

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

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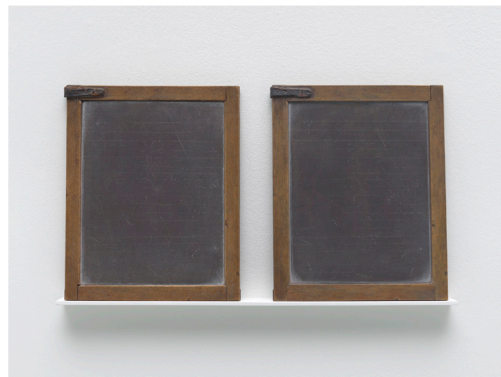
Vija Celmins

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY | 522 WEST 22ND STREET
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February 10–April 15

Vija Celmins is a ruthless poet. The artist's images in this exhibition—rippling waters, blank slates, stones, stars—are as obdurate as they are yielding, as everything as they are nothing. Experiencing a fastidiously constructed painting, sculpture, drawing, or print by the artist, often made over many years and with an endless supply of patience, is not unlike looking into a mirror. You see yourself in the picture or object you're gazing at—or falling into—wondering how it came to be, and how you got there, too.

Celmins frequently works small—it is when she is at her most astonishing. Here, *Night Sky #26*, 2016–17, a painting nearly five feet tall depicting exactly what it's titled, doesn't carry the same concentrated, jewel-like charge of her more modestly scaled oil-on-canvas works, such as *Reverse Night Sky #1*, 2014, a sort of negative image of the cosmos; *Untitled (Falling Star)*, 2016; or *Untitled (Ochre)*, 2016, perhaps a yellowing section of our ancient Milky Way, or bubbling hot metal, freshly poured out of its crucible. *Reverse Night Sky #3*, 2016, a charcoal drawing, looks like a dirty paper towel and a glimpse into forever.

Celmins was born in 1938 in Latvia. She and her family fled the country prior to the Russians seizing it from the Nazis in 1944. They lived in a refugee camp in Germany, overseen by the United Nations, before relocating to Indiana in 1948. The artist's slate works—exact reproductions of children's blackboards, paired with their originals—feel stolen out of time, wrenched from World War II. They are lonely-looking, penitential things. Unsentimental. Mean, even. While Celmins's starscapes ask us to countenance the impossibility of the universe, her slates, portals of dusty, grim beauty, force us to consider the ground we stand on, six feet below.



Vija Celmins, *Blackboard Tableau #12*, 2007–15, 1 found tablet, and 1 made tablet: wood, leather, acrylic, alkyd oil, pastel, 11 x 8 1/2".

— Alex Jovanovich