

## THE BALTIMORE SUN

# Jo Smail's photographs and paintings respond to centuries of change in Florence, Italy

By MARIE CLAIRE | JAN 06, 2015



Take note of perfect squares, grids, right triangles, and other unsuspecting geometric shapes. With a Florentine backdrop, Smail ingeniously places awry, intentionally misaligned contemporary art in the context of a Renaissance city defined by its perfect domes. (Courtesy of Goya Contemporary)

**Cities are** always rebuilding themselves. In Florence, Italy, the rebuilding is evident in its streets and buildings, and Baltimore-based artist Jo Smail hints at this cycle in her show “Leaning Over the Edge of the Moon” at Goya Contemporary. Smail’s layered paintings and photographs intuitively respond to the architecture and history of Florence, where she spent four months as a faculty member in residence as part of a MICA study abroad program. During her time in Italy, Smail took photographs, which hang above a series of five paintings and make up the majority of the show. But the photos sidestep the typical landscape or cityscape tourist snapshots, focusing instead on details of grout textures, thin wandering lines, and leak stains found on facades of Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance Florentine buildings. The paintings are a response to the photographs and seem to echo the city structures, which are erected, inevitably eroded by the weather, repainted, and left with mysterious stains and marks over the years. The relationships between Smail’s photographs and her abstract, collaged paintings are not obvious. But when two works of art are hung together, our eyes flicker from one to the other, and we meditate on how they are related.

Smail's paintings use a palette that could grab your attention on the highway in the middle of the night—bright orange, purple, and yellow shades of acrylic and oil paint punctuate large, layered sections of patched canvas. The colors feel uncanny in the context of her photographs, which employ a more muted palette.

Long strings unravel where Smail has torn and pieced fabric on the canvases by hand, and viewers might feel an OCD impulse to rip them off. The strings act like bridges through the paintings as they diagonally cross up over the plane, and loop down and to the side. In 'Squandering Ooze to Squeezed Dough,' a mess of tangled frays sits to the right of a canvas-length blue-and-white-striped phallus, or some amorphous shape that totally resembles an erection (in both senses of the word). Smail's diptychs are full of shapes that remind you of things—evoking recalled images in the way clouds or puddles do—but clearly they are only abstract shapes.

In 'Manmarks Treadmire Toil There,' the relationship between photograph and painting is the clearest. The photo captures a lone scratch on a stone wall, a simple arc shape resembling a hill or a headstone. That shape suggests accidental mark-making, and the painting essentially replicates this tombstone shape over and over in a series of pencil waves—the sort of mindless doodle found on student desks, the marks we make when we are thinking about something else. Other pairings strongly reference architecture, such as in 'Marmalade Heart,' where an angular, carrot-colored shape expands the full length of the painting, while simple pencil Xs carelessly slice through the paint. The stacked rectangles and small, upside-down dome shapes vaguely resemble a building or a blueprint. The twin photograph above it is a bumpy, cement texture with two blue spray-painted lines crossing it. The gestures and textures in the photograph relate to some of the painting's scratch marks, but then go beyond the materials. Layered fabric and paint on the painting lead you to wonder how many times those stucco walls have been repainted over the years. Loose, gestural lines in the photos and paintings make you imagine an absentminded pedestrian dragging a coin across a stone wall, leaving a mysterious squiggle. In both the photographs and the paintings, Smail iconizes peripheral details, which become important only once you have stared at them very hard for a very long time. The vaguely geometric, cream-colored fabric pieces are the foundations of the paintings, building on each other and overlapping to the effect of physical stiffness. We get a sense that something has been constructed, then patched and repaired indefinitely. The fallacious structure of Smail's patches nods to abstract expressionist painter Hans Hofmann's series of architectonic paintings. A separate room in the gallery contains dozens of photographs, which draw attention to bits and pieces of buildings from an uncanny, modernist point of view. Most of them show the Florentine sky framed by an obstruction such as a fire escape, or a street lamp. The sky shapes recall the cutouts in the paintings in the other room. These shapes are sometimes round and dome-like, while in others, the sharp angles feel like they could cut the viewer's eyes. The electrical wires, iron rods, and gutters that obstruct our view of the sky mimic the tangled canvas strings in the paintings, providing an essential structure to both the sky's and the canvas' negative space and reminding us that everything on earth is below the sky and everything we build on earth obstructs our view of it.

While Smail's often-grotesque, abstract shapes are immediately captivating, viewers will also take note of perfect squares, grids, right triangles, and other unsuspecting geometric shapes. With a Florentine backdrop, Smail ingeniously places awry, intentionally misaligned contemporary art in the context of a Renaissance city defined by its perfect domes.