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Starting from Scratch: Considerate of every mark, painter Jo Smail lets go of what she thinks she knows

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Jo Smail at her studio in Woodberry (Patrick Alejandro/For City Paper)

Jo Smail starts with nothing—maybe a clean sheet of paper, or a piece of raw canvas. Then, slowly and deliberately, she builds. When she makes a painting, each line, shape, and scrap of canvas matters, but she's not sure whether these decisions are more conscious or more intuitive. "It's not about doing whatever you like," she says. "It's narrowing your focus and concentrating so specifically on that focus. And that's when you start to invent."

Smail has done plenty of inventing (and reinventing) in her life so far, but it has all progressed naturally, and occasionally out of necessity. She grew up in Durban, South Africa, and she got her first degree in English and history. After getting married and having three children by the time she was 24, she decided to go to art school—partly because she didn't know anything about contemporary art. "I went to art school as if I was going to earn money from art," she says with a little smile. After a divorce, and after her kids grew up, her second husband got a job with Johns Hopkins University. So they left South Africa, before the end of Apartheid, to come to the U.S. in 1985. A few years later, Smail landed a teaching job at MICA, where she still teaches painting and independent studio courses (full disclosure: She was a professor for Performing Arts Editor Maura Callahan).

But then there was a period of loss. In 1995, a studio fire destroyed all of her work. Then, she lost her ability to speak and walk after a stroke in 2000. She started making shapes and marks

in her paintings and drawings that represented silence and sounds that became a new kind of language.

She didn't let these events bring her down—even after the stroke, she says she never felt depressed, but poured her energy into learning how to speak again. "I often think that it's really about your attitude to something," she says. "So when you're forced to change, then it's sort of sometimes a gift that you're given, in spite of yourself."

A heap of unstretched, colorful, cut-up canvas scraps sits on the floor of Smail's bright Clipper Mill studio, among flat files and stacks of small paintings and near wooden racks that hold larger paintings. She's been pulling from this stack of old painting scraps, cutting out shapes, and pasting them onto a new series of paintings that hang on a nearby wall. In one of these, a lilac and blue grid leans toward the painting's left edge—more like some kind of character than a grid, really—as if it's trying to escape the four or five ultramarine and violet rectangular-ish shapes that flank it. A thin, wrinkled piece of cotton hangs over the top right corner of the painting like a tired veil.

A few inches above this painting hangs a much smaller one with three distinct yellow shapes. A pink cut-out tongue shape swoops down over these yellows, barely touching a thick purple strip of paper. "I don't ever throw things away," she says, "so they get sanded or chewed over." These new paintings look fun to make, I tell her, but she laughs and says, "Well, nothing's fun to make."

At first they seem quite different from her collaborative collages with the South African artist William Kentridge, which are on display in the show "Dialogue" at Goya Contemporary through Oct. 24. Though she's made several diverse bodies of work, you can almost always pick up links between them; her last show at Goya incorporated photos of Italian architecture against the sky, framing it in some distinctively Smail-esque shapes. The collages, neatly framed and hung in the back gallery, are all fairly small, quiet, and minimalist, but they each contain many of the artists' recognizable moves.

In 'Collaboration #2,' a Victorian chair (with what looks somewhat like human legs instead of chair legs), torn into shape from black paper, dances next to a delicate ink drawing of an iris. To the right of the flower is a small grid, painted in the lightest shades of pink that are almost more inconspicuous than the white paper. Smail's touches of pink, contemplative grids and dark, looping ink marks remain distinct from but complementary to Kentridge's often more illustrative figures and objects.

"When I began that collaboration, I thought I had done something really good," Smail says. "So I let him work on them, and then I thought, 'hmm, they got even better.'" She says that when you have "two personalities working on the same thing" it forces you to be more present, to see what's there and what it needs. "It's similar to one's own process . . . it sort of puts you out of your way of working, and reintroduces you to something else." After starting these collaborations in the early 2000s, she and Kentridge—who's known best for his often political, expressionistic charcoal drawings and stop-motion animations—both started collaging more in their separate practices.

The show highlights a point where many of the common threads of her work, and her life, have come together. After the 1995 studio fire, she literally had to start from scratch, which was freeing—she had nothing to lose. This is when she made the "Pink Paintings": a series that uses tender shades of pink in abstract compositions, often in an imperfect grid of wobbly rectangles.

She says that the fire made her realize that what really matters is love, and she sought out a way to communicate that in her work. "And so that's what happened," she says, "when I was just walking down the road one day and felt the inside of [my husband's] arm and thought, 'hmm, I'm going to try to paint that.'"

It seems impossible for abstract art to be completely separate from the observable world around us. Smail agrees that it's impossible to not bring your own associations to art, but she's careful to avoid sentimentality in her work by focusing on material and exploring what she doesn't understand. "I think if you start painting what you know, it's probably going to be boring," she says. "I think what you don't know is much more interesting and much more challenging." After her stroke in 2000, she got to work as soon as she could move her arm. The works that came out of this period encapsulate speaking and silence at the same time. The pink areas of her work were like silence, quiet and subdued in a way that recalls Agnes Martin, while the bold, black, often Matissean floral shapes represented speaking. Her paintings and drawings, which are presumably just as meditative for her to make as they are for her viewers to look at, transform these big feelings and minute observations into poetic marks and shapes. Smail's fascination with what she doesn't know has been a constant throughout her life. She often rereads Clarice Lispector, finding new things in her writing each time, and she reads Stéphane Mallarmé because she doesn't always understand what he's saying, but she likes the sounds of his words. The feeling she gets from reading his words is similar to the way she approaches art. "When I'm making art, it's not because I really understand what I'm doing; it's because it feels right."

She is reserved and modest, in many ways, about her own resilience, and though many would call a fire and a stroke traumatic, Smail thinks of them as challenges, or as chances to recalibrate. "And that's almost lucky, in a way, when you have to start everything from scratch," she says. "That's a real treat, that 15 years ago, I couldn't do anything. And I remember how that was, and the more I remember that, the more really careful and specific I am about every decision that's made."

"Dialogue" is up at Goya Contemporary through Oct. 24. For more info visit goyacontemporary.com or josmailartist.com.