

WAKING UP FROM THE INSIDE OUT



20 Smiles



WAKING UP FROM THE INSIDE OUT
JO SMAIL 1998-2009

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DEDICATED TO THE LATE
DR. RICHARD KALTER





QUE LA BLANCHEUR DEFEND (THAT ITS WHITENESS DEFENDS)

NOTES ON JO SMAIL

TERENCE MALOON

« Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux,
Ne retiendra ce cœur qui dans la mer se trempe,
O nuits ! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
Sur le vide papier que la blancheur defend »

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ¹

It is 2002 and my first visit to Jo Smail’s studio in a converted warehouse in the suburbs of Baltimore. Our paths have crossed sporadically over three decades, yet this is the first time I have seen her paintings in more than twenty years. She and I have met, usually quite briefly, in far-flung places, in different epochs and in different incarnations – in London, Johannesburg and Sydney, on her turf and on mine. Here in Baltimore the symmetry of our meetings is re-established. During the time we have known each other there have been long discontinuities and blanks caused by wrenching moves and upheavals, efforts of adaptation and accommodation to new circumstances, new countries, new jobs, new people, changing times and different ideas which have marked us profoundly and could easily have made us strangers to each other. In her case, she has had to make adjustments far more dramatic and fundamental than I could possibly imagine ...yet we face each other again, still on the young side of old-age, sharing the sense of people who have been many times demolished, many times resurrected, a *tabula* much re-written and many times *rasa*. A cause of unspoken exultation: we agree we are pretty much “the same”.

Jo Smail is an artist who has evolved a great deal, so her current work is, on the face of it, a very different proposition from anything of hers I have previously seen. There is a dense cluster of paintings hanging on the first wall of the studio and the initial challenge for me is their “gaping” – their spaciness, the consistent emphasis given to their grounds and the sensation of gleaming whiteness they emit. Then there is what we could call their wilfully paradoxical character: the apparent levity and slightness of the imagery, the devil-may-care juxtaposition of discordant techniques and disparate graphic idioms, and the evident disarray of focal values and collapsed or inverted visual hierarchies. Yet, despite all of this, there is an obvious (to me) tremendous alertness, fastidiousness, rigour and sophistication in their formal confection.

One of the small paintings has a figurative element that perplexes me: there is something cute and greetings-cardish about it. Momentarily I am able more or less to overlook this figure, because something else in the painting has diverted my attention. It is a small, dark dot in the upper right quadrant, isolated against the immaculate gesso ground; it strikes me that the dot is in just the right place in relation to the figure (which I have mentally reduced to an abstract blot) and to the shape and surface of the painting. It has just the right visual weight and just the right amount of space around it for its energy to course all the way through the extent of the painting, with this aura of energy dwindling and expiring just as it reaches the edge.

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Smail’s paintings make us consider visual phenomena in terms of the weight of their presence, their energy and pulsation. She is able to establish perfect ratios between the “something” and the “nothing” – so much so, that these seem interdependent, the one implying the other – as if this particular proportion of gesso had “required” a dot to occur in this particular place, and vice versa. That mysterious interchange, the commutation between solid and void, is familiar to me from earlier works of Smail’s. Isn’t it one of the things that make her tick as an artist?

When all is said and done, it is pleasant to think that Jo Smail has landed up where she has: with ready access to the Matisse in the Baltimore Museum of Art, with the exceptional Greek vases in the Walters Museum, Barnett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* nearby in Washington and works by the great seventeenth-century Chinese painter Chu Ta in Princeton, in the Freer Gallery and in the Metropolitan Museum.² Then of course there are the Pollocks in New York.

There are four commentaries concerning the relationship of figure and ground – by Yve-Alain Bois, Paul Valéry, François Cheng and Martin Heidegger. Each of them is different, but each seems highly relevant to Smail’s work:

Yve-Alain Bois: “To perceive is first of all to perceive a figure against a ground (this is a basic definition of perception). But the ground is not a given: it is indeed what we must preconsciously

construct differently each time we are solicited to perceive. If such is the structure of perception, how could it be possible to prevent a pictorial field from becoming a ground against which the figures will solidify as figures and which they will push back? [Barnett] Newman’s stroke of genius is to have understood that perception is made of a constant synthesis of different levels, and that to prevent this annihilation of the pictorial field as background, he would have to set some of those levels in irreconcilable opposition to one another. His strategy was to emphasize the intentional nature of the perceptual field by urging us to shift from our preconscious perceptual activity (or the ‘normal’ preconscious level of perception) to a conscious one, and at the same time to prevent this consciousness from crystallising in any definite way.”³

Valéry: “Our background is made up of incoherent incidents and appearances: sensations, all kinds of images, impulses, isolated words, fragments of phrases ... But to convey what requires to be conveyed and *wants* to be detached from this chaos, all these very heterogeneous elements need to be represented by a unified system of language and need to form some discourse. The transposition of interior events into formulae made up of signs of a consistent species – equally conventional – can be regarded as the passage from a less pure to a more pure form or appearance.”⁴

François Cheng: “The line we employ to identify reality [in painting] only functions fully as a result of the Void. If line is to breathe and pulsate, then the Void has to precede, prolong and even enter into it. Since it is possible to establish lines and volumes at one and the same time, this is because the ebb and flow of line, like the void it encloses or which surrounds it, shows these things – or, better, suggests them.”⁵

Heidegger: “Only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings [...] Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom.”

“The nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs.”⁶

I remember some works of hers from the mid to late 1970s which she showed me in Johannesburg in 1980. There were two quite large canvases made of panels which had been stitched together, the seams projecting forward from the stretcher and functioning as a sort of rectilinear drawing, creating vertical and horizontal

divisions. Each compartment of canvas had been flooded with very dilute acrylic, as if suffused with watercolour tints in warm colours – purples, russets, golds. As with the pinks and yellows of her recent works (in *Wild Grass Is So Easy; Bathroom Cha Cha*, pages 18–21), these did not register as autonomous colours that broke up the visual field and stood out separately from the ground. Instead, they were like a modality or variation of the ground – a shading and shimmering of the substance of the white cotton duck.

On the same occasion she showed me some paintings that weren’t on stretchers. There was a set of five or so panels where the support (heavy, handmade paper, I think) was stiffened and encouraged to warp and buckle. These had alluring surfaces, dark and shiny as bronze or lead, with an implicit relation to the body, like cuirasses, like torsos, possibly intending an allusion to Matisse’s series of bronze reliefs, the “Backs”. Each panel was in effect a warped version of itself or a distorted version of its neighbour.

There were no figure-ground relationships to speak of in those works.

Throughout her life Smail has been an inveterate reader of poetry, and she has given considerable thought to the relationship between poetic language and the language of painting and drawing. How do her works resemble poetry? There is a painting called *Code* (pages

42–43) which mimics the layout of words and their spacing (also maybe suggesting a flight of birds in space); words crop up in several other paintings; and her works tend to have oddball, evocative titles.

The quality of poetry arises from the way Smail’s works defer and resist any specificness of meaning, and even more so from her strategic exclusions, the sparseness, spaciousness and concentration of her means, and above all the atmosphere of reflection that surrounds everything she does.

Blanks and voids are a great feature of Smail’s works – which makes comparison with the poetry of Mallarmé (a great favourite of successive generations of visual artists) inevitable. As Robert Martin Adams wrote, “Mallarmé is an author for whom void provides a – perhaps the – central experience; from its emplacement at the heart of his work, it rays out in a spectrum of directions through modern poetry, modern prose, modern critical theory. The perilous presence of Mallarmé is not to be escaped” – not by Smail, not by me.⁷

Mallarmé described how the modern poet (meaning: himself) had renounced the cult of personality, the lyrical fervour and rhetorical excess of Romanticism, and now, instead, “cedes the initiative to the words, mobilised by the shock of their inequality”. Because “the elocutionary disappearance of the poet” has set language free, the reciprocal relations of words now come to

define the substance and structure of the poem, where “everything becomes suspense, a fragmentary arrangement with alternation and opposition, combining in the total rhythm that will become a silent poem with blank spaces”.⁸

This is close to being a description of a painting or a drawing – to wit: one of Smail’s paintings or drawings.

On the subject of Mallarmé, Paul Valéry observed that his poetic language was not only very different from everyday speech, but remote from literary language generally. Mallarmé sought to render the language of his poems precious by establishing a unique, highly restricted lexicon, developing idiosyncratic, specialised usages of certain carefully chosen words, and claiming a freedom and flexibility of syntax that would result in more concentrated, integrated, beautiful forms: “Mallarmé made a sort of science of *his* words. There can be no doubt that he deeply pondered their figures, explored the inner space where they appeared both as *causes* and *effects*, assessed what might be termed their *poetic charges*, and by pursuing this work and clarifying it to such a degree, words could be secretly, virtually organised by the power of his intelligence, through the mysterious workings of his profound sensibility.”⁹

Isn’t that what Smail does – sifting, testing, weighing, clarifying her visual language, saturating it in the atmosphere of reflection,

which makes her pictorial idiom, if not precious, then ...exquisite? If we regard Mallarmé's achievement as a deconstruction and distillation of the poetic legacy of nineteenth-century Romanticism, maybe Smail accomplishes a comparable deconstruction and distillation at the *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century, of the legacy of Modernism, although this could be much too mighty and crushing a claim that we, like Smail herself, might prefer to skirt.

However, unlike Mallarmé, Smail is no purist, and her perfectionism can incorporate profanity, babble, visual noise, slang. Her hermeticism is leavened with humour: her affection for deflationary, humorous titles goes back as long as I have known her.

"The gaiety of language is our seigneur" wrote Wallace Stevens – now there's a notion to conjure with.¹⁰ Elsewhere Stevens wrote: "Poetry must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully".¹¹ And, evoking the kinds of ambiguous, reversible apparitions that come and go in Smail's works on paper, Stevens wrote some beautiful lines about

*An argentine abstraction approaching form
And suddenly denying itself away.*

*There was an insolid billowing of the solid.
Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air.*¹²

Indicating two diametrically opposed approaches to diction in modern poetry, Paul Valéry contrasted the purist, aestheticist approach of Mallarmé to that of Verlaine: Verlaine mixed the most common everyday speech with the artificial diction of the Parnasian poets, creating a medium of "pungent, cynical impurity – although not infelicitously".¹³

More recently Denis Donoghue remarked how the poetry of Philip Larkin can invite readers "to imagine the pleasure of seeing words not filled with meaning but emptied of the responsibility of meaning; going on vacation to feel the exhilaration in 'nothing', 'nowhere' and 'endless'".¹⁴

For Heidegger, "the essence of art is poetry":

"Poetry is thought of here in so broad a sense and at the same time in such intimate essential unity with language and the word, that we must leave open whether art in all its modes from architecture to poesy, exhausts the essence of poetry...

Building and plastic creation [...] always happen already, and happen only, in the open region of saying and naming. It is the open region that pervades and guides them. But for this very reason they remain their own ways and modes in which truth directs itself into work. They are an ever special poetizing within the clearing of beings."¹⁵

1. "Oh nights! Nothing will be retained by this heart sopped in sea –
Neither the old gardens that the eyes reflect,
Nor the desert light of my lamp
On the blank paper that its whiteness defends."
Stéphane Mallarmé: "Brise Marine" (Terence Maloon's translation)

2. Chu Ta, spelt also Zhu Ta, and additionally known in the United States by the name of Bada Shanren. See Wang Fanyu et al.: *Master of the Lotus Garden – The Life and Art of Bada Shanren 1626-1705*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990, and François Cheng: *Chu Ta 1626-1705, le génie du trait*, Phebus, Paris, 1984.

3. Yve-Alain Bois, "Perceiving Newman", in *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 201-203.

4. Valéry: "Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé" in *Ecrits divers sur Stéphane Mallarmé*, Gallimard, Paris, 1950, p. 59.

5. François Cheng: *Vide et plein – Le langage pictural chinois*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 78.

6. Martin Heidegger: "What Is Metaphysics?" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 103-104.

7. Robert Martin Adams: *Nil – Episodes in the literary conquest of void during the nineteenth century*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1966, p. 155. Curiously enough, there is a 1944-47 collage by Robert Motherwell, *Mallarmé's Swan* in the Cleveland Museum of Art, which makes a sort of vignette of dribbles of ink, a feature I associate with some of Smail's collages.

8. Stéphane Mallarmé: "Variations sur un sujet". Mallarmé's conceptions are surprisingly visual and graphic. Paul Valéry remarked of Mallarmé's poem, "Un Coup de Dés": "All his invention, pursued for years on end, deduced from the analysis of language, books, music, is based on the consideration of the page as a visual unit." – Paul Valéry: "Le Coup de Dés – Lettre au Directeur des *Marges*" (1920), in *Ecrits divers* (op. cit.) p. 18.

9. Paul Valéry: "Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé", in *Ecrits divers* (op. cit.) p. 58.

10. Wallace Stevens: "Esthétique du Mal".

11. Wallace Stevens: "Man Carrying Thing".

12. Wallace Stevens: "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination".

13. Valéry: "Je disais quelquefois ..." (op. cit.) p. 61.

14. Denis Donoghue: *The Pure Good of Theory*, Blackwell, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, p. 73.

15. Martin Heidegger: "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Basic Writings* (op. cit.) p. 186, 199.



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JO SMAIL: AN OVERVIEW

KAREN WILKIN

“Begin with emptiness” and “Nothing is not uninteresting,” wrote Jo Smail, some years ago, in a list of “thoughts and instructions to myself.” More recently, in a conversation in front of a group of her recent paintings, she spoke of valuing “a sense of nothingness.” If these provocative phrases suggest that Smail’s art is devoid of incident, think again. Quite the contrary. Her paintings and works on paper depend on a rich visual vocabulary, a eloquent lexicon of marks, assembled over the years, that includes scrawls, tendrils, smudges, finger marks, spidery words, frayed grids, staccato strokes, elegant organic swells, and more, all deployed as carriers of feeling. Nuances of surface and visual weight create remarkable complexities out of that “sense of nothingness.” There’s always a lot to look at, in Smail’s work, even when the image is radically stripped down. If she is interested in emptiness and nothingness, it is not because she is a minimalist at heart but because she deals with essences. She describes the acute simplifications that increasingly characterize her work – a gradual emptying out of non-essentials – as “eliminating noise,” saying “I enjoy the ‘quiver’ of the object itself.”

Over the past decade, Smail has turned her paintings and works on paper into embodiments of the indispensable, testing the limits of extremes, as if seeing just how economical she can make her work and still end up with something surprising and expressive to look at. No matter how rarified her efforts, she obviously strives not only to respond to the formal implications that arise in

the course of working, but also to retain a memory of human agency so that we are always aware of the presence of the artist’s hand – now tremulous and almost hesitant, now assured and assertive. In her works on paper and collages, Smail sometimes includes elements from her own past work, chosen, after distance has been imposed by time and their original meaning attenuated, and then fragmented, so that new associations can be imposed by the new context. In her canvases, she can play fragile (or aggressive) marks against expanses of a pink so tender that it threatens to fade if we look away or make images of white paint and raw canvas so elusive that they almost defy vision; she can scribble barely legible words or set bold, dark configurations against minimally inflected fields. Over time, we begin to recognize repeated elements – calligraphy, linked triangles, blocks, scrawls, and indescribable shapes that seem curiously familiar – reassembled and rearranged to suggest new meanings with each iteration; at times, the members of this repertory company of actors are dramatically transformed by alterations in density, so that similar marks become different as a result of alterations in transparency or opacity. The result is to at once suggest the certainties and, paradoxically, the elusiveness of image-making.

For all their graphic clarity, Smail’s pictures, whether on paper or canvas, are ultimately more about space-making and emotional resonance than about two-dimensional structure. Variations in the scale, density, and color of her family of pictorial elements, along

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with the modulations of touch that conjured them into being, suggest that this cast of characters is capable of provoking a wide range of associations, without recapitulating our normal perceptions of the world around us; these contrasts, abetted by the artist’s faultless sense of placement, also create space. Smail is preoccupied by such subtle variations. “How alike can I make things?” she asks. “What minimal differences can I impose to make them occupy different spaces and have different moods?” These imposed differences can also be differences of perception. The seemingly allusive but ultimately ambiguous shapes that are the protagonists of a recent, notably restrained series have their origins in overscaled images of flower heads. Smail concentrates on the exterior contours of the mass of petals, turning the complicated three-dimensional, multi-part blossom into a single flat unit, divorced from its normal setting, enlarged, and drained of color. The result? Fascinating shapes, placed in tensely dynamic relationships to the rectangle of the canvas, sometimes embedded in small inflections of the surface. These equivocal silhouettes hold our attention for a long time, as we explore their complex perimeters. They suggest many things but not primarily (or sometimes ever) flowers. The paradox is that emphasizing what should be the most characteristic aspect of a blossom – its profile – at the expense of everything else, turns out to render that blossom virtually unidentifiable. In this vaguely unsettling series of images, Smail detaches visual evidence from naming and interpretation; she convinces us of the unreliability of labels and forces us to concentrate on pure

optical sensation, allowing what we see to trigger a wealth associations – some of them, no doubt, floral or, at least, botanical or organic – without insisting that we choose any one of them.

At a time when many works of art depend on rigid explications and directives for interpretation, Smail’s work is refreshingly free of instructions for use. She (rightly) trusts that her images will speak directly, albeit open-endedly, through the combination of their physical qualities and the traces of her hand and mind, without her viewers’ needing recourse to words and explanations. Yet knowing more about the context in which her work of the last decade or so was made enhances our experience and deepens our understanding. In 1995, a fire destroyed all of Smail’s work. Five years later, embarked on a new series of paintings, she suffered a stroke that deprived her of speech and mobility, all of which she had to relearn. Smail’s works since 2001 are documents and celebrations of a laborious process of recovery, as well as meditations on the nature of meaning and how it is communicated.

None of this would be of any interest if the visible manifestations of these concerns were not as satisfying as they are, independent of explanation. Smail’s work doesn’t require us to know anything of her history to command our attention or to offer us rich rewards. Learning about the artist’s struggle to overcome adversity increases our admiration for her strength of will and her achievement, but the expressive excellences of Smail’s paintings and works on paper are self-evident.

BEGINNING AGAIN

If I could, I would paint the invisible. I imagined it quiet and light. An emptiness surrounded with skin or soft like the inside of an arm. I wanted to touch, gaze, and explore. Could I paint a caress?

I had to begin. Pink felt appropriate: Small, insignificant, baby girl, first steps, new skin, soft... What to draw? Something straightforward like knitting “plain.” Begin with a single unit and see where it takes me. I want to be on the side of the not clever, the vulnerable, inconsistencies and mistakes. This is what beginnings are like.

How the units touch, support, squeeze, and hold each other is important. I study the gesture of one shape towards another or its passive isolation. They might have edges so soft they melt into each other. It’s become the way I see intimacy; the spaces between us when we care about each other.

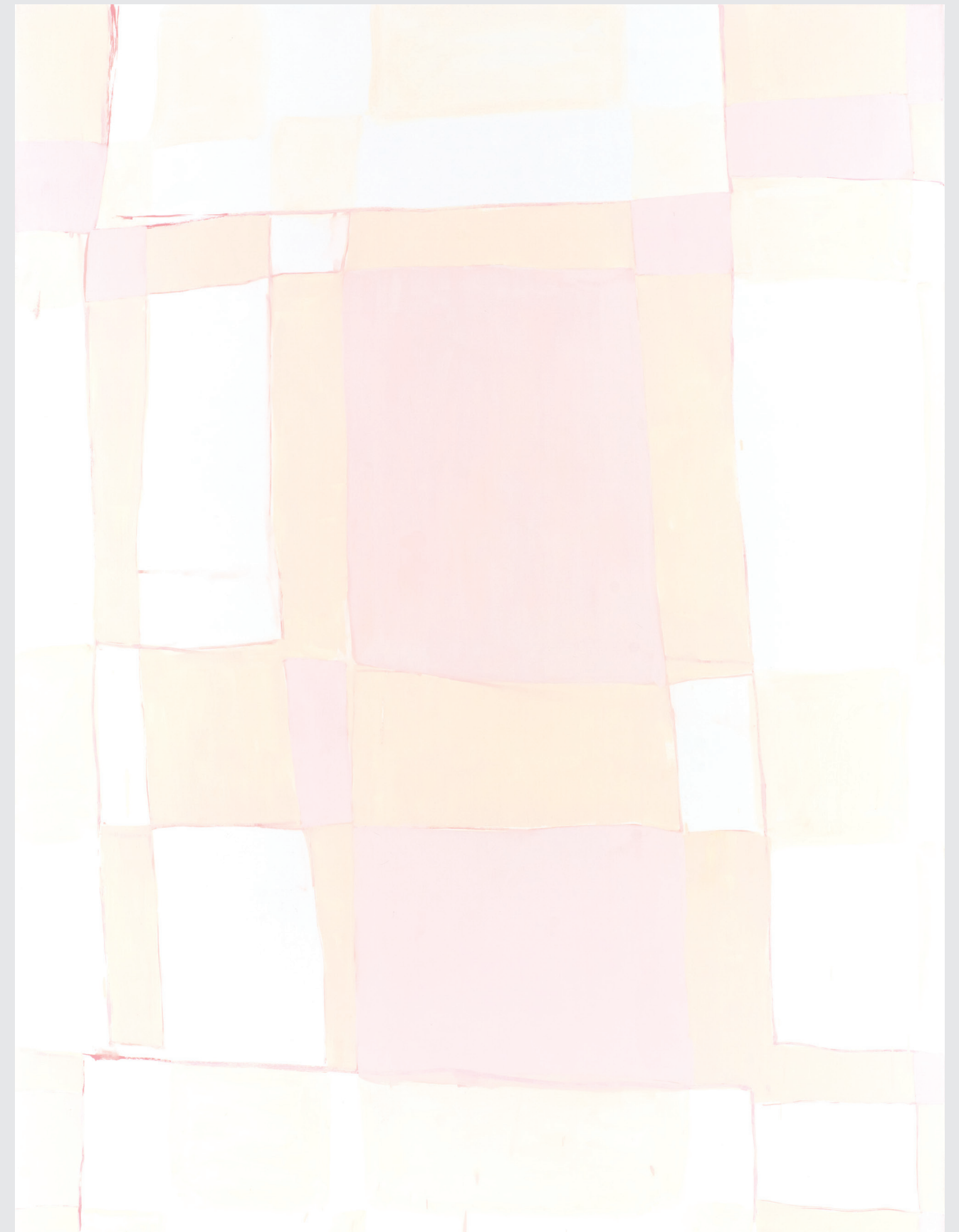
JO SMAIL

Wild Grass is so Easy

1998

oil on canvas

80 x 60 inches



Bathroom Cha Cha

1998

oil on canvas

80 x 60 inches



SPEECHLESS

Speechless 1
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches

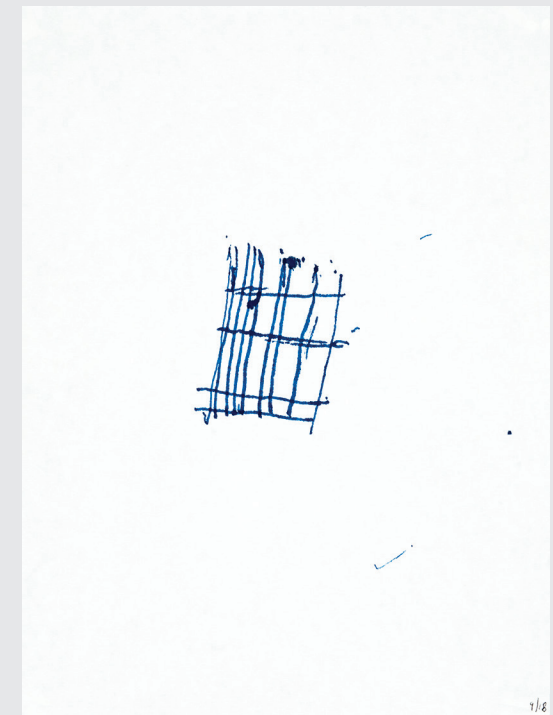
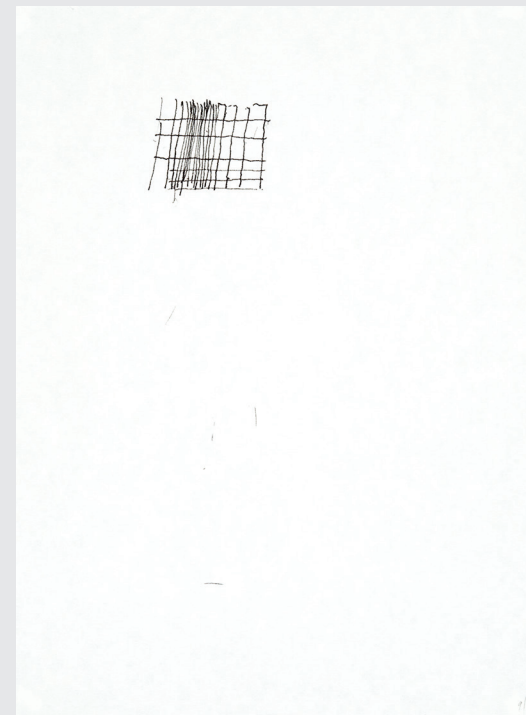
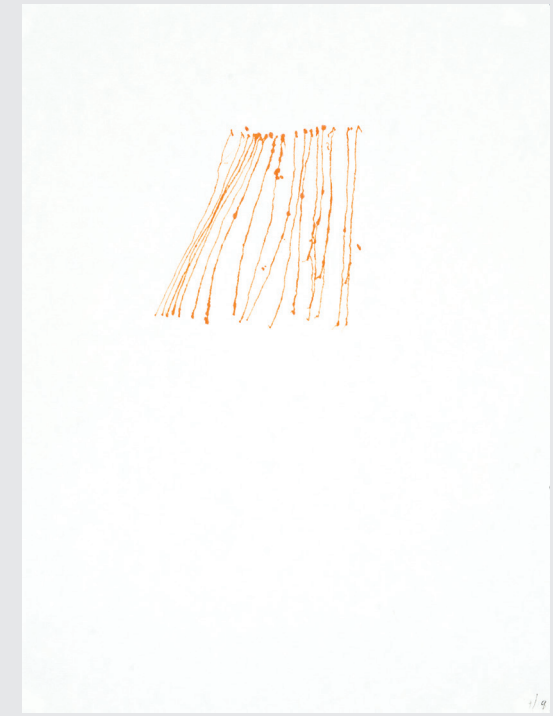
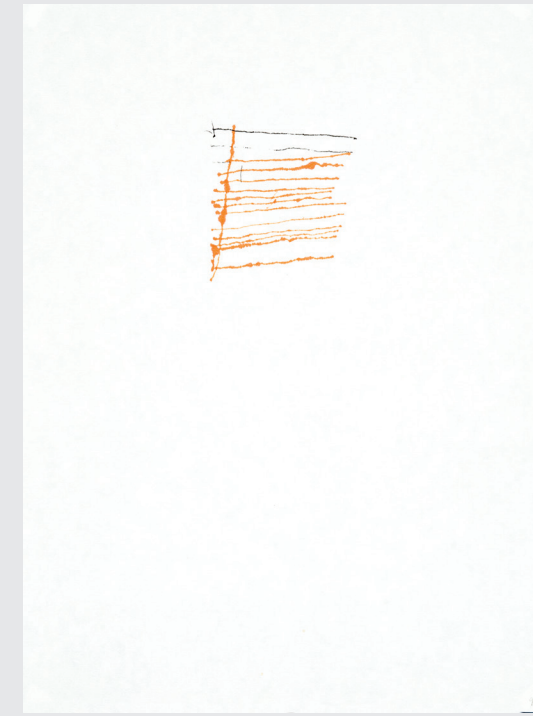
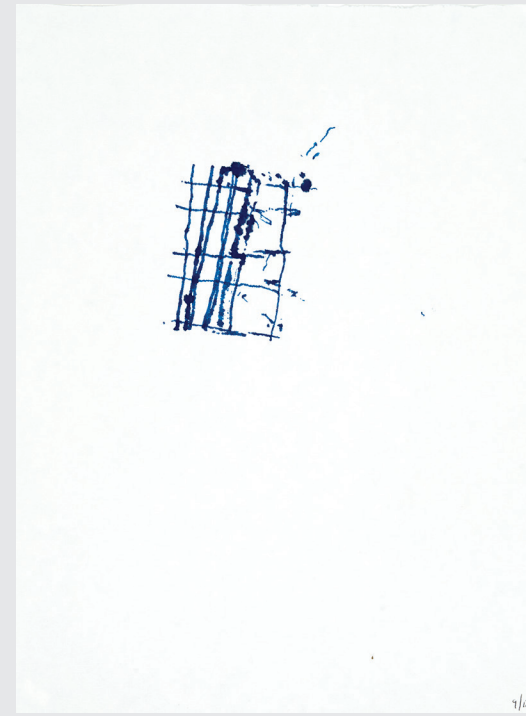
Speechless 2
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches

Speechless 3
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches

Speechless 4
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches

Speechless 5
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches

Speechless 6
2000
ink on paper
12 x 9 inches



DEGREES OF FLUENCY

Juxtapositions:

Speaking and Silence

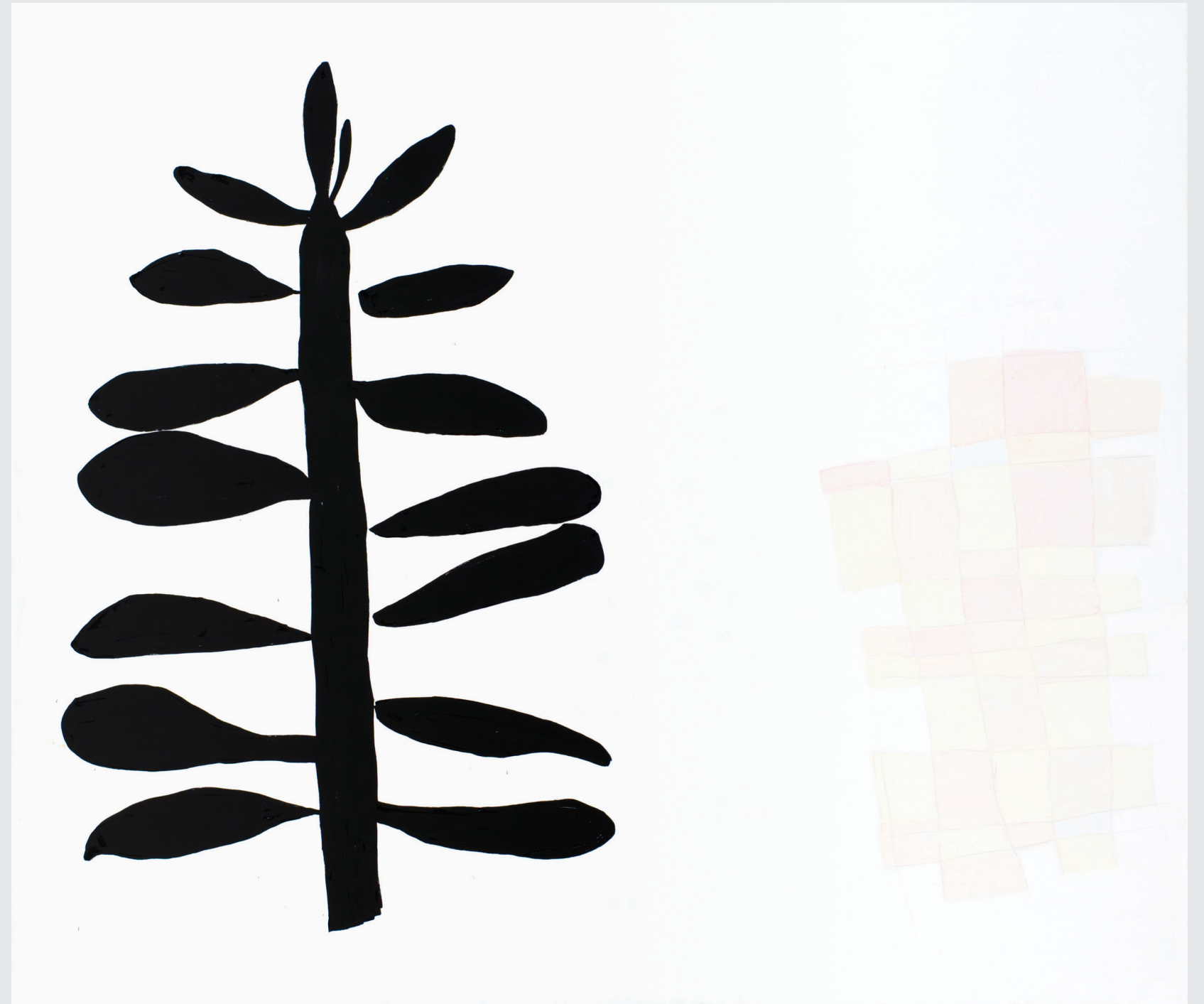
Body and Soul

I sense my elbow is where my spirit lies.

JO SMAIL

Cries and Whispers
2001
oil and pencil on canvas
60 x 70 inches

COLLECTION OF
THE AMERICAN EMBASSY,
JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

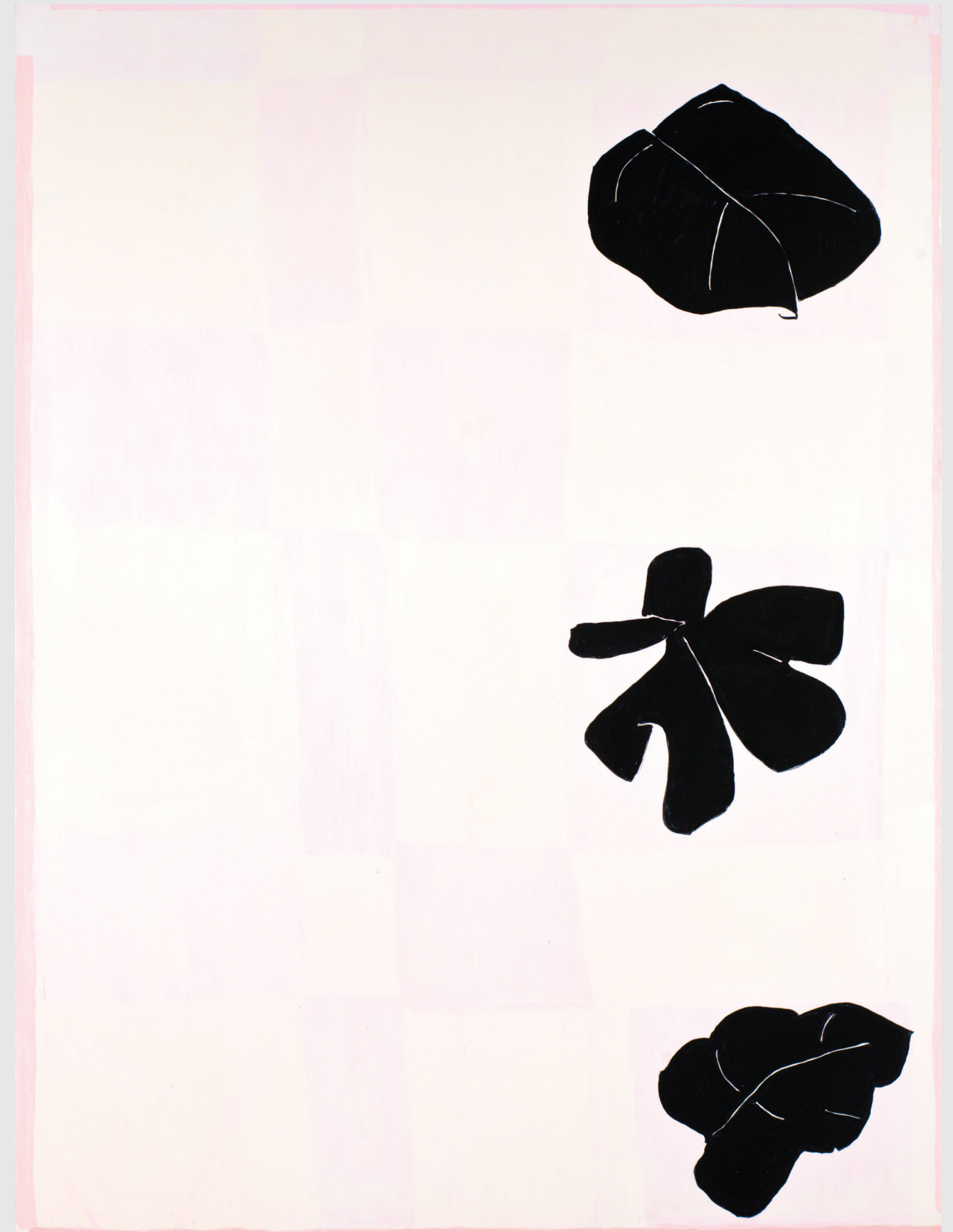


Black Angels with Handkerchiefs

2002

oil on canvas

80 x 60 inches



Coming up for Air
2002
oil on canvas
80 x 60 inches



Small Birds Flying Low

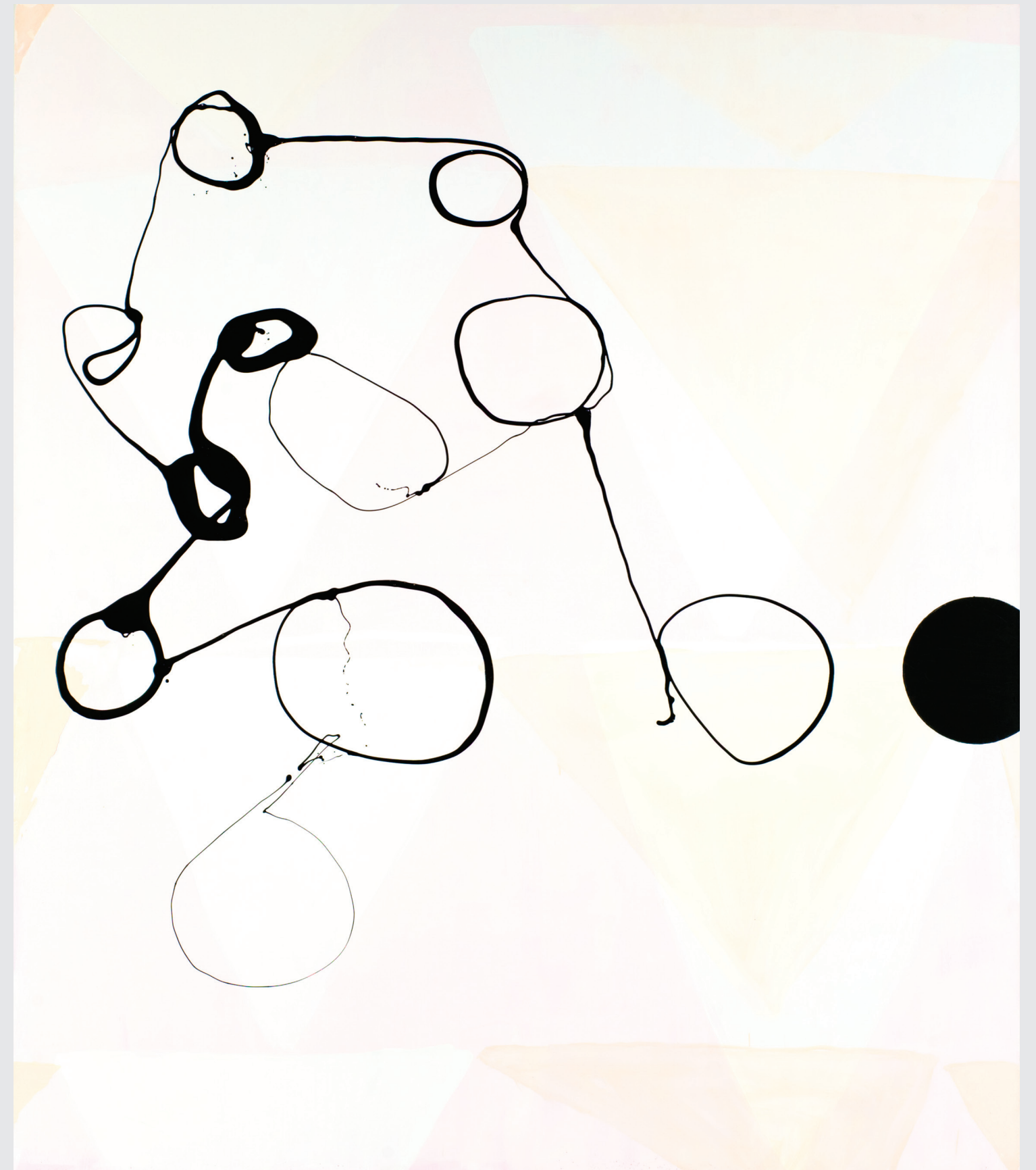
2003

oil on canvas

70 x 60 inches



Howling Mongrel
2004
oil and enamel on canvas
70 x 60 inches

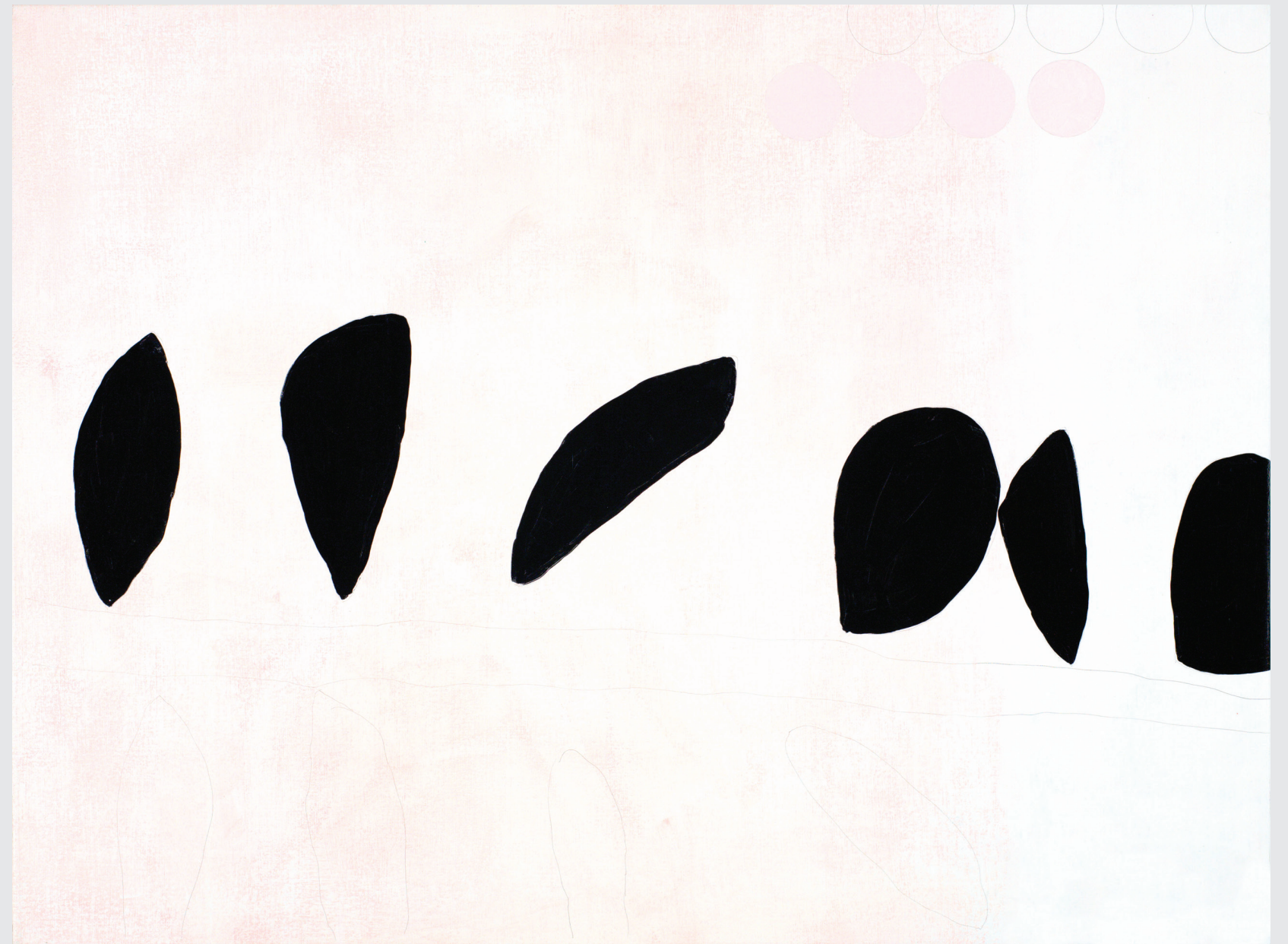


Inheritance of the Backwoods

2003

oil on canvas

36 x 48 inches



Incomprehensible Triangles

2004

oil on canvas

36 x 48 inches



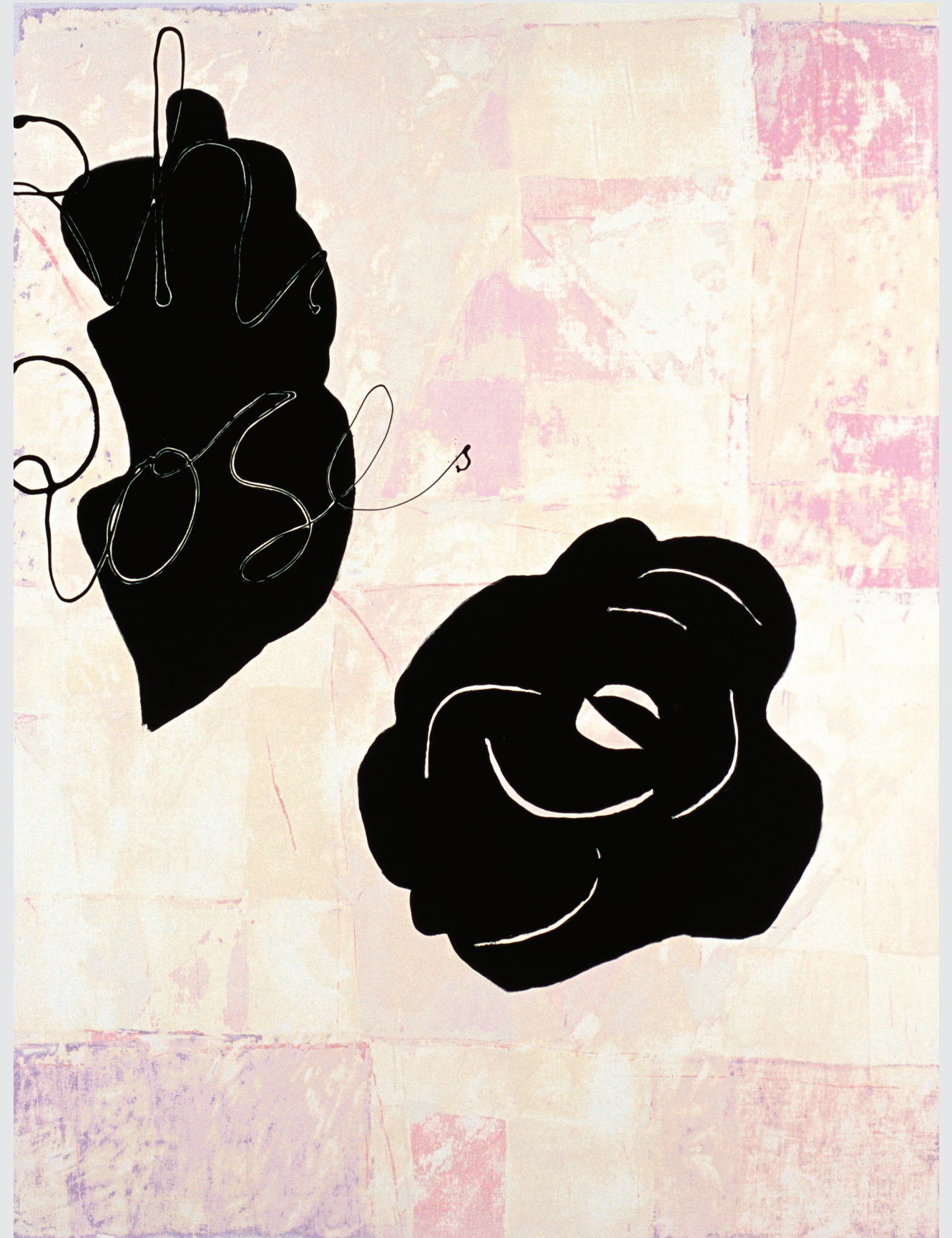
Code
2004
oil on canvas
36 x 48 inches



Hotel Hotdog
2004
oil and enamel on canvas
36 x 48 inches



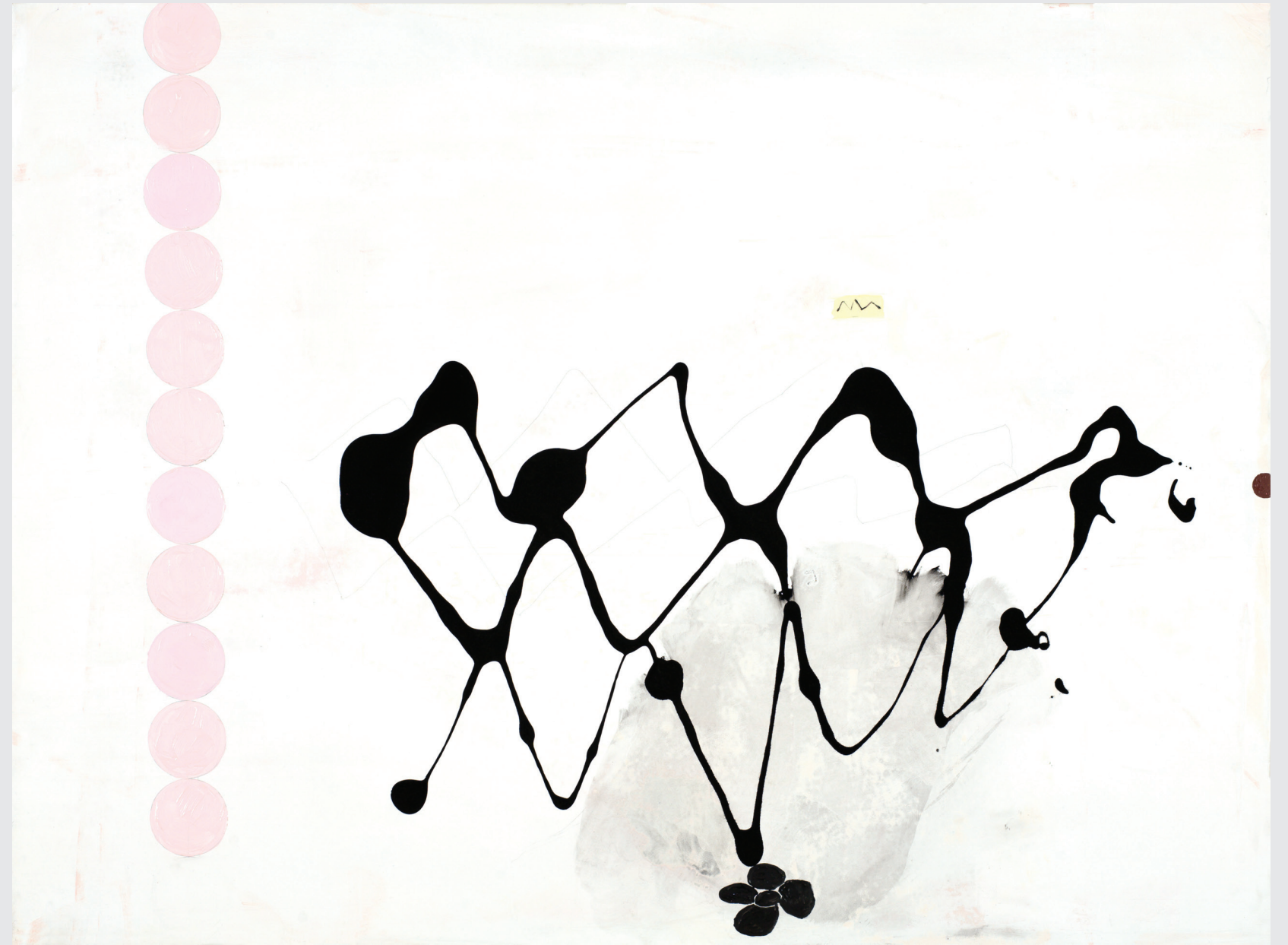
Rhesus Rose
2005
oil and enamel on canvas
80 x 60 inches
PRIVATE COLLECTION,
REHOBOTH, DE



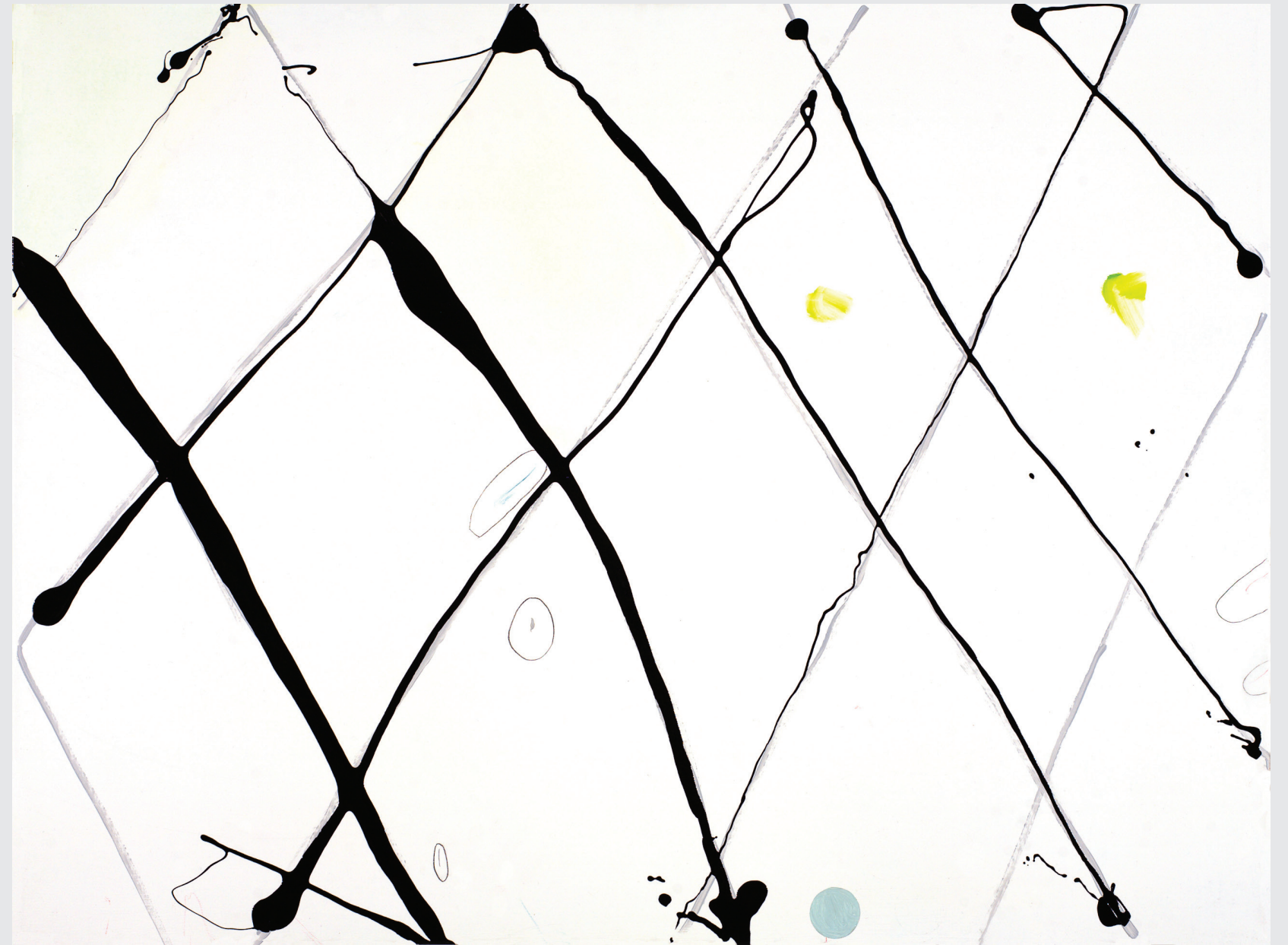
Lemonade
2005
oil and enamel on canvas
48 x 36 inches



Dropping in Unannounced
2005
oil and enamel on canvas
36 x 48 inches



Scent of Deer
2005
oil and enamel on canvas
36 x 48 inches



Duck Feet
2004
oil and enamel on canvas
40 x 50 inches

COLLECTION OF
DAVID AND SUZI CORDISH,
BALTIMORE, MD



Deux
2007
oil and enamel on canvas
20 x 20 inches

Humming a Love Song
2007
oil and enamel on canvas
20 x 20 inches

COLLECTION OF
JIM AND CAROL TRAWICK,
BETHESDA, MD

Either Or
2007
oil, enamel, and pencil on canvas
20 x 20 inches

One and It's Shadow
2007
oil on canvas
20 x 20 inches



COLLABORATIONS: KENTRIDGE AND SMAIL

“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.”[†]

[†]*Art in Review: Jo Smail at Axis Gallery* by Holland Cotter, New York Times, February 10, 2006.

#7

2005

mixed media

15 x 22 inches

COLLECTION OF
JACK RASMUSSEN,
BETHESDA, MD

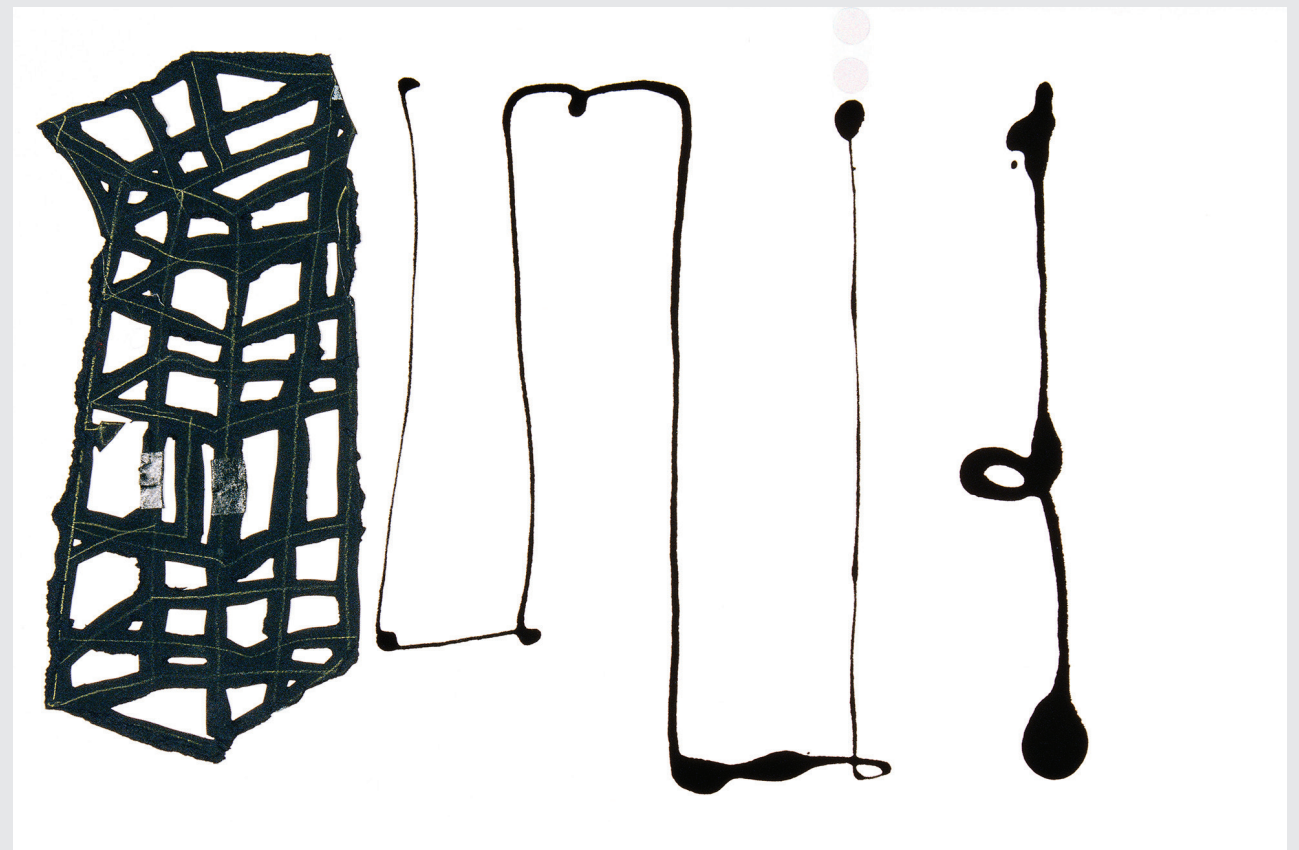
#8

2005

mixed media

15 x 22 inches

PRIVATE COLLECTION



#9
2005
mixed media
15 x 22 inches

#10
2005
mixed media
15 x 22 inches



SPECIES OF LOVE
& ANGEL'S FOOTSTEPS†

Before speaking there was the other side of the tongue,
I saw silence.

Now I shout or whisper.

Seeming contradictions live in a world of perhaps,

Opposites attract or not...

There are 15,000 varieties of orchids, I'm told.

I call love without words,

Without knowing names.

I sit before the faces of flowers,

Losing myself.

Things happen and suddenly you know.

JO SMAIL

†The title *Angel's Footsteps* comes from:

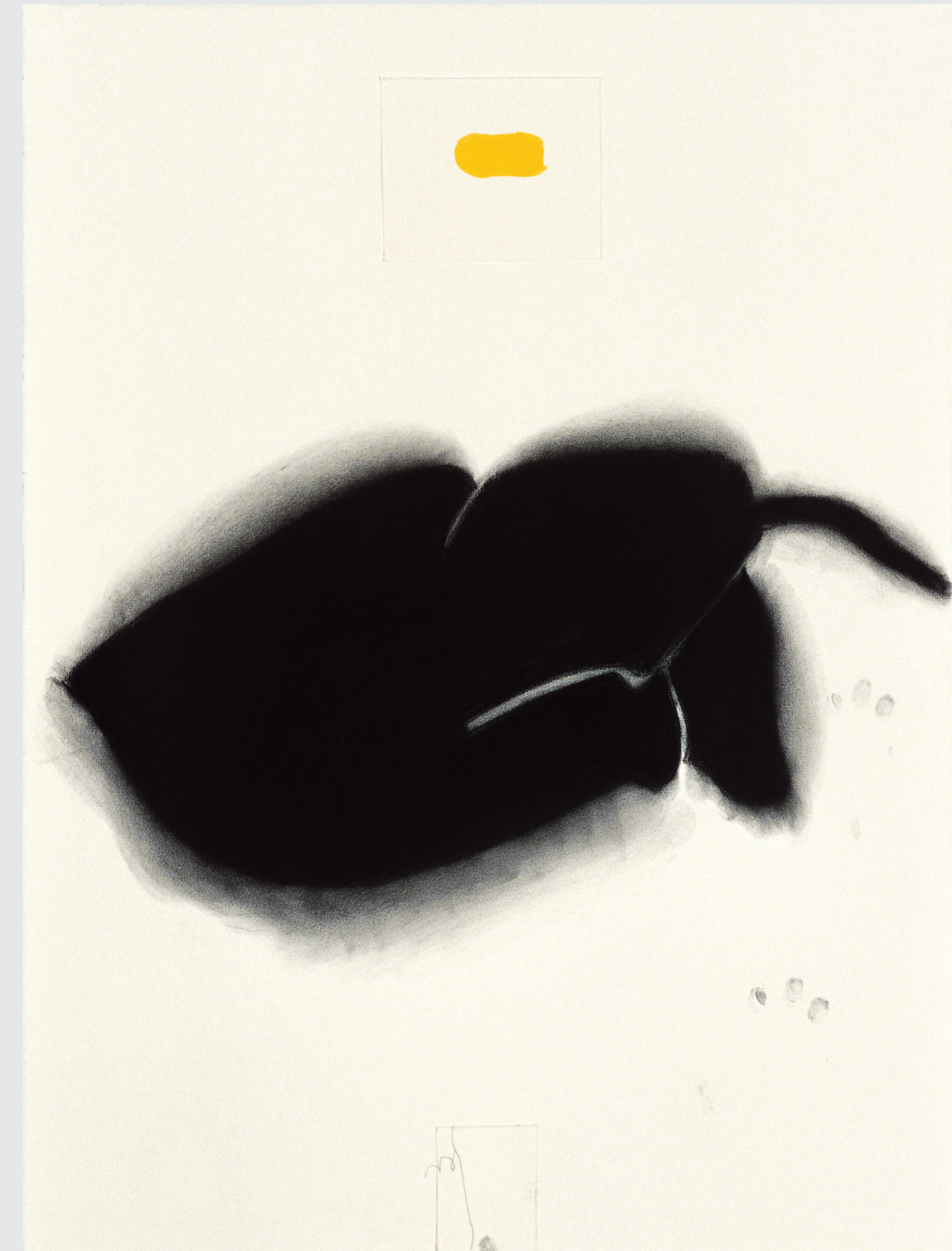
“Cette nuit l'écriture est venue à moi, – Clarice, son pas d'ange dans ma chambre.”

p. 42, *Vivre L'orange* in *L'heure de Clarice Lispector* by Hélène Cixous, Published
by Des femmes. 1989.

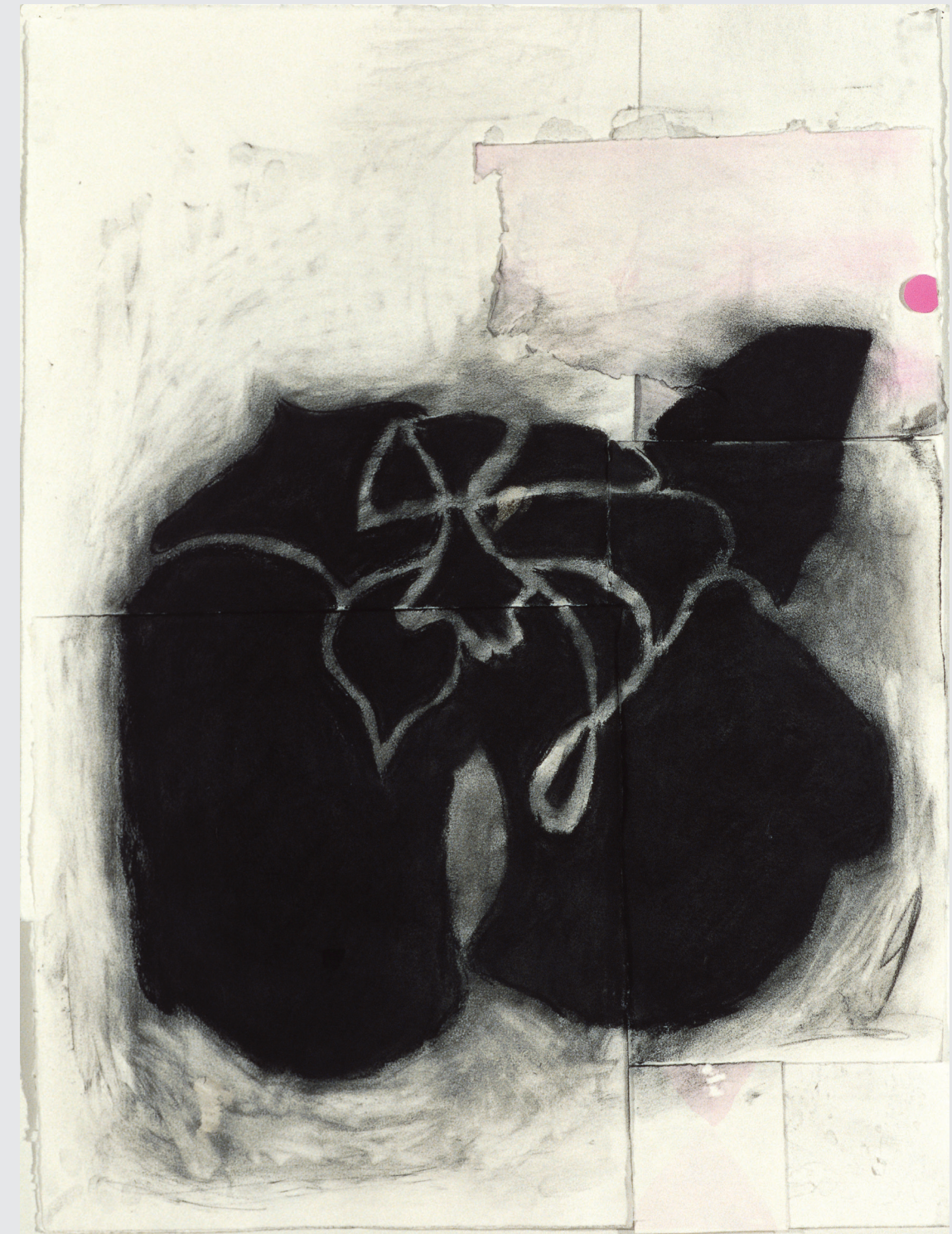
Species of Love #1
2007
charcoal and collage on BFK paper
30 x 22 inches



Species of Love #11
2007
charcoal and collage on BFK paper
30 x 22 inches



Species of Love #19
2007
charcoal and collage on BFK paper
30 x 22 inches



Species of Love #28
2007
charcoal and collage on BFK paper
30 x 22 inches



Angel's Footsteps #17

2007

pastel, pencil, and collage on BFK paper

30 x 22 inches

COLLECTION OF
BRIGITTE BOMM,
NEW YORK, NY

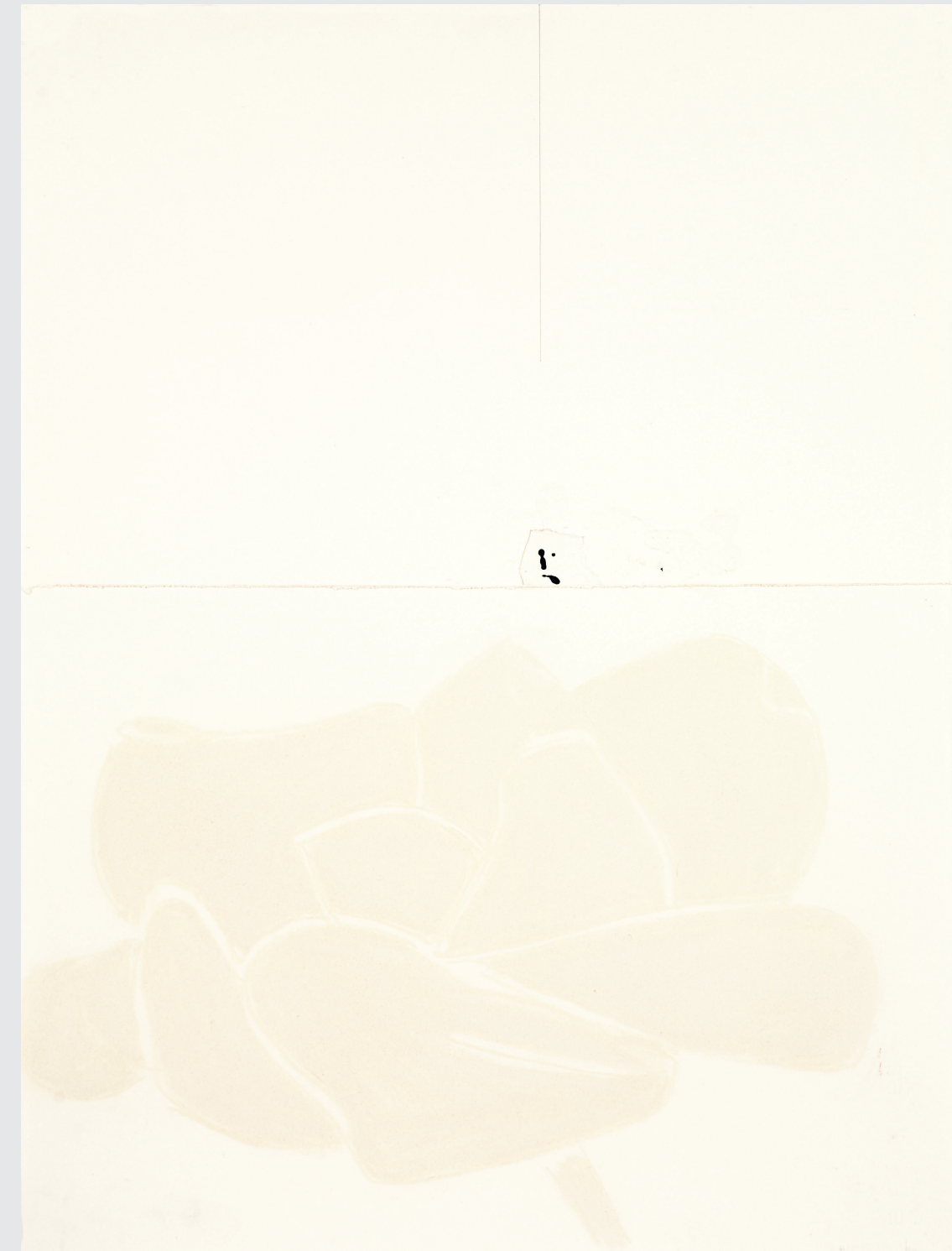


Angel's Footsteps #21

2007

pastel and collage on BFK paper

30 x 22 inches



Angel's Footsteps #22

2007

pastel and collage on BFK paper

30 x 22 inches



Angel's Footsteps #23

2007

pastel, enamel, and collage on BFK paper

30 x 22 inches

COLLECTION OF

AMY RAEHSE AND DAVID TOMASKO,

BALTIMORE, MD



CONJURATIONS[†]

“Dona Fronzina, when she was little ... ate squatting behind the kitchen door. No one knows why.”[‡]

The odd things that happen in my paintings are like that.

JO SMAIL

Degrees of absence

Up against nothing

How blank can you go?

Is there such a thing as nothing?

Laughing over nothing (*equals* joy)

Unspeakable points to the ineffable nature
of abstraction

Unsayable, unknowable but not unthinkable

“This cloud of unknowing was precisely that. It
offered no knowledge.”[‡]

Trying to paint (or not paint) the thing we cannot
speak about – love, in all it’s aspects and colors

Surrounding something with tidbits of abstraction

Going to extremes

Poetry with blanks

JO SMAIL

[†]CONJURATION – the casting of magical spells, the invocation of spirits; an incantation; a trick.

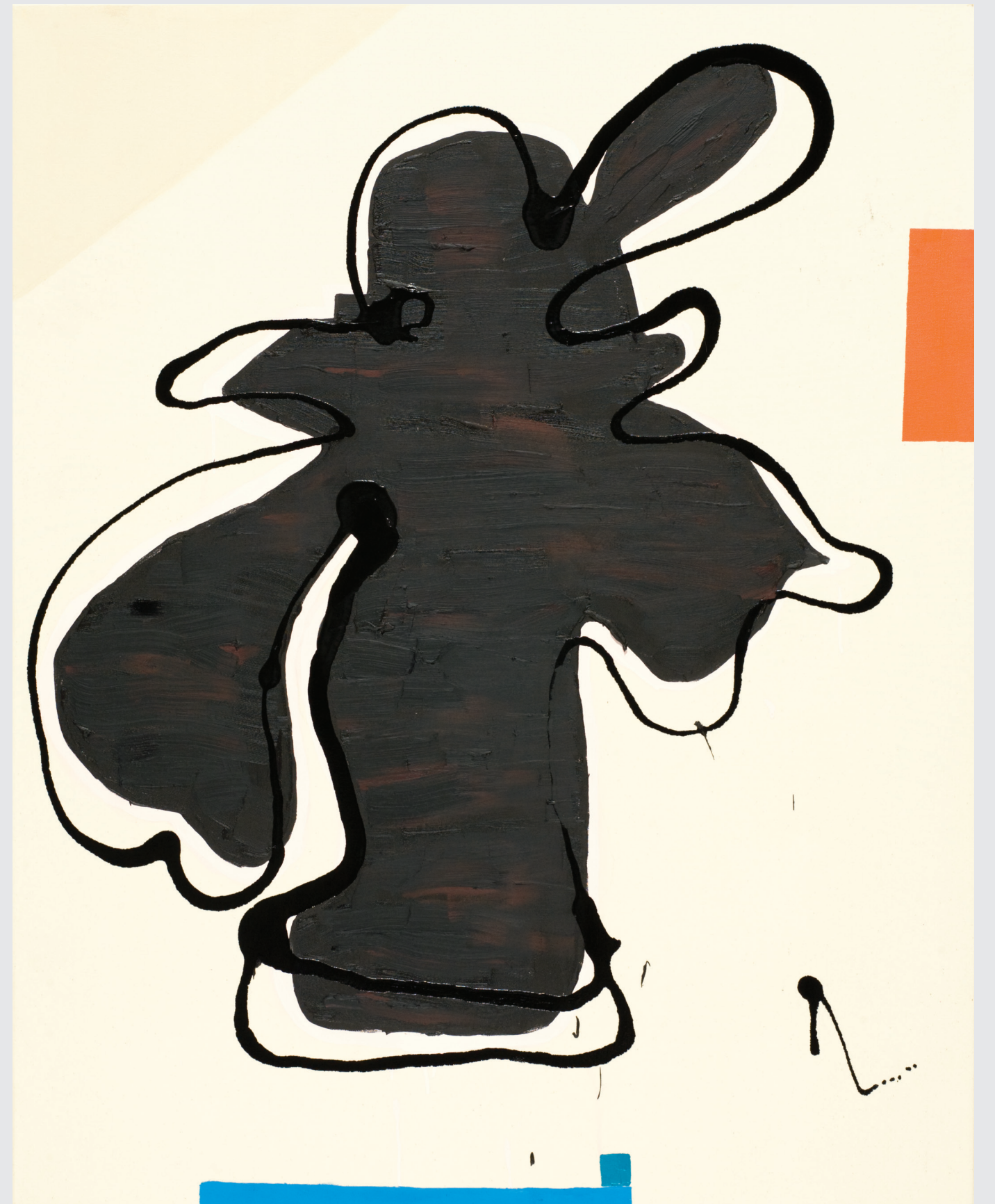
[‡]*The Conjurations of Donna Fronzina* in *Soulstorm* by Clarice Lispector, p. 145. Translated by Alexis Levitin. New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York. 1989.

[‡]*The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong, p. 301. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 2004.

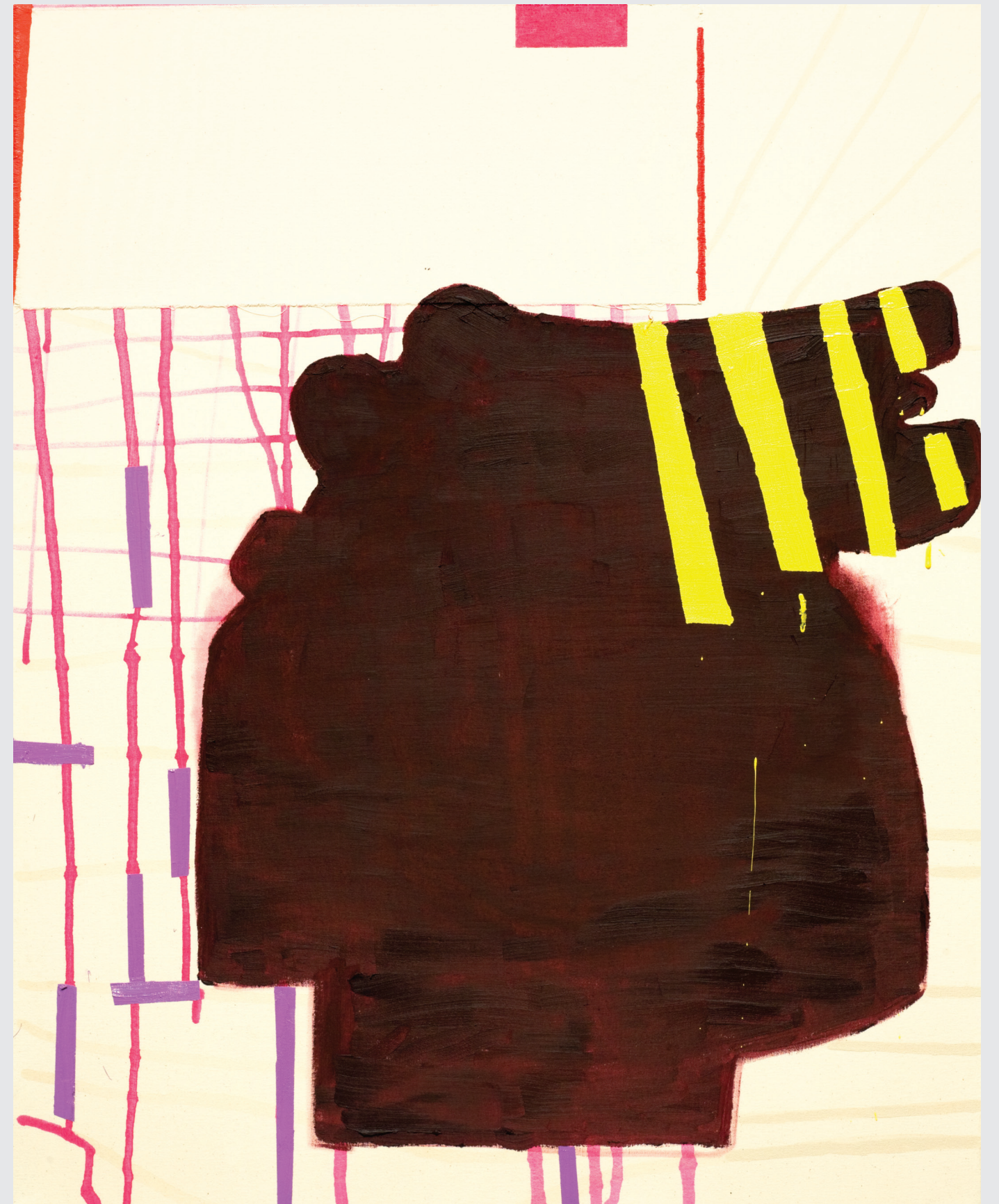
Opting for Mobility
2008
oil and acrylic on canvas
40 x 50 inches



Called Back to Life
2009
oil, acrylic, and enamel on canvas
50 x 40 inches



Ultimate Latin
2009
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
50 x 40 inches



Agitated Meditation
2009
oil, acrylic, enamel, and collage on canvas
50 x 40 inches



Agitated Meditation

DETAIL »



Imagining an Absence
2009
oil, acrylic, enamel, and collage on canvas
50 x 40 inches



Finding a Location
2009
oil, acrylic, enamel, and collage on canvas
50 x 40 inches



Daisy with Muscles
2009
acrylic and collage on canvas
24 x 18 inches



Typing with One Finger
2009
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
24 x 18 inches



Painting with Topknot
2009
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
24 x 18 inches



Garden of Gnomes
2008
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
12 x 9 inches



The Power to Attract
2008
oil and acrylic on canvas
12 x 9 inches



An Undefended Heart
2008
oil and collage on canvas
12 x 9 inches



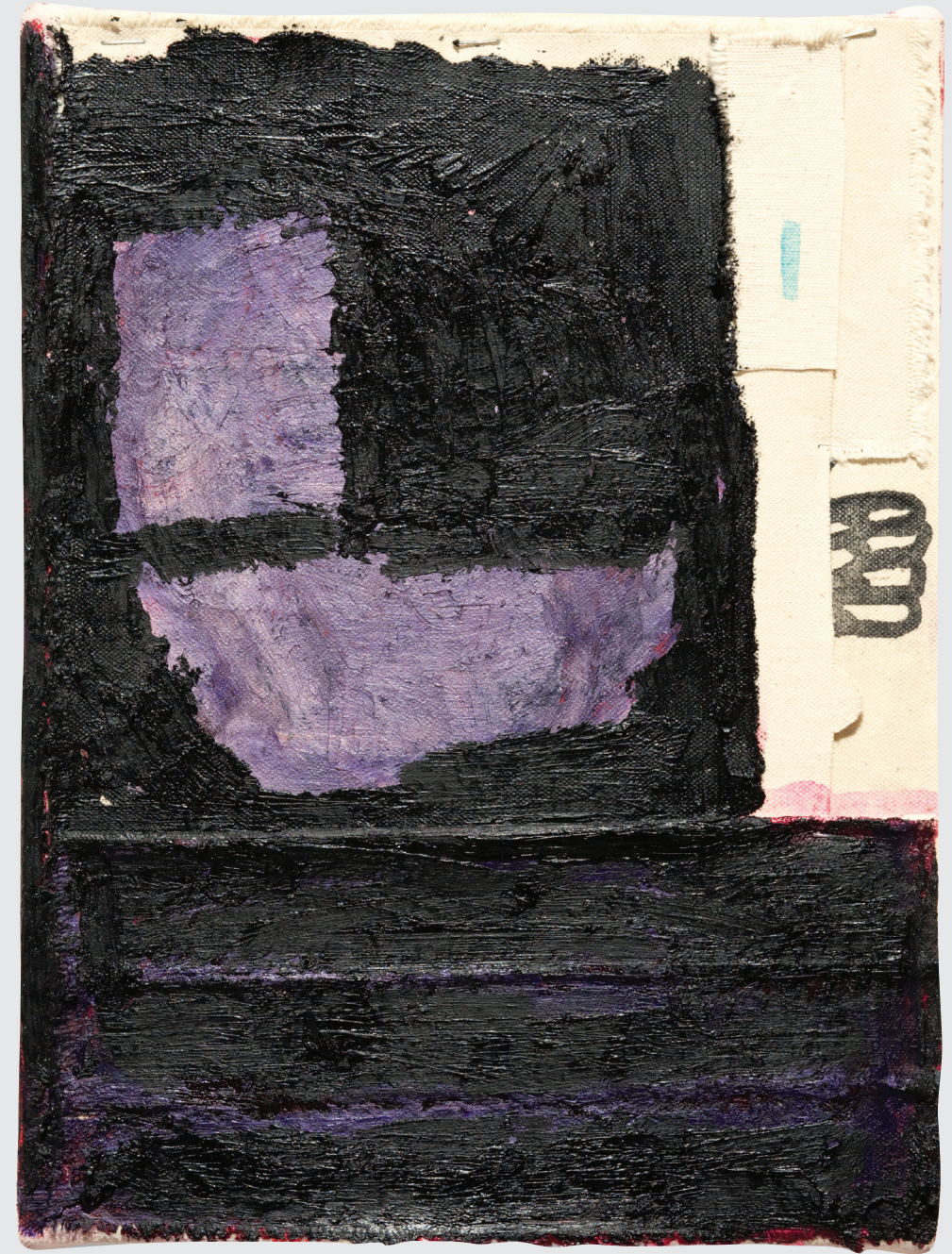
How to Swim
2008
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
12 x 9 inches



Enchanted Ear
2008
oil and collage on canvas
12 x 9 inches



Belly of the Sky
2008
oil, ink, acrylic, collage, and staples on canvas
12 x 9 inches



Ripening Thought
2008
oil, acrylic, collage, and staples on canvas
13 1/2 x 12 inches



Up from Nowhere
2008
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
13 x 9 inches



Painting with Tail
2008
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
12 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches



Painting with Headdress
2008
oil, enamel collage, and staples on canvas
12 3/4 x 11 inches



Shadow of a Remote Past
2008
oil and acrylic on canvas
12 x 9 inches



Holding Up Silence
2008
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
12 x 9 inches



Thinking Germinates
2008
oil, collage, and staples on canvas
12 ½ x 9 ½ inches



Painting with Awkward Left Hip
2009
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
12 x 9½ inches



Painting with Horn
2009
oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas
15½ x 14 inches



JO SMAIL**BORN**

1943 Durban, South Africa

EDUCATION

1978 NHDAD. Johannesburg College of Art, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1975 NDAD. Johannesburg College of Art, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1963 BA. University of Natal, Durban, South Africa.

SELECTED PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

USA Embassy, Johannesburg

Chase Manhattan Bank, Johannesburg

Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, NY

Durban Museum and Art Gallery

Gertrude Posel Collection, University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg Art Museum

Johannesburg Chamber of Industries

Mobil Corporation

National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town

Premier Milling Group, Johannesburg

Pretoria Art Museum

University of the Orange Free State

University of South Africa

University of Stellenbosch

University of the Western Cape

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2009 *Conjurations*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

2008 *The Limits of Language: A Selection from 10 Years*, McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA.

2007 *Species of Love and Angels Footsteps*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

2006 *New Beginnings*, Axis Gallery, New York, NY.

2004 *Degrees of Fluency*, Heriard Cimino Gallery, New Orleans, LA. Curated by Margaret Evangeline.

Rockville Art Place, Rockville, MD.

Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

2003 Pinkard Gallery, Maryland Insitute College of Art, Baltimore, MD.

2002 *Goya Contemporary / Goya-Girl Press*, Baltimore, MD.

1997 Rockville Art Place, Rockville MD. Curated by Jack Rasmussen.

1990 55 Mercer Street, New York, NY.

Ombondi Gallery, New York, NY.

1989 Ombondi Gallery, New York, NY.

1984 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1981 Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.

1979 Association of Arts, Pretoria, South Africa.

1978 Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

1977 Johannesburg Art Museum, South Africa.

Fabian Fine Art, Cape Town, South Africa.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 *Winners of Trawick Prize*, Fraser Gallery, Bethesda, MD.

The Grey House that Thinks Itself into Your Head Without Asking, Fingston Gallery, Pace University, New York, NY.

The Commerce and Culture Series, The Center Club, Baltimore, MD.

2007 *Triangle Alumni DUMBO Arts Festival Exhibition 25*, Brooklyn, NY.

Trawick Prize Finalists, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD.

Strictly Painting 6, McLean Project For The Arts, VA. Curated by Kristen Hileman.

Speaking of Silence 1, Sub-Basement Studios. Curated by Peter Brum.

2006 *Trawick Prize Finalists*, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD.

2005 *Soft Openings*, American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center, Washington, DC. Curated by Jack Rasmussen.

Critics' Picks: Just Looking, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD. Curated by Franklin Sirmans.

2004 *Inward Gazes*, Goucher College, Towson, MD. Curated by Cara Ober.

Trawick Prize Finalists, Creative Partners Gallery, Bethesda, MD.

Prize Winners, Maryland State Arts Council, Baltimore, MD. Curated by Peter DuBeau.

2003 *Conversations*, Collaboration with William Kentridge.

-04 Traveling exhibition. Curated by Barry Nemett. Evergreen House, Baltimore, MD.

Delaware Center for Contemporary Art, Wilmington, DE.

Joseloff Gallery, University of Hartford, Hartford, CO.

Tufts University Gallery, Medford, MA.

Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY.

Karl Drerup Gallery, Plymouth State University, NH.

2003 *Breaking New Ground*, The Wyman Arts Center, Baltimore, MD. Curated by Peter Brum.

Fully Integrated, Degas Gallery, Mclean, VA. Curated by Y. Chung and Andrea Pollan.

The Fables of La Fontaine. Traveling exhibition.

Curated by Koren Christofides, Ken Tisa, and Robyn Chadwick.

Centre pour l'Art et la Culture, Aix-en-Provence, France.

Exhibition Space of Temple University, Rome, Italy.

The Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA.

The Meyerhoff Gallery, The Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD.

2001 *Artists of the Alfred & Trafford Klotz Residency at Rochefort-en-Terre*, Pinkard Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD.

2000 Musee du Chateau de Rochefort-en-Terre Morbihan, France.

1999 *The Untroubled Mind*, Vila Julie College, MD. Curated by Peter Brum.

1998 *Chance and Necessity*. Traveling exhibition.

-99 Curated by Power Booth.

Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD.

St. Mary's College, MD.

McLean Center for the Arts, VA.

University of Ohio, Athens OH.

1998 *Chance and Necessity: Prints*, Goya Girl Press, Baltimore, MD.

WPA / Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Cross Currents '98: Pure View, The Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, MD. Curated by Kristen Hileman.

Artscape '98: Empowerment Zone Artists, City Hall Gallery, Baltimore, MD.

Delaware Art Museum Biennial '98, Wilmington, DE.

- 1997 *Not So Simple*, Gallery 901, Washington, DC.
Curated by Annie Gawlak.
- Artist as Collector*, Goucher College, Baltimore, MD.
Curated by Bill Schmidt and Helen Glazer.
- Out of the Ashes*, Rosenberg Gallery of Goucher College,
Baltimore, MD.
- 1996 Natalie Knight Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1995 *Maryland Institute: Then and Now*, Montpelier Cultural Arts
Center, Laurel, MD. Curated by Barry Nemett.
- 1994 *New Realities*, Staib Gallery / Art Wall + B, New York, NY.
Curated by Patricia Patton.
- Maryland Institute: Then and Now*, Josiah White Exhibition
Center, Jim Thorpe, PA.
- Works from the Garden*, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD.
Curated by Jann Rosen-Queralt.
- Between the Sexes*, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD.
- 1993 Trask Gallery, The National Arts Club, New York, NY.
Contemporary South African Art, Consulate General,
New York, NY.
- 1992 *Triangle Artists*, The Lorraine Kessler Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY.
- 1991 *Reverberations*, Frostburg University, Frostburg, MD.
Enigmatic Expressions, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD.
Curated by Charlotte Cohen.
- 1990 *Voices from South Africa, Contemporary Art Against Apartheid*,
Stuart Levy Gallery New York, NY.
- 1989 *Triangle Artists*, Pine Plains, NY.
- 1986 *Guest Artist Retrospective*, Invitational Exhibition,
Johannesburg Art Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Cape Town Triennial*, National Museum Tour, Cape Town,
South Africa.

- 1985 *Tributaries Contemporary South African Art*.
European tour sponsored by BMW.
- Women's Festival of the Arts*, Funda Gallery, Soweto,
South Africa.
- Gertrude Posel Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1984 *Four Johannesburg Painters*. National Touring Exhibition.
National Gallery of South Africa, Cape Town.
1820 Monument Gallery, Grahamstown.
University of the Orange Free State Gallery, Bloemfontein.
Pretoria Art Museum.
Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.
Durban Art Gallery.
- 1983 *South African Contemporary Art Invitational*.
Sponsored by BMW, South Africa.
- 1981 Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1979 Association of Art, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Gertrude Posel Gallery, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1978 Salon International d'art Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel.
Renaissance '78, South Africa Association of Art,
Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Total Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 1976 Fabian Fine Art, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1975 *Art South Africa Today*, Biennial, Durban. Prize winner.
Juried by Clement Greenberg.
- 1974 *New Signatures*, Pretoria, South Africa.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2009 *Waking Up From The Inside Out: Jo Smail 1998-2009*,
essays by Terence Maloon and Karen Wilkin.
Catalog: *Influence & Collaboration in Contemporary Art*,
Evergreen House, Baltimore, MD.
- 2008 Catalog: *The Limits of Language: A Selection from 10 Years*,
text by Nancy Sausser, McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA.
- 2007 *The Searcher* by Deborah McLeod, Baltimore City Paper,
October 31.
Baltimore Artist Wins Award by Glenn McNatt,
The Baltimore Sun, September 11.
Trawick Prize Winners, Arts Beat by Rachel Beckman,
The Washington Post, September 6.
Catalog: *Trawick Prize*.
- 2006 *Art in Review: Jo Smail at Axis Gallery* by Holland Cotter,
New York Times, February 10.
*New Beginnings: Jo Smail (including collaborations with
William Kentridge) at Axis Gallery*, by Briget Goodbody,
Art on Paper, May–June issue.
Around the Galleries, Jo Smail at Axis Gallery,
by Karen Wilken, Hudson Review, Summer issue.
Catalog: *Trawick Prize*.
- 2005 *Jo Smail at Heriard-Cimino* by Susan Elizabeth Ryan,
Art in America, May issue.
MAP Show is a Striking Snapshot of Regional Art by
Glenn McNatt, The Baltimore Sun, May 5.
*Residents In? Just Looking: The 19th Annual Critics' Picks
Exhibition* by J. Bowers, Baltimore City Paper, April 27.
Jo Smail by Laurie Delk, The New Orleans Art Review,
January–February issue.
- 2004 *Pink Freud* by J. Bowers, Baltimore City Paper, September 29.
Catalog: *Trawick Prize*.
- 2003 *Artistic Give and Take* by Linel Smith, The Baltimore Sun,
December 18.
- 2000 *Expo Franco-Americaine au Musee du Chateau* Review,
Quest-France July 5.
- 1999 *Chance and Necessity* by Adam J. Lerner, Art Papers,
March–April issue.
- 1998 *Jo Smail at Rockville Art Place* by Joe Shannon,
Art in America, June issue.
- 1997 *The Artist as Lobbyist* by Michael O'Sullivan,
The Washington Post, December 11.
Jo Smail at Rockville Arts Place by Ken Oda,
KOAN Art Newsletter, November issue.
Artist's Collect the Darndest Things by John Dorsey,
The Baltimore Sun, November 25.
The Colors of War and Peace at Rockville Arts Place by
Nancy Ungar, Montgomery Gazette, October 31.
Catalog: *15th Anniversary Celebration*, Maryland Art Place,
Baltimore, MD.
Not So Simple by Annie Gawlak, October.
Artist as Collector by Helen Glazer and Bill Schmidt, October.
Artistic Rebirth in Shades of Pink by Holly Selby,
The Baltimore Sun, April 13.
Out of the Ashes by Helen Glazer, April.
- 1994 *Garden of Art* by John Dorsey, The Baltimore Sun, May 25.
- 1991 *Enigmatic Art Show Requires Deep Thought* by John Dorsey,
The Baltimore Sun, January 7.
Review by Mike Giuliano, The Baltimore Evening Sun,
February 7.

1990 *150 South African Paintings* by Lucy Alexander and Evelyn Cohen, Struikhof, Cape Town. South Africa, p. 152.

1986 Catalog: *Johannesburg Art and Artists: Selections from a Century* by Sheree Lissoos.

Catalog: *Cape Town Triennial*.

1985 Catalog: *Tributaries: A View of Contemporary South African Art*.

Jo Smail, illustration and interview by Hillary Prendini and Glynnis Underhill, *Style* magazine, March issue.

1984 *A Little Artistic Courage* by John Dewar, *Johannesburg Star*, August 8.

Jo Smail, Interview by Franka Severin, *Johannesburg Art Foundation News Letter*, July issue.

Four Painters at The National Gallery by Benita Munitz, *Cape Times*, May 24.

Jo'burg Artists on Show by Eldred Green, *Cape Argus*, May 14.

Catalog: *Four Johannesburg Painters*.

1981 *A Painter who Knows her Own Mind* by Joyce Ozynski, *Rand Daily Mail*, March 3.

Jo Smail by Terence Maloon, Essay written for Solo Exhibition, Goodman Gallery, South Africa.

1977 Catalog: *Art in South Africa: A Short Survey*.

AWARDS

Trawick Prize: Best in Show, Bethesda Contemporary Art Award, 2007

Strictly Painting, McLean Project for the Arts Award, 2007

Maryland State Arts Council, Individual Artist Award (Painting), 2007, 2004, 1995, 1991

Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation Creative Fellow, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, 2003

Residency, Rochefort-en-Terre, France, 2007, 2003, 2000

Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, 1996-97

Maryland Institute College of Art, Trustees Teaching Award, 1992

Residency Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center, Vermont, 1996, 1994

Triangle Artist's Workshop, Pine Plains, New York, 1989

Cambridge Shirt Award, *Art South Africa Today*, 1975

Abel Coetzee Award, *Johannesburg College of Art*, 1975

JO SMAIL is a Professor

at the Maryland Institute College of Art (1988–Present).



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CREDITS

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