

Jo Smail

1943 Born in Durban, South Africa. Lives and works in Baltimore, MD

Education

1978 NHDAD. Johannesburg College of Art, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1975 NDAD. Johannesburg College of Art, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1963 BA. University of Natal, Durban, South Africa.

Selected Solo & Two Person Exhibitions

- 2020 *Jo Smail: Bees with Sticky Feet*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
Jo Smail: Flying with Remnant Wings, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 2018 *Jo Smail and Paul Jeanes: Clippings, Voids and Banana Curry*, Kohl Gallery,
Washington College, Chestertown, MD
- 2017 *Jo Smail: The Past is Present*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore MD
- 2015 *Jo Smail & William Kentridge: Dialogue*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
- 14-15 *Jo Smail: Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
- 11-12 *Jo Smail: Degrees of Absence*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
- 2009 *Jo Smail: Conjurations*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
- 2008 *The Limits of Language: A Selection from 10 Years*, McLean Project for the Arts,
McLean, VA
- 2007 *Species of Love and Angels Footsteps*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
- 2006 *New Beginnings*, Axis Gallery, New York, NY
- 2004 *Degrees of Fluency*, Heriard Cimino Gallery, New Orleans, LA. Curated by
Margaret Evangeline
Rockville Art Place. Rockville, MD
Goya Girl Press & Contemporary Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD
- 2003 Pinkard Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 2002 Goya Girl Press & Contemporary Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD
- 1997 Rockville Art Place, Rockville MD, Curated by Jack Rasmussen
- 1990 55 Mercer Street, New York, NY
Ombondi Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 Ombondi Gallery, New York, NY
- 1984 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1981 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1979 Association of Arts, Pretoria, South Africa
- 1978 Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1977 Johannesburg Art Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa
Fabian Fine Art, Cape Town, South Africa

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2019 *School 33 Art Center's 40th Anniversary Exhibition*, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD
- 2017 *Trawick Prize, Ruby Award Show*, Katzen Museum, American University, Washington DC
Painting not Painting, curated by Zoe Charlton and Tim Dowd, Sindikit, Baltimore, MD
- 2016 *Repurposed Realities*, Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore MD
- 2015 *With Silence Comes Peace*, Silber Gallery, Goucher College, Baltimore MD, curated by Laura Amussen
Juried Faculty Exhibition MICA, Juror Barry Schwabsky, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD
- 2014 *Transformations*, Juror Jack Rasmussen, Mclean Project for the Arts, VA
Baltimore Artists + WPA + Mera Rubell = LOVE, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY, Curator Mera Rubell
- 2012 *Philosophy of Figure*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
It..., Hirschhorn Museum, Two Person Show with Fabienne Lasserre, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD, Juror Melissa Ho
Trawick Prize 10th Anniversary Exhibition, Gallery B, Bethesda, MD
- 2011 *Becoming Something Found*, Jolie Laide Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
Sondheim Semi-Finalists, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
Faculty Exhibition, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 2010 *The Marks of Six Painters*, Gallery 447, Cambridge, MD
- 2008 *Grand Prize Winners of Trawick Prize and Bethesda Painting Award*, Fraser Gallery, Bethesda, MD
The Grey House that Thinks Itself into Your Head Without Asking, Fingston Gallery, Pace University, New York, NY
The Commerce and Culture Series, The Center Club, Baltimore, MD
- 2007 *Triangle Alumni DUMBO Arts Festival Exhibition 25*, Brooklyn, NY.
Trawick Prize Finalists, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD.
Strictly Painting 6, McLean Project for the Arts, Virginia. Curated by Kristen Hileman
Speaking of Silence 1, Sub-Basement Studios, Curated by Peter Brum
- 2006 *Trawick Prize Finalists*, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD
- 2005 *Soft Openings*, Katzen Art Center, American University Museum, Wash. D.C. Curated by Jack Rasmussen.
Critics' Picks: Just Looking, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD. Curated by Franklin Sirmans.
- 2004 *Inward Gazes*, Goucher College, Towson, MD, Curated by Cara Ober
Trawick Prize Finalists, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD
Prize Winners, Maryland State Art's Council, Baltimore, MD. Curated by Peter DuBeau.
Conversations, Collaboration with William Kentridge. Curated by Barry Nemett
Evergreen House, Baltimore, MD
Delaware Center for Contemporary Art, Wilmington, DE
Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford, Hartford, CO
Tufts University Gallery, Medford, MA
Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY
Karl Drerup Gallery, Plymouth State University, NH.

- 2003 *Breaking New Ground*, Curated by Peter Brum. Wyman Arts Center, Baltimore, MD
Fully Integrated, Curated by Y. Chung and Andrea Pollan. Degas Gallery,
McLean, VA
The Fables of La Fontaine, Curated by Koren Christofides, Ken Tisa & Robyn
Chadwick, Centre pour l'Art et la Culture, Aix-en-Provence, France
Exhibition Space of Temple University Rome, Italy
The Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
The Meyerhoff Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 2001 *Artists of the Alfred & Trafford Klotz Residency at Rochefort-en-Terre*, Pinkard
Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 2000 *Musee du Chateau de Rochefort-en-Terre*, Morbihan, France
Benefit Exhibition, Curated by Jack Rasmussen. Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1999 *The Untroubled Mind*, Curated by Peter Brum, Vila Julie College, MD
- 1998 *Chance and Necessity*, Curated by Power Booth, Maryland Art Place,
Baltimore, MD
St. Mary's College, St. Mary's City, MD
McLean Center for the Arts, McLean, VA
University of Ohio, Athens, OH
- 1998 *Chance and Necessity Prints*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD
WPA/Corcoran Art Auction, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Cross Currents '98: Pure View, Curated by Kristen Hileman, The Art Gallery,
University of Maryland, College Park, MD
Artscape '98: Empowerment Zone Artists, City Hall Gallery, Baltimore, MD
Biennial '98, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE
- 1997 *Not So Simple*, Curated by Annie Gawlak, Gallery 901, Washington, DC
Artist as Collector, Curated by Bill Schmidt and Helen Glazer, Goucher College,
Baltimore, MD
Reunion Benefit Exhibition, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
Out of the Ashes, Rosenberg Gallery, Goucher College, Baltimore, MD
- 1996 *Natalie Knight Gallery*, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1995 *Then and Now*, Maryland Institute, Curated by Barry Nemett, Montpelier Cultural
Arts Center, Laurel, MD
- 1994 *New Realities*, Curated by Patricia Patton, Staib Gallery/Art Wall + B, New York, NY
Then and Now, Maryland Institute, Josiah White Exhibition Center, Jim Thorpe, PA
Works from the Garden, Four Person Show, Curated by Jann Rosen-Queralt.
School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD
Between the Sexes, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1993 *Trask Gallery*, The National Arts Club, New York, NY
Contemporary South African Art, Consulate General, New York, NY
- 1992 *Triangle Artists*, The Lorraine Kessler Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY
- 1991 *Reverberations*, Four Women Show, Frostburg University, Frostburg, MD
Enigmatic Expressions, Four Person Show, Curated by Charlotte Cohen, Maryland
Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1990 *Maryland Art Place Benefit*, Curated by Susan Badder, Maryland Art Place,
Baltimore, MD
Voices from South Africa, Contemporary Art against Apartheid, Stuart Levy
Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 *Triangle Artist's Workshop*, Pine Plains, NY
- 1988 *Faculty Exhibition*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD

- 1987 Artscape Juried Exhibition, Baltimore, MD
- 1986 Artscape Juried Exhibition, Baltimore, MD
Guest Artist Retrospective Invitational Exhibition, Johannesburg Art Museum,
Johannesburg, South Africa
Cape Town Triennial Juried Exhibition, South African National Museum, Cape
Town, South Africa
- 1985 Tributaries Contemporary South African Art Cross-cultural invitational exhibition,
European tour. Sponsored by BMW
Women's Festival of the Arts, Funda Gallery, Soweto, Gertrude Posel Gallery,
Johannesburg
- 1984 *Four Johannesburg Painters*, National Touring Exhibition: South African National
Gallery, Cape Town; 1820 Monument Gallery, Grahamstown; University of
the Orange Free State Gallery, Bloemfontein; Pretoria Art Museum;
Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg; Durban Art Gallery, South Africa
- 1983 South African Contemporary Art, Invitational Exhibition, sponsored by BMW,
South Africa
- 1981 Faculty, Fine Art Department, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
- 1979 Association of Art, Johannesburg.
Faculty, Fine Art Department, Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
- 1978 Tel Aviv Art Fair Israel. Salon International d'art Tel Aviv
Touring Exhibition, USA, Invitational Exhibition, SA Prints
Renaissance '78, SA Association of Art, Johannesburg
Preview Tel Aviv Art Fair exhibition, Total Gallery, Johannesburg
Group show, Association of Art, Johannesburg
- 1976 Invitational Summer Show, Fabian Fine Art, Cape Town, South Africa
- 1975 *Art South Africa Today*, Juried by Clement Greenberg, Biennial, Durban (SA Prize
Winner)
- 1974 New Signatures, Pretoria, South Africa

Selected Public and Corporate Collections

USA Embassy, Johannesburg
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore MD
Chase Manhattan Bank, Johannesburg
Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, NY
Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland OH
Durban Museum and Art Gallery
Gertrude Posel Collection, University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg Art Museum
Johannesburg Chamber of Industries
Johns Hopkins University Collection
Mobil Corporation
National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town
Premier Milling Group, Johannesburg
Pretoria Art Museum
University of the Orange Free State

University of South Africa
University of Stellenbosch
University of the Western Cape

Awards

- 2014 Nominated for Anonymous as A Woman.
2012 Best of the Best, Sapphire, Trawick Prize Winner, selected from Trawick Prize winners of the past 10 years.
2010 Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award (Painting).
2007 Trawick Prize: Best in Show, Bethesda Contemporary Art Awards.
2007 Strictly Painting, McLean Project for the Arts.
07/04/95/91 Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award (Painting).
2003 Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation Creative Fellow, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.
2000/03/07 Residency, Rochefort-en-Terre, France.
1996/7 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant.
1992 Maryland Institute College of Art, Trustees Teaching Award.
1994 & 96 Residency Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center, Vermont.
1989 Triangle Artist's Workshop, Pine Plains, New York.
1975 Cambridge Shirt Award, Art South Africa Today.
1975 Abel Coetzee Award, Johannesburg College of Art.

Selected Publications

- Jo Smail: The Past is Present*, © Goya Contemporary, 2017, Essays by Shannen Hill, Timothy App, ISBN: 978-1-5323-4938-6
Jo Smail: Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon, © Goya Contemporary, 2014
Essay by Amy Eva Raehse, ISBN: 978-1-4951-3233-9
Jo Smail: Degrees of Absence, © Goya Contemporary, 2011
Waking Up from the Inside Out: Jo Smail 1998 – 2009, © Goya Contemporary, 2009
Essays by Terence Maloon & Karen Wilkin
ISBN: 978-1-61539-739-6, LoC#: 2009928019
The Hudson Review © VOL. LXII, NO. 4, Essay by Karen Wilkin, 2010
The Limits of Language: A Selection From 10 Years, text by Nancy Sausser, © McLean Project For the Art, 2008
Trawick Prize Catalog, © Trawick Prize, 2007 & 2006
The Hudson Review © Volume LIX, No. 2, Essay by Karen Wilkin, 2006
Influence & Collaboration in Contemporary Art, ©Evergreen House of Johns Hopkins University, Essay by Barry Nemet, 2003.
Chance and Necessity, Essay by Adam J. Lerner, © Art Papers, 1999.
150 South African Paintings by Lucy Alexander and Evelyn Cohen. © Struikhof Publishers, Cape Town, South Africa, 1990 ISBN 10: 0947458255
ISBN 13: 9780947458256
Johannesburg Art and Artists: Selections from a Century by Sheree Lissos, Cape Town Triennial, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1986. ISBN: 062012101 9780620102100
OCLC Number: 1925834

AD Art Director (No 2 & No 3), © Johannesburg Tributaries - *A View of Contemporary S.A. Art* (BMW), Johannesburg, Cape Town Triennial Catalogue, Cape Town, 1985
Jo Smail, © Goodman Gallery, South Africa, essay by Terence Maloon, 1981
Art in South Africa - A Short Survey by Frieda Harmsen, Published by Department of Information, Pretoria, 1977

Selected Bibliography

- 2020 *Critics' Picks, Jo Smail*, ARTFORUM, October 2020
Jo Smail with Louis Block, The Brooklyn Rail, July – August 2020
An Artist as Resilient as She is Joyous, Hyperallergic, May 9, 2020
- 2016 *Studio Visit, Ten Award-Winning Baltimore Artists in their Element*. Jo Smail, Painter, Photographer, Printmaker. BmoreArt Journal of Art + Ideas: Issue 2
- 2015 *Compatriots Collaborate* Interview by Judith Krummeck, 91.5FM WBJC Baltimore, October 8, 2015
Palette Palace Illustration, Baltimore Magazine, October 2015
Starting from Scratch by Rebekah Kirkman, City Paper, Baltimore, September 30, 2015
Meet Me in the City. Jo Smail's photographs and paintings respond to centuries of change in Florence, by Marie Claire, City Paper, Baltimore, January 7, 2015
- 2014 *Group Dynamics* by Cara Ober, Style Magazine, September 2014
- 2012 *Jo Smail Wins the Mega-Champion "Best of the Best" "Sapphire" Trawick Prize*, Bmoreart, November 3, 2012, Baltimore, MD
The Trawick Prize Celebrates 10th Anniversary Baltimore Artist Wins \$10,000 Prize by Jessica Ablamsky, Gazette, November 7, 2012
Baltimore, DC Artists Named Trawick Prize 10th Anniversary Winners by Erin Donahue, ChevyChasePatch, November 5, 2012
The Trawick Prize 10th Anniversary Competition and Exhibit by Michael O'Sullivan, Washington Post, November 9, 2012
- 2012 *Juried Faculty Exhibition "It..."*, Decker & Meyerhoff & Pinkard Galleries Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD
Jo Smail at Goya Contemporary by Jennie Hirsh, Art in America, April 2012
Presence in Absentia by Cara Ober, Urbanite, January 3, 2012, Baltimore, MD
- 2011 *Catalog: Art Collection of the United States Consulate General, Johannesburg, South Africa*.
- 2010 *At the Galleries* by Karen Wilkin, Hudson Review, VOL. LXII, NO. 4, Winter.
- 2009 *Waking Up from the Inside Out: Jo Smail 1998-2009*, essays by Terence Maloon and Karen Wilkin, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.
A Year in Visual Art, Top Ten. Jo Smail, Conjurations at Goya Contemporary, Baltimore City Paper, December 9.
- 2008 *Catalog the Limits of Language: A selection from 10 years text* by Nancy Sausser, McLean Project For the Arts, McLean, VA
- 2007 *The Searcher* by Deborah McLeod, City Paper, October 31, Baltimore, MD
Baltimore Artist Wins Award by Glenn McNatt, The Baltimore Sun, September 11.
Trawick Prize Winners, Arts Beat by Rachel Beckman, The Washington Post, Sept. 6.
Trawick Prize Catalog.
- 2006 *Art in Review: Jo Smail at Axis Gallery* by Holland Cotter, New York Times, February 10, 2006.

- New Beginnings: Jo Smail (including collaborations with William Kentridge) at Axis Gallery*, by Briget Goodbody, *Art on Paper*, May-June 2006.
- Around the Galleries, Jo Smail at Axis Gallery*, by Karen Wilken, *Hudson Review*, Summer 2006.
- The Trawick Prize Catalog.
- 2005 *Jo Smail at Heriard-Cimino* by Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Art in America*, May 2005
MAP show is a striking snapshot of regional art by Glenn McNatt, *The Sun*. 5/5/2005
Residents In? Just Looking: The 19th Annual Critics' Picks Exhibition by J. Bowers. *Baltimore City Paper*. 4/27/05
Jo Smail by Laurie Delk. *The New Orleans Art Review*. January/ February 2005.
- 2004 *Pink Freud* by J. Bowers. *Baltimore City Paper*. 9/29/04.
The Trawick Prize Catalog.
- 2003 *Artistic Give and Take* by Linell Smith. *Baltimore Sun*. 12/18/03.
Influence & Collaboration in Contemporary Art Catalog, Exhibition at Evergreen House.
- 2000 *Expo Franco-Americaine au Musee du Chateau* Review. *Quest-France* 7/5/00
- 1999 *Chance and Necessity* Review by Adam J. Lerner. *Art Papers*, March, April 1999.
- 1998 *Jo Smail at Rockville Art Place* by Joe Shannon, *Art in America*, June 1998.
- 1997 *The Artist as Lobbyist* Review by Michael O'Sullivan. *The Washington Post*. 12/11/97.
Jo Smail at Rockville Arts Place Review by Ken Oda, *KOAN Art Newsletter*. Washington DC. 11/97.
Artist's Collect the Darndest Things Review by John Dorsey, *Baltimore Sun*. 11/25/97.
The Colors of War and Peace at Rockville Arts Place, Review by Nancy Ungar, *Montgomery Gazette*, 10/31/97.
15th Anniversary Celebration Catalog, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD.
Not So Simple by Annie Gawlak. 10/97
Artist as Collector by Helen Glazer and Bill Schmidt. 10/97
Artistic Rebirth in Shades of Pink by Holly Selby, Article, *Baltimore Sun*. 4/13/97
Out of the Ashes by Helen Glazer, 4/97
- 1994 *New Realities* by Carl Hazlewood. Review, Cover. 10/97.
Maryland Institute is Gratifying Surprise by Adrienne Redd, Review, *The Morning Call*, PA. 7/10/94.
Garden of Art by John Dorsey, Review, *Baltimore Sun*. 5/25/94.
Review by Mike Giulano. *City Paper*. 5/18/94.
- 1991 *Enigmatic Art Show Requires Deep Thought* by John Dorsey, Review, *Baltimore Sun*, 1/7/1991.
Review by Mike Giuliano, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 2/7/1991.
- 1990 *150 South African Paintings* by Lucy Alexander and Evelyn Cohen. *Struikhof*, Cape Town, SA. p 152, illustration and article.
- 1986 *Johannesburg Art and Artists: Selections from a Century* by Sheree Lissos. Catalogue. Artist's statement. p 67.
Cape Town Triennial Catalogue.
- 1985 *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art Catalogue*. Artist's statement. p 43.
Jo Smail, illustration and interview by Hillary Prendini and Glynnis Underhill. *Style Magazine*, 3/85.
- 1984 *A Little Artistic Courage* by John Dewar. Review. *Johannesburg Star*, 8/8/84.

- Jo Smail* Interview by Franka Severin. Johannesburg Art Foundation News Letter, July '84.
- Four Painters* at National Gallery by Benita Munitz. Cape Times, 5/24/84
- Jo'burg Artists on Show* by Eldred Green. Cape Argus, 5/14/84.
- Four Johannesburg Painters* Catalogue. Artist's statement.
- 1983 *Art and Artists of South Africa* by Esme Berman. p 49, 163, 166, 244, 300, 517, 519. Balkema, Rotterdam and Cape Town. 1983.
- 1981 *How to go about Buying Local Art* by Sharon Levin Style Magazine, p 97, 98, 101. October 1981.
- A Painter who Knows her Own Mind* by Joyce Ozynski. Rand Daily Mail, 24/3/81.
- Jo Smail* by Terence Maloon. Essay written for Solo show at Goodman Gallery.
- 1978 *Fighting Gloom at Wits* by Joyce Ozynski. Express, 11/5/78.
- 1977 *Art in South Africa: A Short Survey* Catalogue.

Lectures

- 2015 Jo Smail on Pietro Perugino, Contribution to Blog, www.paintersonpaintings.com
- 2011 Jo Smail, Post Baccalaureate, MICA, Baltimore, MD
- 2009 Jo Smail, American University, Washington DC
- From Joseph Beuys to Goya: The Arch of My Life in Art Hoffberger School, MICA, Baltimore, MD
- From Joseph Beuys to Goya: The Arch of My Life in Art Post Baccalaureate, MICA, Baltimore, MD
- 2007 Jo Smail, University of Maryland, College Park
- 2002 Art and Autobiography, Shimizu, Japan

ARTFORUM



Jo Smail, *Salvaging Flowers*, 2020, archival pigment print, 24 1/2 x 23 1/2".

BALTIMORE

Jo Smail

GOYA CONTEMPORARY
3000 Chestnut Avenue Mill
Centre #214
March 18–October 20, 2020

In 1985, when Jo Smail emigrated from her native South Africa to Baltimore, she brought with her some scraps of paper. Among these remnants were family recipes, which were often transcribed on the backs of newspaper articles about apartheid. Struck by the marriage of such disparate subjects, Smail integrated reproductions of these archival snippets into jaunty abstract paintings and collages for a show at this gallery in 2017. They are Smail's most

political works to date and remain poignant, especially as her adopted homeland grapples with its own history of violent racial injustice. Smail is yet again conjuring her past in this exhibition, but this time she's relying heavily on her decades-old collection of African textiles to further her ever-expanding lexicon.

Three shaped paintings from Smail's ongoing series "Mongrel Collection," 2018—fifty-four of which are displayed in her concurrent survey just a few miles east at the Baltimore Museum of Art—hang salon-style near the entrance. Their eccentric shapes, cut from MDF, are primarily based on Matissean forms and serve as the foundation upon which the artist layered her precariously arranged fabrics into a mélange of beguiling compositions—an homage to the beloved Frenchman and her erstwhile upbringing. The textiles also appear in each of the twenty-five pigment prints populating the remaining walls. To create these works, Smail paired the jaggedly scissored bits of cloth with meandering pen drawings on intimately scaled sketchbook pages, which were then photographed, enlarged, and printed. The act of reproduction magnified the subtle warp and weft of the patterns while highlighting their frayed edges, as we see in *Butterfly Eyes*, *Salvaging Flowers*, and *Twilight*, all 2020. The fabric's idiosyncrasies are what make these works endearing. They're like people: clever, exuberant, a tad whimsical, and just a little rough around the edges.

— Andy Martinelli Clark

BROOKLYN RAIL

JO SMAIL with Louis Block

“The more vulnerable we are when we paint,
the better the painting will be.”

In her recent artist book, *Flying With Remnant Wings* (2020), Jo Smail asks “Could I paint a caress?” Throughout her career, Smail (b.1943, Durban, South Africa) has dealt with similar questions. From early poured paintings and calligraphic abstractions to experiments with the grid and collaged patterns, Smail’s work has been concerned with the spaces between movement and material, between the spoken word and the intangible feeling. Fittingly, her titles and writing often reference literary figures such as Clarice Lispector, H.D., Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Mallarmé. What does it mean to paint a caress? Painting has always had to mediate between the tactile and the visual, and Smail’s project is one that delights in the blips and wobbles inherent to that process of sensory translation.

On the occasion of her retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art, *Flying With Remnant Wings*, as well as her solo show at Goya Contemporary, *Bees With Sticky Feet*, Smail and I spoke about her life and work. The following is an edited version of a video conversation held in June from our respective quarantine locations, Baltimore and Ithaca, NY.



Portrait of Jo Smail, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



Jo Smail, *Chewing on Shadows*, 2014. Acrylic, enamel, pencil, and artist's tape collage on Canvas, 70 x 70 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Louis Block (Rail): I'd like to begin by reading a quote from an author you're very familiar with, Clarice Lispector, from her book *Água Viva*: "I want to grab hold of the *is* of the thing. These instants passing through the air I breathe: in fireworks they explode silently in space." I love how she describes artmaking as an interior and temporal process—it's a statement of the desire to represent some intangible mass that we're floating through.

Jo Smail: Reading Clarice is all you need in terms of art theory. [*Laughter*] I was reading William Carlos Williams at the time I made the early paintings, and he's all about the *is* too.

Rail: Could you talk about how you came to painting, and your education and early career in South Africa?

Smail: I didn't grow up drawing or painting, although I made things out of clay we found in a river, and I made all of my own doll's clothes and a house for them to live in. So that about says a lot, that art was not on the cards at all in my upbringing. My first degree was in History and English—and babies—because I didn't want my home to be like my parents' home, which was always short of money. And I wanted to study something really practical, even though I don't really think that History and English are practical subjects—but they're more practical than Drama and Philosophy, which I was interested in as well. I went to University when I was pretty young, and I graduated at 19. When I was 23, I already had three children, which always boggles students' minds when I tell them.

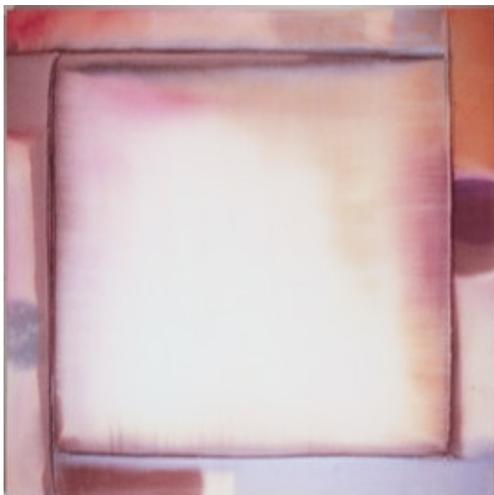
There was something I knew was missing about my life. I knew quite a lot about literature and contemporary music, but I had no idea how it all fit in with art. I asked myself: *What don't you know anything about?* My answer: *Art*. So, when my youngest child was about four, I took up some classes for housewives, painting still lifes, but I thought, gosh, there must be more to art than this. So a friend of mine helped me get into the Johannesburg College of Art.

Rail: What was being taught there during the '70s? What was the general attitude toward painting?

Smail: We had traditional courses like lettering, design, figure painting, and history of art, but it was a mixture of all of this traditional stuff and being in an environment that was incredibly avant-garde. Some of the faculty had studied at St. Martins College of Art in London and they would do things like walk into a classroom and say "What's the grade you want to have?" and we'd have to announce that grade on our first day, and then they'd walk out and leave us there for the rest of the semester and we would think "Well, we've already gotten As so we'll just do whatever we like." Then I was given strange assignments such as taking five letters of the alphabet and constructing something, and so I got on the roof and dumped about 25 pounds of flour, saying A, E, I, O, U, and then downstairs on my desk I wrote some kind of treatise on existentialism or something. [*Laughter*] I was so confident in those days. I'm much less confident now.

Rail: And it was sculpture that really drew you at the beginning?

Smail: Yes, it was. There wasn't much written about Joseph Beuys at that stage, and we were scrounging for everything we could find on him, and Anthony Caro was the big noise right then. Welding was in vogue, and as much as I tried, I just couldn't do it, so that's when I began to use canvas as a material, and the canvas became flatter and flatter, and then it wanted paint, so I gave it paint. In 1975, Clement Greenberg came to South Africa to curate the South African Biennial, and I entered a stitched canvas with flooded paint, which was à la Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. Greenberg gave me a prize and then the following year I got my first solo exhibition in Cape Town.



Left: Jo Smail, *Breath*, 1977. Acrylic on stitched canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Right: *Purple Space*, 1977. Acrylic on stitched canvas, 69 x 69 inches. (Both destroyed in a fire.)

Rail: On the subject of childhood and schooling, you have written about childhood ballet instruction as your “first memory of touching nothing.” How much of your process relies on other senses besides vision? Sound, touch, taste, etc.?

Smail: Well, I’ve never wanted to tell stories, so I’ve always believed that if abstraction has any validity, it’s about the things we feel in our lives and the way that our lives are animated, and maybe that goes back to my ballet experience as well. I also remember saying: touching nothing with care. When you touch the air with care, your hand touches it, really *touches* it, so that you can believe something is happening out there. I’ve always been interested in nothing.

In 1997, I visited the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. I wanted to see Matisse’s *Dance* (1910). The windows of the museum were open, so I gazed at the painting with a breeze on my face. And in 2017 at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in London I saw Rose Wylie’s paintings for the first time. They made me giddy with delight—I laughed out loud. Our friend Basil Beattie is a Royal Academician, so we could see *Matisse in His Studio* upstairs on our own before the crowds. I felt my body curve into an odalisque form, and felt his brush skim across the surface and curl around the edges of pattern—all charged with the joy that emanates from his use of color. When you feel the air on your face, when you see the work of a painter in an environment that isn’t something that you know, as grand as the Royal Academy, it’s so different than the computer, and I think that’s what painting or art is all about, that experience.

Rail: Going back to this idea of emptiness, nothingness, you often leave unpainted fields of canvas in your work or collage patches of raw canvas on top of painted areas. I wanted to ask how you think of those areas—as full, as receding into space?

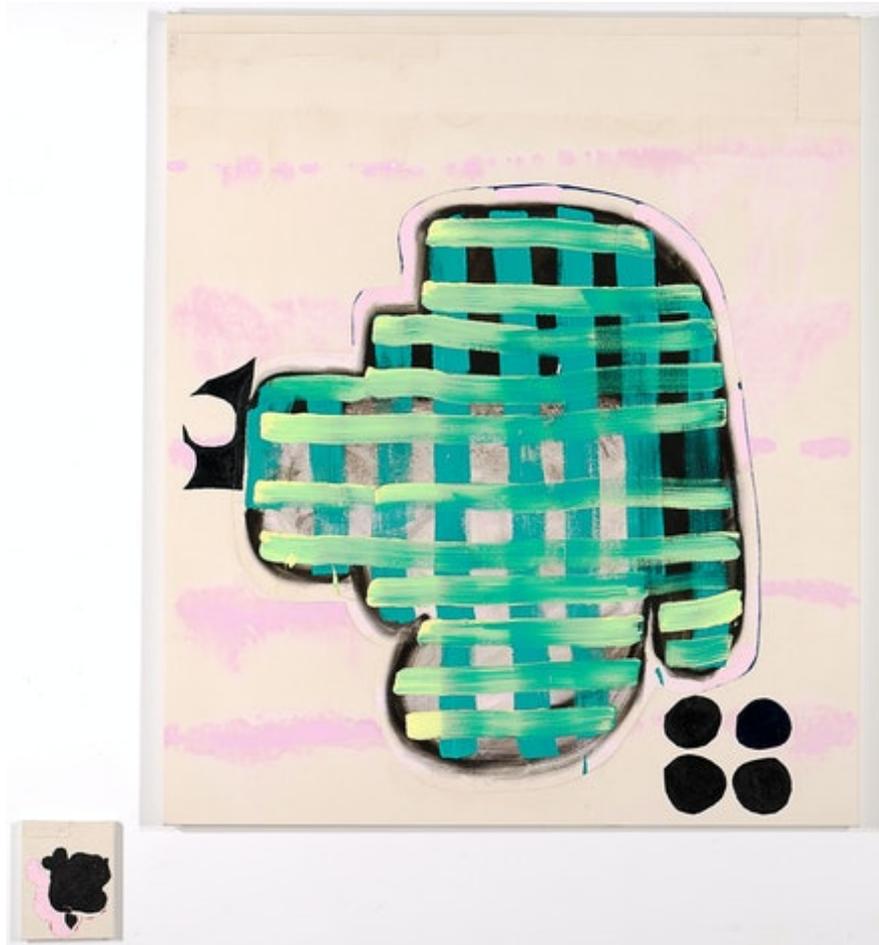
Smail: Once I suffered a stroke and was unable to speak. I was thinking that if I was going to talk about not being able to speak, then I needed to get rid of any kind of substrate or anything on the canvas. That was my initial reason for using raw canvas, to really start from scratch, and to build something on that. It’s just to do with nothing, really nothing, and then something. When formalism and aesthetics get talked about, it’s implied that they relate to nothing in the world, but I don’t believe that. This bare canvas has its own life, its own sensibility, and I juxtapose it with something, an image. After the stroke I could not speak, so that was what I was saying with bare canvas. As I learned to speak, I gave it an image which you could recognize.

Rail: The majority of your canvases are rectangular, but their edges are often invaded by collaged elements, loose strings, or thick applications of paint, causing the edge to shake or quiver. In the early work from South Africa there is also an awareness of the architectonics of the rectangle informing the interior of the paintings. What is your relationship to the rectangle?

Smail: I used triangles as well, and I did actually think about the rectangle a lot then. The seams would go diagonally or horizontally, so in that way I did relate to the edge very much. But now, I don’t, and I think it’s given me a certain freedom. I remember someone saying in my studio that the new work seems to be so much more pertinent than the older work, when I had to have so-called background or negative space. Now I don’t think about negative space—everything has to be positive.

Rail: The grid appears in many of your paintings, and earlier work sometimes references weaving. You also let the canvas edge unravel until individual strings become mark-making elements.

Smail: Absolutely, I felt as if I was unraveling, and the canvas was good enough to help with that, and when you're working with a grid, when you're drawing by hand, the wobble makes it more vulnerable. Vulnerability really excites me, and I think that the more vulnerable we are when we paint, the better the painting will be. If that makes any sense.



Jo Smail, *Figure in Plaid Walking a Dog and Dog*, 2011. Oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 70 x 60 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Rail: There is a painting in the show, *Figure in Plaid Walking a Dog and Dog* (2011), which incorporates a collaged grid. It reminds me of Julian Schnabel's *Formal Painting and His Dog* (1978), there is a similar humor in the titles.

Smail: Collage is just another device—I'd cut out old paintings and then collage them onto new canvases. That image was the best part of that painting, and there was this little thing sitting at the bottom of the canvas, and a curator came by one day and said "Oh, that looks like somebody walking a dog." And I thought "Brilliant title!" I'm not against humor. Once upon a time Clement Greenberg decided that humor was out, but that was a long time ago. The more I laugh... I just love Rose Wylie's work. I think she's brave, but she would probably just think

she's doing what she needs to do. In a catalogue essay on her paintings Barry Schwabsky wrote that "although they might look artless, they're the opposite of the art that hides art." I love that.

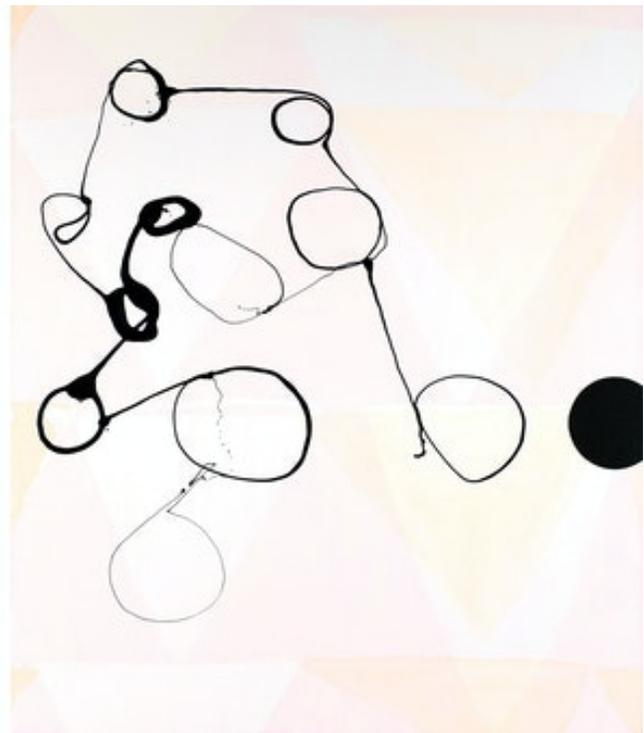
Rail: You had connected the canvas unraveling with vulnerability—to what extent do you try to exert control over your materials?

Smail: When I go into my studio I always have great ideas as to what I'm going to do, but then that doesn't happen, so I just fool around. I think it all happens by accident. The best ideas you don't have much control over. It reminds me of H el ene Cixous. She is an atheist but whenever she's writing well, she says "Oh, God did it." [Laughter]

Rail: Yes, her essay "The Last Painting or The Portrait of God" presents a sort of jealousy toward the language of painting and what it is able to accomplish without words. She writes:

I gather words to make a great straw-yellow fire, but if you don't put in your own flame, my fire won't take, my words won't burst into pale yellow sparks. My words will remain dead words. Without your breath on my words, there will be no mimosas.

Smail: "No mimosas," I love that too. And one doesn't even have to know what it means but it conjures up something so beautiful. So "God" wrote that, definitely.



Left: Jo Smail, *Wild Grass is So Easy*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 inches. Private Collection. Right: Howling Mongrel, 2004. Oil and enamel on canvas, 70 x 60 inches. Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Rail: She is also obsessed with this enigmatic phrase from Kafka's deathbed: *Lemonade everything was so infinite*. While we're talking about language, do you want to touch on the work you made while recovering from your stroke in 2000? What role did drawing and writing play in your recovery?

Smail: Nobody thought I was going to speak again. My speech therapist said there was no sign of action in my throat, so don't hold hope for speaking. He tried all sorts of things with beating out time and using rhythms to try and speak. But then he started to sing *Happy Birthday*, and I joined him. I think that's because you go back to the most basic instincts and come up with something that has really been in your life forever—and that was all I could do—so I'd go back to my hospital room and start singing *Happy Birthday*. Then of course everybody brought in hundreds of music books, and we'd all have sing-ins, and I'd hum. It was just a glorious time of my life. Even though I suppose I wasn't supposed to feel happy, I felt terribly happy.



Left: Jo Smail, *Species of Love #20*, 2006-07. Charcoal and collage on paper, 30 x 22 inches. Right: *Dyed Eggs and Thongbells*, 2012. Oil, acrylic, enamel, pencil, and collage on canvas, 80 x 60 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Rail: You were also using the color pink in most of your paintings around that time. When did you start using pink?

Smail: The pink started after '96 when a fire destroyed my studio and all of my work. I was walking down the road with my husband one day after that and felt the inside of his arm. I decided to paint that part of his arm—I was trying to paint love. It had to be something uncomplicated and straightforward, and it just came out as pink. New beginnings, new skin. I proceeded to make pink paintings in squares for about three years until I had the stroke, and then the pink became silence, and I would throw things over the canvas. It took a while to learn how

to speak. I could only repeat words that I was told. That's all I could do, so those are what I threw across the canvas, the words.

Rail: Like *Dustmop Department* (2004).

Smail: Yes, that's the title of a painting and those are the first two words in a whole series that begin with the same phonetic sounds.

Rail: It does seem as if these are projects that could take entire lifetimes, just to paint that feeling of touching someone's arm, or of learning to speak.

Smail: Absolutely, but I'm prone to go all over the place. I have been told there is a logic to what I do, even though I don't always feel it. One thing leads to another, if I have a show then I start thinking of something new.

Rail: The pink paintings also seem to reference weaving or patterning. It's so easy to forget that the canvas is a woven object, but when it starts to unravel it's very clear. To what extent do you conceive of the canvas as a substrate versus a living textile?

Smail: We have a fairly adequate—I would say adequate, not large—African art collection, which we brought from South Africa. Back then, I'd be in the middle of a painting and would get a phone call from somebody who was going to go out and collect Ndebele beadwork on a field trip, and I'd drop my paintbrushes and go. We'd sit in these huts and they would come over the mountains to sell these incredible beadworks, which had been taken down out of the rafters, because the beadwork is used for particular rituals and once those rituals are over the work is just stored. I think the patterns and the canvas weave might reflect the Ndebele beadwork. Beading is such a rhythmic process.

I'm actually working with a grid these days as well, on top of African fabric, and the African fabric recedes into the background, and the grid manifests itself more authoritatively, and then I put other things on top of it so that the whole space is very difficult to latch onto. The compositions are based on shapes from Matisse paintings, so they're becoming more complex, which excites me.

Rail: What is the backing for the shapes?

Smail: At first there was just cardboard, but now it's MDF, which is about the same thickness as cardboard and also looks like it, and I've graduated to putting a cleat on the back of it, so I'm learning along the way.

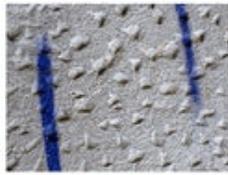
Rail: I wanted to ask about photography as well. I remember seeing your show at Goya Contemporary in 2014, *Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon*, in which you had paired paintings with photographs of walls in Florence as well as stand-alone photographs of the space between roofs and the sky. Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between photography and your paintings, especially when they become composite objects?



Jo Smail, *Looking At, Looking Up, Looking Down*, 2014. Studio installation view. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Smail: Maybe I was being a bit pretentious then. I was talking about photography and its unrealness compared to a painting with its realness that you have to actually experience. Photography was something that I thought of as a second-hand experience. But when I was photographing those gaps in the sky—which Florence is full of, all you have to do is put your camera up and it’s just magic!—I was thinking about nothing, that infinite nothingness, which tied into my desire to paint nothing. *Nothing* you can’t actually speak about, and *love* you can’t actually talk about, and anything that’s of value you can’t actually talk about. Words like *magic*, *experience*—we are at a loss to actually find words for those things. So maybe it is a longing for something other than the tangible world. But, I’m pretty happy with the tangible world. [*Laughter*]

In *A Breath of Life* (1978), Clarice Lispector wrote: “Today is a day of nothing? That is down to the wire. Could there be a number that is less than zero? That begins where there is no beginning because it always was?” She deals with metaphysical thoughts a lot. She’s somebody who is probably always reaching out for something, and the reaching is the whole reason for being, as opposed to the finding.



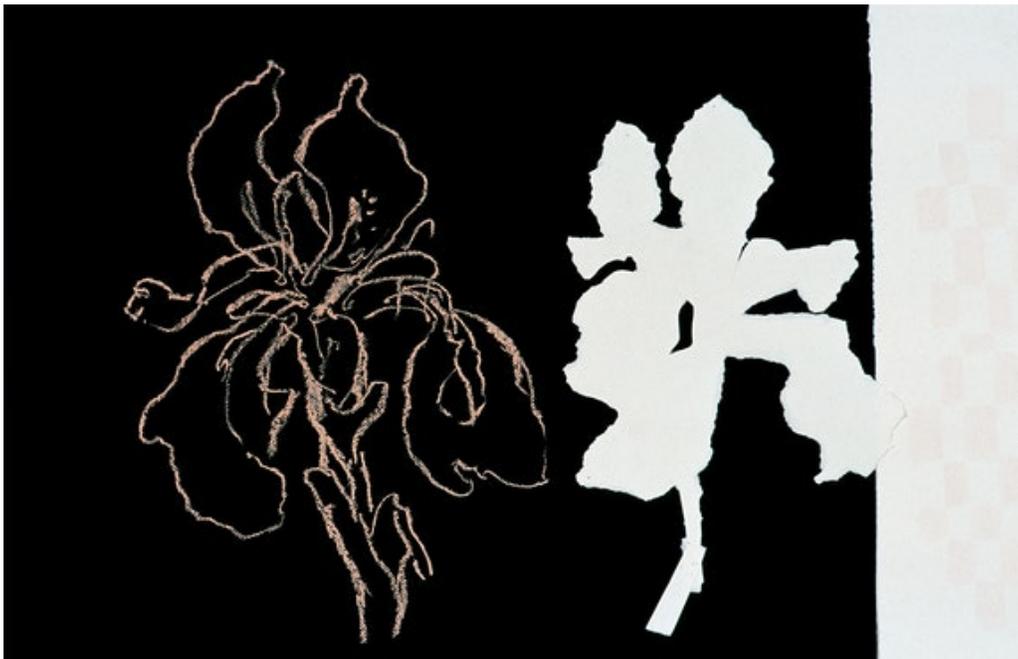
Left: Jo Smail, *Marmalade Heart*, 2014. Diptych: Acrylic, found fabric, pencil, collage on canvas, 50 x 40 inches, and archival digital print, 24 x 18 1/2 inches. Right: *Angel's Gaze*, 2014. Diptych: Acrylic, found fabric, pencil, collage on canvas 50 x 40 inches, and archival digital print, 24 x 18 1/2 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Rail: The following year at Goya Contemporary, you presented collaborative work made with William Kentridge. How did those collaborations begin?

Smail: I'd met him in 1981 at my last show at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. He came with his wife and one of his children and told me he was battling with painting. I knew he loved to draw, so I said to him, "Well, you don't have to worry about painting, just do what you love to do." It's always seemed to me that we're constantly wanting to be somebody that we're not, but we have to be satisfied with who we are. That's where any kind of magic happens, when you are just given to your vulnerabilities and given to your eccentricities—which was drawing in his case. At that point, his career hadn't taken off yet, but it really did after he had a piece in documenta. Of course, I think he's a genius, being able to collaborate with so many people, to put a whole lot of things together and make something beautiful out of the operas and everything else he's done.



Jo Smail and William Kentridge, *Collaboration #10*, 2005. Mixed media on Paper, 15 x 22 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.



Jo Smail and William Kentridge, *Collaboration #6*, 2002. Mixed media on paper, 22 x 30 inches. Private collection.

Rail: Did you only collaborate by mail or in person as well?

Smail: No, I went up to New York in 2002 when he was doing a residency at Columbia and I took a whole folder of work with me. Joan Mitchell had a show on at the Whitney, which we went to together, and I remember him saying “Ah, I didn’t think I’d enjoy this, but I really did.” He was doing a lot of charcoal drawings at the time, and I was making careful watercolors, and he decided not to mess them up. I think a lot of collaborations are done in terms of destroying the

work that you're given, and then doing something else to manifest your own being over that, but he treated my work with such care and love. Because he thought my work was so clean, he decided to use collage, and that opened up a gate for me to continue to use collage as well. I think that was the value of those collaborations, it just opened so many doors for me too. The next time we collaborated, I stuck things in the mail and he sent them back to me with his additions. I thought that I'd done some beautiful very minimal drawings, and he sent them back with these incredible little creatures and objects on them, and then they came to life. They were so much more magical after he'd done his magic on them.

Rail: You moved to Baltimore in '85, and now your work is in the Baltimore Museum of Art, which you live right next to. The Cone Collection at the BMA has an amazing holding of paintings by Matisse, which you are drawing on in the current work. Can you talk about that connection between your work and the collection?

Smail: As I said, I come out of shows thinking something has to change. After my last show, which was much more politically oriented, I was thinking—you know, it's so twee talking about love all the time—but I thought, "What do you love?" "You love Matisse." So, I started working with Matisse shapes, it's as simple as that. I started filling sketchbooks with the shapes, and because I had been working on little three-dimensional objects, I thought this would be a way of translating that abstract work. Matisse is there wherever you look. I truly do think it's like my own collection, because it's right there on my doorstep, which is such a privilege. That was something we didn't have in South Africa. I didn't grow up in the normal sort of artist way of being taken to an art museum continually by my mother, we never did that. So, having this right there—and it literally is: you walk across the road, and you're there with Matisse.



Installation view: *Jo Smail: Flying With Remnant Wings*, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2020. Courtesy the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Rail: And you've named it the Mongrel Collection?

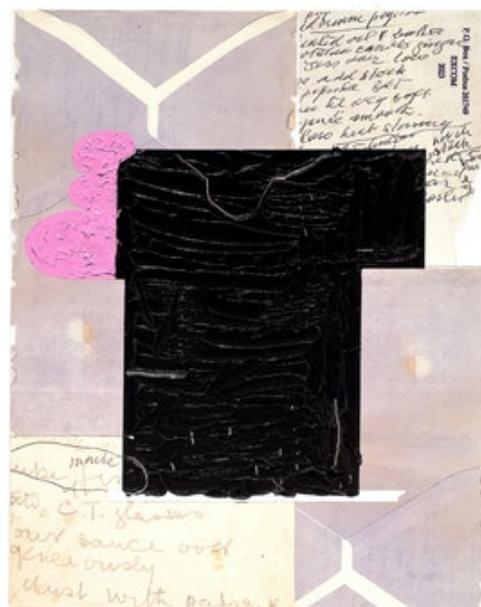
Smail: Yes, another influence that I should mention is seeing Rei Kawakubo's show at the Metropolitan Museum in 2017. It just absolutely blew me away, and I got the word collection from her. I thought, well, I'm a mongrel, and so this is my collection. I was thinking of Rei Kawakubo a lot—she would work with canvas, she would work with paper. I have one of her quotes here:

For more than forty years that I have been making clothes, I have never thought about fashion. In other words, I have almost no interest in it. What I've only ever been interested in are clothes that one has never seen before, that are completely new, and how and in what way they can be expressed. Is that called fashion? I don't know the answer.

Rail: I feel that way about the shapes in the Mongrel Collection. I know they come from Matisse paintings, but I can't exactly place where they fit into the paintings and what they are, like new shapes that I've never seen before.

Smail: I deliberately put my own spin on them. Nobody has asked me how I dare use African cloths, and I've been waiting for this question through interviews and conversations. People bring it up all the time when somebody else uses African cloths and they're white, they have to explain themselves. As Yinka Shonibare has said, they're not African fabrics, they're made in Holland for Indonesian markets, but they've become ubiquitous in Africa. I was born in Africa, and my whole love of being is African. I've collected these cloths for years and have used them as curtains, as bedspreads, as tablecloths because they have such gorgeous patterns, which is part of what I love about Africa, but I haven't used them on my work before now.

Rail: For another recent show, *The Past is Present* (2017), you also used old newspaper clippings and grocery lists blown up and collaged onto the paintings. What caused this sudden return to the past?



Left: Jo Smail, *A Labor Crisis*, 2017. Paper, acrylic, and digital prints on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Right: *Monk Fish*, 2017. Acrylic and digital prints on canvas, 50 x 40 inches. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Smail: When I left South Africa, I brought back a whole lot of scraps of paper and newsprint which had recipes written on them. When I turned them over I found articles that related to apartheid, and I just knew that I had to use them in some way. It felt like this was something that was a given for me, and if I didn't use it I would be disowning my past. Of course, there were all those fifties ads as well, so in a way it was really humorous and dreadful at the same time.

Rail: In her catalogue essay, Dr. Shannen Hill writes of your painting over newspaper clippings as an act of "nowness." Those pieces were made about three years ago now, but they seem more and more relevant given the current uprising against police brutality and racism.

Smail: That's exactly why I started to read Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998) again, which outlines the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, an inquiry into human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1993. It's horrifying to read, even though it's a wonderful book. I needed to remind myself of why we left South Africa before the end of apartheid. I was baking a lot, which is what everyone else was doing, baking their way out of the pandemic, and I wasn't going to the studio because I didn't see the point when no one was going to see the work. But that video of George Floyd shook me, and I think everybody around the world felt that way, to see that video was just horrifying, so I hope that it makes a difference. *Country of My Skull* contains the voices of ordinary people who will shape the course of South African history. *I can't breathe* is the voice of an ordinary man, George Floyd, who may also change history.



Clockwise from top: Jo Smail, *My Mother Warned Me*, 2017. 9 x 5 1/2 inches. *A State of Mind*, 2017. 6 x 6 inches. *Uniforms for Whites and Non Whites*, 2017. 7 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches. Digital Prints and acrylic on paper mounted on board. Courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore.

Rail: The earliest painting of yours that I've seen a photo of—which was destroyed in the studio fire—is titled *Breath* (1977), and the first Lispector quote we mentioned is also about breathing in the material of life, and seems to reflect how poignant the statement *I can't breathe* becomes, how breathing stands in for life and how those words can represent more than one act of violence.

Smail: It is so hard to even try to make work that has the intensity and realness of those words. I recently figured out what my professor at art school meant when he told me my figure drawings had soul. Everybody else had drawn all their lives, and I was this person who hadn't drawn anything, with no facility. All the drawings were put up in front of the room, and the students were criticizing them and ignoring my drawing completely, and the professor said, "Well, I'll tell you something: this drawing has more soul in it than all these other drawings put together." And my heart just sunk, well, it sunk out of joy. Facility sometimes gets in the way of the stuff that is real—that's what motivated me to mention that. It was my first year at art school—I drew like it was a matter of life or death. I am motivated to do the same now.



Installation view: Jo Smail: *Flying With Remnant Wings*, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2020. Courtesy the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Rail: I wanted to read one more quote by Clarice Lispector, from *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), because you've mentioned the idea of "complete body awareness" in art, and she writes so beautifully about the body and form:

Since I must have a form because I don't feel strong enough to stay disorganized, since I inevitably must slice off the infinite monstrous meat and cut it into pieces the size of my mouth and the size of the vision of my eyes, since I'll inevitably succumb to the need for form that

comes from the terror of remaining undelimited—then may I at least have the courage to let this shape form by itself like a scab that hardens by itself, like the fiery nebula that cools into earth.

Could you talk about the studio practice as a full body experience?

Smail: Art is based on knowledge that our bodies already have. Our bodies know when there's something small, and exaggerating that smallness makes art, or moving with your whole arm, or moving with your fingers in a tiny way. Just verbalizing those notions of expression is how art is made. If I was to be reincarnated, I would maybe bother with an exercise class in an art school, with sound as well, so that we could move our whole bodies and learn to draw.

I'm reminded of when I taught basic design, and I asked the students to invent a musical instrument. They came in with things that rattled and boxes of leaves which they stood in, all sorts of things, and then I asked them to draw. In groups of three or four they would play their musical instruments, and the other students would draw the sounds in long or short movements according to what they were hearing. I know that people don't remember what they've been taught because things just go in one ear and out the other and then you move on, but that was one of the classes that I'm most proud of. There's an essay by Jan Verwoert titled "Why is Art Met with Disbelief? It's Too Much like Magic" (2014) He likens an Italian nursery rhyme to the way rhythms and rhymes work in art, and he thinks of it as so essential that we're not about economies, that we're about something more, and that magic is where art comes in.

Rail: One final question: since we've spoken so much about her—when did you first read Clarice Lispector?

Smail: I took out a movie in the '80s, I think. It was called *The Hour of the Star*, and I was just brokenhearted at the end of it. I was sobbing, and I thought, I've got to find this book, I've got to find where this movie comes from. I went to the Johns Hopkins library and they only had Portuguese copies of it, but eventually I found an English version in London, and it's just absolutely remarkable. Did you ever read *The Hour of the Star*?

Rail: Yes! "All the world began with a yes."

Smail: "Yes" says it all, it's everything. The world began with a yes. I named one of my paintings *Howling Mongrel* (2004). There is a moment in *The Hour of the Star* where she talks about the howling mongrel and grass growing up between the cracks—it won't die even though it's got all this concrete over it. It won't say no to life. It says yes.

Contributor
Louis Block

HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist as Resilient as She Is Joyous

Few artists have reinvented themselves in their prime the way Jo Smail has; few have had to.

By Barry Nemett
May 9, 2020



Jo Smail, "The Caress" (2020), watercolor and African print on paper, 9 x 9 inches (photo by Julien Davis, all works courtesy Goya Contemporary, Baltimore)

*Our past makes us who we are
A small girl sits on the floor in a ballet class
Her teacher asks her to reach out and touch the air gently with care
This is my first memory of touching nothing*

— Jo Smail

BALTIMORE — Jo Smail’s poetic annotations, like the one above, accompany her paintings, drawings, and collages in a book that documents overlapping solo shows at the Baltimore Museum of Art, curated by Kristen Hileman, and the nearby Goya Contemporary, curated by Amy Raehse. Both exhibitions are now shuttered by the pandemic, but viewable online.

Born and raised in South Africa, Smail left behind a national reputation as a painter when she emigrated to the United States 35 years ago. She has lived ever since just a five-minute walk from the BMA, which houses one of the most extensive collections in the world of artworks by Henri Matisse. The French master plays a key role in both of Smail’s exhibitions.

In the first room of the BMA exhibit, two colorfully decorated adjacent walls create a kind of mammoth, double-page-spread brimming with daredevil collisions. Pizzazzy fabrics smack up against simple, drawn lines. Each abstraction gains muscle when viewed as part of a sweeping polyptych.



Jo Smail, “Mongrel Collection” (2018-19), shaped constructions, acrylic, African fabric, digital prints, canvas, pen, duct tape on cardboard & MDF (photo by Mitro Hood, Baltimore Museum of Art)

Many of the 57 canvases and constructions in this grouping quote Matisse’s shapes and patterns. From her book:

Matisse’s shapes

Why not?

A place to begin

I steal

Embellish them

Pattern upon pattern

*Getting strength looking back
In order to go forward*

The title of her BMA show is “Jo Smail: Flying With Remnant Wings.” The subtitle comes from the liberating, bittersweet words of another poem she wrote:

*A bird says:
Check out those eyes
But he is mistaken
The eyes are painted on the butterfly’s wings
He dives in
And tears at his mistake
The butterfly escapes with remnant wings*

The “remnant wings” are also an allusion to the artist herself, who turned a corner after a stroke profoundly affected her mobility and speech.



Jo Smail, “A Labor Crisis” (2017), paper, acrylic and digital prints on canvas, 50 x 40 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

Shortly before the stroke, she had suffered another tragedy: a fire in an area of the city known as Clipper Mill Industrial Park, which housed her studio and those of many other Baltimore artists. The fire destroyed much of her life’s work. In its wake, Smail got busy.

After these twin traumas, she mourned her physical losses, but her fierce determination reminded me of a story I heard about a lone working lightbulb unearthed from the rubble of a devastating hurricane.

Jo Smail is a hurricane lightbulb.

First, she regained control of a single syllable: “do.” Through disciplined effort, and with the loving support of her husband, the retired, internationally renowned research scientist Julien Davis, who is also an accomplished photographer, she ultimately regained her movement and language. And then some.



Jo Smail, "Patched Heart I" (1996), oil on canvas,
80 x 60 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

Shortly before her shows opened, I visited Jo, a longtime friend and colleague, in her studio. How distant it seems now, when I didn't have a clue what COVID-19 meant, and Zoom was what motorcycles did.

Our conversation took off with Matisse, and no matter how far we left him behind, we kept zigzagging back to pick him up. Jo talked about South African institutional racism during her youth. She talked about the handwritten ingredients of her deceased relatives' favorite dishes, which were sometimes penciled over newspaper articles or adverts about subjects as disparate as apartheid and frilly-aproned dresses.

For the past few years, Jo has been incorporating digitally enlarged snippets of these overlays into her collages. From there, we talked about dance; travel; nursery rhymes; poetry; humor; "being kind to loss"; fire; danger; nerve; nothing (nothing has always fascinated this artist). One thing we didn't talk about was risk, but, like heat in cooking, risk has always served as a standard element in Smail's art-making.

I thought of the drawing, "Zebra Dream I" (1982), one of her few surviving works completed before the fire. The first image of Jo's I ever saw (almost 40 years ago), it is included in the Goya Contemporary show, *Bees With Sticky Feet*. Some areas are crisp and clear, but more aren't. Casually reinventing themselves, the marks squiggle across the page, wobbling like pie-eyed honey bees high on nectar. The artist's younger self, by turns insecure and cocksure, navigates chaos, courts failure, and finally soars.



Jo Smail, "Zebra Dreams" (1982), acrylic, charcoal and pencil on paper, 23 x 31.5 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

Her works from a decade later — powerful, yet disarmingly slight and fragile, “hurricane lightbulbs” like “Patched Heart 1” (1996), “Knitting Mistakes” (1997), “Whisper,” (2001), and “Attempting to Fly (2004) — are full of geometric shapes in pinks and pale yellows; they touch air, not each other, despite the tight quarters of their painterly grids. In the recent series of works she created with her fellow South African, William Kentridge, her contributions are often similarly restrained.

Kentridge was unrestrained, though, in his praise for her during a speech he gave in 2002. Upon receiving an honorary degree from Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), where Smail taught for 29 years, he gave Jo a shoutout as being one of the three most influential people in his life, who encouraged him to follow his great passion and draw more and more. Her encouragement led him to his groundbreaking animated films. The rest, as they say, is history.

In their “Collaboration #1” (2005), we see two coal-black figures soldiering on, while shouldering a flattened, collaged Winsor & Newton Artists’ Charcoal box in pink and white, and a scrap of pink notepaper. These are echoed by pink triangles glinting faintly in the background, and, on the left, an abstract black-and-pink fragment of a checkerboard.



Jo Smail and William Kentridge, "Collaborations #1," (2002), watercolor, garbage bag, Post-it paper, black construction paper and charcoal box on paper, 22 x 30 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

The multiple directions that Smail has pursued over the years have resulted in a rich, interwoven body of work. Often, she collaborates with herself, collaging passages from earlier periods of her career, as she does in "The Caress" (2020), in which she counters quiet rectangles that she painted in 1998 with a loud swatch of curved fabric that she glued below it 20 years later.

Few artists have reinvented themselves in their prime the way Smail has; few have had to. The author Douglas Adams could have been thinking of her when he wrote: "Flying is learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss." Fearless abandon: her relatives didn't hand down any recipes for that. (Or did they?). But that's Jo Smail's natural creative bent — imbibing the glorious nectar of nerve.