

# BmoreArt

## Goofy Gravity and Weighty Gravitas: Jo Smail at Goya Contemporary

Smail's new exhibit is equal parts blended diversity and congruous incongruity.

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*Songs of Beating Wings*, 2022. © Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Joe Hyde

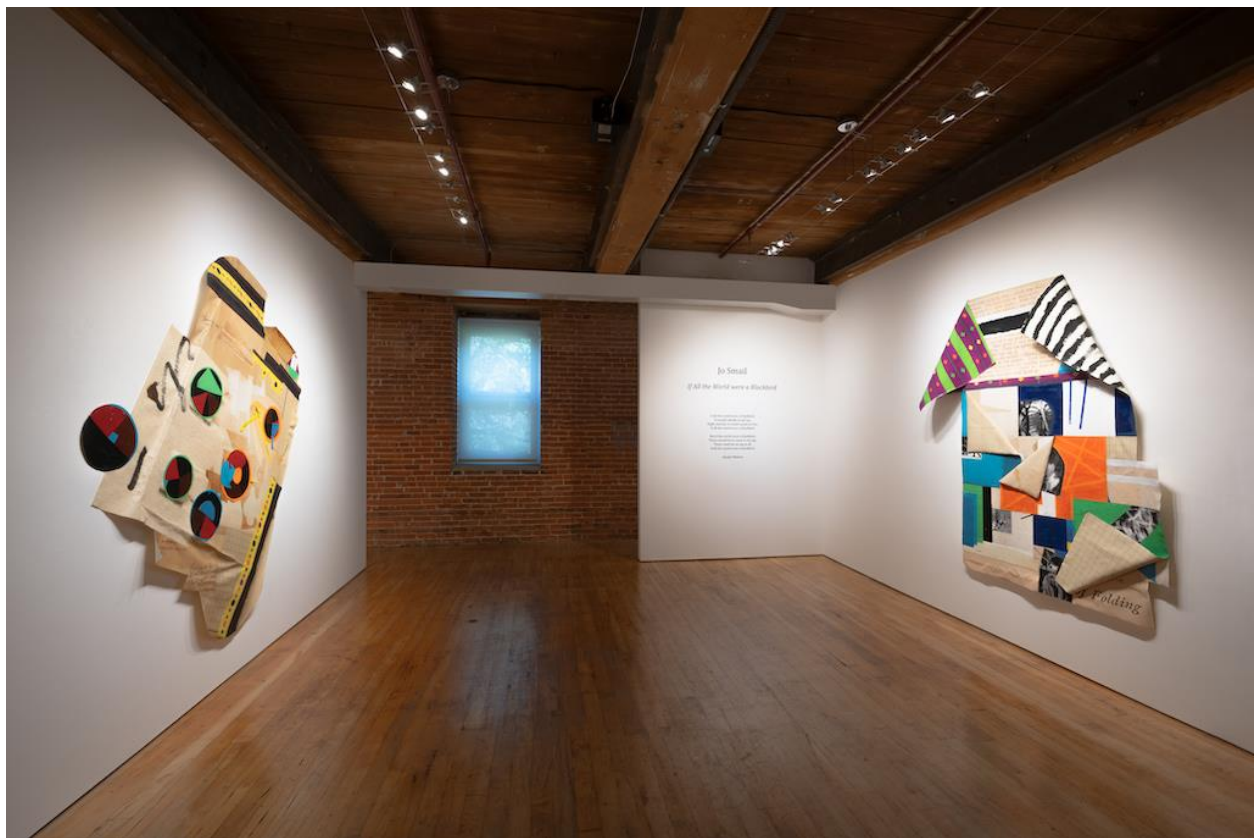
You don't have to be a synesthete to see, taste, or touch sounds. Just use your imagination. Jo Smail's "Songs of Beating Wings," one of three large abstractions in her solo show *If All The World Were A Blackbird* at Goya Contemporary, offers a nod to the sky-high flight of a bird chorus. Curated by gallery director Amy Raehse, the show runs through November 23, 2022.

The shaped painting, "Beating Wings," blends clamorous fluttering and un-uttering song with rich, sensual surfaces. There are loud grids against grids shy and vapory; black and white against hue; opacities against luminous transparencies; a pink frown near a smile. And overlapping the artist's mother-in-law's

technologically enlarged cursive handwriting, there's a gloppy tic-tac-toe game board waiting to be "X"-ed and "O"-ed. There are also a pair of contrasting, wing-like triangles the color of orange sherbet. The stark white and off-white papers range from watery gesso to painted areas patinated to look like beige, aged parchment.

In Smail's artist statement, she quotes the British music critic Tom Service. The best absurdist poems, he writes, "confront big ideas through lightness of touch, humor, and sleight of hand." Similarly, Smail's 3D collages/ paintings/ constructions/ shaped canvases/ abstractions/ improvisations—she just calls them works—are simple and whimsical, complex and serious. Serious fun, that is.

Smail's carefully constructed work is built crisply, with shifting visual echoes. She isn't above being inspired by an art form as housebroken as napkin folding. In "Songs of Folding and Hiding," the artist incorporates folding instructions printed out from a Victorian book on the subject that Smail brought with her from South Africa, where she was born and educated before emigrating to the United States in 1985.



*Songs of Playing and Cooking and Songs of Folding and Hiding, 2022, ©Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Joe Hyde*

She left her homeland to accompany her husband, the now-retired internationally renowned scientist Julien Davis, who became part of a research lab at Johns Hopkins University. Three years later, Jo was hired to teach at Maryland Institute College of Art, where she was a beloved professor until retiring in 2017.

Smail gathers "Folding and Hiding" into what resembles not so much a table setting with napkins as the home the table might be set in. The work itself is built solid as a house where, upon entering for a dinner party, you spot diners that include zebras, elephants, and giraffes, like at a relatively normal-yet-Star-Wars-like bar. The beasts never overstay their welcome, and they're generous scene-sharers to boot. A giraffe doesn't overshadow graph paper—more like the other way around, literally. Smail's work asks us to hold together in one coherent thought wild animals' necks and butts with fine dining.

Much of our lives are steeped in strange, wide-ranging combinations of this against that. We take them for granted. Accordingly, in the beautifully filmed and wonderfully silly “Everything Everywhere All at Once” (2022), which I saw when I started writing this review, absurdity reigns and incongruity is a big part of the kingdom. Woven through this touching, serious movie, there are many inane plot threads occurring throughout several preposterous universes. One of the most inane could be captured by the rallying cry, “Hail Bagel! Hail everything! Hail Everything Bagels!”—as nonsensical as that war whoop might sound to anyone who hasn’t seen the film.



© Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Joe Hyde



Songs of Folding and Hiding, 2022, ©Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Julien Davis



Songs of Beating Wings, 2022, ©Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Julien Davis

Smail also appreciates absurdity and incongruity, and it looks like the artist has loads of fun in her studio. Hail Smail and Whimsy! Her imagery embraces head-on pileups gracefully, masterfully, and unexpectedly. It took her about four months to complete “Folding and Hiding.” Like most artists of consequence, she sweats over most of her sustained artistic projects. A consummate designer, she knows how to put things together—one of life’s main challenges.

Two years ago I wrote about [Smail’s retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art and her simultaneous one-person exhibit at Goya Contemporary](#). I wrote about the challenge of the major stroke Smail suffered in 2000, which resulted in the temporary loss of most of her movement and all of her speech, forcing her to, as she once told me, “start from scratch.” Through hard work and good fortune, she has since regained both. But it was certainly a physical and emotional struggle to put things back together and to make sense of the gigantic wonkiness—the nothingness—the world put in her way. In my Hyperallergic article, I called her works’ incongruities “daredevil collisions.” I wrote how each small abstraction “gains muscle” when viewed with her other small abstractions. And I wrote a little about nothing.



©Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Joe Hyde

Across the BMA exhibit’s first two walls, the 57 boogieing constructions just seemed to pour out. Actually, “pouring out” sells them short. Her spontaneity has been nurtured by a 50-year art career of considered and sophisticated decision-making. As the narrator states in one of Smail’s favorite novels, *The Hour of the Star* by Clarice Lispector, “I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort.” Whether or not they “poured out” with ease, boogie is what they did. They do it again in her present show.

In her [Studio Visit conversation](#) with Amy Raehse, Smail talks about seeing a South African dance group under the choreography of Gregory Vuyani Maqoma perform a requiem of Ravel’s *Bolero*. “It was startling to see,” she said, “the use of hip-hop, tribal dance, ballet, and Spanish dance all set to the music of a French composer.” Blended diversity. Congruous incongruity.

Smail makes us conscious of quotidian jolts. As the music critic quoted in her artist statement asserts, the best absurdist express themselves with a light touch. Perhaps when she was going through the traumas of

her stroke and its aftermath, Smail viscerally experienced inklings of the clashes that inspired the deepest, most memorably offbeat, upbeat artistic choices she makes today.

Hanging on walls to themselves are the five- and six-foot painted constructions discussed above, as well as a bit larger image, “Songs of Playing and Cooking.” This latter work includes snippets of handed-down, handwritten recipes that her mother-in-law scribbled.



©Jo Smail courtesy Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Joe Hyde

Rounding out the rest of the exhibit, many much smaller independent works are integrated into eight circular ensembles to play with their shaped-canvas friends. These single elegantly whacky “cartoon abstractions” are more powerful and dazzling when viewed within the wonders of their respective groupings. Every part of the groups offer unexpected contrasts, rhymes, or moments in time.

A spiral-eyed cherub is my favorite of the seven cut-outs that comprise “While Flying With Angels.” This blue-winged figure clothed in geometry is more representational than Smail usually gets, which makes this figure appear larger than her six companions. The artist seems to account for this scale shift by making the figure a few inches smaller than the others. At first, the angel’s “cuteness” bothered me, but then I saw it as the choirmaster directing a chorus of angelic pieces, and it looked on-target.

In “While Flying Down to Earth,” each of the eight pictorial “haiku” is enhanced by its Swiss-watchery/bullseye-archery cohorts. Round and round they go in precise nuttiness, while evoking references that range from Robert Smithson’s Utah-based, counterclockwise *Spiral Jetty*, Smail’s personal collection of vibrant African fabrics, earth-toned Australian aboriginal bark painting, to unforeseeably simple drawn lines. As Raehse writes in the press release for this phoenix of an artist, “the most predictable feature in Smail’s work is to expect the unexpected.”

Smail’s clock-like ensembles represent mini-multiverses with perhaps other versions of themselves existing elsewhere. This returns us to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* with its well and widely time-traveled travelers.

Calling the shots, there's a spiral-eyed, grid-bibbed choirmaster. Bubbling behind a hidden grin are Smail's serious stories which pour out of everything everywhere but also out of a deep nothing. The wonders, whimsies, and tragedies of what's unexpected accounts for that. Smail's groupings are composed of painted poems chock full of goofy gravity and weighty gravitas.



*Untitled (Gray Elephant)*, ©Jo Smail courtesy  
Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Julien Davis



*Untitled (Black Elephant)*, ©Jo Smail courtesy  
Goya Contemporary/ Photo: Julien Davis

**Jo Smail's *If All The World Were A Blackbird* curated by gallery director Amy Raehse at Goya Contemporary runs through November 23, 2022.**