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THE 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.

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

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.

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.

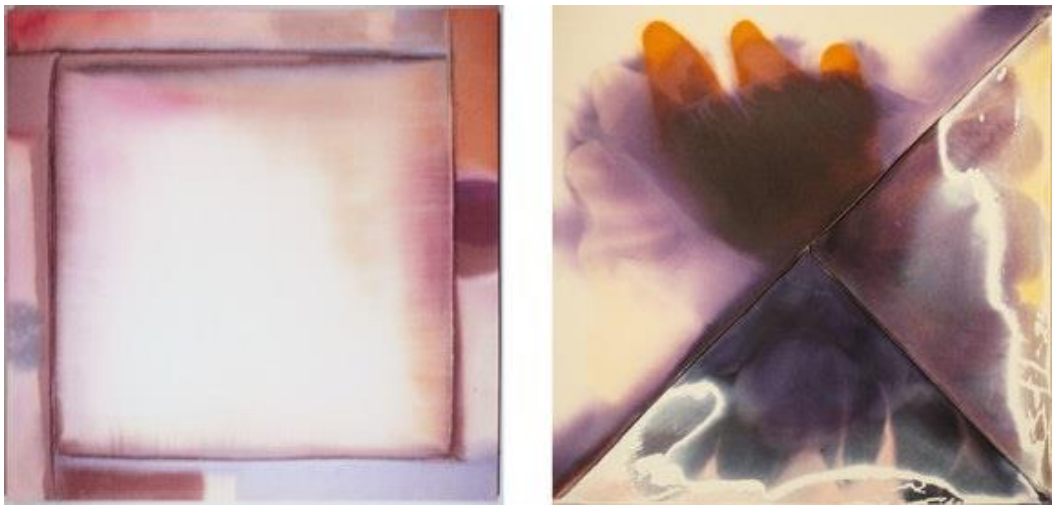
There was something I knew was missing about my life. I knew quite a lot about literature and contemporary music, but I had no idea how it all fit in with art. I asked myself: *What don't you know anything about?* My answer: *Art*. So, when my youngest child was about four, I took up some classes for 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.

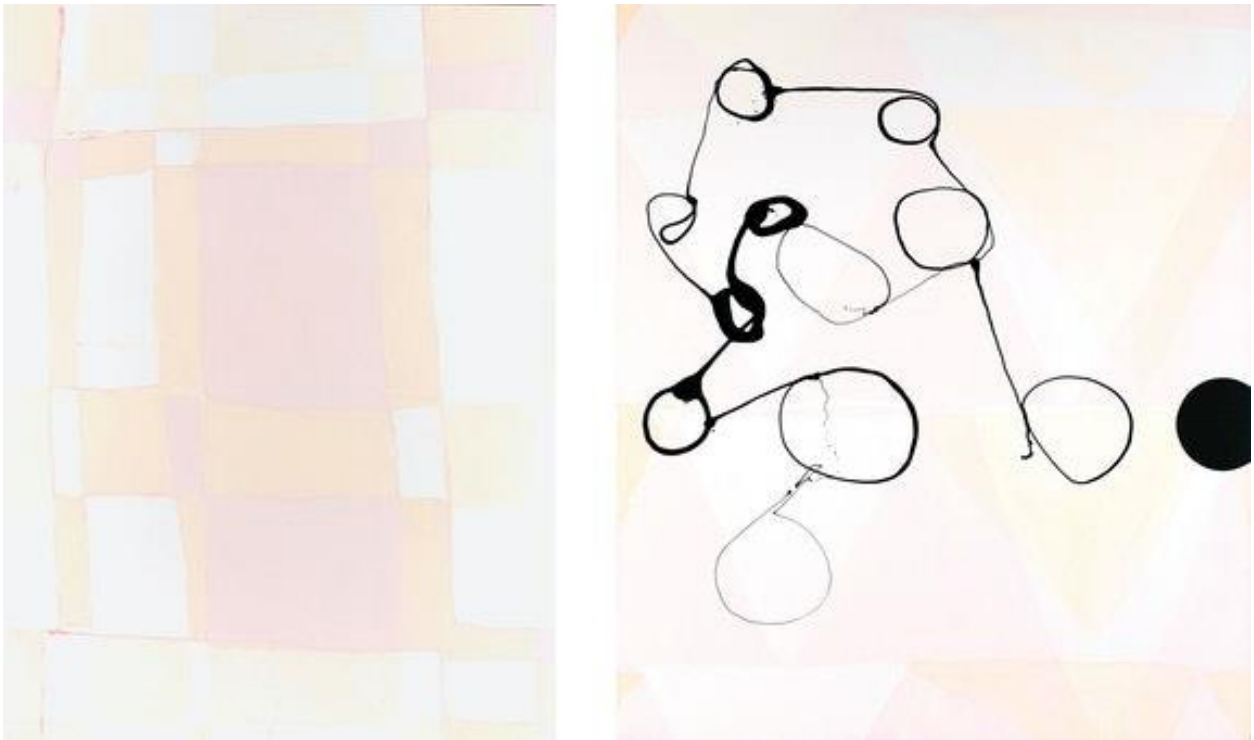
Rail: You had connected the canvas unraveling with vulnerability—to what extent do you try to exert control over your materials?

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 Hélène 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?

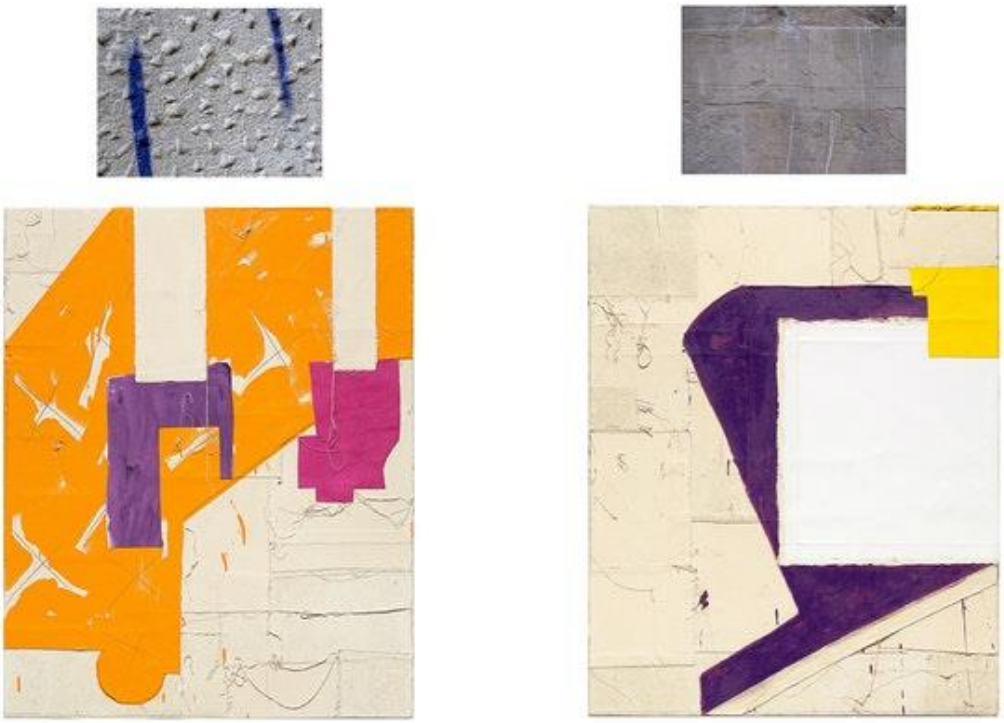
Smail: At first there was just cardboard, but now it's MDF, which is about the same thickness as cardboard and also looks like it, and I've graduated to putting a cleat on the back of it, so I'm learning along the way.

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*]

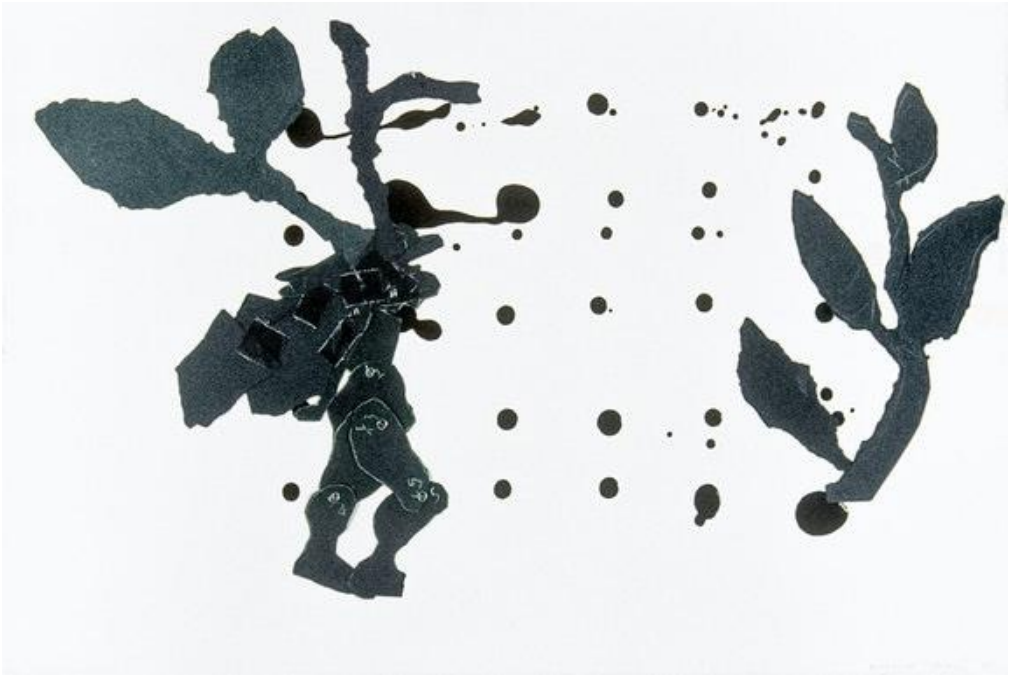
In *A Breath of Life* (1978), Clarice Lispector wrote: "Today is a day of nothing? That is down to the wire. Could there be a number that is less than zero? That begins where there is no beginning because it always was?" She deals with metaphysical thoughts a lot. She's somebody who is probably always 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