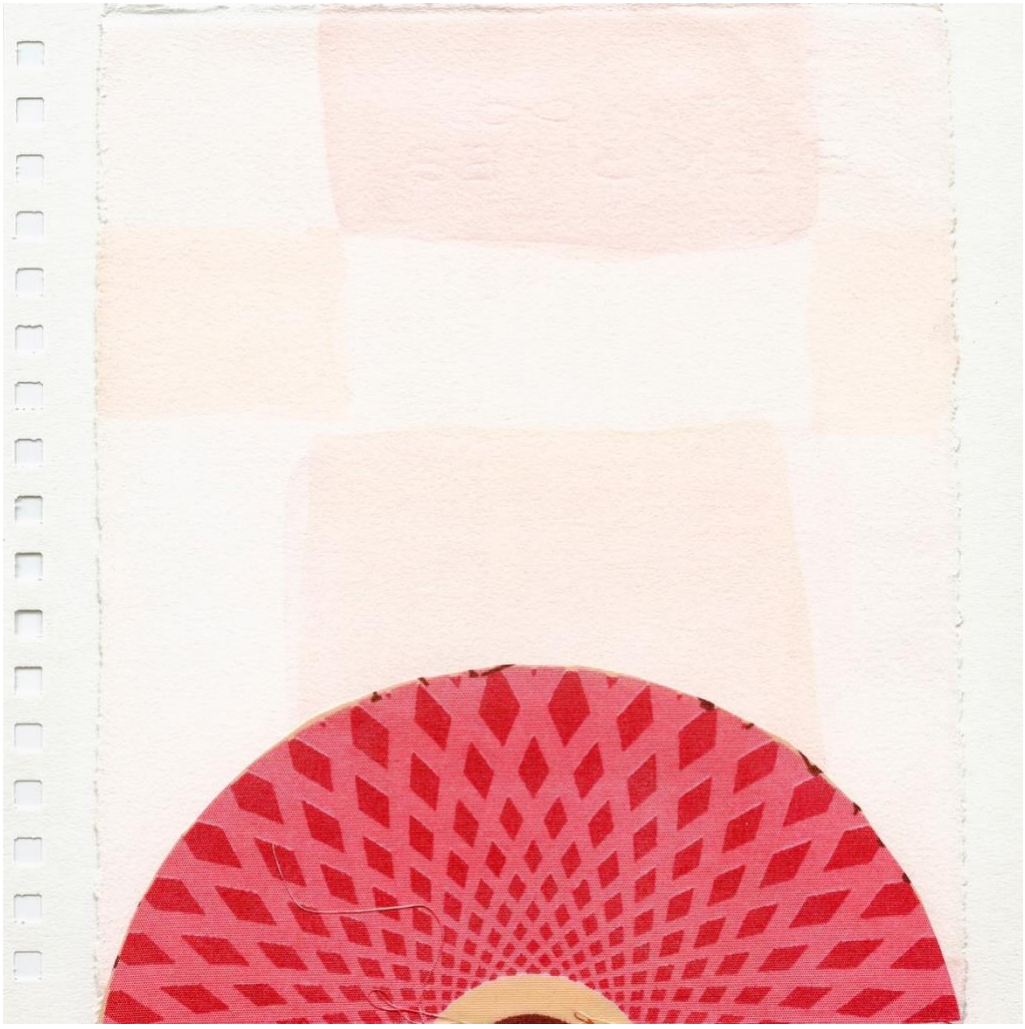
HYPERALLERGIC

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)

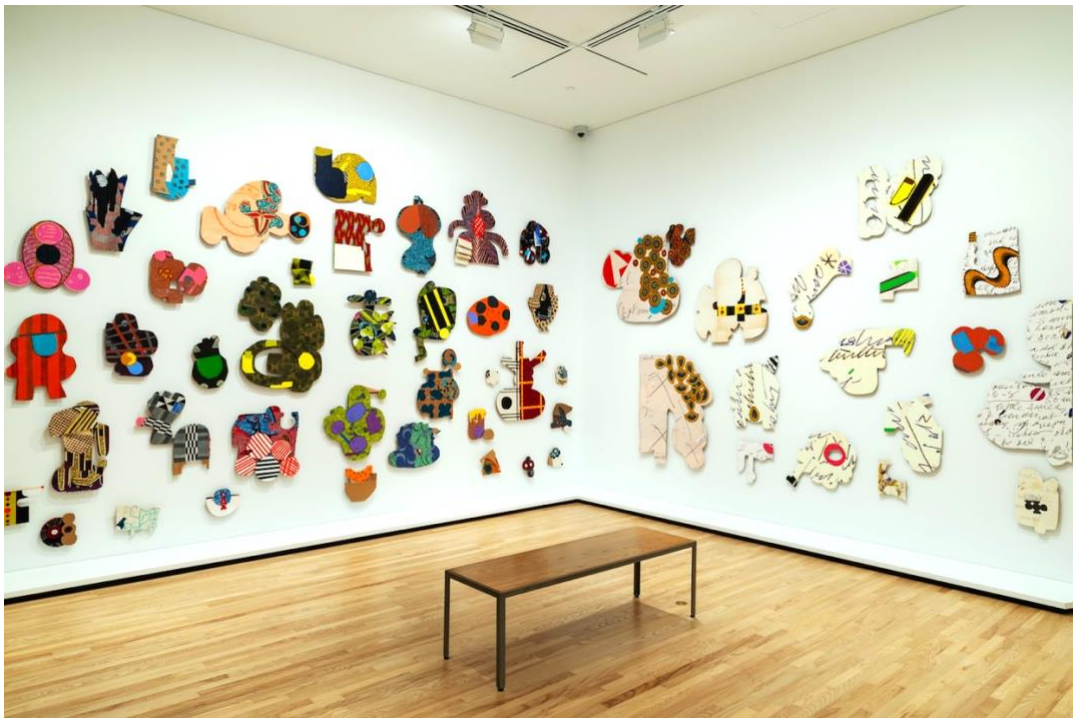
Our past makes us who we are
A small girl sits on the floor in a ballet class
Her teacher asks her to reach out and touch the air gently with care
This is my first memory of touching nothing

— 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:

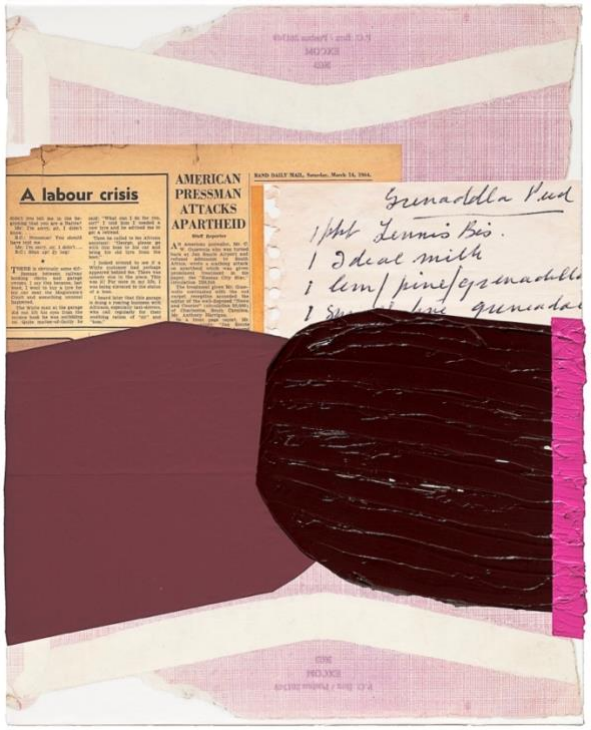
Matisse's shapes
Why not?
A place to begin
I steal
Embellish them
Pattern upon pattern

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.



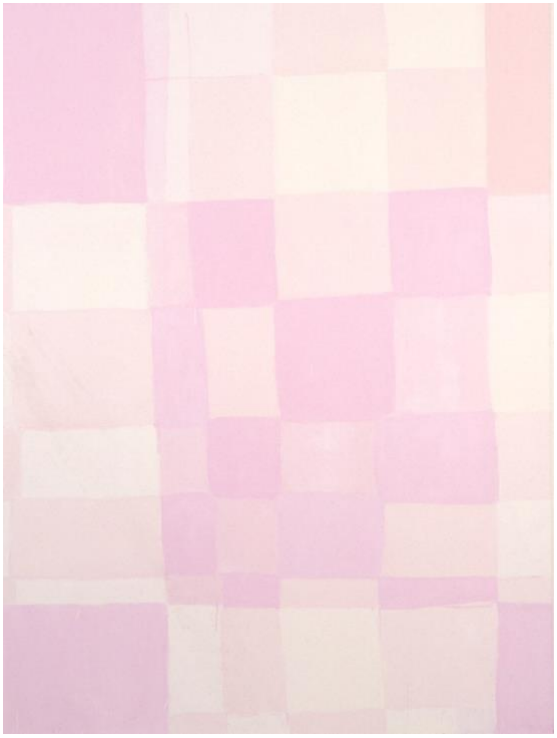
Jo Smail, “A Labor Crisis” (2017), paper, acrylic and digital prints on canvas, 50 x 40 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

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.



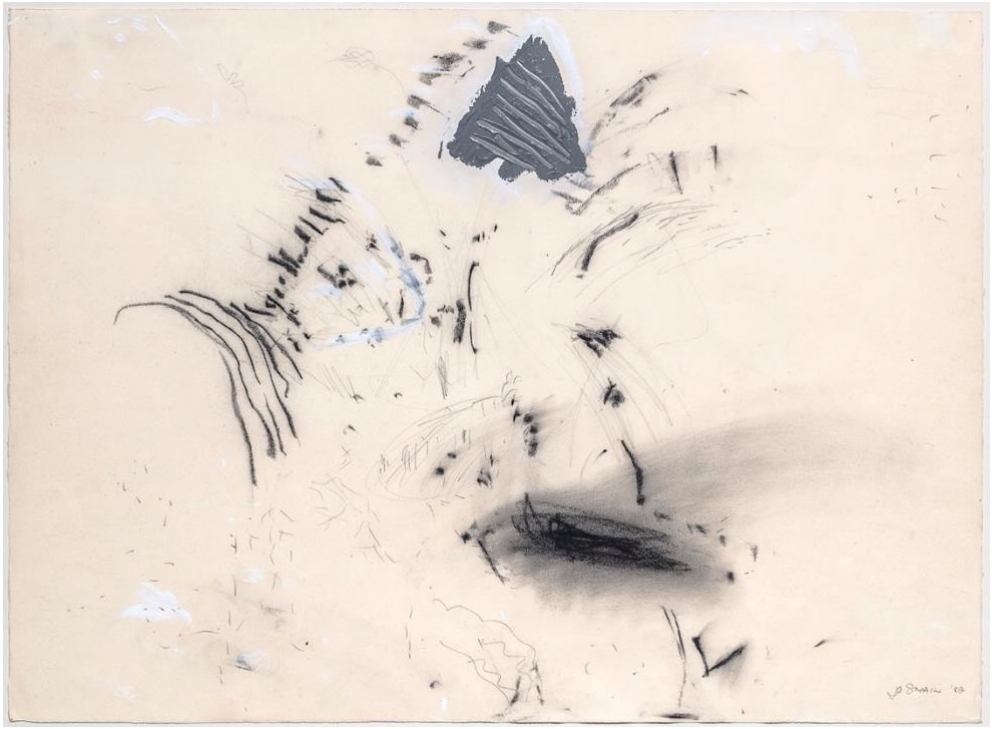
Jo Smail, "Patched Heart 1" (1996), oil on canvas, 80 x 60 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

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.

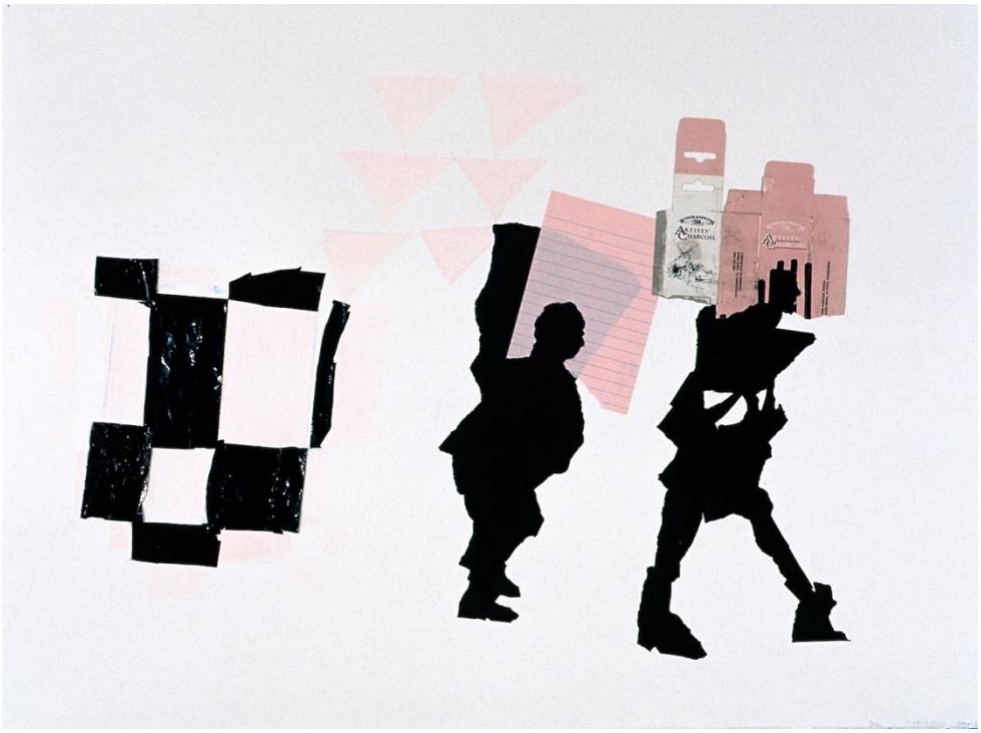


Jo Smail, "Zebra Dreams" (1982), acrylic, charcoal and pencil on paper, 23 x 31.5 inches (photo by Julien Davis)

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.

Jo Smail: Flying With Remnant Wings *continues at the Baltimore Museum of Art (10 Art Museum Dr, Baltimore, Maryland) through August 9.*

Jo Smail: Bees with Sticky Feet, *curated by Amy Raehse, continues at Goya Contemporary (Mill Center, Studio 214, 3000 Chestnut Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland) through August 9.*