

# The New York Times

## Art in Review: Jo Smail

By Holland Cotter  
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Axis Gallery, 453 West 17th Street, Chelsea through March 4

Chance plays a significant role in Jo Smail's recent work. Ms. Smail, who was born in South Africa and teaches art at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, suffered a major stroke in 2000 that left her partly paralyzed and unable to speak. Her art assumed a role in her recovery.

She began to make pictures with splashes of black paint on a white or pink ground. In some cases, the rudimentary marks ended up resembling natural forms, like clouds or flowers, or Ms. Smail would manipulate them in that direction. In other cases, she left them abstract, letting her titles open paths to concrete readings.

The three floating shapes in "Black Angels With Handkerchiefs" -- two rough-edged ovals and a floret -- both are and are not what the title describes. The two explosive, emphatic black forms in "Cough" become, thanks to the title, painterly equivalents of a spasmodic physical action. "Code," with its small black geometric shapes on a pink ground, brings to mind punch-card patterns, or Morse code language, while also being a Mary Heilmannesque abstraction.

Ms. Smail has said that painting was her substitute for language at a time when she couldn't speak; this seems literally true in "Tongues Wag," a calligraphic painting of words she was unable to say. And visual speech becomes a dialogue in several small-scale collaborations between Ms. Smail and her fellow countryman William Kentridge, done from 2002 to 2005. One artist would start a piece; the other would add to it, riffing on the original image. Done through exchanges by mail, these small, eloquent pieces suggest a primer of how visual language works, moving from gesture toward meaning, with meaning never pinned down.