

## ALEXIS SMITH *History in the Making*

BY DARRAGH MCNICHOLAS DECEMBER 9, 2015



*It's Up to You* (2008), mixed media, 21 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 1 3/4 inches

In “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell claimed that cliché and “stale imagery” not only marred writing, but the very capacity for clear thought. Yet the same things Orwell hated about clichés—their lack of specific meaning and wealth of unruly, associative ones—make them a rich subject for Alexis Smith. In the twelve mixed-media collages on view in this show—her first in New York in over a decade—Smith revamps midcentury American clichés about desire, patriotism, sex, and leisure, twisting them with satire to scrutinize their noxious undertones.

In *Girl Friday* (2014) a retro brunette wearing little more than a chef’s hat stands in front of a white picket fence as she barbecues with a beauty-pageant grimace. Smith methodically empties the scene of any of its commercial appeal. A sausage from the grill, held aloft at the end of a long skewer, is burnt past edibility. The woman’s possibly exciting midsection is obscured by a postcard of another American leisure cliché: a stretch of road, cars, and Californian beach. The piece works like a mirage that dissipates to reveal a darker, but not unhumorous reality.

Smith has a long history of assemblage stretching back to the ’70s. Her works combine made and found objects, often from thrift stores, so that one is constantly guessing which strange details are the product of artistic intervention and which are poetic accidents. Only a few interventions push *Girl Friday* from a passable advertisement, fueled by parallel but conflicting desires for eroticism and domesticity, toward a more ambivalent artwork about how shared fantasies structure American life. Smith grew up in Los Angeles, one of the great factories of American fantasy, and treats Hollywood phrases and imagery like the objects she finds in thrift stores. She picked up her name from the ’50s Hollywood star Alexis Smith when she was seventeen.

In *Slice of Life* (2009), painted on what appears to be a corrugated square of pizza box, a young couple share a cheese pizza on the green grass of a sunny hill. A slice-shaped black-and-white photograph of a stern, uniformed Navy man replaces the head of the young man. Not only is the tranquility of the scene disturbed by the wedge of wartime imagery, it’s outmatched by medium; the photograph is real in a way that the pizza box painting can’t be. The overly serious implication that idyllic scenes like this are not only deluded, but maintained by constant and very real war, is balanced by the facetious pun that gives the artwork its name.

The works in Smith’s show have a curious way of playing with tense. *It’s Up to You* (2008) pairs a found painting with a promotional hand fan “Compliments of Bucie Enterprise,” which delightfully boasts: “Advertising Specialties – Calendars – Fans.” In the center of the fan, a poem titled “It’s Up to You” sounds like it might offer a *carpe diem*-like sentiment, but it begins: “Have you made someone happy, have you made someone sad, / What have you done with the day that you had?” The slip into past tense shifts the meaning of the title to “It [*Was*] Up to You.” By the time the poem concludes, it reads more like a lament about wasted life: “What have you done with your Beautiful day, / God gave it to you, did you throw it away?”

A slight tear towards the bottom of the fan only reinforces the sensation of discarded life, and Smith pairs the accidentally depressing poem with a painted scene that looks as if it was sourced from an episode of *Looney Tunes*: a farmhouse, with a barn door hanging from its hinges, lies vacant beside a knotted, leafless tree surrounded by dead grass. A single wagon wheel rests up against the crude fence that encircles the property. The clichéd sentimentality of each component emphasizes the fact that they are artifacts of a culture that carry meaning less in their intention than in their existence.

Smith’s work is often retrospective, but anti-nostalgic. Images like *Slice of Life* and *Girl Friday* look back toward the plucky optimism of midcentury America that inevitably gestured towards the future from which we now view it. Looking at those collages is, ultimately, like looking back into America’s prelapsarian past to find that it was flawed all along, and, worse, that it was at its cruelest when it was most naive.