

Garth Greenan Gallery 545 West 20th Street New York New York 10011 212 929 1351 www.garthgreenan.com

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Contact: Garth Greenan
(212) 929-1351
garth@garthgreenan.com
www.garthgreenan.com

Alexis Smith: Not In Utopia



Wasteland, 2013, mixed media, 28 x 40 inches

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to announce *Alexis Smith: Not In Utopia*, an exhibition of four monumental installations at 545 West 20th Street. Opening on Thursday, June 10, 2021, the exhibition features a selection of Smith's immersive wall murals, all created between 1980 and 1982. Works like *Tightrope* (1980), *Cathay* (1981), *Satan's Satellites* (1982), and *Fool's Gold* (1982) extend into three dimensions, transforming gallery walls into theatrical backdrops—augmenting her unique form of conceptual art suffused with the imagery of Hollywood and the American West.

Measuring nearly 11 by 22 feet, *Fool's Gold* was the largest of the three murals included in Smith's landmark 1982 solo exhibition *Satan's Satellites* at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles. By that time, Smith had largely shifted from literary to pulp and pop references—more resonant complements to her iconic imagery. Around the same time, her small-scale collages exploded into large installations and murals, evidencing her growing ambition and confidence. In leaving behind poignant literary observations, her work increasingly relied on her own ability to spot the strange and messy constellations of meaning present in popular culture and cliché. As if embracing Simone Weil's precept that "on the whole ... second class

works and below are most suitable for the elite, and absolutely first class works most suitable for the people,” her work became unabashedly pop in its sources and realization.

In the painting—a desert scene spotted with cacti and circling buzzards—an old prospector and his burro traverse the arid landscape within a painted trompe l’oeil wood frame, captioned, “Sometimes men went crazy from the heat.” While the phrase might have come from a pulp romance novel, Smith repurposes it, hinting at the prospector’s existential despair and delirium. A white plaster cowgirl is fixed to the painting, so that she rides side-saddle on the donkey. The figure, alabaster white and three-dimensional, is out of place, like a mirage or erotic hallucination.

Like *Tightrope* (1980), *Cathay* (1981), and *Satan’s Satellites* (1982), the mural confuses the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and installation, mirroring Smith’s playful blending of fiction, myth, and reality. Just as she appropriated her name from a Hollywood actress, Smith was not only inspired by Hollywood illusionism, but actually employed it, working on early renditions of *Satan’s Satellites* with a former CBS set painter. Each mural not only poses questions about the real and unreal within the context of an illusory space like a movie set—a line of questioning which can quickly degrade into abstract scholasticism—but also raises questions about the tectonic influence of myths, fictions, phrases, and images that form the substrata the American psyche.

Born in Los Angeles in 1949, Alexis Smith studied painting at the University of California, Irvine. She has exhibited extensively, including shows with Mizuno Gallery (1974, Los Angeles), Whitney Museum of American Art (1975, 1991, New York), Nicholas Wilder Gallery (1977, Los Angeles), Holly Solomon Gallery (1977, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1983, New York), Rosamund Felsen Gallery (1978, 1980, 1982, Los Angeles), Margo Leavin Gallery (1985, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2009, Los Angeles), Walker Art Center (1986, Minneapolis), Wexner Center for the Arts (1997, Columbus, Ohio), Greenberg Van Doren Gallery (2001, 2004, New York), and Honor Fraser Gallery (2013, 2016, Los Angeles).

In 1991, the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a retrospective of the artist’s work which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles) in 1992.

Smith’s work has also been included in many important museum exhibitions, such as *American Narrative: 1967–1977* (1977, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston), *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–1985* (1989, Cincinnati Art Museum), *Image World: Art and Media Culture* (1989, Whitney Museum of American Art), *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A., 1960–1997* (1997, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art), and *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity* (2000, Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Most recently, Smith was included in *Los Angeles: Birth of an Art Capital* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art, 1974–1981* (2011–2012, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), and *Physical: Sex and Body in the 1980s* (2016, Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

Smith’s work is featured in the collections of major museums around the country, including the Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art; the Walker Art Center; and the Whitney Museum of American Art. A retrospective of Smith’s work is currently being organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to represent Alexis Smith.

Alexis Smith: Not In Utopia will be on view at Garth Greenan Gallery, 545 West 20th Street (between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues), through Friday, July 30, 2021. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. For more information, please contact the gallery at (212) 929-1351, or email info@garthgreenan.com.

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