bits of flotsam less imagistic than symbolic. The sheets were kept in loose-leaf binders with elaborately decorated covers, a return to and extension of the artist's childhood hobby of collage. Smith attended the University of California, Irvine, pursuing a half-hearted ambition to become a French teacher. She abandoned that goal when teachers in the newly formed art department encouraged her to continue her explorations of the book medium as a form of art. Studying with artists Robert Irwin, Ed Moses, Vija Celmins, and Bruce Nauman, Smith was encouraged and attracted by their vision of the art process. She graduated in 1970. Smith eventually more or less jettisoned the practice of making fragile one-of-a-kind books because they came to seem to her a little precious and impractical, but that work with text, image, and object is the foundation of her art. In its furniture, its light, and other accoutrements, her first installation, at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1972, simulated the atmosphere of a reading room. (For Smith, it particularly evoked a Christian Science reading room.) On the walls, in Plexiglas frames, were mounted typewritten pages of text—chapter 14, "Picture-Writing," of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*—collaged with small geometric shapes of cutout paper. This installation is the earliest example of Smith's use of appropriation as a method of renewing clichés, a process, as she has remarked, with a conscious place in her art:

Consciousness makes things boring. The commonness replaces whatever symbolic meaning something had in the first place. If you take a cliché back to the original impulse underneath, you can cause a person to experience that source in an undervalued way.

"By the shores of Gitche Gume / By the shining Big-Sea-Water...." The words of *The Song of Hiawatha*, the stuff of school poetry reading, are etched into the American collective memory. As such, they have featured in jokes, cartoons, parodies—have become clichés. The passage Smith used has to do with Hiawatha's invention of an alphabet—a symbol of communication. The verses are typed on green music paper; small paper circles, crescents, and triangles, and photographs of such things as hands upon a keyboard, are spaced along the lines like musical notes, heightening the evocation of music created by the ground. The musical setting makes the words sing with fresh meaning:

From his pouch he took his colors,
Took his paints of different colors,

On the smooth bark of a birch-tree
Painted many shapes and figures,
Wonderful and mystic figures,
And each figure had a meaning,
Each some word or thought suggested.

Although Smith's image vocabulary set her work apart from Conceptual art as it was defined in those years of nascency, the two approaches can now be seen to share certain parallel interests. Smith's work does have a place in Conceptual art as it is more broadly understood today; in fact, it has a kind of prescience for the current generation of Conceptual artists, who are sometimes referred to as post-Conceptualists. In this, it is related to the late-'60s and early-'70s approach of John Baldessari and Edward Ruscha, who, of course, also live in California. The apprehension of society as mediated by images seems to have been quite evident, as an urgent subject for art, to artists in the Los Angeles of the post-Pop '70s. The city was nearly naked of museums and galleries; with few at-hand sources for so-called "high culture," these artists addressed the available popular culture of films, advertising, paperbacks, magazines, and billboards.

One important difference between the creation of art and of science is the feasibility of paraphrase. The semantic content of a great scientific paper . . . can later be paraphrased by lesser scientists without any serious loss of content. On the other hand, the content of an artistic work . . . is actually dependent on the exact manner of its realization . . . In other words, to paraphrase a work of art requires a genius equal to that of the original creator. Such a successful paraphrase would in fact constitute a work of art in its own right.

This text from a breakthrough piece of Smith's, *Madame Butterfly*, 1975, originally appeared in the magazine *Scientific American*. In *Madame Butterfly* it is juxtaposed with two old film stills, the scenes evoking creativity in science and in music respectively. On successive sheets of pale-blue paper Smith goes on to explore Puccini's opera, combining a program-note-like synopsis with visual tokens: an origami butterfly, a Stars and Stripes labeled "made in Japan," and a blot of black Japanese ink resembling a butterfly. (The Rorschach test is again a cliché of psychology in the movies.)

The kind of reduction of a plot or narrative to the essential quip, quote, or rebus that Smith perfected in *Madame Butterfly* paradoxically adds rather than subtracts potential interpretations. The process of addition, of course, is furthered by the text's juxtaposition with an image. Nancy Marmor, analyzing Smith's narrative collages from the early '70s, wrote of this bond in them between picture and word or *lexia*, as she calls it, after Roland Barthes. The terms of that bond, she points out, range from "images or objects that function cen-

tripetally, remaining extremely close to the words of the text and giving no more than sensuous particularity to a key term or phrase, to those images that are much less literal, that act centrifugally, expanding outward from the narrative by surprising associative leaps, complementing and extending the text by metaphoric processes that find their parallels in the structure of figurative language."³ Or, as Jean-Luc Godard has said (Smith quotes him in her *Cathy*, 1981):

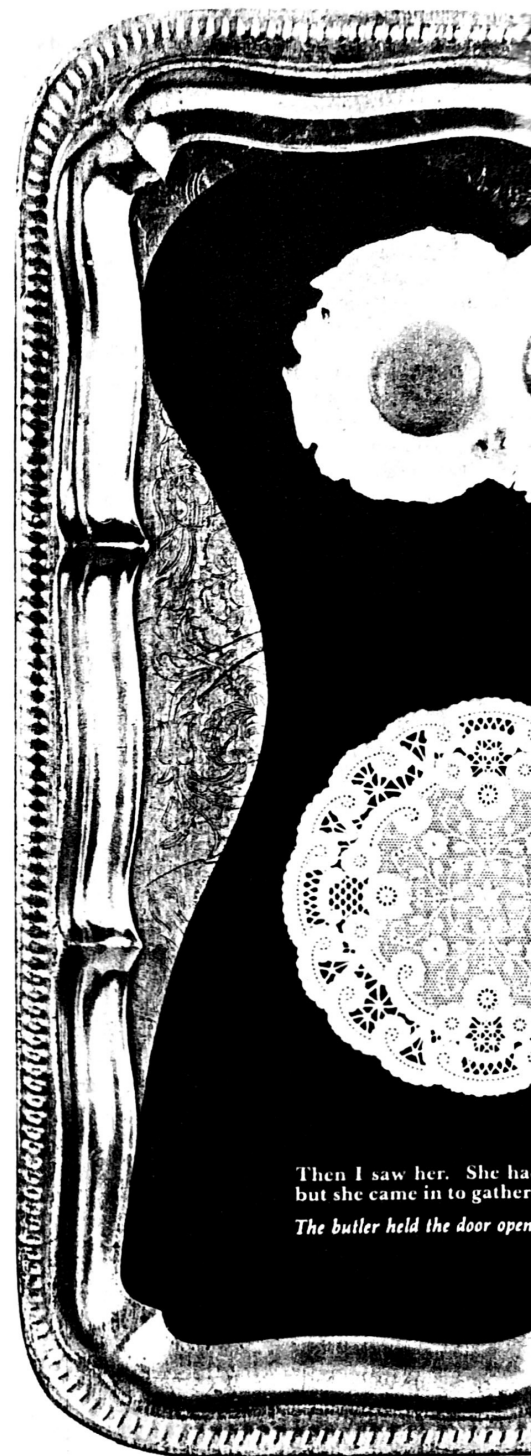
We must confront vague ideas with clear images.

After 1980, the internal associative gaps within Smith's work were extended into the architectural space around it, in the process gaining a dramatic power and presence. Her contextualist concern with the work's relationship to the so-called "neutral" gallery space was organic to the work as well as to the times, and was a by-product of the artist's readings of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966, to which she had been introduced by the Los Angeles architect Coy Howard, her longtime companion. Smith started to multiply the layers of meaning even farther by extending the themes of her collages into the context of the architectural space. *Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles*, 1980, an installation in the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, included sawdust on the floor and, on the walls, painted graphics that reinforced the content of the collages. Smith had in fact begun making "Chandlerisms," works incorporating brief sentences by the writer of Los Angeles thrillers, in 1978: "She sat in front of her princess dresser trying to paint the suitcases out from under her eyes." "He looked about as unobtrusive as a tarantula on a slice of angel food." "I sipped my drink. I like an effect as well as the next fellow." *Golden State*, 1980, includes a long passage from Chandler's *Little Sister*:

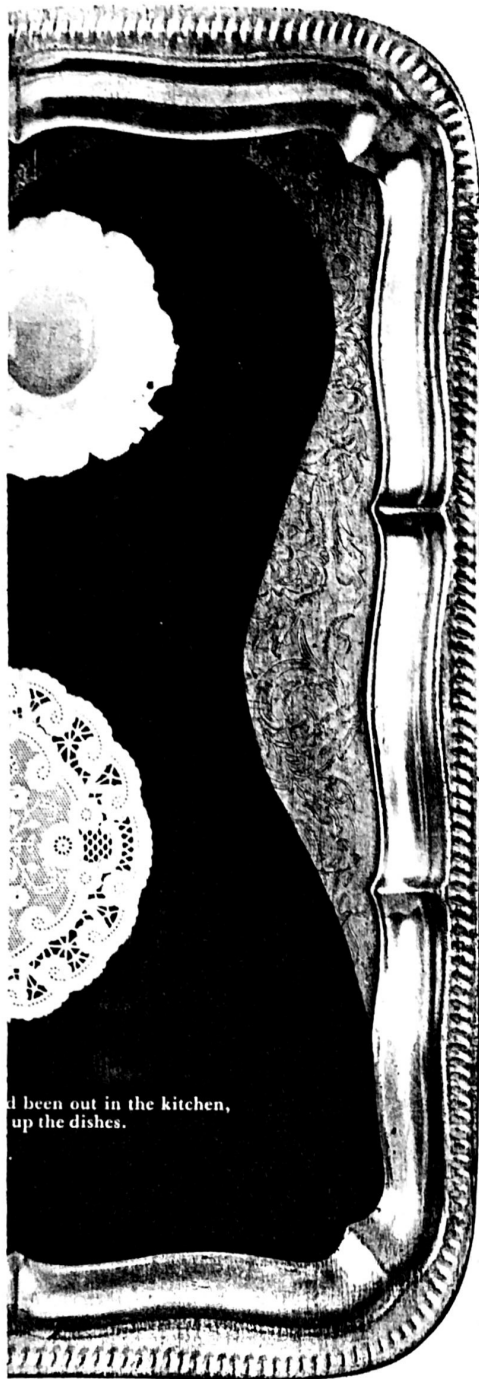
I drove east on Sunset but I didn't go home. At La Brea I turned north and swung over to Highland, out over Culver's Pass and down onto Ventura Boulevard, past Studio City and Sherman Oaks and Encino. There was nothing lonely about that trip. There never is on that road.

Fast boys in strip-tear-down Fords shot in and out of traffic streams, missing fenders by a sixteenth of an inch, but somehow always missing them. Tired men in dusty coats waved and lightened their grips on the wheel and plunged on north toward home and dinner, an evening with the sports page, the battery radio, the whining of their spoiled children and the gabble of their silly wives.

The Chandler installation of 1980, incorporating many of these quips, was a leap forward from Smith's previous works. Previously her combinations of image and text had been weighted toward text; now they became specifically visual. And with her appropriations from Chandler, Smith began to



Then I saw her. She had
but she came in to gather
The butler held the door open



been out in the kitchen,
up the dishes.

Alexis Smith, *Bombshell*, 1982, mixed media, 17½ x 12½"
Private collection.

show a preoccupation with the themes of lost innocence and disillusionment, linked to the notion of destiny. This development is manifested in several pieces on being American. The sense of a loss of innocence in Smith's work may also be seen as a disaffection with Modernism. At this juncture, her collage work loses its reductivist, self-referential tendency and leans more heavily on the world of the culture at large. This direction can be called "post-Modern," in the sense that post-Modernism, as Craig Owens writes, "neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference."⁴

The realization of this shift in Smith's art could be seen in the ambitious installation *Alexis Smith Presents U.S.A.*, 1981, at the Holly Solomon Gallery, New York. The installation combined song lyrics, Burma Shave ads, and texts borrowed from the writings of John Dos Passos, Thornton Wilder, Nathanael West, and John Steinbeck. Dos Passos' use of newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, and biographical vignettes of historical personages woven together with fiction in his trilogy *U.S.A.* proved a model for Smith's more critical use of appropriation; and in its ability to summon memories, feelings, and other functions of the mind and body, her incorporation of images and objects from the quotidian world echoes his use of the technique of stream-of-consciousness. In her *Newsreel*, 1980, Smith cites Dos Passos:

to rebuild yesterday to clip out paper figures to stimulate growth wrap newspaper into faces smoothing and wrangling in the mirrors barely fall curtains of time).

One panel within the *U.S.A.* installation consisted of the first line of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*—"A poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream"—typed onto brown paper tape and then mounted in sections on a row of flattened cardboard boxes, generating individual cells of meaning bound together by a frame, and set against a wall-sized painting of a town and city landscape. This panel of boxes, since reused in a newer work, is a good example of Smith's associative thought. The words "a poem, a stink" overlap a box labeled for apples and one for Clorox bleach. With them on the boxes are a delicate peel of apple-green paint and a little circle of bandanna. The frayed red fabric of the bandanna echoes the shape of an apple, and also, perhaps, in its wornness, evokes the ragged drifters of Steinbeck's books. "A grating noise, a quality of light" crosses the boundary between a match carton—the matches, of course, which must be scratched along a rough surface to ignite, suggesting both a grating noise and light—and a box labeled "glass," for another kind of light, and another noise. A small firecracker is set on the match carton, and

a brassy tin-can lid on the "glass" box both glitters with a third reference to light and alludes to the canning factories of Cannery Row. "A tone, a habit" is superimposed upon a Wrigley's chewing gum box, for things getting chewed up, and a box for books of matches—more matches, more books—along with a crushed hair curler (a reference to the prerequisite nagging wife, and her tone of habitual complaint?) and a crushed Lucky Strike pack. Smoking, of course, is a major romantic habit in these books, and the cigarette label may recall the un-Lucky workers in *Cannery Row*; the several match references may be inspired by the possibility of a "strike" in the book "A nostalgia," set on a box for orange Crush (that sweet sticky soda pop of childhood), is topped with another tin-can lid, this one all orange with rust, as round and orange as the California sun. The accumulating references to "crush" may suggest something of the labor men are subjected to in Steinbeck's book. Finally the words "a dream" are mounted on a carton for Cracker Jacks, recalling the firecracker earlier in the series, the "crackers" who worked for the dream, and of course the prize, always disappointing, in every box of that children's confection. This is topped by a crushed paper cocktail parasol—protective covering in a state of disintegration.

The rest of the collages in *U.S.A.* were less physically ephemeral. Made of aluminum and cardboard, their integration with graphics applied directly to the wall was more interwoven. This was the first installation in which Smith employed collages as compositional elements in a larger picture, and doing so led her to consider the walls of a space as potential canvas, easily altered to adapt a particular architectural context. The collages gained an extra layer of meaning as motifs whose meaning might contribute to and depend upon the place of installation. Late last year in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, for instance, the boxes relating to *Cannery Row*, shown in *Alexis Smith Presents U.S.A.* against a background symbolizing a transition of small-town into urban life, were mounted upon a bright-orange, wall-sized, labellike painting proclaiming "TOPLESS vegetables." The image showed a conical toy, spinning in place like a classroom globe. In this nostalgic context, *Cannery Row* attained new poignancy.

The move from Smith's internally directed collages of the '70s toward an address of the exterior world has developed farther in her work of this decade. Her wall graphics are often reminiscent of cinema posters, billboards, and WPA murals, so they are naturally suited for public spaces. And Smith's public-art projects since 1980, including sculpture at Art Park and participation in the MacArthur Park art program in Los Angeles, are notable. Conspicuous among them, perhaps, is *The Grand*, 1983, a permanent installation, the renovation of the three-story-high Keeler lobby of the

... A HELLHOLE IF EVER THERE WAS ONE.

DeVos Hall performing-arts facility in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On a large scale, the work explores the tension between the monumental public image and the intimate collage. The experience of working on larger-scale projects had a strong influence on the physicality of the art in a pair of complementary exhibitions in 1982. Each of the murals in "Satan's Satellites," at the Felsen Gallery, included a discrete collage element encompassed within the large expanse of the painting. The work that gave the exhibition its title (which came from a sci-fi B-movie) was a planetary outerspace vista with the edge of a passing space vehicle clipped by the right margin and metal hubcaps doubling as spaceships off in the distance. The caption read, "Dawn found them moving over an unfamiliar landscape." On another wall a ragged basketball hoop hung over mounted flickering flames: "... a hellhole if ever there was one." And in a third mural, *Fool's Gold*, a desert scene dotted with cacti under an immense red hot sun, a painted prospector led a painted prospector hidden by a three-dimensional plaster figure of a woman. The work was framed in a painted border of trompe l'oeil wood, and captioned, "Sometimes men went crazy from the heat." The murals' large-scale graphics were drawn from mechanically reproduced sources—photographs, comic books, magazines. As Gregory Ulmer has written, in "The Object of Post-Criticism,"

Means of mechanical reproduction receive exact copies of sights and sounds (in collage terms, mechanical reproduction remains on little signs and sounds from their contexts—de-motivate them, hence the loss of resonance, the undecidability of allusion) only to re-motivate them as signifiers in a new system.

In a second room in "Satan's Satellites" were smaller collage works based on some of the same texts as those in the three murals. Here, for example, "Sometimes men went crazy from the heat" was superimposed on an image of Chiquita, a banana wearing a Carmen Miranda-style sombrero and a pair of plastic lips. The piece is entitled "Go Rose," in reference to the double application of the word "rose" in both "Satan's Satellites" and the section—"Christmas Eve, 1943," at the Hugo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles—used the same source material of "vicarious adventure," the emphasis in "Christmas Eve" was more on narrative structure than on imagery. It was comprised of 43



collages whose texts were also borrowed from a variety of popular literary genres—thriller, combat stories, romances, westerns, science fiction. The show was conceived as a loose narrative, organized according to the premise that the plots in these kinds of genres are basically the same and the characters and their emotions interchangeable. Absurdly inappropriate people made comments and undertook actions in what wound up as a weirdly familiar story. Though the works exist as independent entities, had their texts could be read in sequence:

*The hint of compassion she had seen before seemed to have evaporated. Her icy eye cut into him and froze her heart.
She shivered in his grasp. His was that sudden, icy frost.
A chill wind blew from the north. High up the stars twinkled dimly
as the sky filled with scores of white parachutes...*

The images in which the texts were mounted were developed from found paintings and mechanically reproduced images drawn from the culture of kitsch. This reference was literally outlined in the works' outlandish frames, which Smith constructed in the style of the '40s or '50s so that they appear "found." The "genre" writings were supported by "generic" imagery and framing.

This complication of text, image, and object reaches Byzantine proportions in the series "Jane." The allegorical fragments thrive in their symbiotic relationship. Consider *The Perfect Couple*. Of a grid of color photographs, by far the largest shows a football player about to pass the ball. The grid is a classic structure of Modernism, of course, and here it also refers to the football gridiron. Over this image Smith has silkscreened caricature faces of gladiators, one of them lifting up a woman

who smiles at him seductively. Relating football to the war games of the classical past, the montage signals their continuity. Set over the image is a bent and rusted child's baton. Evoking the female cheerleader or jargon-twirler, it tells us of the role allotted to women in these games. And its broken crook (like a bent phallus), makes the cartoonlike violence of the gladiators real. Printed upon the montage images, in a letter-sweater typeface called "Princeton," is a quotation from a biography of Jayne Mansfield: "She could wrap him around her pinkie, but he could pick her up with his." The allegory is furthered by the fluted frame of faux marble, alluding to classical ruins. *The Perfect Couple* is a condensation of Smith's use of popular culture as allegory.

Walter Benjamin, as Gregory Ulmer points out, has written that "allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things." Ulmer continues, "the premise being that something becomes an object of knowledge only as it 'decays,' or is made to disintegrate (analysis as decay)."¹ The texts and objects that Smith incorporates often stand in for decay. She has combined the aspects of montage and allegory so that the image from daily life can serve as the source for an idea. The object is used "not to convey its natural characteristics but those which we ourselves have lent it."² Smith is upping the ante, conceptually and formally—piling on the metaphors, similes, analogies, symbols. The texts are other—the oracle of Delphi in a temple of papyrus, on a lawn of Astroturf, with a fountain of bubbling Aylar, a simulacrum of truth that is fitting that as a child, Smith changed her given name, Patricia Anne, for Alex, and later for Alexis, the name of a film star.

Like something out of a late, late movie. Like something out of a late, late movie. □

Hunter Drohojowska, the chair of the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences of the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, is working on a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe.

1. Christopher Knight, "The Grand Catalogue essay, Grand Rapids Art Center, September 1983.
2. All quotations of Smith are from interviews of her by Gregory Ulmer in *Journal of Post-Pedagogy*, no. 1, January 1937.
3. Nancy Marmer, "Alexis Smith: The Narrative Act," *Artforum*, no. 14, December 1976, p. 33.
4. Craig Owens, quoted in Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Pedagogy*, ed. Foster, Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983, p. 97.