

Studio Visit

Focus On: Jo Smail



Welcome to **Studio Visit** where we focus on the practices of artists during the time of Covid-19 and beyond. All text and images copyright ©Studiovisit, Goya Contemporary, and the artist.

For more than 40 years, Jo Smail's powerful work has intertwined the narratives of visual language with that of expressive language. In the artist's newly released book *Flying with Remnant Wings* which reflects the long-standing influence that linguistics and the shape of language has placed on her pictorial practice, Smail waxes poetic as she delves into the significance of this moment in her life, opening two major exhibitions: one which focuses on new work at her longstanding gallery, Goya Contemporary, and the other, which is retrospective in nature, at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Smail had the occasion to sit 6 feet apart from Goya Contemporary's Executive Director, Amy Eva Raehse, to discuss her work, her two latest exhibitions, and to take her temperature amidst a global pandemic.

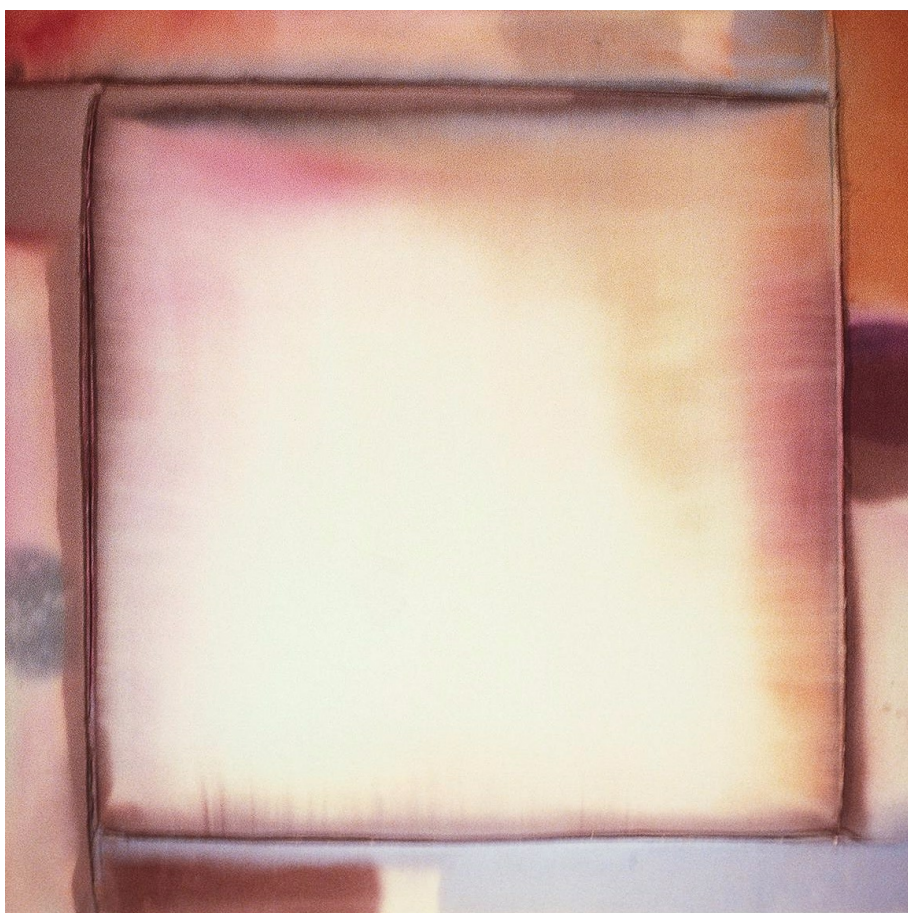
Amy Raehse: Jo, what are the factual and biographic events in your life that have informed your practice? How would you describe your creative process?

Jo Smail: We moved from South Africa to Baltimore in 1985. My scientist husband, Julien Davis, was offered a job at Johns Hopkins University. While we were in South Africa, I taught at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Johannesburg College of Art, and I showed my work at The Goodman Gallery. Before leaving SA, we packed up my studio and brought the contents with us. In 1996, my studio in Baltimore burnt down destroying all traces of 25 years of painting. Since the fire my work has become autobiographical.



Picture of the artist, Jo Smail, in her studio in South Africa, 1981.

In this image, I sit alongside a painting [titled *Breath*] that I transported to Baltimore but lost in the fire. My concerns were more about process then. I was working on stitched canvas, flooding the bare canvas with acrylic paint and letting the stitched seams direct the flow of paint. I worked on the floor, tilting the canvas in different directions.



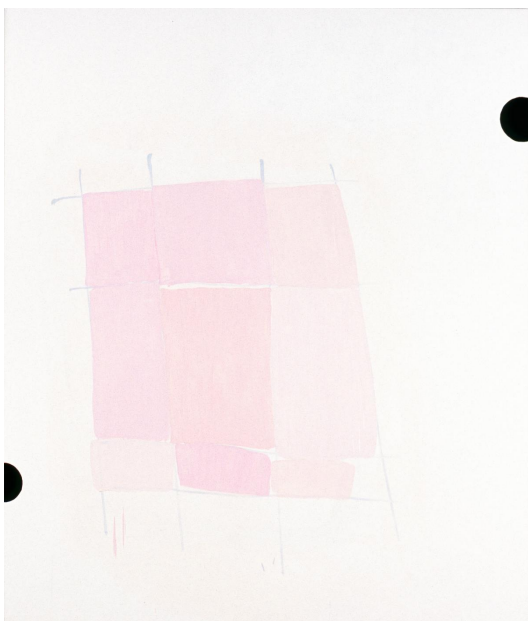
Breath 1977, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches, destroyed in a studio fire.

After the fire I had to start over and think about what was really important to me. Walking with my husband one day I felt the inside of his arm--the soft part. I decided to try and paint that. I was trying to paint love. It revealed itself as a delicate pink--new skin--beginnings--fragility--intimacy. And then I suffered a stroke--another kind of beginning over, quite literally. At first, I was unable to move, speak or write. The work reflects my attempt to do just that. Now, the pink is my beginning point. Over the pale squares or triangles, I throw black enamel. Working this way keeps me [purposefully] out of control. I use black paint to describe images and things--it is a way of speaking.



Jo Smail and William Kentridge, *Collaboration #1*, 2005, Mixed media on paper, 22 x 30 inches

During this period, I collaborated with my friend, William Kentridge. I sent him a series of watercolors (pinks), with black enamel thrown or dropped onto the surfaces. He was doing many charcoal drawings at the time, and seeing my work he thought he would try to clean up his act! So, he began to use collage. That in turn influenced me. So, I started to work with bare canvas. The bare canvas is zero. And when the threads unraveled, it spoke of how I felt at the time. Collage began to be my way of reconstructing: making something from nothing.



Betwixt and Between, 2003, Oil on canvas, 60 x 70 in.



Jo Smail with her husband, Julien Davis

AER: How appropriate for this moment in time as well, to find innovation in form and content out of melee. But your titles? Your titles do not reflect the melee.

JS: Right, my titles do not reveal the struggle. They are poetic or funny. They come after the work is finished. They are often playful or humorous. Sometimes I

laugh out loud.

AER: Yes, your titles can be spirited, poetic, and sometimes influenced by the writings of those you admire. With that in mind, what books inspire you?

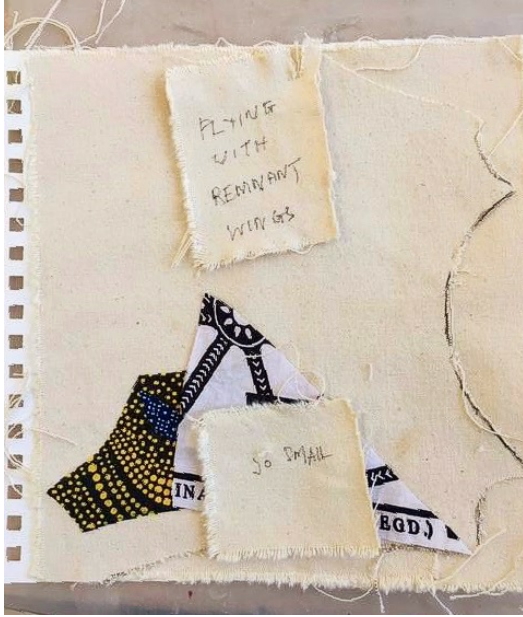
JS: I read a lot of poetry. I have a predilection for poetry that I don't really understand! Becket's Poems in English come to mind. Also, John Ashbery. And Clarice Lispector. I read and reread *The Hour of the Star*. Lispector influenced Hélène Cixous. I read her too!



Image: A small sampling of books in the artist's workspace.

AER: I read similar collections, but you were the friend, years ago, who introduced me to Clarice Lispector! I can't thank you enough for that recommendation. And now, you have your newest book, an artist book that we released in March. How did you arrive at the structure of this book and the subsequent series of prints that were generated as a result of the book?

JS: I had not given any thought to making an artist's book--until Kristen Hileman (curator of the BMA retrospective) asked me to consider it while in discussions about the exhibition. So, I did. I went to my studio and started to make a book. I began with a sketch book in which I had done masses of contour drawings based on works by Matisse. After my last exhibition at Goya, I asked myself the question: Who or what do you love? My answer: Matisse. I find his work miraculous. It is the rhythms and rhymes that the shapes make that turn me on! In an essay by Jan Verwoert in his collected essays in a book titled *Cookie*, there is an article titled: *Why is Art Met with Disbelief? It's Too Much Like Magic*. It is this that appeals to me in Matisse--the magic of rhythms and rhymes! And then there are the exquisite patterns of cloths of my African homeland. If you put both together--wow! I felt it was a recipe for success!



Cover of artist book in progress.

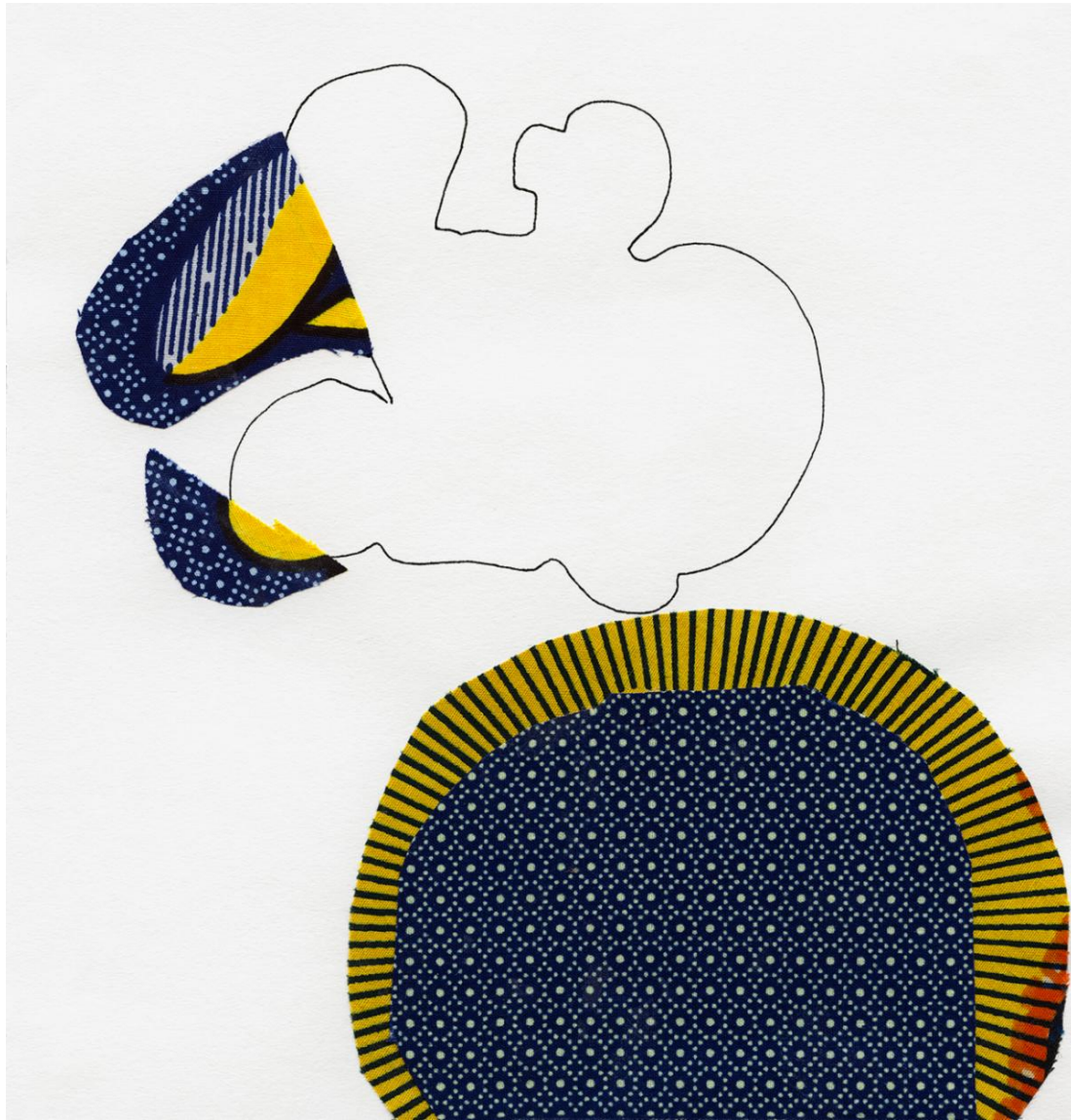


Jo Small: Flying With Remnant Wings, 2020. Published by Goya Contemporary Gallery.

Julien, my husband, had the idea of blowing up the scale for the collages. AND that is what we did for the Goya show. When the work is enlarged all the weft and weave of the fabrics are revealed! It's totally different from the book itself. I find that metamorphosis to be another level of thrill! Sheer magic--to quote Jan Vervoert!



AER: Sheer Magic, indeed! And tell me a little more about the use of African textiles. In 2017, you and I worked on a very personal exhibition titled *The Past Is Present* which introduced ephemerae into your object making. That series of objects made use of family recipes found in your personal archive, often transcribed on the backs of news articles and advertisements that were characteristic during the time of South African apartheid. Your work used memorabilia to point to injustices and to confront domestic norms. This new work is quite different. It is almost the contrary, as it celebrates the beauty of Africa and its material culture. Can you elaborate on this difference?



Bees with Sticky Feet, 2020, Archival pigment print, 24.5 x 23.5 inches, Edition of 5.

JS: I began working with African cloths in 2017 when I was challenged by artists Zoe Charlton and Tim Dowd to do something I had not done before. I have collected African cloths for years. It made such sense to use them then, and now!

I think of myself as a mongrel who lives in the U.S.A., but who was born and raised in Africa with a father of Scottish descent and an Irish mother. In fact, this is why I titled the series *The Mongrel Collection*. The works are comprised of so many different references. I used the African cloths as a counterpoint to the horrors of apartheid and in *The Mongrel Collection* I use them for the vibrancy and joy that their patterns evoke. The shapes are derived from Matisse, but the

work is an amalgamation of things--just like me.



Installation view of *The Mongrel Collection*, 2019 at Baltimore Museum of Art.

AER: Jo, you are amazing: infinitely zigging and zagging! Adversity, and the challenges of overcoming adversity, are not uncommon in your life. You have continually remained open to rethinking, reinventing, shifting, and learning from each challenge you face. What do you foresee being the evolution or discovery within this moment in time, dealing with isolation and a global pandemic?

JS: I saw the South African dance group, Vuyani Dance Theater perform *Cion: a Requiem of Ravel's boléro* twice. Once at the Joyce Theater in NY city and the following week at the Kennedy Center in Washington. That was in January. It was startling to see the use of hip-hop, tribal dance, ballet, and Spanish dance all set to the music of a French composer! The choreographer, Gregory Maqoma created a requiem that seeks to stand against the darkness of death and bring hope for humanity. It seems so appropriate for the horrific times we are going through now. Maqoma says after watching migrant workers dance: *I would watch them dance their traditional forms, fascinated by their bodies and sweat. It was only later that I realized that movement was a survival mode for them, a way of dealing with their displacement and staying in touch with their old homes and the people they left behind.* My own artwork is informed by loss-leaving a country I loved--the fire--the stroke and now the pandemic! Right now, the whole world mourns! It is almost unbearable. I think I go through the same things we are all going through. I bake, and I cook, who knew those occupations could be so therapeutic! And I have my studio--a haven away from the news. I continue, as I have always done--I try to focus on love, and more love... Ouch! That makes me sound so sweet and sickly.

AER: But it's genuine... you are all about love! You mentioned love three or 4 times today. Your love is like an explosion: It has many layers and intensities that are revealed at different times, in different ways. And I know that the experience of making the work--the discovery and the play--are as important to you as the resulting images. It's why your work is so heartfelt and real.

JS: When I am working I forget the outside world. But paradoxically when I focus--truly focus--there is no separation between me and the world outside!

Hmm... perhaps that is another way of saying when I am at my most playful and therefore forget myself, I am myself.



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Installation of *Jo Smail: Bees with Sticky Feet* at Goya Contemporary Gallery.

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