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Review: The arc of Alexis Smith's career in just 11 works. A smart L.A. show to see now



Alexis Smith, "Medium Message," 2013, mixed media mural (Parrasch Heijnen Gallery)

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Alexis Smith has been a major artist since her first mixed-media text-and-image collages of the 1970s. No one does assemblage better than she.

A beautifully installed survey at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery tracks the arc of Smith's career in just 11 smartly selected works.

From 1977, "Labyrinth" lays out many salient aspects of her approach. The work is simplicity itself — a printed book-illustration pasted onto paper and captioned with a snippet of text, all set within in a shaped frame. Frames are important to

all of Smith's work, which itself is dedicated to reframing established points of view.

This one is shaped like a Monopoly house, similar to Joel Shapiro's little cast-iron house sculptures from the same period. Those set aside Minimalist art's obsession with nonfigurative abstraction.

Rather different houses collide within Smith's homey frame. Sebastien le Clerc's intricate 1677 plan for an elaborate garden labyrinth at the royal Palace of Versailles outside Paris meets an 1872 fragment of Walt Whitman's democratic poetry: "The paths to the house I seek to make / But leave to those to come to the house itself."



Alexis Smith, "Labyrinth," 1977, mixed media on paper (Parrasch Heijnen Gallery)



Alexis Smith, "My Fair Lady," 1985, mixed media collage (Parrasch Heijnen Gallery)

In Smith's image-and-text pieces, art is proposed as a playful and meandering refuge, an exclusively aristocratic European legacy evolved to a self-directed, inclusive American model.

Given the domestic focus on the home, the work also resonates with a shrewdly feminist undercurrent. It turns up repeatedly in the show, not least in "Medium Message," a large wall mural from 2013.

"Medium Message" inserts a lavishly decorated, heart-shaped candy box, notably upside-down, and a child's battered drum set into a gray text painted on the wall. The objects take the place of words: "The [candy box] is the [drum set]."

Our topsy-turvy adult interactions are given form that is interchangeable with long-ago childhood disturbance. Smith's poetics of unanticipated consequences — a Marshall McLuhan-like observation about mediums and messages — are the fundamental stuff of art.