

Art in America

JO SMAIL

By Jennie Hirsh
March 27, 2012



The paintings and photographs in “Jo Smail: Degrees of Absence” showed the artist using familiar and new approaches, respectively, in her subtle, potent work. Born in South Africa, Smail is based in Baltimore, where she has taught at the Maryland Institute College of Art since 1988. The life-changing events that have punctuated her career—a transcontinental move, a devastating studio fire in 1995, and a stroke a decade ago that left her temporarily without speech and mobility— have certainly not slowed her down as she nears her 70th birthday.

The show’s 13 mixed-medium paintings on canvas, all from 2011, continue to challenge the limits of the picture plane by exceeding the edges of the canvas and employing various collaged layers. With the photo series “Public/Private,” Smail took images she shot during a trip to Italy

in 2010 and adorned them with trimmings—zippers, buttons, thread and lace—from the sewing boxes passed down to her from her mother and mother-in-law or discovered in Italian flea markets.

The painting *Scent of Melons*, 70 by 60 inches, embodies the simultaneous busyness and stillness that often occupies Smail's work. In the midst of ample raw canvas sits a large amorphous scribblelike shape containing a flurry of activity. Within the shape, purple blotches and red lines are punctuated by a section of black calligraphic marks that has been affixed to the canvas—a self-conscious juxtaposition of two distinct abstract spaces. To the right and above, two patchy gessoed rectangles are simple passages that seem to offer metaphorical bandages for invisible wounds.

In several instances within the installation, a small canvas was placed very close to a larger work. Next to the upper right corner of *Figure in Stripes Bird Watching* (50 by 40 inches), which is a field of canvas with a collaged grouping of various stripes and marks at center bottom, hung the 11-by-9 1/2-inch *Bird*. It is as if the abstract figure of the larger work peers up at the pendant painting flying just above it, at once confirming and defying the limits of the picture plane while engaging with the wall itself.

The exploration of spatial texture in the paintings is echoed in the 54 embellished photographs (each 17 by 22 inches) of city walls and tombs. With a sense of humor and careful composition, Smail glued two safety pins to the image of a crack in an old pale yellow wall in *Public/Private #24* (2010–11). Similarly, a bright red button with dangling black thread mirrors a stuck-out tongue in a schematic face drawn on a wall. *Public/Private #20* (2010–11) was one of the few images to include a second photograph. On the upper left of the main photo, depicting a stuccoed wall graffitied with an abstracted black-and-white Madonna, is a smaller picture of the writer Helène Cixous on a television set taken by Smail in the 1980s, a reference to her own personal Madonna.

Photo: Jo Smail: *Public/ Private #20*, 2010-11, digital print, photograph and collage, 17 by 22 inches; at Goya Contemporary.