

← Back to Original Article

ART

A Taste for Mischief

Alexis Smith, a leading figure in public art, seasons her works with vintage images and tongue-in-cheek wit.

February 08, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Alexis Smith is a culture scavenger. For 25 years, she has drawn quotes from authors as disparate as Jane Austen and Jack Kerouac and combined them with found objects such as posters, matchbooks, ticket stubs, toys, puzzles, car parts, costume jewelry or whatever else might catch her magpie eye.

Quirky, amusing and wry, she has been labeled a principal second-generation inheritor of the L.A. Pop tradition. Since Smith completed her bachelor's degree at UC Irvine in 1972, her assemblages have been shown consistently at galleries and museums, including a 1992 retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, seen here that same year at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

"Out of inanimate objects, I find connections with the real world," Smith says. "These things create the ether of meaning that people share, though they are not conscious of it. That fascinates me, and that is what I make art out of."

Smith, 48, is thin as a whippet, and her curly blond hair is threaded with gray. Sitting on a sofa in her Venice studio, she is surrounded by stacks of books on European furniture, Sevres porcelain and the aesthetics of the Greek banquet. Smith used them to research her latest undertaking, a mural with collages for the tony restaurant at the new Getty Center in Brentwood. The work is titled "Taste."

"I think it's incredibly brave of the Getty to let me do this piece," she says.

The high-profile nature of the assignment seems to have provoked Smith's sense of humor. As usual, she found unforeseen potential in double-entendre. Did the fact that the Getty seems to be the epitome of classical good taste affect her choice of mural topic? With a Mona Lisa smile, Smith answers: "I've been thinking about taste for a while. When the Getty wanted a piece for the restaurant, it made perfect sense to do something that talked about culinary taste and aesthetic taste and how both of those words have come to be the same. The idea of the Getty being symbolic of good taste and an arbiter of taste, what makes for good taste, all of those issues came into play."

The center's J. Paul Getty Museum does not collect contemporary art, except in its photography department, but Smith was selected for the prestigious commission by the Getty Trust's then-president, Harold Williams; its vice president, Stephen D. Rountree; and Getty Museum Director John Walsh. (The committee also commissioned preeminent L.A. Pop artist Ed Ruscha to paint a monumental canvas of a shaft of light for the lobby of the Harold Williams Auditorium.) Both artists were recommended by Lisa Lyons, who is the Getty Trust's contemporary art consultant.

"I was impressed by Smith's other public art projects and thought she had a good understanding of how to connect the history and the use of the space with the users," Lyons says. "It occurred to me that her sense of humor could be put to good use in a restaurant and that she understands issues of style and taste. What I like about the piece is that it's clearly a work of art but also terrific decor."

The Getty mural is the latest in an impressive roster of public art commissions undertaken by Smith since 1982. Although many in the art world are most familiar with her studio works, regularly shown at the Margo Leavin Gallery in West Hollywood, less known is the fact that she has become a leading figure in the competitive world of public art. Ambitious endeavors in Southern California include her 600-foot-long slate-and-concrete Snake Path, completed for the Stuart Collection at UC San Diego in 1992, and the 120,000-square-foot terrazzo floor for the Los Angeles Convention Center, completed in 1993.

At the Getty, Lyons also organized a small survey exhibition, "A Matter of Taste," chronicling the relationship between the artist's studio- and public-art activities. At the show's entrance, a collage of fake wood paneling is captioned by Diana Vreeland's observation "We all need a little bad taste. No taste is what I'm against."

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Smith has mastered the art of juxtaposing image and text to access multiple levels of meaning. At the Getty's restaurant, she and her assistants painted one wall with black silhouettes of objects associated with food (a turnip, a bottle of wine) and culture (a Chippendale chair, a violin).

"It's a European and classical progression, very Getty-looking and not alluding to other cultures," she explains.

These silhouettes are studded with terra-cotta plates painted with words evolving from "tasty" to "tasteful."

"They are at the opposite ends yet show the common thread of experience, perception and pleasure that ties them all together," she says.

Another wall is painted with an enlarged drawing of a 17th century Japanese banquet and a 1950s advertisement from a Spanish-language design magazine offering "Modernismo."

"The wall is anchored by the idea of culinary taste and aesthetic taste but has a slightly more ethnic character," Smith says. "In a sense, it alludes to the fact that these issues are common to multiple cultures."

The murals are surmounted with a series of what perceptual psychologists call "Rubin's figures," facing profiles in black-and-gold-crackle finish that can be seen in reverse as a goblet or a vase.

"The vase connects to the aesthetics while the goblet connects to the food," Smith explains. "The faces represented people of different tastes."

Each of these collages bears a quote concerning taste. A Japanese proverb, particularly appealing to the artist, states: "It is harder to please the eye than the stomach." A quote from Brillat-Savarin says, "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are."

On a third wall, above the dictionary definition of "taste," Eve presents Adam with an apple. With a mischievous grin, Smith says, "It's about the limits of good taste. Not only did Eve offer the first taste, but the fact that they are naked and doing something ill-advised makes it seem that the bounds of propriety are

being challenged." A collaged photograph of Carmen Miranda, who often challenged such bounds, offers the quote "Taste is the flower of good sense."

Smith had all of the walls painted in a faux travertine, mirroring the cladding of Richard Meier's architecture, which is apparent from every window in the restaurant. Asked if she was making a comment about the abundance of luxury materials at the Getty, Smith confesses: "Sort of. It added the fashion thing of being beige and black, the two most elegant, serviceable colors."

In other words, it was a matter of taste.

In all of Smith's work, there is a tongue-in-cheek quality.

"I think there is an element of subversion," she acknowledges. "At the very least, I am poking fun at the ideas. In some ways I'm giving a thoughtful analysis of it, and in other ways, I'm sort of amusing myself with the idea of taste."

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Smith grew up in L.A., and her memories of orange blossoms and movie stars, combined with a lifelong fascination with the seductive power of common objects, led her to study art. Since 1990, she has lived in Venice with her husband, Scott Grieger, an artist who also plays with language in his paintings.

Smith refuses to abide by strict definitions of public and studio art--"I think the things feed into each other. It suits my nature." Noting that she has designed bookplates for the Getty Library as well as playing cards, jewelry, scarves and movie posters, she says, "The thing that makes something art is that the product reflects the personal sensibility of the artist."

For Smith, 1997 was dedicated not only to completing the Getty project but also to finishing drawings for a major work still in process for the Schottenstein Center, a sports arena at Ohio State University in Columbus.

Smith's design for the 72,000-square-foot terrazzo floor, bordered by a red block O, features terrazzo fragments that reproduce archival photographs celebrating 100 years of men's and women's athletics from the school's history, including a 1916 woman's basketball team and an image of John Havlicek dunking a ball.

"It has a funny, built-in statement about celebrity and larger-than-life heroes and only being able to get so close to them," she says. At such a vast scale, details become huge, and Havlicek's arm, for example, is rendered 60 feet long. "You'll be able to stand on a balcony and see Havlicek's face," Smith says. "On the floor, like a Lilliputian standing on Gulliver, you'll know what you are standing in but you won't be able to stand back and savor it, so there will be an edge of frustration."

"It's one of my typical things, where the point is built into the piece and part of your physical experience. The art is in the seamless mesh between the material and the idea, so they can't be talked about separately."

Last fall, the university's contemporary museum, the Wexner Center for the Arts, organized an exhibition of Smith's work titled "My Favorite Sport," which included her sports-oriented collages along with an installation of found memorabilia focusing on Ohio State's obsession with its prized Buckeye football team. "From the Cradle to the Grave," executed on site, featured both a bassinet and a coffin tricked out in the university's colors of crimson and gray.

"Hanging around the athletic department, I got a lot of fodder about people's identification with their team and their school," she says, slyly.

Also in the works is a commission from Culver City's Art in Public Places program, spurred by a development by Costco. But instead of creating a piece within the proposed shopping center, Smith selected for her site a strip of property behind the building, in the residential neighborhood north of Washington Boulevard, where she has designed a dog walk. The work is scheduled for completion by the end of this year.

The owner of a brown mongrel named Friday, Smith was intrigued by the fact that the Costco site had once been a racetrack for greyhounds. The artist jokes that her inspiration was "the ghosts of dogs past." Giant enameled panels of Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of a running dog will serve as backdrop for a landscaped walkway with canine-shaped topiary and an inset haiku that reads, "Where did that dog that used to be here go? I thought about him once again tonight before I went to bed."

A pointillistic effect in the enlarged photographic panels should create a soft and welcoming atmosphere--"It will be very impressionistic," she says.

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The public inclusiveness of her art is crucial to the artist, who once said: "I come from a normal middle-class background and I don't think culture should only be for the ones who can afford it."

"There are a lot of knee-jerk public art cliches about making work," she says now. "I don't necessarily believe in the collaboration that submerges the artist's identity. I think public art should have the artist's vision, the same as studio art does. I always structure my projects so I can quit if I can't control my artwork. I make it hard for people to hire me. I'm not a prima donna. I respond to realistic issues. But if it looks like the art content is going to be lost, I quit. I've had a lot of experience, and I want to be in the position where there aren't any big things I'm ashamed of out in the world."

Smith has learned to take into account the unpredictable future that can come about. Vandals destroyed her bronze sculpture of a suitcase installed in MacArthur Park a decade ago. A 1982 work, "Starlight," a train mural with collages of passengers, was commissioned for the lobby of L.A.'s now-defunct Unity Savings Bank, and she had to buy the collages and the rights to re-create the work back from the Resolution Trust Corp.

"I don't have any illusion that commercial places will endure for a long time," she says. So today, Smith tries to create projects that are massive in scale, durable in their materials and as intransient as possible. She works with dozens of assistants, including contractors, painters and architect Christine Lawson, who will move to Columbus for six months to oversee completion of the terrazzo floor.

Asked if she ever considers just forgoing such hassles to make only studio collages, Smith says: "I never wanted to do just that. Even when I did delicate paper pieces in the early '70s, I did sculptural installations. I did performances. I never made little things.

"The idea of getting people to help me is a natural thing. When I was a kid, I used to enlist the kids in the neighborhood to put on plays. It's like some innate thing that comes out of being bossy."

* "A Matter of Taste: Alexis Smith's Commission for the Getty Center's Restaurant" continues through April 12 at the Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Brentwood. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Thursdays and Fridays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Parking

reservations required. (310) 440-7300.