

JO SMAIL
LEANING OVER THE EDGE
OF THE MOON



NOVEMBER 20, 2014 –
- JANUARY 28, 2015



“Something happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints that centuries had constructed around curiosity, desire, individuality, sustained attention to the material world, the claims of the body.” Stephen Greenblatt

In 2014 I spent 4 months in Florence, Italy taking photographs.

LOOKING AT, LOOKING UP, LOOKING DOWN

Looking at:

“To see the world in a grain of sand... hold infinity in the palm of your hand” William Blake

Looking up at the sky, thinking:

“Could there be a number that is nothing? That is less than zero? That begins where there is no beginning because it always was? And was before always?” Clarice Lispector

Looking down:

“The way up and the way down are one and the same” Heraclitus

THE PAINTINGS

Influenced by the photographs, the paintings were made in my studio on my return this summer.

Bare canvas: a constant reminder of beginnings

I patch: construct, build

I glue: cover up

I tear: like giving birth

I cut: damage or break

I wrap: like clothing

I paint: reveal, excavate

Pattern evokes origins

DIPTYCHS

The physicality of the paintings are contrasted with flat photographs. I think about ways of “being” and ways of “seeing”. What constitutes “being” and what constitutes “seeing”?

Presence and memory.

Jo Smail / October 2014

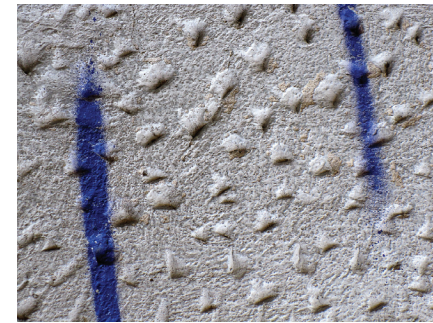
Chewing on Shadows

2014

acrylic, enamel, pencil, artist's tape, collage on canvas

70 x 70 inches





DIPTYCH 1

Marmalade Heart

2014

archival digital print

18.5 x 24 inches

2014

acrylic, found fabric, pencil, collage on canvas

50 x 40 inches





DIPTYCH 2

Manmarks Treadmire Toil There

2014

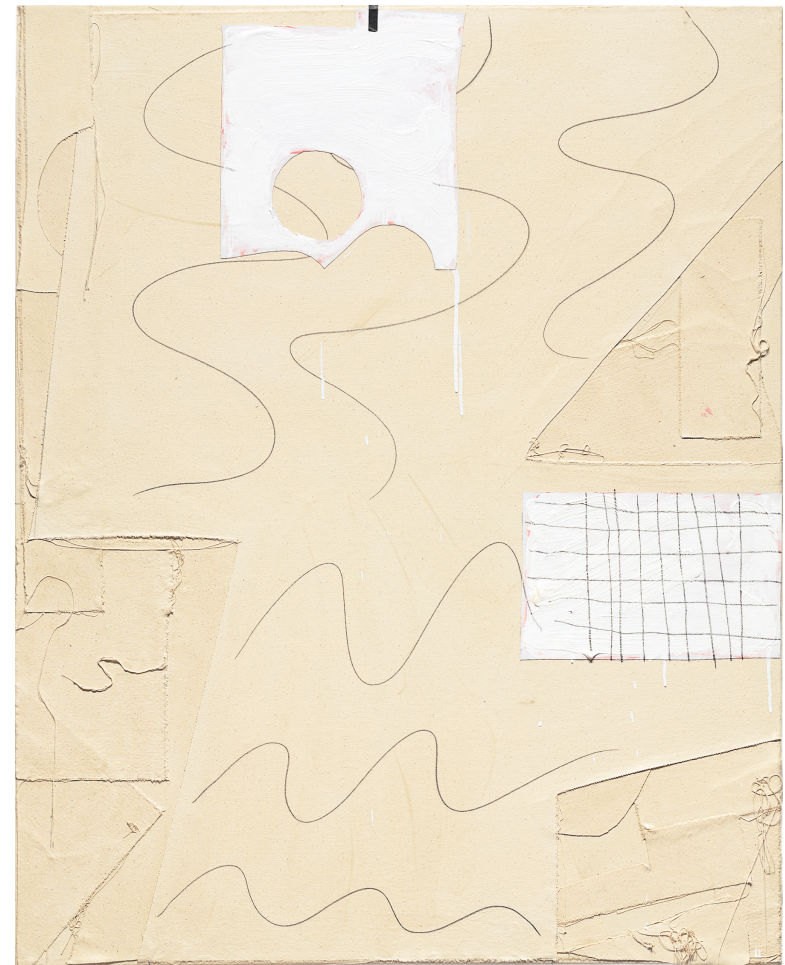
archival digital print

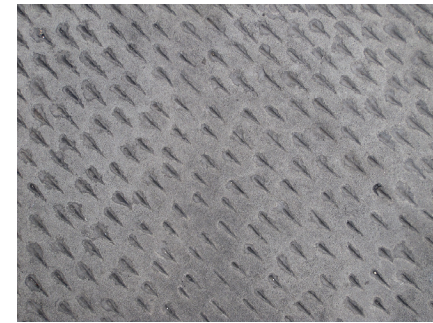
18.5 x 24 inches

2014

acrylic, pencil, artist's tape, collage on canvas

50 x 40 inches





DIPTYCH 3

Squandering Ooze to Squeezed Dough

2014

archival digital print

18.5 × 24 inches

2014

acrylic, pencil, artist's tape, found fabric, collage on canvas

50 × 40 inches



DIPTYCH 4

Puffball and Torn Tufts

2014

archival digital print

18.5 x 24 inches

2014

oil, acrylic, found fabric, pencil, collage on canvas

50 x 40 inches





DIPTYCH 5

Angel's Gaze

2014

archival digital print

18.5 x 24 inches

2014

acrylic, found fabric, pencil, collage on canvas

50 x 40 inches

TOUCHING THE VOID

If I have known the artist Jo Smail 15 years, I have known her a lifetime. The connection feels like memory, evading sequence and time, perhaps even truth. Recent studies of cognitive retention reveal that memory will restructure itself to accommodate invention over fact. In this way memory is by no means simple terrain; rather, it is a mystery. This is true of Jo Smail's enigmatic new works assembled for the exhibition Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon. Like memory, her works are fictive intersections that approach truth, and then recede.

For this exhibition, Smail constructed images by applying dissonant techniques that collapse reality and celebrate abstraction through the use – uncharacteristically, for Smail – of the camera. If we were to discuss the province of photography, the invocation of Barthes' name would be inevitable. Photography's relationship to reality does, as Barthes would submit, make us a witness. Photography stops time. However, why someone is compelled to act upon such power, and how they go about it, is a matter of debate. What the artist wants us to see, or conversely (as Susan Sontag might argue) what the artist chooses *not* to reveal, transforms the image. For Smail, this transformation involves the use of empty space, that which is often referred to as 'nothing.'

Smail's use of the camera helps achieve a kind of single lens silhouette in a way that our eye cannot. Knowing that we bring meaning to shape based on personal experience, Smail chooses to remove the cultural artifact inherent in the history of architecture, replacing it with the language of painting. In doing so, no longer is the picture *of* something. It is instead, as American artist Robert Heineken claimed, an object *about* something. The vibration between such hairs of difference – the trembling, the quiver – is the liminality that we find in the latest works by Jo Smail. The framing and manipulation are new, but informed. As much as she reinvents herself, Smail always includes a sense of her own history: an echo, a trace, and an exchange. Her practice is cumulative. A conversation runs from one body of work to the next, adapting and collecting information along the way.

Perplexing as it may seem, the interstice or absence in Smail's work is just as imperative as that which fills the space. There is a weight to emptiness, a tension that pushes and pulls simultaneously, of which Smail's paintings and works on paper

make us acutely aware. Whereas blank space proclaims meaning by that which touches its edges, pregnant space is correspondingly defined by its surrounding nothingness. Eastern religions understand this concept, believing the empty and the full are of equal position, mutually dependent and reliant on one another. “Thirty spokes unite at a hub,” writes Lao Tzu, “[but] it’s the emptiness that makes the wheel usable.”

Through the sheer act of summoning nothing, it transitions into something. Nothing is therefore something – something of great significance in fact – steeped in intellectual complexity and transcendence. This is the best way I know to introduce Jo Smail, whose work is most profound because it straddles the line between visual weight and the void, between the something and the nothing... and thus, is everything.

Everything and Nothing, Jorge Luis Borges’ celebrated collection of short stories, has been the subject of countless discussions in the studio with Jo Smail. In his writing, Borges illuminates the quandary of many creators, the desire to capture that which is impossible to capture – the essence of being. The image of Borges, a sightless man in his later years mentally reciting lectures about “modest” blindness, elicits a deliberation on the failures of language. Words fail to actually create anything tangible. Paintings at least try. Through text, we may assemble pre-existing words in ways we hope seem relevant, even new, but they are repurposed. Words are shaped or manipulated for the current objective, but not created. In contrast, paintings create shape or color or light where none existed before, but they are subject to the failures of interpretation. The risk of inadequately communing exists in both mediums. One is left to wonder if with heightened senses, a blind man (like Borges), by acquiescing to limitation, can better succeed in describing the elusive nature of things by sanctioning memory to reveal the quintessence of pigment, form, light, or

luminosity, while bowing down to the vagary of intangibility. This would assume everything that came before – every diminutive or seemingly trivial detail – accumulates and matters.

Perhaps the brilliance of Smail’s new work is in its similar wisdom. Like the potency of a sightless man explaining sight, I wonder if Jo’s understanding arrives from her own history, her own relearning of the world following myriad adversities from a studio fire to a stroke. Losing one’s ability to speak and write, as Smail did, is not so far from losing one’s sight. Each loss alters how one interprets the world. Losing one’s works and belongings in a studio fire, as Smail did, is not unlike losing one’s past. It forces one to be reincarnated, with eyes more open, understanding keener, heart more empathetic. Great loss is like touching the void, and perhaps profits a sagacity unmatched by any other experience. But these accumulated moments do not govern Smail’s work. They are the human experiences that provide the abstracting effect. Whereas looking up or down, in or out, naturally orients the viewer to the position of the camera, Smail’s work does not. Instead, it pulsates, confusing figure with ground, capsizing the void.

When I leave the studio I note the pile of torn paintings. Accumulated parts, pieces, and disembodied scraps of paint pile in a humorously funerary vignette on the ground. I think “sleep well old friends, I’ll be seeing you again, some day, some how, somewhere.” After all, they are traces of the day, evidence of our existence, touching the void. They are the language of Jo Smail.

AMY EVA RAEHSE
Exhibition Curator



JO SMAIL**BORN**

Durban, South Africa

TEACHING

1988 to present at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. Previously taught at the University of Witwatersrand, the Johannesburg College of Art, and the Johannesburg Art Foundation, Johannesburg 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 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

John's Hopkins University Collection.

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, 2003-2014

2014

Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon,
Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

2011

Degrees of Absence,
Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

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.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS, 2003-2014

2014

Transformations,
McLean Project for the Arts, VA.

Baltimore Artists + WPA + Mera Rubell = LOVE,
Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY.

Abstraction: Finding the Thread,
VisArts, Rockville, MD.

2012

Philosophy of Figure,
Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

Juried Faculty Exhibition "It",
A two-person show with Fabienne Lasserre,
Melissa Ho Juror,
Hirshhorn Museum,
Maryland Institute College of Art,
Baltimore, MD.

Trawick Prize 10th Anniversary Exhibition,
Gallery B, Bethesda MD.

2011

Becoming Something Found,
Jolie Laide Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.

Sondheim Semi-Finalists,
Maryland Institute College of Art,
Baltimore, MD.

2010

The Marks of Six Painters, Gallery 447,
Cambridge, MD.

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.

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

2005
Soft Openings,
American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center, Washington, DC.

Critics' Picks: Just Looking,
Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD.

2004
Inward Gazes,
Goucher College, Towson, MD.

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

Prize Winners,
Maryland State Arts Council, Baltimore, MD.

2003-04
Conversations,
Collaboration with William Kentridge.
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.

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.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY, 2003-2014

2014
Group Dynamics by Cara Ober,
Style Magazine, September 2014.

2012
*Jo Smail Wins the Mega-Champion "Best of
the Best" "Sapphire" Trawick Prize*,
Bmoreart, November 3, 2012 Baltimore, MD.

*The Trawick Prize Celebrates 10th Anniversary
Baltimore Artist Wins \$10,000 Prize* by Jessica
Ablamsky, Gazette, November 7, 2012.

*Baltimore, DC Artists Named Trawick Prize
10th Anniversary Winners* by Erin Donahue,
Chevy Chase Patch, November 5, 2012.

*The Trawick Prize 10th Anniversary Competition
and Exhibit* by Michael O'Sullivan, Washington
Post, November 9, 2012.

2012 *Juried Faculty Exhibition "It",
Decker & Meyerhoff and Pinkard Galleries*
MICA, Baltimore, MD.

Jo Smail at Goya Contemporary
by Jennie Hirsh, Art in America, April 2012.

Presence in Absentia by Cara Ober,
Urbanite, January 3, 2012, Baltimore, MD.

2011
Jo Smail's "Degrees of Absence" at Goya
Contemporary, by Hannah Hill, BmoreArt,
December 16, 2011, Baltimore, MD.

Catalog: *Degrees of Absence*,
Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

Catalog: *Art Collection of the United States
Consulate General*, Johannesburg, South Africa.

2010
At the Galleries by Karen Wilkin,
Hudson Review, VOL. LXII, NO. 4, Winter.

2009
*Waking Up From The Inside Out:
Jo Smail 1998-2009*, essays by
Terence Maloon and Karen Wilkin,
Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD.

*The Year in Visual Art, Top Ten. Jo Smail,
Conjurations at Goya Contemporary*,
Baltimore City Paper, December 9.

The Fugitive Mark by Bret McCabe,
Baltimore City Paper, October 14.

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 by Holland Cotter,
New York Times, February 10.

*New Beginnings: Jo Smail (including
collaborations with William Kentridge)*,
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.

Catalog: *Influence & Collaboration
in Contemporary Art*, Evergreen House,
Baltimore, MD.

AWARDS

Nominated for Anonymous Was A Woman, 2014

Best of the Best, Sapphire, Trawick Prize Winner,
selected from Trawick Prize winners of the past
10 years, 2012

Maryland State Arts Council, Individual Artist
Award (Painting), 2010, 2007, 2004, 1995, 1991

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

Strictly Painting, McLean Project for the Arts
Award, 2007

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

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