

Alexis Smith



Ten years ago, Patricia Anne Smith adopted the name of the well-known actress Alexis Smith. This act foreshadowed her attitude toward existing phenomena and her art. She began to utilize names, literature and pictorial imagery as if they were found objects and created an art which, like her name, suggests whimsical, ironic and sometimes mysterious interrelationships.

Initially her work took the form of "scrapbooks" which one leafed through. As she became more involved with sequence and narrative rhythm, she discarded the book format in favor of panels which were mounted linearly on the wall. Her work revolves around single themes presented as collages of visual imagery and literary excerpts. This thematic structure differs markedly from traditional collage in which formal elements are echoed and repeated throughout the whole. The visual and literary elements in Smith's collages often relate less to one another than to the central idea or metaphor which they illustrate.

At times the visual components function almost like clues in a detective story as they shape and embellish the cursive literary statements. These works evoke a sense of psychological investigation not unlike dream analysis or spontaneous association. Just as the most ridiculous or unexpected image in a dream may provide insight when seen in context, Smith encourages the most commonplace and banal to appear mysterious and ironic. In this way, images as diverse as a page of buttons, a handprint or a photograph of ocean waves relate directly to her text, yet render a wealth of intuitive associations and interpretations. Smith's greatest talent as a collage maker lies in her ability to choose this kind of banal, kitsch or romantic image and free its broader associative qualities by carefully controlling its context.

The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges represents for Smith an artist whose designs and endeavors parallel her own. Two of the works in this show involve

Borges directly. One draws its text from Borges's narrative "The Library of Babel," another treats Smith's personal sense of involvement with Borges as an alter ego. In his preface to Borges's *Labyrinths*, James E. Irby describes a philosophy which Smith and Borges share: "Borges is always quick to confess his sources and borrowings, because for him no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes." For Smith, whose career began during an era of Pop art and found objects, the adoption of this attitude toward both literary and visual sources was a logical progression. Smith's isolated images and subject matter are chosen for their broad unconscious associations. Part of the magic of her art is her ability to touch these "pre-existing archetypes," yet remain elusive and whimsical.

Metaphysical rarely seems a good word to describe contemporary art, since so many derogatory connotations attend it, but perhaps one of Borges's redefinitions of that word applies to Smith's work. Concerning the philosophers in one of his short stories, Borges explains that "They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature." It is precisely by maintaining the kind of light irony and droll humor one might expect in fantastic literature that Smith manages to approach topics as metaphysically oriented as the nature of dreams and reality and the transmigration of spirit.

Smith describes her art as a way of getting the viewer to engage an idea or concept without explaining it directly, but she does not think of herself as a "conceptual artist." For her, form and content share equal importance, and although these pieces may initially engage the viewer conceptually, their effectiveness lies in her sensitive interweaving of imagery and text.

Barbara Haskell  
*Curator*

## Catalogue

Measurements are in inches, height preceding width. All works are mixed-media collages on paper unless otherwise noted.

1. *The Library of Babel*, 1973, 12 × 120  
Lent by Nicholas Wilder, Los Angeles
2. *Charlie Chan*, 1973, 12 × 124  
Lent by Frank Gehry, Santa Monica, California
3. *The Keynote to Success*, 1973  
Lent by Faith Flam, Los Angeles
4. *Deja Vu*, 1974, 12 × 124  
Lent by Holly Solomon, New York
5. *The Red Shoes*, 1975, 12 × 144  
Lent by the Grinstein Family, Los Angeles
6. *The Glass Bead Game*, 1975, 12 × 144  
Lent by the artist
7. *Charlie Chan—Words Cannot Cook Rice*, 1975  
Alphabet macaroni on paper, 14 × 18¼  
Lent by Holly Solomon, New York

## Alexis Smith

- 1949 Born in Los Angeles, California  
1970 B.A., University of California, Irvine  
Lives in Venice, California

## Solo Exhibitions

- 1974 Riko Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles  
1975 Carp, Los Angeles, "Anteroom," an installation piece  
University of California, Santa Barbara, "Rapido," an installation piece

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1972 University of California, Irvine, "Greater Magic"  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, "Margaret Lowe, Barbara Munger, Alexis Smith, Margaret Wilson"  
Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, California, "Southern California: Attitudes 1972"
- 1974 University of Nevada Art Gallery, Las Vegas, "Works Selected by Nicholas Wilder"
- 1975 Whitney Museum of American Art, "1975 Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Art"  
University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, "Both Kinds: Contemporary Art from Los Angeles"  
School of Visual Arts, New York, "Four Los Angeles Artists: Foulkos, Goode, Smith, Wheeler." Exhibition traveled to Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut  
Sarah Lawrence College Art Gallery, Bronxville, New York, "Work, Image, Number"

November 15—December 14, 1975

## Whitney Museum of American Art

945 Madison Avenue  
New York, New York 10021

Cover: Warner Brothers photograph of Alexis Smith