



Alexis Smith, *Starlight*, 9' x 39' mixed media, 1982, permanent installation, Unity Savings and Loan, West Hollywood, California.

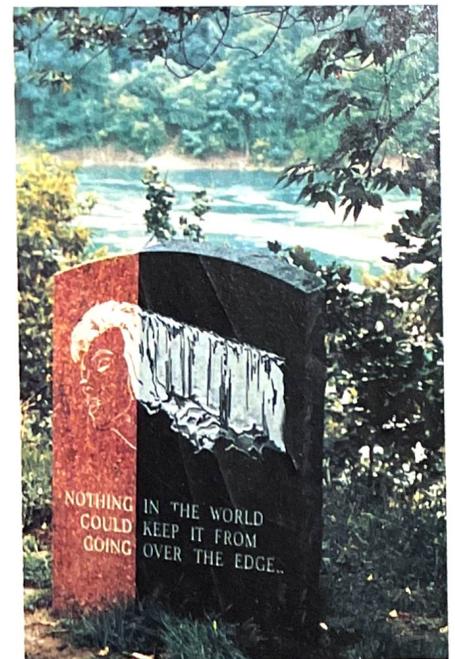
## THE PUBLIC ART OF ALEXIS SMITH

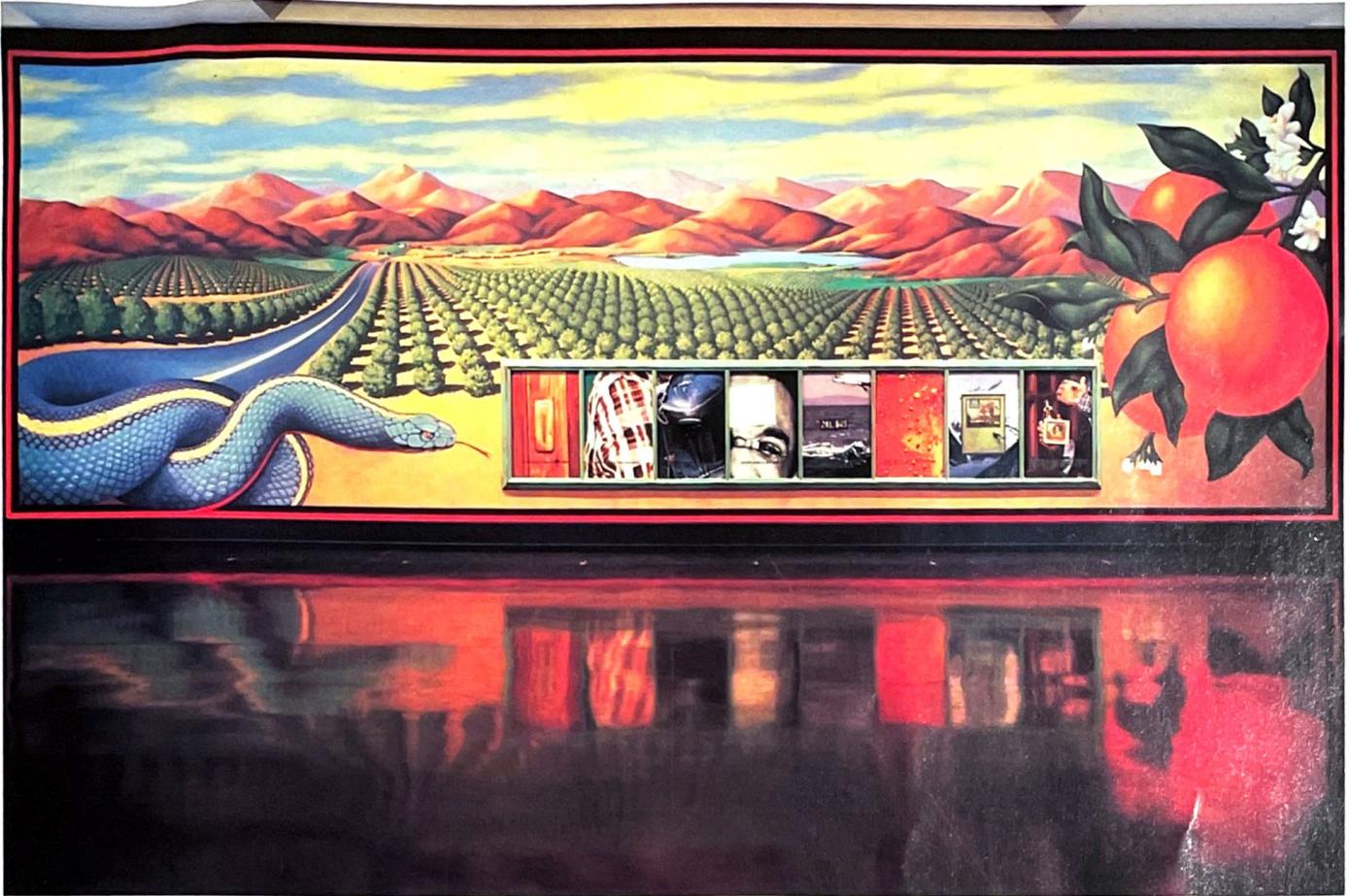
Hunter Drohojowska

Alexis Smith, *Mini-Monument*, 1986, bronze suitcase, MacArthur Park, Los Angeles.



Alexis Smith, *Niagara*, 1985, granite marker overlooking Niagara River, Art Park, Lewiston, New York (destroyed).





Alexis Smith, *Same Old Paradise*, 22' x 65' mixed media, 1987-88, installed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (Oct. 1987-Jan. 1988).  
 Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

*Not in Utopia . . .*

*But in the very world, which is the world  
 Of all of us, — the place where in the end  
 We find our happiness, or  
 Not at all!*

— William Wordsworth

Public art often seems like an oxymoron.

The history of modern and contemporary art being largely secular, the fountains, sculptures, and plazas of this century reflect a more corporate than public sensibility.

In addition, art is one of the few occupations to offer a semblance of autonomy to an individual. Why would any artist volunteer for the committees and bureaucracy of public art? Especially an artist like Alexis Smith.

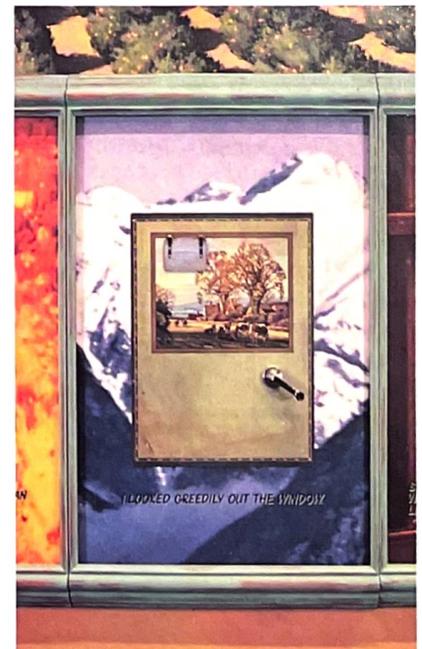
Smith's early collages and miniature books were beyond private. They were hermetic and fragile in both concept and appearance. It turns out that during those protean years, the 1970s, Smith was doing the research on the relationship between word, image, and culture that would translate to her large-scale public work in the 1980s. She was developing the conceptual underpinnings that pertain today whether she is redecorating a theater lobby or preparing individual collages for an exhibition. But why public art? "The obvious reason is that it's a way to build something

permanent on an architectural scale," explains Smith. "It's a way to get access to a wider, more diverse audience than at a gallery or museum.

"People who wind up doing a lot of public art have a sort of missionary quality, the civic spirit of people who would like to upgrade the environment," Smith continues. "The process puts you in touch with so many people, it gives you an opportunity to reaffirm your aesthetic values. For an artist, it's a vehicle for doing something meaningful, to give an out-of-the-ordinary quality to ordinary places. Especially when using site-specific imagery. You repackage things so that people can appreciate and enjoy them."

Repackaging, as Smith calls it, is crucial to understanding her attraction to and success in the field of public art. Smith's art comprises the objects, images and texts produced, and often forgotten, by the larger culture. This material tends to have strong mnemonic associations which are triggered when recontextualized by the artist. That which has been lost to cliché or nostalgia is renewed when Smith juxtaposes disparate bits and pieces of, say, the writing of Jack Kerouac with visuals associated with being *On the Road*. Whether the result is a poster, or a public installation, Smith rejuvenates the tired and familiar.

Detail of *Same Old Paradise*.



## MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT · CONCOURSE B



Alexis Smith, collaborative proposal with R.M. Fischer for Concourse B, Miami International Airport, 1989. Rendering by Lucia Vinograd of mural with “Flying Wing” sculpture.

The public in public art is a genuine concern for Smith. She uses words like “appropriate” and “responsible” when discussing concepts for site-specific sculpture. “People don’t get any choice about whether they are going to experience these things or not and there is a lot of terrible stuff in the world. I don’t come from an elitist academic background. I come from a normal, middle-class background and I don’t think culture should only be for the ones who can afford it.”

If Smith’s studio art is about repackaging public experience in ways that provide private meaning for her as an artist, her public art is the reverse. Her private and recurring concern with memory, destiny, and the passage of time has affected her choice of public imagery.

This is apparent from Smith’s first public art project, *Starlight*, 1982. This mural of a speeding train was designed for the wall of Unity Savings in West Hollywood. The title is a turn on the name of the luxury locomotive “The Daylight,” which was christened with champagne by Olivia DeHavilland and is remembered for shuttling movie stars between Los Angeles and San Francisco. These “stars” are out at “night.” Collages framed by the train’s windows feature dark silhouettes matched with titillating quotations from classic train movies like *Shanghai Express*: “I can’t replace our ideals but I’ll buy you a new

watch when we get to Shanghai.” This quote is attached to the image of a woman’s gloved hand, which is adorned by a toy watch, while smoke of gold netting floats from her cigarette. The severe vanishing point perspective of the train’s receding tail is more than dramatic; it incorporates and camouflages a wheelchair ramp in the bank lobby.

The piece exemplifies much that is effective in Smith’s public art. She has utilized a difficult aspect of the site’s architecture — in this case, the wheelchair ramp — in designing her installation. The client was accommodated by the mural of a train engine pulling cars because the bank’s motto is, “In unity, there is strength.” In addition, she chose imagery and information of interest to the location’s clientele — the bank’s customers are given something to look at and even read while waiting in line to do business. Old films offer a history common to most people while providing words and pictures that can be interpreted on more than one level. Smith doesn’t use popular culture, like movies, as kitsch but as authentic American experience, the *lingua franca* of the late 20th century. She went to that source again in her epic public art piece, *The Grand*, 1983, which constitutes the complete renovation of the Keeler Grand Foyer of DeVos Hall, a performing arts center in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

“My personal theory is that the imagery

of something should be appropriate to the content of the place,” says Smith. “It should be built into the concept in such a way that it’s the most fundamental thing. That’s the key to all my pieces. In the studio, you can make any content you want. In public art, the content is based on who is going to look at the piece, how they will experience it physically as well as visually.”

In redesigning the interior of the performing arts center, Smith had to address three problems. The space was vast and confusing, badly lit, and carpeted entirely in orange. She went to the most salient aspect of the Grand Rapids landscape for her source material — the Grand River that bisects the city. She used the rushing water as a way of creating different visual motifs for each of three levels, thereby providing a sense of location and direction. She came up with a new lighting scheme. Finally, the effect of the ubiquitous orange was counteracted by Smith’s use of blue, the color of water, in painting the walls and, occasionally, the ceiling. She used the central staircase as metaphor for the rapids so the “river” zigzags for 60 feet from the top level to flow over a facing and swirl in an eddy around the second-floor columns. On either side of the river, giant pictograms of male and female faces are made with symbols of old and new Grand Rapids: farm buildings and boats create the man; skyscrapers and cars make up the woman.

On the second level, the water motifs are joined by imagery derived from the word “grand” such as the grand piano or the grandeur of opening night at the theater. A mural of piano keys is anchored on one end by a top hat and on the other by a dancing shoe. Hung along the mural are twenty copper-framed oil paintings in the style of early modernist geometric abstraction, all collaged with quotes from Depression-era plays, novels, songs, and vaudevillian humor such as the book *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* or the witticisms of Will Rogers. The recollection of lost glamour is reinforced by art deco motifs which in themselves refer back to water imagery and to Native American designs.

On the ground level, this is more apparent as nature gives way to theater decor, with a stylized waterfall along a rear wall, wave patterns on the stairs, and hand-beaded collages that appear to be art deco but are again drawn from Native American designs. Under the staircase, a column transformed to look like a tree appears to protect a park bench from the painted waterfall. This wall is also hung with collages of vaudeville banter matched to amateur theatrical photos from Grand Rapids in the ’20s and ’30s. A ground-floor projection room has been painted with a marquee for the Grand Theater announcing “Keeler Grand Foyer” and incorporating

two existing clocks.

Smith resurrects memories of the romance and glamour of past theater life in part to recreate that experience in the present. She grounds the image of elegance in the art deco motifs that also relate to the roots of the community, in the river and the Native American culture that once thrived there. In a practical sense, the paint techniques of glazing, combing, rag rolling and Spanish stucco, fake tile and marble were all popular during the Depression era she was attempting to evoke. This enabled her to cover large areas of architecture thematically. Smith learned the techniques from Richard Sedivy, an artist who had worked for years as a scenic painter with CBS. In 1982, he had helped her paint wall-sized, generic graphics for an installation called *Satan's Satellites* at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery. He collaborated with her again on the massive *Same Old Paradise* mural at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1987-88.

Even outside of the public art enterprise, Smith finds herself collaborating: "I like working with other people and I've made my studio work in such a way that I work with framers, silk-screeners, and people who do installation work. I like getting involved with people whose technical expertise is other than my own. It's like, 'Hey, kids, let's do a play.' I was that way as a kid, and I'm that way as an adult."

Smith had other reasons for entering the arena of public art. "A few years ago, I couldn't control the quality of my opportunities," she says. "I didn't have representation in New York and I wasn't taken very seriously for my studio work. The public art arena was much less competitive. It was a wide-open field where you could make a giant statement. People were willing to let me do big projects based on my ideas. Being a woman and a Californian didn't hurt me. I didn't have to have a lot of East Coast cachet."

Smith has quipped that women are successful at public art because they have learned to negotiate and compromise in order to survive in a man's world. Smith had her first public art rejection in 1985 after designing a work for the Brooklyn Central Library, a beautifully-detailed 1920s building which was constructed in the shape of a book. Smith's proposal consisted of a painted blue graphic with bronze and wood attachments that formed the image of a steamship. It was to have been painted on the wall of the library's mezzanine with a quote by Brooklyn's poet, Walt Whitman: "The untold want by life and land ne'r granted, Now, voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find." The piece touches on the themes consistent in Smith's work — the romance of travel, the journey as metaphor for the spiritual growth and the sustenance available through literature and art. Never-



Alexis Smith, collaborative proposal with R.M. Fischer for Concourse B, Miami International Airport, 1988. Rendering by Lucia Vinograd of landmark bar with bronze globe.

theless, this particular ship was interpreted as being a luxury liner, and the piece was rejected as elitist. Since Smith's public art is site-specific, the Brooklyn boat is unlikely to be recreated elsewhere.

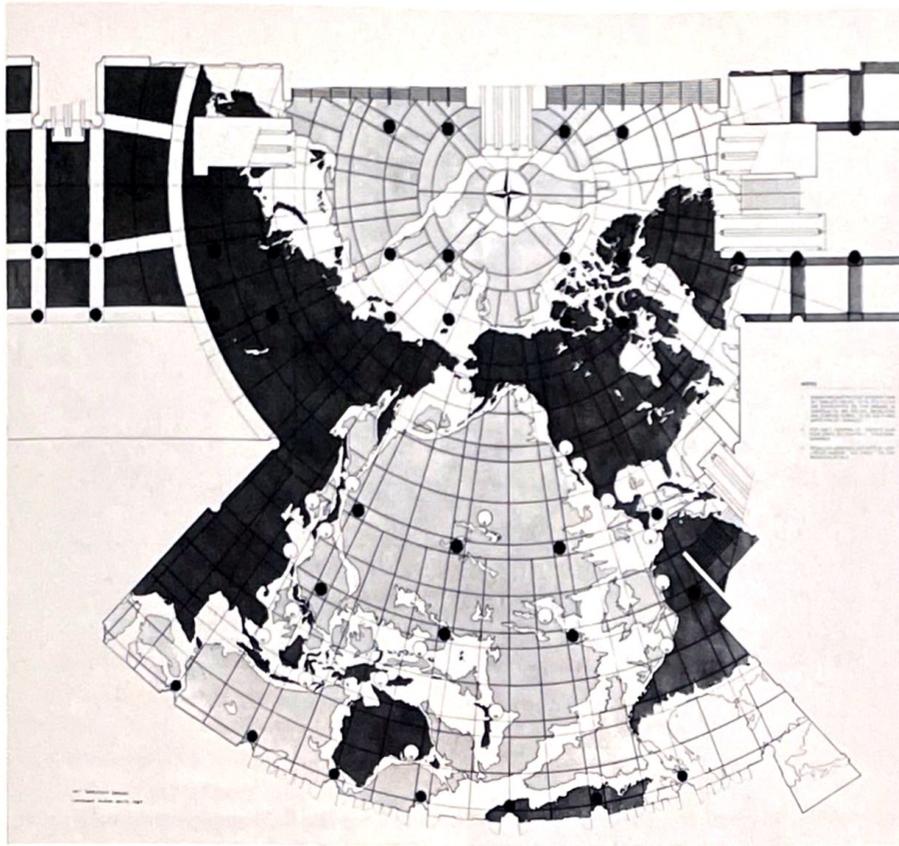
"Public art is like a war of attrition," says Smith. "You have to care the most and have the most stamina to get your own way. It's therapeutic for people who are compulsive and controlling, which artists are. It's a good balance to be part of a process with variables and unknowns. It doesn't matter how wonderful you or the client are, there are circumstances where the project won't get done." Smith's philosophy is born of experience. Crises and disappointment have plagued her public art projects for the last five years.

*Niagara*, 1985, a sculpture created for Art Park in Lewiston, New York, consisted of a granite headstone on a site overlooking the Niagara River. It was engraved with the image of Marilyn Monroe, her hair flowing in rich waves to become the falls of Niagara. The epitaph was taken from the Monroe movie *Niagara*: "Nothing in the world could keep it from going over the edge." As though victim of a prophecy, the piece was destroyed by vandals. There is special irony considering the work emerged out of Smith's ongoing interest in the tragic lives led by women of fame and fortune, a theme she explored most thoroughly in a series of collages collectively

titled *Jane*, 1987. "Public art affected my private art in that it gave me greater confidence in materials and scale," says Smith. "It's paradoxical, though. As the art becomes more visible, i.e., public, the artist becomes less visible. Private art in a gallery is less visible, but the artist is more visible."

In 1986, Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, a private college in Los Angeles, embarked on a public art program in nearby MacArthur Park. The school's dean, Roger Workman, and its gallery curator, Al Nodal, felt the school had become isolated from the surrounding community, which had come to be populated mostly by Hispanic and Asian immigrants. In addition, the park had become a gathering place for criminals and was dangerous for locals as well as students. Nodal invited ten artists to a week-long meeting with the neighborhood — the shopowners, the elderly, the families, the police and fire departments. From that dialogue, artists generated proposals in an attempt to reclaim the park.

Smith, as usual, came up with a proposal that was both practical and aesthetic. As a conceptual gesture, she got the city to renovate and relight the 1930s neon signs that topped movie theaters and hotels in the area. They had been dark since the black-out ordinances of World War II. The names Wilshire, Asbury, Ansonia, Olympic, Westlake now



Alexis Smith, Plan for South Lobby, Los Angeles Convention Center; terrazzo floor, 50,000 sq. ft., scheduled for completion 1993.

shine at night, brightening the entire neighborhood, which in itself deters crime.

Acknowledging the park as central to the city's history, Smith created three mini-monuments, each matched with what she calls "Chandlerisms." These are quotes from the distinctive voice of L.A.'s detective novelist, Raymond Chandler. In the concrete path that circles the park and its lake, Smith embedded a pair of ballroom dancers in terrazzo with the Chandlerism: "Crazy as a pair of waltzing mice." On a hillside, she placed a headstone engraved with a pair of boxers and the quote: "Mine was the better punch but it didn't win the wristwatch." A bronze suitcase sitting next to the path is embossed with the words: "She was sitting in front of her princess dresser trying to paint the suitcases out from under her eyes." In addition, Smith designed a park bench with a bronze plaque of General Douglas MacArthur — for whom the park was named — and a Chandlerism that read: "He had a jaw like a park bench." This last work was never completed as the project ran out of funds.

The sleeping past of a once-glorious site was awakened by Smith. Yet, she didn't forget the requisite practical component, in this case, the lighting of the old signs. She addressed the park's present constituency with her monuments to less-than-conventional heroes — the immigrants and homeless who have become its regular habitués. She chose

images she hoped would be cross-cultural — dancers and boxers, a suitcase, and a general — and legible to a non-English-speaking audience.

Among the other artists who completed sculptures for MacArthur Park was R.M. Fischer. Smith, impressed both by his gateway sculptures and by his handling of the complicated bureaucratic and interpersonal problems associated with the park, asked him to collaborate with her on a mammoth project for Miami International Airport.

The frustrations Smith had encountered during her public art career were minor compared to the debacles of the Miami experience from 1988 to 1989. Initially, it seemed a promising opportunity since artists of the caliber of Ed Ruscha and Elyn Zimmerman were completing successful pieces for the Art in Public Places (APP) program of Dade County, Florida. When APP asked artist Robert Irwin to propose a piece for the Miami International Airport, he suggested a "dialogue," an analysis of the airport's systems by other artists. He wanted to oversee a masterplan of artists working with architects, and Smith was among those he selected. Although Irwin wanted artists to work in teams, Smith and Fischer turned out to be the only collaborative effort. As she put it, "I knew the airport was going to be a big headache and I wanted to share that headache. After MacArthur Park, I knew Ronnie was

no pollyanna about public art. Also, we had a common point of view. We both use source material that we find and reassemble rather than invent."

Smith and Fischer came to the conclusion that the Miami airport, as the U.S. port of entry for Latin Americans and Caribbeans as well as Europeans, was unusually chaotic. "It was not a place where an artwork would make much of a dent," recalls Smith. Plus, the aviation director who would be responsible for the realization of their work, Dick Judy, was known to be quixotic, making snap decisions that affected the long-term plans of architects and artists.

Smith and Fischer decided their presentation should be theoretical as well as practical. Rather than come up with a single work of art, they proposed redecorating the entirety of Concourse B. It was in poor condition but had certain architectural aspects that were desirable. The romance of travel that had long fascinated Smith became the basis of three renderings. The first was a mural of North and South America, surreal in that the bodies of land appear to be sky and surrounded by clouds rather than ocean. A sculptural relief alluding to an airplane, designed by Fischer, appears to be plowing through the sky mural and into the concourse. Although this mural was in a confined area, it determined the tone for the rest of their project. They hoped these works of art would serve as landmarks for designated areas of the concourse.

Their second suggestion was to be a circular bar surrounding an enormous bronze globe, a reference to one that had been in Miami's old seaport/airport.

The third proposal meant extending their deco-derived motifs — covering walls in stylized palm trees, making wall sconces shaped like angular bird wings. "We wanted to show them what we could do if we took over the whole concourse with this design. We wanted to do the carpet, the lighting, sandblast the glass, the whole thing."

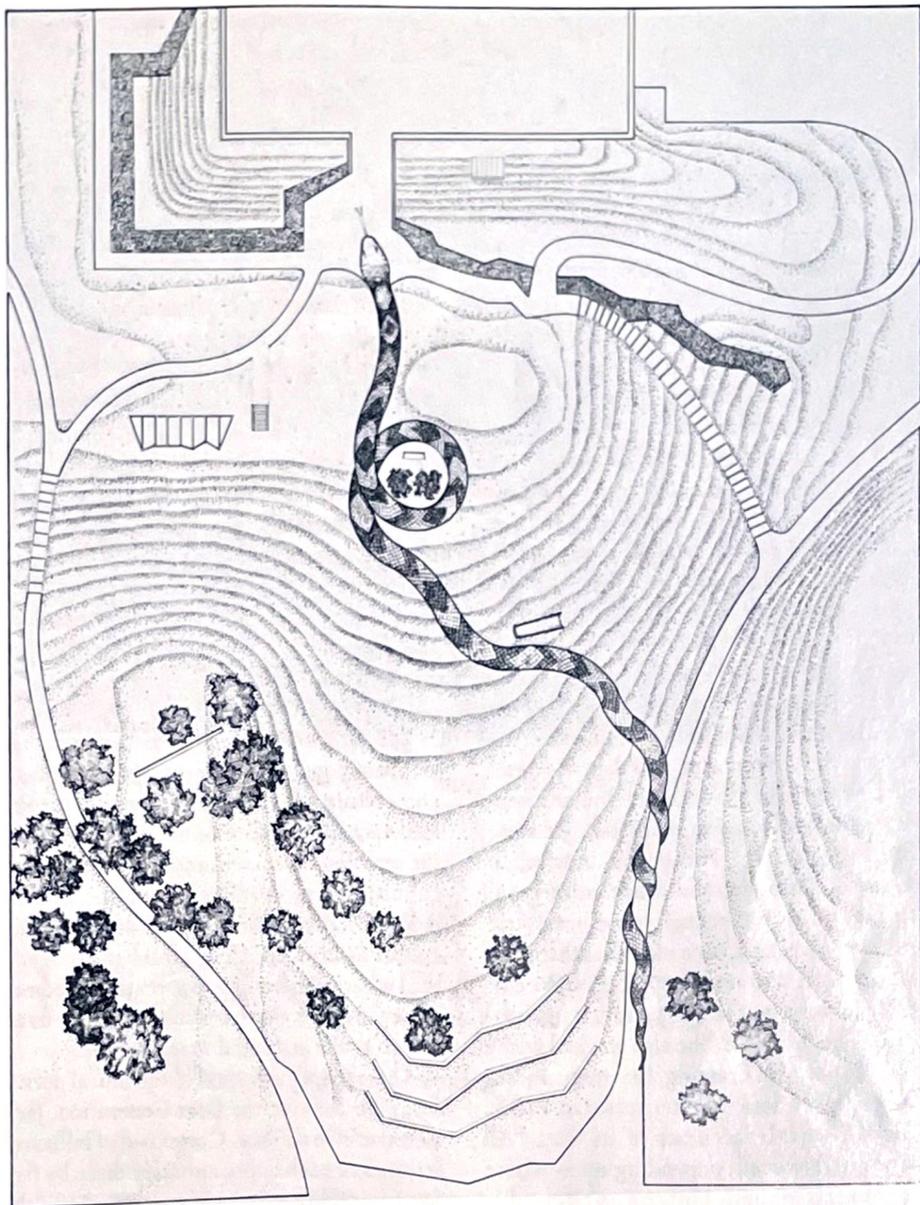
Aviation director Judy and Irwin both approved the artists' three-part proposal. Judy wanted to begin construction of the bar immediately and sent the airport architect Dennis Jenkins to L.A. to discuss ways to realize the artist's plans. A month later, the artist received a copy of a memo from Jenkins to the airport. Smith recalls, "He ignored everything we discussed." His revised plans featured an acrylic globe, lit from within, surrounded by a bar where there were small notations for "sculptural opportunities." The artists quit the project in May of 1988.

In September, Irwin and authorities with APP approached Smith and Fischer with a new concourse and a new architect. The artists came up with a less ambitious, more

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pragmatic proposal, a simple attempt to identify the otherwise anonymous Concourse D, where two levels were connected by an escalator. Working with illustrator Lucia Vinograd — who had worked with Smith on the mural for *Same Old Paradise* — they came up with an elongated, horizontal amalgamation of auto, arrow, and airplane imagery wrapped around the curlicues and angles of ornamental iron, screen doors, and the hood ornaments of old cars. Meant to be fabricated in chrome and bronze and emphatically identify “Concourse D,” it was to be suspended beside the 220 feet of escalator on the second level so that a passenger could ride alongside it or see it as signage from the ground floor. The artists made the presentation but Dick Judy had been dismissed from his position. Smith recalls having a bad feeling about the project from this point. “You have to be able to smell when these things are about to go belly up. You don’t want to wind up with a contract for a project that isn’t happening.” In October of 1989, Smith and Fischer wrote a letter of resignation, saying in part, “The commitment of the airport to working with artists seems too tenuous and the internal politics too uncertain to present a truly viable opportunity for our long-term involvement.”

By 1989, Smith was able to bring considerable experience to a public art project. In Cleveland, Playhouse Square was a traffic island the city wanted to renovate to become a centrally-located downtown plaza. The site was to be bordered on one side by a new hotel, on another by an office building, and on a third by three renovated vaudeville theaters for which the place was named. Smith was asked to transfer the character and flavor of the theaters to the park. The preliminary phase was staged as a collaborative design charette between Smith, Cleveland-based architect Ron Payto, and the former city architect Paul Volpe. Together, they came up with a design that utilized theatrical imagery: streetlights that looked like candelabra, a balustrade with torchères that delineated one side of the park, paving that was made to look like classic theater carpet, and a seating area that replicated a small stage, with seats at different levels and special viewing boxes. An architectural “backdrop” on the stage featured a mosaic landscape with real trees as scenery while a mural on the reverse side reproduced the view in the park in *trompe l’oeil*. Smith points out that the project is noteworthy not only for the way theatrical imagery is used to enliven a generic urban plaza — a similar principle to that used for the Miami International Airport — but it is a rare instance of an artist being chosen as the lead designer for a large-scale architectural project. Unfortunately, a change in the economic and political climate in Cleveland



Alexis Smith, *Snake Path*, slate pathway, scheduled for completion 1991; Stuart Collection, University of California at San Diego.

has the project on indefinite hold.

These experiences helped prepare Smith for the challenge of the L.A. Convention Center. The New York architectural firm of Pei, Cobb, Freed has enthusiastically accepted her proposed 50,000-square-foot terrazzo floor for the south lobby. It will feature a map of the Pacific Rim dotted with circular medallions five feet in diameter, each representing a culture of the region. The land will be sand-colored terrazzo and the water will be two shades of blue, for shallow and deep areas. Smith worked with Jim Freed, the design architect, and Gruen Associates, the technical architects, on what has proved to be her most technically demanding project. “After the basic concept was accepted,” says Smith, “it took one and a half years to get the project physically integrated into the plans for the building.”

The lobby itself is fan-shaped and connected to the long rectangle of the main exhibition spaces. The supporting columns of the lobby form a semi-circle defined by radiant lines that caused Smith to think of the grid of a map projection, which she incorporated into her design. The projection grid was practical because terrazzo, a liquid combination of marble chips and colored cement, must be poured in small, workable segments. During construction, this systematic geometric grid would also provide a means for referencing and locating the irregular contours of the map.

As with Playhouse Square, Smith’s role in the L.A.C.C. project was more as architectural designer than as artist. The piece will be executed by a terrazzo subcontractor. Smith worked with architecture student Christine Lawson to produce some forty

pages of detailed working drawings to be included in the city's construction bid package.

The geometry of the architecture determined the orientation and the appearance of the piece in the pragmatic fashion that has become an integral part of all Smith's public art. "Public art has to do everything design does and still be a work of art," she says. "There is an internal tension between that practical point of view and trying to remain within the context of art history. There has to be an internal logic so you don't have to know the whole history of art to get it. In studio art, you're redefining the discipline. With public art, you're defining the art experience but it has to be the same object for the initiated as for the uninitiated."

Smith's sensitivity to the public is apparent in her idea for the medallions. She recognized L.A. as the crossroads of the Pacific Rim and chose images that would be familiar to visitors of many origins. The medallions contain design motifs of different cultures that were selected for their startling similarities. Although they represent Alaskan Eskimos, Northwest Indians, Southwest Indians, early Mexicans, Panamanian, Peruvian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Philippine, Australian, Samoan, Hawaiian, and other cultures, all are related to the wheel, wave, or spiral. Smith sought the advice of two anthropologists to make certain her symbols were correctly located on the map, and not inadvertently objectionable. She also worked with a cartographer in drawing the map. In the process, she found that her terrazzo Pacific Rim is perfectly accurate in its way. "All maps are distorted, depending upon where the center is located. This one isn't more distorted than any other map, it's just in the shape of the south lobby." The scale, however, is intentionally disorienting. "It's halfway between something small enough to be miniature and real-life size, a scale you never encounter in the world," explains Smith.

The client and the architects were initially so delighted with Smith's proposal, they asked her to tackle the west lobby. She proposed a terrazzo map of the night sky, to be executed on two levels. The lower-level floor features the edge of the world with an aerial view of California and the western United States and a crescent moon hanging in the sky over the earth. An escalator leads to the second level where the floor becomes a dark blue terrazzo map of the night sky. The Milky Way is set in pale grey terrazzo. The constellations are indicated by lines of red dots connecting white terrazzo stars.

Unlike her previous works, this piece did not have to accommodate itself to pre-existing architecture and atmosphere. It has more references to eternity than to the immediate past. As opposed to the heroes of popular

culture, the mythology of the Convention Center is universal and timeless.

It is such grand mythology that inspired the *Snake Path* that Smith has proposed for the Stuart Collection at the University of California, San Diego. The Garden of Eden symbolism of this remarkable piece is indebted to *Same Old Paradise*. That enormous mural (22 by 65 feet), with attached collages, was conceived as an installation for the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and it was exhibited there from October 1987 to January 1988. It has yet to find a permanent home.

In *Same Old Paradise* Smith has returned to the subject of travel but by now, it is apparent that the recurring theme means more than relaxation or vacation. It is a metaphor for spiritual growth and internal evolution. This interpretation is reinforced when recalling Smith's statement concerning the missionary zeal of those who work in public art. There is a tacit faith that the redemptive power of art can serve this imperfect world. This might explain why Smith often sources her art from popular culture. Rooted in fantasy, pop culture is meant to compensate for the inadequacies of reality. Smith is not critiquing the manipulative, consumerist nature of pop culture. She reads it like a fairy tale, mining it for moral parables. Instead of seeing pop culture as an escape from quotidian drudgery, she twists the meaning. Recreation becomes re-creation, so that pop culture serves as an escape to the potential magic of life.

The collages attached to the mural derive from the Bible of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Composed of billboard fragments, each approximately three by five feet, with life-sized objects attached, the eight collages bear quotes that read across the bottom of the mural: "The road was straight as an arrow/Moths smashed our windshield/I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it./My eyes ached in nightmare day/I suddenly saw the whole country as an oyster for us to open, and the pearl was there, the pearl was there/A fast car, a coast to reach, a woman at the end of the road/I looked greedily out the window/Somewhere along the line ther'd be girls, visions, everything/Somewhere along the line, the pearl would be handed to me."

The mural is painted in the style of a 1930s postcard from California, where orchards of orange trees give way to purple mountains majestic. Giant oranges in the foreground, at the far right side of the mural, form the tempting forbidden fruit. The heavenly scene is disturbed only by the distant road which metamorphoses into a huge snake upon reaching the foreground. Southern California, which was the Promised Land to so many rootless travelers, is the visual equivalent of Kerouac's searching text. The piece is about

restlessness, a parable of the American conviction that the better life is always just over the horizon.

The *Snake Path* references are more obviously Edenic than those for *Same Old Paradise* and the sentiment is more philosophical and optimistic. The Southern California location is ideally suited to the references to paradise. The site is the underground addition to the main research library at UCSD. The earth removed during construction will be mounded atop the new underground facility and create a slope down to the university's engineering plaza. The 500-foot serpentine walkway will curve its way up the new hill. The snake's tail will be inlaid in the walkway approach off the engineering plaza. The snake path will be nine feet wide and composed of one-foot hexagonal slate tiles in gray, green, sand, and purple tones. It will loop around a Garden of Eden, a rest area with a stone bench that has been planted with two apple trees. Curving uphill, it will pass the monument of a seven-foot-tall stone book standing on end. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is etched on its spine. The cover will be engraved with the quote, "Then wilt thou not be loth/To leave this paradise, but shalt possess/A Paradise within thee, happier far."

The sentiment is apt for students destined to leave the ivory tower for the trials of the outside world. Smith has drawn a parallel between the university and Garden of Eden, where the library is a symbol for the tree of knowledge. "It's about becoming older and wiser, so the paradise of knowledge is what you take when you leave the shelter of the garden," admits Smith. The head of the snake path will be embedded in the walk at the entrance to the library. It is Smith's most successful piece in the way that the physicality of the piece is both its content and its metaphor. It is a work that was generated by the library in terms of its placement in the landscape and its existence as an idea.

So it is that Smith, the artist who first gained recognition for thimble-sized books, enlarged her sentiments to reach a public. "In order for public art to be good," explains Smith, "it has to solve problems but be natural enough that no one notices. It has to be meaningful enough to be beyond question, to work on a subliminal level. That's the trick.

"It's harder to do public art than to do regular art." □

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*Alexis Smith is represented by the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles. This text has been adapted from the catalogue for "Alexis Smith Public Works" at the Mandeville Gallery, University of California, San Diego, January 12-February 24, 1991.*

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