

ARTFORUM

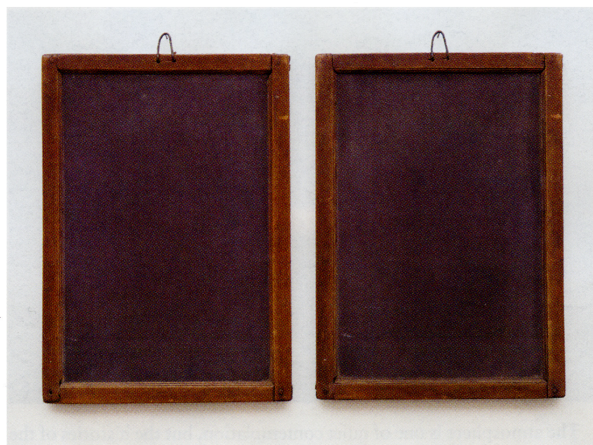
Vija Celmins

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Vija Celmins's show at Matthew Marks Gallery was her first exhibition of new work in Los Angeles in more than forty years. It represented a kind of homecoming for an artist once closely identified with the University of California, Los Angeles, and the beaches of Venice, which she perennially alludes to in her transcriptions of water into the surface tension of untitled, placeless waves. All eighteen of the paintings, sculptures, and works on paper in the show were made in the past decade, and seven of them were also shown at the New York gallery last spring for her first presentation of new work in nearly seven years. The Los Angeles installation was tight and, as Celmins claimed, "severe," though not in the sense of being cruel or unadorned; rather, it was acute and uncompromising. People tend to pin the time of Celmins's toil to something like pictorial meaning. And indeed, the lengthy process by which an image of the heavens becomes *Night Sky #24*, 2016, a velvety oil on canvas, is revealed in each fleck of light puncturing its opacity—physical cavities, obdurate (because minutely realized) wormholes into the duration of its creation. Yet what this grouping fiercely insisted upon was the solicitation of someone to apprehend it, and thus a privileging of the temporality of looking.

In the other large night skies on view—oils but also exquisite mezzotints—Celmins tended to the respective surfaces, the oils flat but also deep (their physical space being another registration of time) and the prints hovering coincident with the picture plane. Some were so light as to threaten disappearance; others doubled down on the darkness of the cosmos as some impossible limit, formalized perhaps as saturation. Celmins's gesture toward the unfathomable is not only a formal technique: Appropriated from *Sky & Telescope* magazine and NASA, these images were procured from sources able to penetrate realms inaccessible to humans. Since 2002, Celmins has also been manipulating such images to create works such as the horizontal *Reverse Night Sky #4*, 2015–17, another oil on canvas. By inverting the blacks and whites in the picture, Celmins turns the space between celestial bodies into a milky gray, which stands in contrast to the stellar blacks that would otherwise serve as points of illumination. (Beyond this more obvious play with swatches, the monochromatic palette contains multiple layers of vibrant colors that assert their presence from underneath the topcoats upon close inspection.) This reversal achieves a unified field of speckled coordinates, evoking the same confounded sense of orientation that informs her horizonless skylscapes and ocean fields.

The reversed night skies pressured the viewer to look harder still, not only as a pragmatic way of adapting to the demands of the image,



Vija Celmins,
Blackboard Tableau #9,
2007–15, wire,
alkyd oil, acrylic, and
pastel, wood,
found blackboard,
each 15 x 10".

but also to thematize conditions of visibility. The adjacent works, too, required close scrutiny. A diminutive, not-yet-titled painting from 2017–18 bore the fissures of a finely crackled surface, transferred from the veining of a glazed ceramic plate, that evoked the parched vistas of the Mojave Desert or the surface of the moon—two sites that Celmins has similarly depicted. Other works on view were likewise referential, pointing to and in some ways continuing the work Celmins did in the 1970s. *Two Stones*, 1977/2014–16, for example, draws on *To Fix the Image in Memory*, 1977–82, for which Celmins collected rocks (made by the cosmos) in New Mexico and fabricated their doubles by hand. The duplicates' bronze surfaces were painted to register every superficial pockmark and discoloration until the two stones were nearly impossible to tell apart. This process also relates to the newer blackboards—*Blackboard Tableau* #9, 2007–15, and *Blackboard Tableau* #14, 2011–15—for which Celmins procured antique writing slates and made pendants that mirror their originals so perfectly that only an errant mark might admit difference, if not priority. Beyond us, and despite the desire for connection that they manifest, each serves as a witness for the other.

—Suzanne Hudson