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ARTFORUM

Alexis Smith, *Easy Rider,* 2016, mixed media, 21 1⁄4 × 14".

Alexis Smith

PARRASCH HEIJNEN GALLERY

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Alexis Smith's oeuvre slips easily into this American life. Using language and literature, toys and glamour, ads and junk shop finds, Smith descends from the droll end of West

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Coast Conceptualism. She turns culture over and pokes at its squirming parts with an air of critical romance and a smile. If Sol Lewitt wrote sentences on Conceptual art and John Baldessari sang them, Smith's wry retorts follow. ("I'm like a writer who makes art," she told an interviewer for MOCATV in 2010.) Sometimes her asides feel like they've slipped out of a Tom Waits song or a Jack Kerouac novel more than from the arch intellectualism of contemporary art. Even her name is stolen, borrowed from a Canadian actress—another example of the artist bending a bit of mass media to her own purposes.

Here at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, more than forty years of the artist's assemblage acumen stretched through eleven pieces that softly emphasized her visual puns more than her more literary forays (where long paragraphs were tucked into the picture plane). The earliest work had been exhibited in her first solo show, at Riko Mizuno's gallery in Los Angeles: In The Einstein Piece, 1973, she attempts, over twenty-five sheets of graph paper, legal paper, diagrams, and frottage, to wend her way through the physicist's conceptions of the universe. The thick explanation, even if relatively plainspoken by the standards of high-level scientists, sits alongside the various pictures that alternately succeed and cheekily fail to illustrate the ideas, as if this were the homework assignment of a student more prone to doodling Einstein's name in gel pen than to working out his mathematical proofs. Across the room (and her career), in Easy Rider, 2016, Smith gave a reverent, rugged frame to a studio still of Marlon Brando in all his Black Rebels Motorcycle Club glory in The Wild One (1953). After checking the work's title, I had to chuckle at the slick red lollipop stuck on his right eye and the bright-red button stamped with EASY (the kind you might find in some of the more humor-strained cubicles out there) on the front headlight of his bike. "The button works," the gallerist told me. I regret not pressing it.

One of the more literary pieces on view, which still pivoted on a visual pun, hung in a frame shaped like a house of the Monopoly game-piece variety. A print of Sébastien Le Clerc's labyrinthine design of the garden paths at the Palace of Versailles from 1677 was coupled with a handwritten quote from Walt Whitman: THE PATHS TO THE HOUSE I SEEK TO MAKE, / BUT LEAVE TO THOSE TO COME THE HOUSE ITSELF. The lines are from "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" (1872), which expresses Whitman's own dream for democracy in America, a swift and subtle counterpoint to the tangled tracks of France's absolute monarchy. The first two footpaths lead to a third, the straight route around the Monopoly board, through the debt and domination of American capitalism.

The most arresting piece in the show greeted you as you walked in. Made from carefully handpainted letters and mounted objects, this rebus involved an upside-down heart-shaped box replete with ribbons, as well as a broken children's drum set whose kick drum's paper skin was ripped and faded. Reading the title, Medium Message, 2013, you understood the simple riddle: The heart is the beat. But these are not just symbols. The heart, meant to hold sweets, couldn't hold anything in its inverted position. The drum kit didn't have any potential for percussion in its tattered state. Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message" rarely gets trotted out these days, except in media studies

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classes, but it still resonated here on a few different levels. And this rebus, with its impractical common objects, felt like both a joke and a prayer, a phrase worth repeating. Underneath all of this humor and artful reference lay a heart, and despite its battered drum I could certainly hear its beat.

— Andrew Berardini