

Baltimore

MAGAZINE

Jo Smail's Visual Poetry Transforms Loss Into Joy

A BMA retrospective celebrates Baltimore's most resilient, genre-busting visual artist.

By Matthew King | November 2, 2020



Jo Smail. *A Labor Crisis*. 2017. —Courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery.
Photography by Mitro Hood.

While the Baltimore Museum of Art is still embroiled in a national controversy over its now paused sale of three important works of contemporary art, the museum remains an active—and vital—institution that recently reopened with strict social distancing guidelines and free, timed-entry passes. Among the can't-miss exhibits this season is visual artist Jo Smail's career retrospective, *Flying with Remnant Wings*, which has been extended for viewing through January 3, 2021.

Few artists have begun again as many times as Smail. Throughout the course of her 30-plus-year career, Smail has navigated a cross-continental uprooting from her native South Africa to the unfamiliar world of Downtown Baltimore, a tragic fire that tore through her Clipper Mill studio and wiped out decades of work, and, just a few years after that, a debilitating stroke that left her temporarily speechless.

With each setback, she not only courageously endured, but came out the other side with an emboldened vocabulary. You might call her an unconditional optimist, or, as her friend and Maryland Institute College of Art colleague Barry Nemett puts it: "Jo Smail is a hurricane lightbulb."

This past March was slated to be a celebration for the 77-year-old visual artist. Her career retrospective, and first-ever solo exhibit, was scheduled to open at the BMA—which has long been a

second home for Smail, located a short walk from her longtime residence. Her calendar filled with press interviews and media events, and friends and family—including her two daughters—had booked flights to visit from abroad. Then, days before the opening, a mysterious coronavirus brought public life to a halt, and left her works isolated in the shuttered museum halls. “It was the weekend everything was going to happen, and then nothing happened,” Smail said in a recent phone interview.

While the BMA remained closed throughout the summer, Smail’s exhibit was made available online through the museum’s bootstrapped virtual programming. Curated by the BMA’s former senior curator Kristen Hileman, *Flying With Remnant Wings* features a broad range of Smail’s prolific drawings, color field paintings, and mixed-media collages. (The exhibit was part of the museum’s commitment to acquire works by only female-identifying artists throughout 2020.)

If the exhibit has a centerpiece, it is the “Mongrel Collection,” Smail’s latest work, which includes more than 50 individual collages spread across two museum walls—a carnival of pasted-together patterns, African textiles, and cardboard cut-outs. Each misshapen canvas is inspired by the negative spaces in the paintings of Henri Matisse, hundreds of which are featured down the hall in the BMA’s permanent Cone Collection—which Smail knows about as well as anyone.



Jo Smail. Mongrel Collection 2018. Courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery
Photography by Mitro Hood

Throughout the quarantine, Smail and Hileman focused their attention on the mixed-genre artist book that was published as a companion to the retrospective. Smail has always had a knack for crafting poetic or irreverent titles. Some memorable examples from her BMA lineup include “Knitting Mistakes,” “Aversion to Hyperbole,” and “St. Augustine has a Revelation in the Shrubbery.” While compiling photographs of these artworks, Hileman had encouraged Smail to consider developing a literary component for the book, such as poems or flash-length essays that could act as a foil for each print.

“Typically, an artist book is a collaboration where a visual artist is paired with a writer, or it’s simply something expressed all visually in pictures,” Hileman says. “It’s not every day you find someone who

can express themselves with poetry, both visually and verbally. It's a special mind that can think in both ways."

Smail initially "freaked at the idea." But it wasn't long before she was sifting through old stacks of notebooks and paper fragments looking for promising lines of inspiration. The title of her retrospective comes from one of these newly crafted poems:

*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 metaphor echoes her artistic ethic, in which form is everything, the root of our reality and unreality. Smail's abstract shapes and visions are influenced by her early experiences with sculpture and dance, as well as her studies at the Johannesburg College of Art. It was there that she worked with conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, the influential German provocateur who advocated for the dissolution of artificial boundaries between art and life, in service of a more humanistic expression.

"Remnant wings" is, of course, also an allusion to Smail's tumultuous personal journey. Included in the BMA retrospective are the frail line-grids she sketched during the early months of recovery after her stroke (part of a series titled "Speechless 1-6"). "You lose everything," she says. "I didn't even know how to clean my teeth. But I told my students what an advantage that could be, to know what it's like to learn these things again from scratch." Situated near the line-grids are the pink paintings that Smail created shortly after the studio fire, when an ordinary afternoon walk sparked a desire to capture the soft feeling of her husband's inner arm. "At that stage, when you feel like you've lost your soul, it was just incredible joy to be able to make these paintings," she says. "I just wanted to paint love, which seemed the only thing that was important."



Jo Smail. Dyed Eggs and Thongbells. 2012.
Courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery



Jo Smail. A Labor Crisis. 2017.
Courtesy of Goya Contemporary Gallery

Collage was a relatively late discovery for Smail. Her collaboration in the mid-2000s with fellow South African artist William Kentridge reintroduced her to the form, as the two pieced together a series of mixed media works by overseas mail over the course of several months. Collage has been fertile territory for Smail's promiscuous artistic impulses, as well as her multi-faceted background. "This mongrel person lives in the U.S.A. Born and raised in Africa of an Irish mother and a father of Scottish descent," she writes in one of her poems.

The recent autobiographical collages are some of Smail's most poignant works to date, grappling, as they do, with the fraught history of her upbringing in a white household during South African apartheid. Pieces like "A Labour Crisis" and "Make Your Dreams Come True" include clippings of 1950s-era newspapers in which handwritten family recipes are scrawled next to brassiere ads and reports about racial segregation. These works excavate the domestic and social inequalities underlying her otherwise happy childhood.

As Smail plumbs these personal dilemmas, the complexity of her aesthetic seems to grow even richer.

"With Jo, as her work evolves, you see this coming together of a belief in the beauty and the power of color and shape and line, all these formal elements, but also a belief that what happens in one's life can be expressed through those visual elements," Hileman says. "This is someone who made the language of abstraction her own."

Some of those newspaper clippings reappear in the larger set-piece, "Aerating History," which decenters the discriminatory-laden artifacts even further, foregrounding intricately patterned textiles and bright clouds of color that seem to bubble up towards the ceiling—the thrilling combustion of a tragic past into a new beginning.



Installation view, Jo Smail: Flying With Remnant Wings. Photo by Mitro Hood.