MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

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THE ART WORLD

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL and most bracing show in town is of paintings, prints, drawings, and painted sculptures by Vija Celmins, at the Matthew Marks Gallery. It is also a rare event, the first solo show in nearly seven years of work by an artist, now seventy-eight, who is not only esteemed but cherished in the art world, as a paragon of aesthetic rigor, poetic sapience, and brusque, funny personal charm.

Her compact paintings, done in oils, invite sustained, closeup attention. Some, of night skies, embed white dots, for stars, in glazes of a dense black, with subliminal admixtures of, Celmins recently told me, ultramarine, raw umber, and ochre. Others are "negatives" of the sky motif, with black and yellow marks speckling off-white grounds. "My linoleum paintings," she called them, jokingly, nailing a resemblance that dissolves with more than a cursory glance. Other works bring a new painterly liberty to her signature realist imagery, commonly done in pencil or woodcut, of choppy seas in which every wavelet can seem to have sat for its portrait. The painted sculptures, of small stones and antique blackboards that bear traces of use, are exceedingly hard to distinguish from the items they mimic, and with which they are paired in the show. They evince meditative dedication.

Celmins was born in 1938 in Latvia, and endured wartime terrors and dislocations, which eventually led her to a refugee camp in Germany. In 1948, a religious charity brought her and her family to Indianapolis. Not knowing any English, she immersed herself in drawing. While attending a local art school, in 1962, she won a fellowship to a summer art program at Yale, where she met the painters Brice Marden, David Novros, and Chuck Close. In Los Angeles, where she earned an M.F.A. from U.C.L.A. in 1965, she painted objects in her studio—a space heater, a lamp, a hot plate—and developed a prescient mode of photo-realism, often using blurry black-and-whites of warplanes, recalling her harrowed childhood, and NASA moonscapes. The subtle grays of Velázquez and the rapt quietness of still-lifes by Giorgio Morandi strongly influenced her. She moved to New York in 1980 and has lived here since. Having been briefly married once, she lives alone now, but with the ready company of as many devoted friends as she makes time for. This show is her first in Chelsea. She rejected wooings from leading dealers, remaining loyal to the low-profile uptown David McKee Gallery, until it closed, in 2015.

"The making is the meaning—to look and record as thoroughly as possible," Celmins said, about her labor-intensive stones and blackboards. Those works stand at the extreme of a consecrated self-abnegation that governs all her art. The spell of making persists in her images of skies and seas, unbounded subjects that she samples from photographs. "You live the details," she told me. When looking at a Celmins picture, I can never decide whether to take it in as a supremely elegant object or to gaze into it with free-falling imagination. I am off balance while transfixed. That effect constitutes the basis—the bedrock—of her gift. ♦

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