

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Conjuring Sea and Sky With Her Brush

By RANDY KENNEDY

There's something fitting about interviewing the painter and sculptor Vija Celmins after sundown. And not only because she's a night owl, known to labor over canvases long into the evening in her studio on Crosby Street in SoHo, with a cat named Raymond Carver twining around her ankles.

It is also because some of Ms. Celmins's best-known works — examples of which are held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tate Modern, the Pompidou and other important museums — are painstakingly wrought images of night skies, so realistic that they can be mistaken for photographs, but so dark and strange that you sometimes see viewers bringing their noses right up to the surface, as if they were trying to focus on the stars through the lens of a telescope.

Ms. Celmins, 78, keeps a clipping of the ascetic abstractionist Ad Reinhardt's 12 rules for painting, one of which is to avoid form at all costs. "No figure or fore- or background," he wrote. "No volume or mass, no cylinder, sphere or cone, or cube or boogie-woogie." And she has been drawn obsessively for more than four decades to her most beloved subjects — the dark sky, the surfaces of the ocean and the moon and the desert, without horizon or perspective — because such seemingly formless vistas allow her to imagine, as she once said, "that I wrestle a giant image into a very tiny area and make it stay there so that it seems inevitable that it is there."

If you're a fan, waiting out that wrestling match can be excruciating. She works with all the haste of a medieval illuminator. But after a hiatus of almost seven years since her last exhibition, she is returning with a new body of work, at Matthew Marks (522 West 22nd Street in Chelsea), her first show there, opening on Friday. In a sense, it serves as a warm-up for a far bigger one, the first full retrospective of her work in more than 20 years, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will open at the end of 2018 before traveling to the Met Breuer, the show's co-organizer, in 2019.

One recent afternoon, Ms. Celmins appeared near her elevator door, wearing an



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Above, the painter and sculptor Vija Celmins, who is returning with a new body of work, at Matthew Marks. Left, one of the works in Ms. Celmins's "A Painting in Six Parts, 1986-87/2012-16."

apron smeared with paint. "Let me take this thing off so I don't look like a dirty worker," she said, winking. "Except that I am a dirty worker." Behind her, in her studio, which shares space with the small apartment where she has lived for 28 years, two assistants were applying touches to paintings bound for the gallery's show, an unusual situation for Ms. Celmins, who has worked

resolutely alone since her student days at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"But I think now that I'm getting older, I'm having this feeling that I want to go out of this world working," she said. "And if I'm going to do that, I'm going to need some help from time to time. So maybe I have to change my ways a little. I may have to start tolerating people."

Long identified as a Los Angeles artist, tangentially connected to the West Coast branch of Pop-inflected photorealism represented by painters like Ed Ruscha and Robert Bechtle, Ms. Celmins began by restlessly rejecting abstraction and making deadpan, slightly eerie paintings of the things right in front of her in her studio: space heater, lamp, hot plate, television.

Next, she turned to images she clipped from magazines, showing totems of war: fighter jets, atomic explosions, a view of Hiroshima after the bomb. It was the late '60s, but these weren't chosen just for political effect: They were reminders of a tumultuous World War II childhood in Latvia, which her family fled as the Soviet Army advanced, ending up in Germany before immigrating to the United States as refugees. ("Where would we be now?" she said, mentioning President Trump's temporary refugee ban.)

She grew up in Indianapolis, not particularly happily. "I had many of the things that immigrants have — the fear, the feeling of always being an outsider," she said, adding dryly, "And Indiana, if I may say so, is one of the worst states."

A scholarship took her west for graduate school, but she had had reservations about the East Coast, anyway. "Who knows what kind of artist I might have been if I had started out in New York?" she said. "I might have drunk myself to death at the Cedar Bar." Though the heart of her work — graphite and charcoal drawings, mezzotint and woodcut prints, paintings — is often described as dark, it has always been backlit, in a sense, by California sun. (Her ocean works are based on a handful of photographs, now yellowed, taken off a Venice pier in Los Angeles in the 1960s.)

In person, Ms. Celmins (her full name is pronounced VEE-ya SELL-mins) is incredibly funny in an unexpected, borscht belt way, and friends say she is looser and less shy than she once was. But she has lost little of the monk-like, eyesight-punishing devotion to a certain kind of perfection, a devotion that drives expectant collectors crazy and has left room for little else in her life. She was married for a few years, to a writer, but has long lived alone, surrounded by a close circle of artist pals.

"I never wanted to be the girlfriend or

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wife of another artist," she told me. "How would that work? I'm so competitive."

Gary Garrels, the senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, said that during his more than 30 years as a curator, at several museums, he has tried at every opportunity to increase public holdings of Ms. Celmins's work. "It was tough, because dealers would tell you, 'There's just nothing available!' And that was before her prices increased. Now you really have to get yourself into a position to acquire if the opportunity comes." (Last year a Celmins ocean drawing, from 1969, sold for \$2.9 million at auction, believed to be a record for a drawing by a woman.)

Mr. Garrels, who describes Ms. Celmins's work as "distilled intensity," added that her importance had always been confirmed in his mind by the zealous love of other artists for what she did. "I've worked with Richard Serra, and he doesn't have much art in his loft, but there is a Vija Celmins," he said. Robert Gober, another longtime admirer, told me: "The quiet dignity of her work is important, especially these days, and it's also commensurate with my inability to explain its effect."

Ms. Celmins has never been much good at explaining the effect, either, which is one reason she rarely agrees to interviews. "I guess my work sometimes confuses people, because I really have nothing to say about the ocean, or the sky, or the moon. It's more about the feeling of the magic of making things I could never have mine: *my* airplane, *my* ocean, *my* sky."

But she added ("because it's not my nature to end things on a positive note"): "It boggles my mind, in the age of the web and everything so fast and fleeting, that someone wants to buy my work and show it, and people still want to look at it. In fact, people even seem to really *like* it now. Which, of course, makes me suspicious."