



St. Augustine has a Revelation in the Shrubbery. 2012-2019

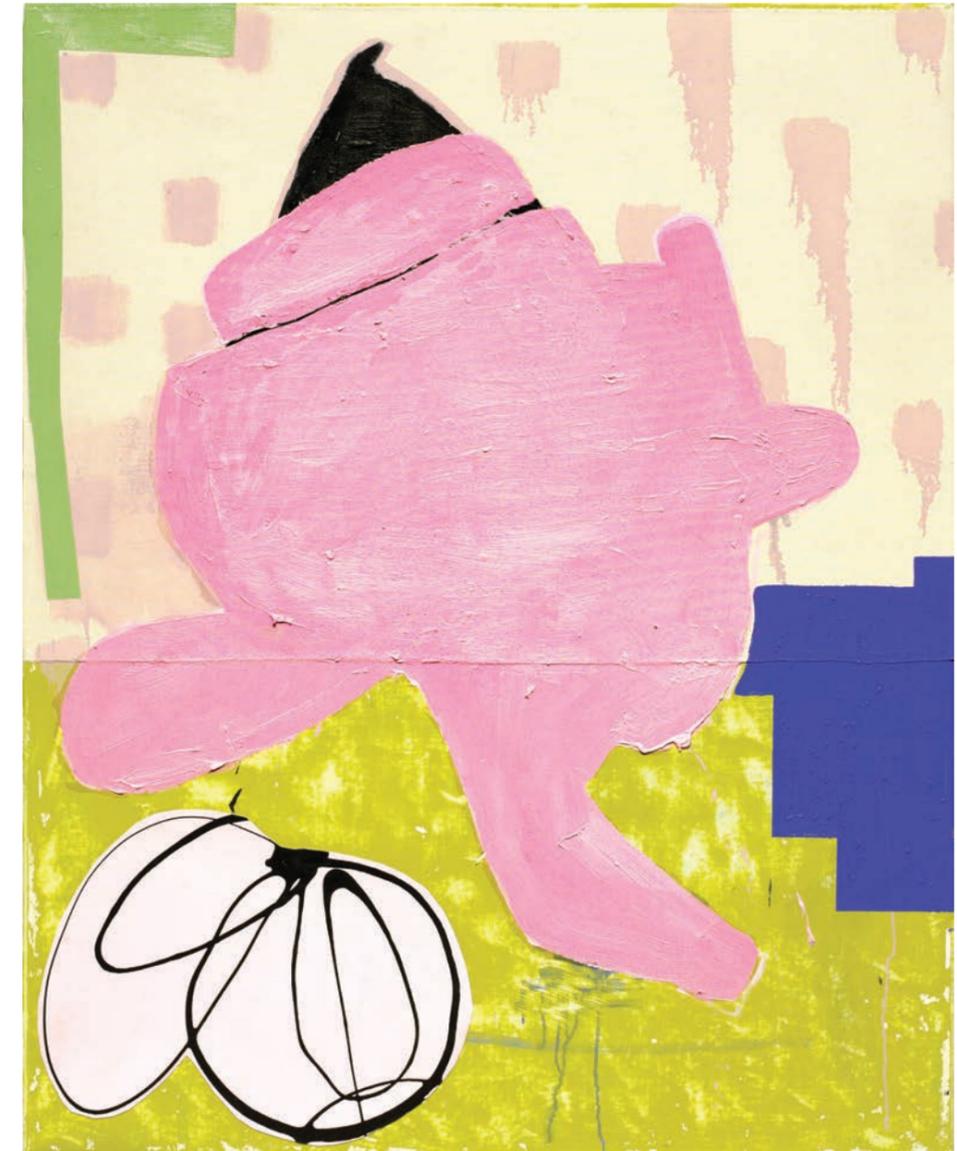
JO SMAIL FLYING WITH REMNANT WINGS

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Curated by Kristen Hileman, Independent Curator

The 2020 Vision installation of the Contemporary Wing is generously sponsored by BGE, Constellation and Exelon.



Finding a Location. 2009

JO SMAIL: FLYING WITH REMNANT WINGS



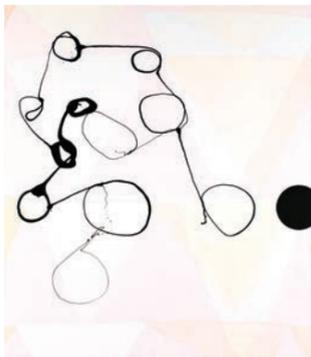
Jo Smail, 2019. Photography by Regina DeLuise

The idea of a mongrel reappears in the art and texts of Jo Smail (b. 1943, Durban, South Africa). Smail—who has a gift for writing that manifests in highly poetic titles for her paintings and exhibitions—employs the image in the following autobiographical summary: “This mongrel person lives in the U.S.A. Born and raised in Africa of an Irish mother and a father of Scottish descent.” The succinct description distills the hybridity of the artist’s background, including the complex experiences of a well-nurtured childhood unfolding amidst the injustices and violence of South African Apartheid (1948–1994)—a period of racial segregation and legal discrimination imposed by the government—and of Smail’s break with her homeland. In 1985, the artist and her husband moved to Baltimore, where Smail had a twenty-nine-year career as an influential professor, and now Professor Emeritus, at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Brazilian author Clarice Lispector (1920–1977), a favorite of Smail’s, also describes a mongrel in her book *The Hour of the Star*, first published in 1977:

... there were heavy footsteps and the howling of an abandoned mongrel. . . .
As day broke, a flock of birds chirped noisily in Acre Street: life sprouted from the ground, jubilant between the paving stones.

This passage inspired the title *Howling Mongrel*, which Smail gave to a 2004 painting that is now in the collection of The Baltimore Museum of Art. With its erratic scrawl of black enamel loops disrupting the soft stillness of a field of pale pink triangles, the painting seems to embody Lispector’s contradictory imagery of a dog in distress as life blossoms around

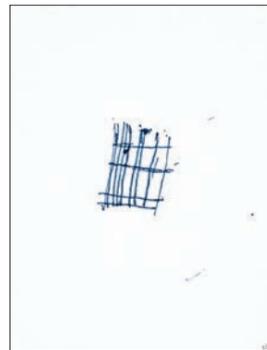


Jo Smail. *Howling Mongrel*. 2004. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Dr. Julien Davis, Baltimore, BMA 2016.11 © Jo Smail

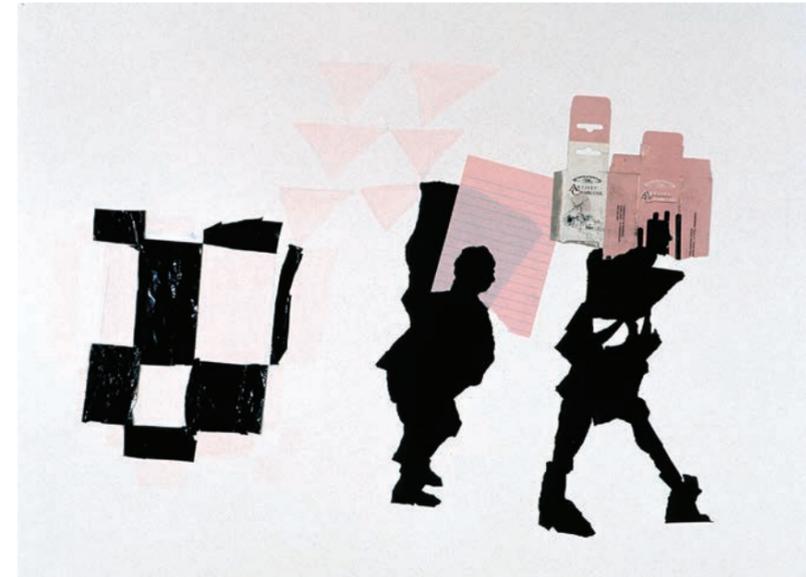
it. At the same time, the work offers a further distillation of Smail’s life, albeit in the language of visual abstraction. After a fire consumed her studio in 1996, destroying almost the entirety of her previous two decades’ worth of color field painting, the artist returned to her art by focusing on the shade of flesh on the underside of her husband’s arm. Painting rectangles and triangles that slip and collide to form imperfect grids, Smail explored the world of variation within pink-toned skin and other personal associations with pink, including beginnings and girlhood. In canvases like *Howling Mongrel*, the color retains its connotation of intimacy, but escapes more saccharine associations: Smail’s subtle fields seem to offer comfort, yet their irregular geometries evidence a destabilized environment.

The artist’s recovery from the fire was interrupted in 2000 when she suffered a stroke, temporarily losing her ability to speak. By undertaking small drawings in the hospital—the *Speechless* series, in which she worked at varying the direction, pressure, and spacing of lines—Smail began the monumental struggle to regain her ability to communicate. With time, these modest marks grew into gestural black passages over the pink fields of new, large paintings. The black form in 2004’s *Howling Mongrel* resembles writing, but a kind of pictorial writing that states more than can be communicated in any single word; it encompasses the mongrel’s, and presumably the artist’s, pain and determination, as well as the persistence of life.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, pink backgrounds and black forms had given way to more colorful compositions in which playful shapes, evocative of faces, plants, and animals, engage in quasi-narrative vignettes on expanses of raw canvas. In these pieces, isolated areas of paint are applied thickly and segments of the canvases themselves are unraveled or patched together. These assorted textures, shapes,



Jo Smail. *Speechless 3*, *Speechless 5*, *Speechless 6*. 2000



Jo Smail and William Kentridge. *Collaborations #1*. 2005

and colors continue to act as components of a visual language generating rich metaphors. *St. Augustine has a Revelation in the Shrubbery* (2012–2019), with its jittery patchwork pattern, simultaneously evokes a condition of fragmentation and of elements coalescing within the force field of the composition. This visual contradiction advances a metaphor of rupture and repair acting in tandem that continues Smail’s examination of the challenges and complexities of life, and how one can face them.

In several series, the presence of the disparate geographic locations that have contributed to Smail’s experience is felt more directly. In the mid-2000s, Smail collaborated with Johannesburg-based artist William Kentridge. The two South Africans intermingled their individual motifs as they sent drawings back and forth by mail until completed. More recently, Smail has merged artifacts of Africa

with imagery of her travels by stitching ostrich egg beads made by the San people of Botswana into prints of the moon photographed over Florence and Baltimore. In *The Mongrel Collection* (2018–2020), Smail adheres African textiles to the surfaces of cardboard shapes inspired by her observations of the paintings of Henri Matisse in The Baltimore Museum of Art and beyond. She has rendered objects from Matisse’s images of domestic interiors and figures nearly unrecognizable by changing their orientation, scale, and surface. Nevertheless, in combination with the vibrant color and pattern of the African fabrics, they demonstrate the multifaceted influence of bold form and lively palettes on Smail’s aesthetic thinking.

Made within the last few years, Smail’s *Past is Present* series confronts the contradictions of her youth in South Africa. Recipes that Smail’s mother and aunts had clipped from newspapers or jotted down on scrap paper are digitally reproduced in these large-scale paintings and conjure a sense of domestic comfort and plenty. However, by incorporating the news articles that appear on the reverse sides of these seemingly innocuous clippings, the artist reveals the extreme discrimination, abuse, and unrest of mid-20th-century South African Apartheid. In *Make Your Dreams Come True* (2016), Smail also enlarges a marginal newspaper advertisement for a bra, adding the element of gender inequality to the problematic underpinnings of her otherwise happy childhood. As with all of Smail’s paintings, there is a profound and unflinching honesty in the content of these compositions that motivates us to look clearly at the inescapable micro and macro injustices that life contains, to do the hard work of healing, and, in the wake of devastation, to create something new that aspires to beauty and, at least, momentary balance.



Jo Smail. *A Labour Crisis*. 2017

Images courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary Gallery © Jo Smail unless otherwise noted.