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Vija Celmins

Press Packet

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The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins

A ravishing retrospective of art, both intimate and cosmic, is at the Met Breuer. Bring your nose close. Let it slow you down.

A recent painting by Vija Celmins, "Vase," offers a close-up of the side of a Chinese porcelain vase, with its finely rendered craquelure glaze. Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

Smith, Roberta. "Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins." *The New York Times,* September 26, 2019.

By Roberta Smith

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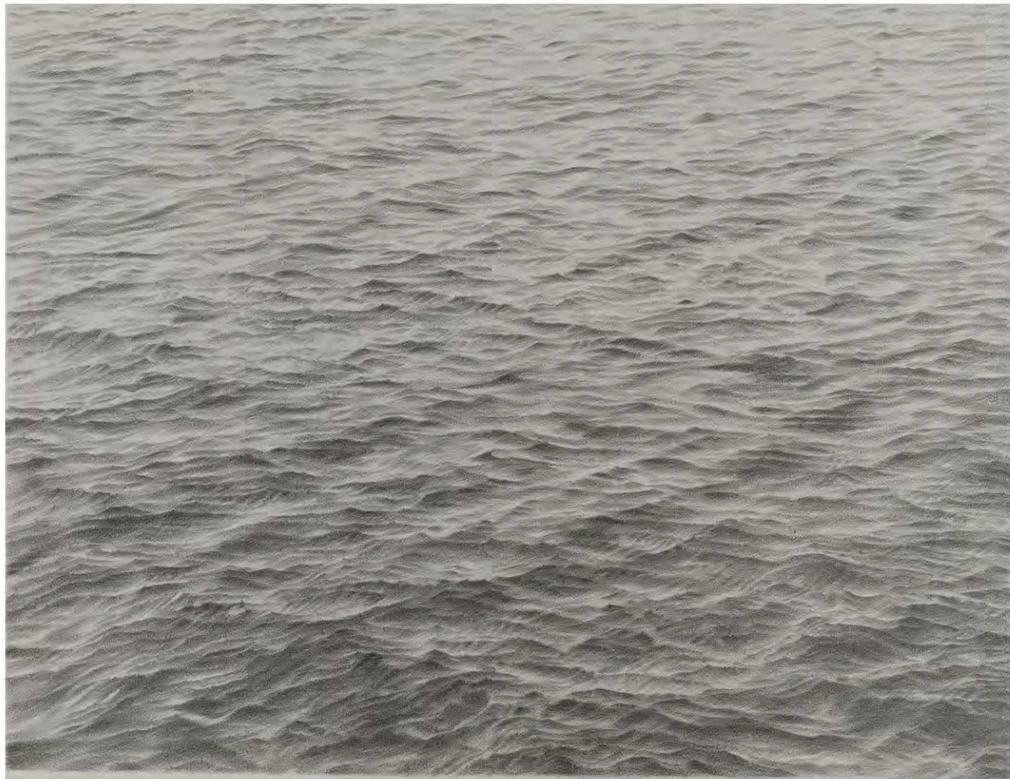
In the 1960s art world, illusion was a dirty word. The old tradition of a painting as a window onto imaginary realities seemed beyond exhausted — just more proof of painting's death. Abstract painting was tolerated, especially if big and flatly painted so that it was undeniably an object. Magic and poetry were banished. "What you see is what you see," said the young Frank Stella, the moment's dominant painter.

Even before pocketing her M.F.A. in 1965, Vija Celmins refused to accept such formalist tyranny. Painting wasn't dead to her and bigness and abstractness were not de rigueur. Ms. Celmins (pronounced VEE-ya SELL-mins) emerged from the University of California in Los Angeles art program determined to be in step with her time yet go her own way.

Now in its sixth decade, the artist's way has been lavishly retraced in "Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory," a quietly ravishing, brilliantly installed (if slightly too big) exhibition of 114 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures at the Met Breuer. Let the magic begin.



Vija Celmins's "Untitled (Ocean)," 1973. Her work, now on view at the Met Breuer, rewards patience and concentration, our critic says.
Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

“I thought I would sit down without all my theories and aesthetics,” the 80-year-old artist has recalled, quoted in a text in the show’s first gallery. “I was going to start in a more humble place with just my eyes and my hand.”

Within a decade, she was becoming known for precise, painstakingly wrought illusions of reality: expanses of ocean waves, star-studded night skies, clouds or the moon’s surface, rendered in graphite, charcoal or muted tones of oil paint. They can take years to make despite their often small size and seem so realistic as to be mistaken for photographs but they feel equally cosmic when they zero in on a bit of pebble-strewn desert, a spider’s web, a fragment of glazed porcelain or the inside of a shell, pocked with tiny craters.

And a different buzz descends when you take a closer look — which the smallness invites. Depicted reality dissolves. Prolonged scrutiny brings awareness of the artist’s hand, the careful textures of her marks, and above all the discipline and concentration that produced them. They invite and reward reciprocal patience and concentration, slowing down perception so thoroughly that the show almost exists in its own time zone.

Ms. Celmins’s “Night Sky (Ochre),” 2016.
Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

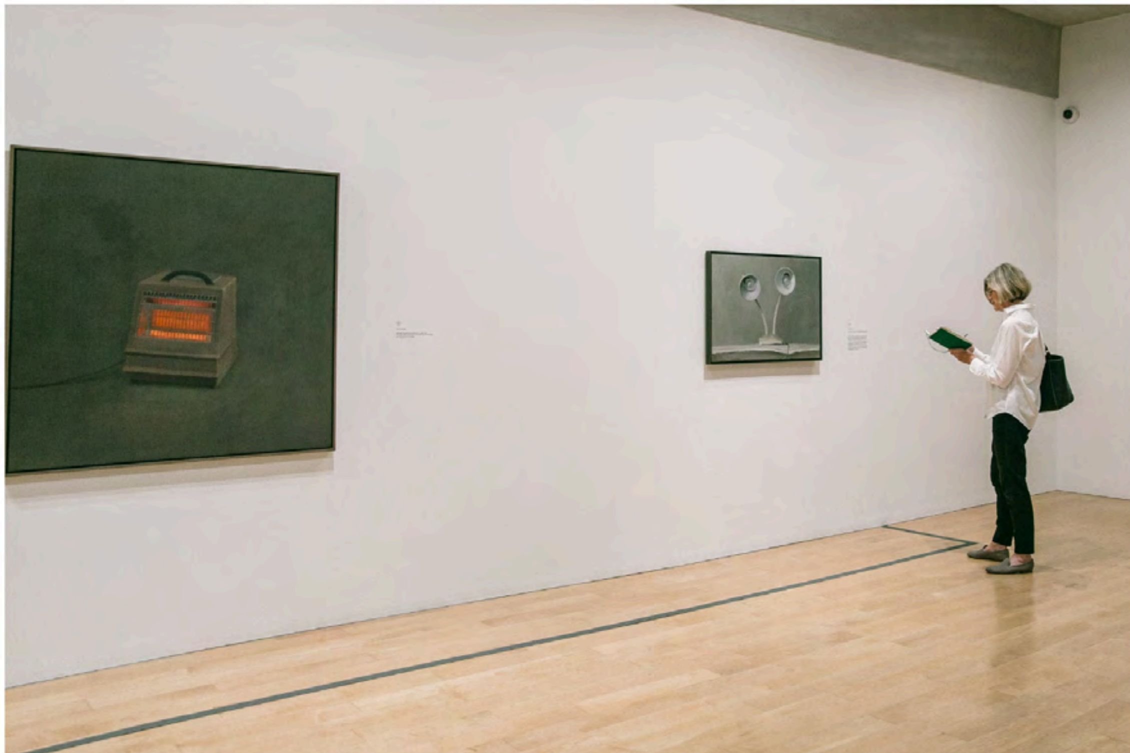
“Shell,” 2009-10, depicts the tiny craters inside a shell.
Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

Smith, Roberta. “Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins.” *The New York Times,* September 26, 2019.

Ms. Celmins calls her efforts "redescriptions," which fits their documentary but luminous plainness and unshowy technique. While her work is aligned with Pop, Minimal and Conceptual Art — and even Photo Realism — and has perceptible debts to Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Giorgio Morandi, it has always stood alone, outside stylistic factions, and stubbornly at odds with her influences.

Her singularity extends beyond her art. Ms. Celmins was born in 1938 in Riga, Latvia's capital, which her family fled during the fall of 1944, when the Soviets reinvaded. They made their way across Germany surviving seven months of bombing, and after the war spent two years with a Latvian refugee camp in Esslingen, near Stuttgart, before immigrating to the United States in 1948. They ended up in Indiana, where the artist earned an undergraduate art degree. Perhaps her wartime and immigrant experiences gave her a depth that many of her American contemporaries lacked — a skepticism and impatience, and a bluntness.

In a recent profile of the artist by Calvin Tomkins in The New Yorker, for example, Ms. Celmins starkly observes that this show was "too large" in its West Coast debut at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (I saw it. She wasn't wrong.) The New York version is somewhat smaller. But here, organized by Gary Garrels of SFMoMA and Ian Alteveer of the Met, it takes full advantage of the diverse gallery spaces of Marcel Breuer's exceptional architecture. It is the tribute that Ms. Celmins's greatness deserves.



From a time when she was "looking at simple objects and painting them straight": From left, "Heater," 1964, and "Lamp #1," 1964. Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

Smith, Roberta. "Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins." *The New York Times,* September 26, 2019.

The retrospective, over two floors, charts the artist's path as a big, generous arc, moving from images of the objects and ephemera in her studio, to the freeways of Los Angeles, and beyond, to the larger world — history, nature and outer space.

It opens on the museum's fifth floor, devoted to works from a mere five years (1963-1968), when Ms. Celmins first committed to "looking at simple objects and painting them straight." She depicts her studio companions — an electric heater, its red-hot coil at full blast; a two-headed lamp; and an electric fan — in varieties of gray. "I'm from a gray land, Latvia," she has said. They also testify to her attraction to the lush backgrounds of Velázquez.

You'll find here the first of the artist's occasional sculptures, which she considers three-dimensional paintings. In the earliest, she acknowledges her debt to Surrealism, including a small fur-lined house and some everyday objects rendered large, like Magritte: a lead pencil over five feet long and three Pink Pearl Erasers of nearly two feet.

Ms. Celmins painted images of war clipped from magazines in fogged-in grisaille, as if suffused with tragedy. Here, "Burning Plane," from 1965. Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

From 1968, "Letter," collage and graphite on paper. Ms. Celmins made the envelope's five stamps separately; three tiny drawings offer aerial views of the Pearl Harbor attack.
Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

Ms. Celmins has claimed that she is not a "confessional" artist. But the looming Vietnam War inspired her to revisit her memories of World War II with subtly harrowing results. She painted images clipped from magazines in slightly fogged-in grisaille, as if suffused with tragedy. Sometimes it hits forcefully, like the anguished B-17 leviathan of "Burning Plane," breaking up as it crashes to the ground. It takes a second look to see the slumped figure in the driver's seat of "Tulip Car #1," which indicates that what initially resembles a junkyard wreck is possibly from Pearl Harbor. In a smaller gallery of tiny graphite drawings there is a depiction of a letter addressed to the artist in her mother's cursive handwriting. Ms. Celmins made the envelope's five stamps separately; each is a tiny drawing with crenelated edges, three offer aerial views of the Pearl Harbor attack.

The second part of the show, on the fourth floor, is devoted to images of the natural world — especially her paintings and drawings of waves, night skies, galaxies and constellations and the sparkling spider webs, those little universes of their own. You may find yourself jumping back and forth among works, parsing similarities but mostly fine differences of scale, material and technique.

Then the show rounds back in to portrayals of objects the artist lives with, usually rendered from photographs in magnified, field-like close-ups. "Japanese Book" portrays a 19th-century book whose creased and worn indigo blue cover seems like a coda to Ms. Celmins's images of night skies, waves and clouds. An especially magnificent recent painting offers a close-up of the porcelain fragment. Its finely rendered craquelure glaze is mind-boggling. The surface darkens on one side, almost like a cropped view of the moon, or a patch of slightly reptilian skin.

The sculptures on this floor intensify the involvement with painting and also ascend to what might be called the trompe l'oeil sublime. In 1982, after five years' work, Ms. Celmins completed the piece from which the show takes its title: "To Fix the Image in Memory" presents 11 pairs of small stones — one real and one meticulously made of painted bronze — forming its own small desert landscape.

"Japanese Book," 2007–10, oil on canvas. Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

Smith, Roberta. "Deep Looking, With Vija Celmins." *The New York Times,* September 26, 2019.

A sculpture of small stones and their painted bronze copies, “To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI” from 1977-1982. Behind it, from left, two drawings, “Untitled (Medium Desert),” from 1974-1975; and “Untitled (Galaxy-Desert),” from 1974. Haruka Sakaguchi for The New York Times

This exceptional work pales next to the artist’s latest forays into three dimensions, which combine small, antique school blackboards of slate with Ms. Celmins’s identical copies in painted wood; they recreate nearly every nick, scratch, and grain, right down to the flecks of chalk dust and sometimes evoke seascapes.

At once voluble and mute, these relics of the human quest for knowledge require almost granular scrutiny before their secrets start to emerge, but you cannot be absolutely sure which the artist made. They are perhaps the most devotional of Ms. Celmins’s efforts. She all but disappears into them, leaving behind only praise for the world.

Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory

Through Jan. 12 at the Met Breuer, 945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan; 212-731-1675

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THE NEW YORKER

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

SURFACE MATTERS

The timeless work of Vija Celmins.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

A few days before the opening of Vija Celmins's retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, last December, the artist, an auburn-haired woman in dark slacks and a slate-blue overshirt, stood in the first gallery and said, to nobody in particular, "This show is too large." Curators are used to comments like this from Celmins, who is prone to self-deprecation. She once told a collector that the painting of hers he had recently bought was "the worst thing I've ever done." The current exhibition, her largest to date, was scheduled to move on, after San Francisco, to the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto, and on September 24th it will open at the Met Breuer, in New York, where Celmins has lived since the early nineteen-eighties. Gary Garrels, SFMOMA's senior curator of painting and sculpture, needed about ten years to put it together, in part because Celmins, who turns eighty-one in October, is so quixotic about how, and when, her work is seen. Both Garrels and his co-curator, the Metropolitan Museum's Ian Alteveer, believe that the effort was long overdue. "Vija is treasured and admired by other artists, and by curators, scholars, and art historians," Garrels told me, "but beyond the art world she is almost unknown."

This has never been a problem for Celmins. Her art has awed critics and found buyers since she began showing it, in the early nineteen-sixties, and her paintings now bring between three and five million on the primary market. Still, she produces relatively little work and vigorously resists all forms of self-promotion. From the late sixties until quite recently, her subject matter has been limited to a few recurrent motifs—oceans, deserts, night skies, spiderwebs, antique writing slates—which she explores, patiently and obsessively, in drawings, oil paintings, prints, and sculptural objects that are unlike those of any other artist. She has erased the line between

Celmins explores recurrent motifs patiently and obsessively, testing the margins between art and reality.

 PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEC SOTH

Tomkins, Calvin. "Suface Matters: The timeless work of Vija Celmins." *The New Yorker,* September 2, 2019, pp. 18–24.

figuration and abstraction. Composition, bright color, narrative, and the human figure have no place in her work, which, at its best, conveys a timeless, impersonal, and rather cold beauty that can be inexplicably moving. When I walked through the exhibition with her in December, she was not happy about the lighting in the first two galleries, where her early paintings were hung. (A technician went off to adjust it.) I gathered that she had been driving the museum's installation staff slightly mad with requests for minute changes in lighting, picture height, wall labels, and other details, and at the same time delighting them with her mordant humor and her lack of self-importance.

One gallery was dedicated to the paintings that she considers her first mature works, all done in 1964—deadpan, single-image still-lifes of functional objects in the studio she had at the time in Los Angeles. There was a goosenecked desk lamp with two bulbs, an electric fan, an electric heater, a hot plate, an old-fashioned revolver that someone had given her to discourage burglars (she's never fired it), and other items, shown in isolation against blank, painted backgrounds. Some of these, the heater especially, with its glowing red coil, had a somewhat ominous look. The most winning image was an opened airmail envelope, with red and blue markings, on a brown background. "I was painting so fast then, a painting every two or three days, trying to find a sensibility and a touch that was anonymous," she told me.

Like most artists of her generation, she was also struggling to break away from Abstract Expressionism, which was still the primary influence in many art schools. As she said to me, "De Kooning and Pollock grabbed the whole canvas and activated all of it . . . that was something I had to do." It's hard to think of an artist whose work is less like Pollock's or de Kooning's. At U.C.L.A., where Celmins got her master's degree in art, in 1965, she started off painting large, gestural abstractions in the Ab Ex manner, but soon ditched all that, along with most received ideas about art. "I was a talented kid, but the work wasn't going in the direction I wanted," she said. "I thought it was too decorative." Painting the dumb objects in her studio, trying to make them be alive on the wall, was a first step. It was followed, a year later, by a series of predominantly gray paintings based on news photographs of Second World War airplanes, in flight or exploding or crashing into the sea. The Vietnam War dominated the news, and Celmins and other artists marched in antiwar protests, but her airplanes came from childhood memories of the earlier war.

Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1938, Celmins was almost two years old when the Soviet Army invaded her country. For the next four years, Latvia was a battleground for Soviet and German forces. The Nazis were driven back in 1944, and in the chaos of the German retreat the Celmins family (father, mother, older sister, and Vija) fled from the Russians in a German ship. The war was ending, but for several months, as they moved from one displaced-persons camp to another in Leipzig, Mannheim, and Esslingen, they were often in danger from American and British air strikes. Celmins was terrified of the airplanes and fascinated by them at the same time. She has few other recollections of those years in refugee camps, which ended when the Church World Service arranged the family's passage to the United States, in 1948. "My biggest nightmare was losing hold of my mother's hand, and never seeing her again," she told me. "It wasn't until I was ten years old and living in Indiana that I realized being in fear wasn't normal."

Growing up in Indianapolis, Celmins soon learned to fend for herself. "My mother and father paid no attention to me whatsoever," she said. "They were too busy with their own lives. This is maybe what's strong in me, that my parents were like peasants—they had their own way of dealing with things." Her father, Arturs, worked long hours as a carpenter—in Latvia, he had been a bricklayer and then a small-scale builder. Milda, her mother, took care of other people's children and was a laundress in a hospital. When Celmins was eleven, her sister, Inta, eight years older and just entering college, contracted tuberculosis and spent the next three years in hospitals. Their shared bedroom was now Vija's alone, and she spent a lot of time in it, with the door closed. Drawing and reading were her refuge and her solace during her first year in America, when she was struggling to learn English. She could read in Latvian, and by the end of the year she was reading fluently in English. (She is still an avid consumer of both novels and nonfiction, as well as books on art.) Eventually, she emerged from her shell, made friends at school, became a track star in running and the high jump and as the class artist did the illustrations for the yearbook. "I never even thought about Latvia," she said.

The Venice section of Los Angeles was scruffy and run-down in 1963 when Celmins, in her first year at U.C.L.A., moved into an empty storefront a few blocks from the beach. There was no real bathroom and no kitchen, and for the next thirteen years Celmins took showers at a friend's apartment and cooked on an electric hot plate—the one in her painting. Artists were just starting to discover Venice. Celmins met Ed Moses, Ken Price, and Tony Berlant, who lived in nearby Ocean Park and was a year ahead of her at U.C.L.A. Berlant was drawn to her "seductive personality," as he described it, and to her being "totally self-critical and on another level totally confident." The L.A. art scene was a men's club—women artists were scarce, and not especially welcome—but "Vija was highly respected from Day One, by everybody," Berlant said. "It's not that she thought she was as good as the men. She thought she was better than anybody." Celmins had close friendships with male and female artists, but she was unconcerned about trends and expectations and fitting in. Both Celmins and Berlant remember having long philosophical discussions with the artist Robert Irwin, who taught at U.C.L.A. "Vija has perfect taste," Irwin once told Berlant. "She doesn't like anything."

Celmins had a rule against sleeping with artists. "I was very haughty," she told me. "Sleeping was always going on, but I thought that would take away my power. I slept with my guys, who were not artists." The anti-artist rule didn't apply to her first love, a boy named Terry, whom she met in her senior year of high school. Both of them wanted to be artists, and after graduation they spent five years at the John Herron Art Institute, in Indianapolis, a first-rate art school that gave them a solid grounding in traditional methods and materials. In the summer of 1962, they travelled to

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Europe on Herron grants, going to the major museums in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Florence, and Madrid. Afterward, they attended different graduate schools; Vija had won a scholarship at U.C.L.A., and Terry went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. They visited each other and wrote letters, but eventually they drifted apart. She sometimes feels that Terry was the love of her life. It was very saddening for her to learn, about fifteen years ago, that he had died.

During the next few years, Celmins had a number of long-term relationships with men who were not artists, but her closest (platonic) friend was Douglas Wheeler, one of the first California artists to work with light and space. They met walking their dogs on Venice beach—Wheeler had a German shepherd, and Celmins had an Alaskan malamute, named Lācīte. (The name, pronounced *la-seet*, means "little bear" in Latvian.) "Vija was different," Wheeler told me. "She looked at things in the deepest way. You could feel her eyes going over everything, like hands. Sometimes we'd find ourselves transfixed by a particular light effect in the sky—not saying anything, but reacting in the same way. I just had a love for her. Seeing her work made me feel O.K. about my life."

Celmins got married in 1968 to Peter Givler, a writer she had lived with for two or three years. Givler was studying at Occidental College for a graduate degree in comparative literature. For a while, they lived in a rented house in Topanga Canyon, and Celmins drove to her studio in Venice. Givler had brought the Alaskan malamute home one day, as a present for Celmins, and the dog lasted longer than their marriage. "When I was a child in Latvia, I never saw a dog," Celmins told me. "They probably ate them. I wanted a dog so much. Lācīte shed every day, so I have dog hairs in my early work—a lot of trouble, but I loved that dog."

Tony Berlant introduced her to David Stuart, a Los Angeles dealer whose gallery showed Berlant's mixed-media sculptural collages. Stuart put several of Celmins's student works in a group show in 1964, and in 1966 he gave her a solo show, with the Second World War airplanes and other photo-based images, and two small sculptures of collaged and painted houses, one of them on fire and the other lined with whitish-brown fur. To her surprise, there were several sales. Noma Copley, the wife of the artist and collector William Copley, bought one of the houses (for three hundred dollars), and Betty Asher, a leading Los Angeles collector of new work, bought the other. The Copley Foundation also gave Celmins its award for an outstanding artist—"It was for two thousand dollars, which kept me going for months." Celmins supported herself by teaching, first at California State College and later at the U.C. campus in Irvine. She liked teaching, and continued to do it occasionally, but since the late sixties she has been able to live on her work as an artist. Looking at her furry house in the SFMOMA show, I asked Celmins if she had been thinking about the Swiss Surrealist Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, done in 1936. She said she hadn't, but Surrealism had clearly breathed on the house, and also on a group of oversized sculptural objects that were in the same gallery—giant replicas, in balsa wood, of three Pink Pearl erasers, a pencil, and a six-foot tortoiseshell pocket comb that was an intentional dead ringer for the one in René Magritte's 1952 painting "Personal Values." SFMOMA acquired this Surrealist talisman in 1998; it was prominently displayed on a lower floor during her show. "I had never seen a real Magritte when I did that comb, but of course I'd seen many reproductions of the painting," Celmins recalled. "I loved it. Magritte was not a very good painter, but he's a visual poet."

By the time she did "Comb," Celmins knew beyond any doubt that she was not going to be a Surrealist or a conceptual artist or a finish fetishist or a California light-and-space artist or any of the other varieties sprouting in Los Angeles. She was going to be a painter, in her own, unpredictable way, and what this meant was that for the next ten years she would give up painting and work almost exclusively with pencils on paper. One of her last paintings, "Burning Man," showed a wrecked automobile and a man running from it, both on fire. "I was thinking maybe I should try some color," she explained. It's a violent, Warholian image, and she never did anything like it again.

On her evening walks with Lācīte, Celmins had started taking photographs of the ocean—the surface of the ocean, as seen from Venice Pier. "I was going to make a film about it, but I didn't do that," she explained. "I'd made a few films, and they weren't very good. What I wanted was to pick an image that just described a surface, and to document that image—place it out there, without any feeling. Of course, that's impossible, unless you're Duchamp. I wanted to remove myself and leave something, a sensibility." At this point, graphite seemed to offer greater precision and anonymity than oil paint. She started small, on fourteen-by-eighteen-inch sheets of paper that she had primed with an acrylic ground. Working from one of her photographs, she built the image slowly, beginning at the bottom right corner and moving up and across. Celmins used a different black pencil for each drawing, from very hard to very soft, achieving a wide and subtle range of grays. She exerted different degrees of pressure for the darker wavelets and the lighter areas between them. "Some people think that I just sit down and copy the photograph," Celmins once told an interviewer. "It is precisely that I *reinvent* it in other terms."

She also made pencil drawings of clouds, and of the surface of the moon, based on NASA photographs she had clipped from magazines, but, from 1968 to 1977, her primary subject was the ocean. A single ocean drawing could take her three weeks. (Celmins didn't think of them as drawings; in her mind she was "re-describing the photograph.") She never used an eraser—if she made a mistake, she'd throw the sheet away and start over. The finished image filled the paper from edge to edge, with no horizon line and no center—a small patch of ocean water that was in motion yet somehow very still. "I let the graphite be part of the work," she told me. "I'm just the holder of the pencil... with my hand moving across and getting the pencil to give more than it was willing to give."

A very large gallery at SFMOMA was devoted exclusively to the ocean pictures, in different sizes and tonal gradations. ("It's too many," she kept saying. "Why do there have to be so many?") What struck me, seeing them together, was

Tomkins, Calvin. "Suface Matters: The timeless work of Vija Celmins." *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2019, pp. 18–24.

their variety. Although in a sense they were all the same—gray images of water, never a real disturbance or a wave—each had its own character, and held its own in galleries with eighteen-foot-high ceilings. I could sort of see what Celmins had meant about the pencil giving more than it was willing to give, but it wasn't just the pencil. What makes her images so alive is the consummate craftsmanship that goes into them—the hand, which knows things that the mind does not. There are no symbolic or poetic references to the eternal sea. Every mark fits with every other mark in a seamless image that refers only to itself. "I never said I loved the ocean," Celmins told me. But, in the battered ledger-diary that she has kept throughout her career, she wrote, in 2013, that "the first look at a wave should (maybe) (if only for a moment) be reminiscent of being in love—a feeling of Oh—of surprise, of senses waking up."

Celmins showed her first graphite oceans in 1969, at the Riko Mizuno Gallery, on La Cienega Boulevard. She didn't tell David Stuart that she was leaving his gallery, and she felt bad about that. The artist James Turrell had introduced her to Mizuno, who was beautiful and charismatic. "Riko knew all the artists of my generation, she loved them, she was a great cook, and she had tons of boyfriends," Celmins said. "I couldn't resist." Mizuno was largely responsible for Celmins's fascination with "all things Japanese," as she put it, including food, clothes (in subdued colors), novels by Yukio Mishima, and, some years later, a Shiba Inu dog named Zīle (Latvian for "acorn"). Zīle succeeded Lācīte and lived with Celmins for ten years, "the most intelligent and independent dog I ever had."

The show at Mizuno sold out, and Celmins stayed with the gallery until 1983. Museums were starting to discover her. The Museum of Modern Art acquired three works by Celmins in 1970—an ocean drawing, a moon drawing, and an ocean lithograph. Her first solo museum show was at the Whitney, in 1973—twelve oceans, all untitled. By then, she was also drawing galaxies, constellations, and arid sections of desert earth. The galaxies and constellations were based on photographs she bought at the library of the California Institute of Technology, where she spent some time in those years. (She is ashamed to say that, on more than one occasion, she took a book into the ladies' room and sliced a photograph out with a razor.) These new images were as restricted in color as the oceans. Celmins had become enraptured by the desert. She would drive, with Lācīte, to deserts in California and Nevada—Panamint Valley, Death Valley, the Mojave—and take dozens of photographs, some of which led to drawings. "I was moving into other imagery," she said, "but trying not to make things too interesting."

A review of her San Francisco retrospective in the January, 2019, issue of *Artforum* greatly annoyed Celmins by referring to her as a workaholic. "I don't work all the time," she groused. "I'm constantly doing other stuff." What she did in the studio far outweighed everything else in her life, though, and this put a strain on her personal relationships. The marriage to Peter Givler ended in 1973. ("He ran off with another literature student," she said.) Celmins had a hard time dealing with the breakup. "I was beating myself up because I couldn't hold on to this guy," she said. We were sitting on a bench in one of the SFMOMA galleries, while technicians and curatorial assistants passed through and sounds of drilling and hammering came from other galleries. She looked slightly surprised, as though she were learning something new. "Then I had this other guy whom I really loved, and that didn't work out, either," she said. "It took me a long time to figure out that maybe I was a partner to these crimes. It seems like I never learned how to communicate, or how to give. I know now, a little. I've become more like a human being."

Celmins has a house in Sag Harbor, on the eastern end of Long Island, a two-bedroom cottage that she bought in 1997 with money from a MacArthur Fellowship. She drives out there nearly every Thursday, from the modest Manhattan loft she owns in SoHo, and returns on Sunday. Celmins could easily afford grander living quarters. After a highly successful show in 2017, she hired an architect and a contractor to carry

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out a major renovation of the Long Island studio that she purchased five years ago, a few miles from Sag Harbor. When it's finished, her plan is to live as well as work there, but she'll keep the house in town. Celmins lives alone, with a large, aggressively friendly cat named Raymond. "Raymond is my husband," she said, when my wife and I visited her in Sag Harbor last fall. "He is a master at knocking things over."

A stuffed Canada goose hangs by a wire from the ceiling of her sunporch, and a diorama of other avian species, including an owl, occupies a large, glass-fronted box on a table in the living room. Celmins has been a bird-watcher since the nineteen-seventies. Her furniture is all secondhand, she said, most of it acquired in local yard sales. ("This chair was five dollars.") When my wife aimed her iPhone at the tiny guest room and bath just off the living room, Celmins said, "You're taking pictures of my toilet?" Before we arrived, she had gone to Loaves & Fishes, a high-end food store in the nearby village of Sagaponack, and brought back devilled eggs, croissants, sweet buns, and other pastries, which were of great interest to Raymond. "Stop!" she ordered, loudly but ineffectually. "Go away." Celmins has two part-time studio assistants, Naho Taruishi and Jamisen Ogg, both artists. In New York, where Celmins's studio is part of her loft, Ogg used to mark temporary grids on her canvases with lengths of string, as a guide, but Raymond learned how to pull off the strings, so now they are testing other methods. Keeping Raymond out of the studio is not an option.

Celmins took us, in her twelve-year-old Toyota, to see the studio she is renovating. "It used to be a private house," she said. The studio part of it has been extended, with high, vaulted ceilings and a skylight. To the right are a combined living and dining room, several bedrooms, and a three-story tower that was one of Celmins's priorities in her discussions with the architect. We climbed the three flights and walked out on a small deck that overlooks meadows and farmland stretching to the Atlantic Ocean. A few horses grazed near a big, fenced-in rectangle of grass—in the summer, Celmins explained, this is a polo field. Being up here made her very excited, like a child with a new toy. She began laughing and jumping up and down in sheer exuberance.

We drove back to Sag Harbor, where Celmins cooked a substantial lunch of fried local flounder, new potatoes, green beans, and asparagus. Raymond kept getting up on the kitchen counter. Celmins would gather him in both arms and drop him, from shoulder height, to the floor. Two minutes later, he'd be back. Raymond is a big cat, and being dropped didn't seem to bother him in the least. (A week or so later, when Celmins was preparing dinner in her New York kitchen, the same pattern was repeated. She finally got annoyed, and dropped Raymond with considerable force. "I could get another cat," she warned him. "Has that occurred to you?")

After lunch, I noticed an elaborate spiderweb under the seat of the five-dollar chair, with a spider in residence. It turned out that most of the chairs and tables had webs under them, some inhabited and others vacant. I thought that maybe Celmins's spiderweb drawings in the nineties had come out of a similar visitation, but no. "They came from a little book I found, from the forties, of the different kinds of webs spiders make," she explained. "I was going through the book, and I realized that the webs described the surface, which was what I want to do." (Celmins's explanations can be delphic. I think what she means by "described the surface"—the same phrase she used about her ocean drawings—is that the image and its support, paper or canvas, are indistinguishable. But I may be wrong.) Her spiderweb drawings are done in charcoal, not pencil, and the images are created by erasing. "I put down a charcoal ground, rub it in with my hands, and the rest is done with erasers," she said. "It's just dust, really. I even bought an electric eraser. But I should have dropped this image earlier, you know? It was getting too relational, too active. Some people feel they're realistic, but the details were just to get you to explore the surface."

Celmins was returning to the city that evening, and we went with her in the Toyota. It was pitch-dark, and raining. Raymond rode in the front seat, in a cat carrier that Celmins didn't bother to close, so he kept getting out. He visited us in the back, but he was more interested in climbing up on the dashboard and walking around there, his tail lashing back and forth between Celmins's face and the windshield.

In 1973, lonely and depressed after her divorce from Givler, Celmins started spending time with some people who lived in a commune near Oakland and followed the teachings of George Gurdjieff, the Armenian spiritual guru. "They were mostly professional people, unhappy people," she recalls. She fell deeply in love with one of them, a mathematician who taught at a college in Monterey. They left the commune together after a year or so—"It was just too much of 'everybody is asleep and you are awake' kind of thing"—and went to live in Big Sur. She and the mathematician broke up in the late seventies. Devastated by this new failure, Celmins returned to Los Angeles, and found that somebody else was living in her studio; she had let another artist use it, he had left without telling her, and the landlady had rented it to a new tenant. At this low point in her life, Celmins stopped making ocean drawings and became obsessed with a new project. For some time, on trips to the desert and to the country around Taos, New Mexico, she had been picking up stones and tossing them into the trunk of her car. Her friend Happy Price, who lived near Taos with her husband, the ceramic artist Ken Price, used to go with her on rock-gathering trips. "I'd fill my pockets with stones I thought would be perfect for her, and she'd say, 'No, no, you've got it all wrong,' " Price remembers. At a certain point, Celmins selected eleven stones, and set out to make an exact copy of each one. "They seemed so beautiful that I wanted to make them myself," she said, in an interview with the artist Robert Gober. "I wanted to see how close I could come. That's how the piece started."

Her stones were of varying shapes and sizes, none of them larger than a fist, and she made a bronze cast of each one and covered that with a base coat of automobile body paint. Jasper Johns's famous sculpture of two Ballantine Ale cans, cast in bronze and painted to match the originals, was very much on her mind. Celmins admired Johns, whom she met first at Riko Mizuno's gallery and then saw again at the Gemini GEL print workshop, in Los Angeles, when she started

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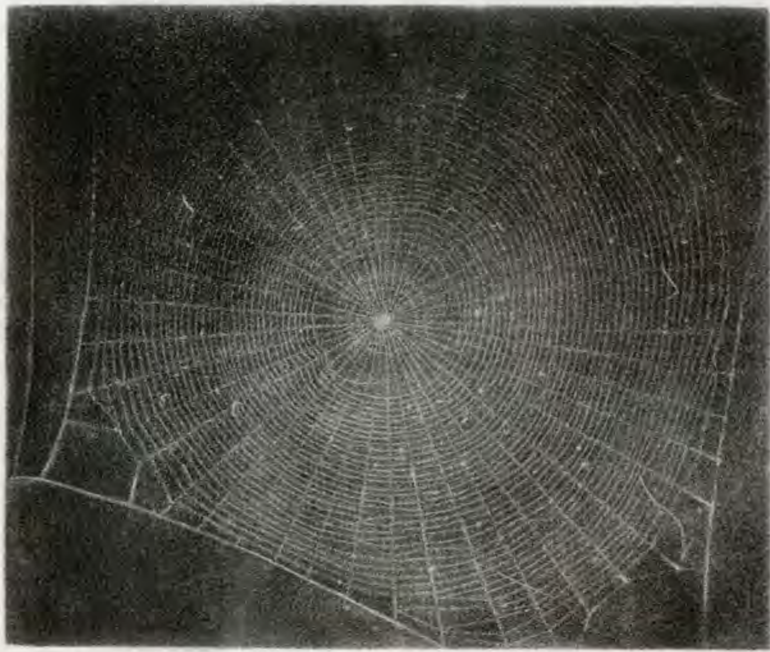
making prints there in the early eighties. The fantastically intricate task of reproducing the eleven stones took five years. (She was doing other things as well.) Working with the smallest brushes and acrylic paint, she matched the colors and every speck and marking on the found stones, so precisely that even she has trouble telling the original from the copy. Celmins believes that, if you spend enough time on a work, something else might come into play, "some subtlety that my brain was not capable of figuring out." Like Johns, she is interested in testing the margins between art and reality.

"Vija's different from other artists I know, who go into the studio and really enjoy it," Happy Price told me. "Vija has struggles." When Celmins was working on her rock piece, Price remembers her saying, "I'm crazy, why am I doing this?" Two identical entries in her diary reflect Celmins's anxiety about the piece: "The stones OVER IMAGINED." She considers the work a long meditation on nature. It is also "a little bit humorous," she told me. "They look like turds, I know."

Celmins's career flourished during the five years she worked on the stones. Her first retrospective exhibition opened in 1979, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, in California, and travelled to three others, including the Hudson River Museum, in Yonkers, New York, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. She won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980, specifically to work on her stones piece, and that year she joined David and Renee McKee's gallery in New York, which represented Philip Guston, one of her idols, and would represent Celmins for the next thirty-five years. In 1981, she moved from Los Angeles to New York City, and gradually found her way back to painting. Using paint on the stones was a first step; oil on canvas, after eighteen years of working in pencil or charcoal, was more difficult. "When I started painting again in the mid-eighties, I couldn't finish anything," she told the artist Chuck Close. "I felt like a baby crawling on my hands and knees." She resumed painting, she said, because "I wanted the work to carry more weight."

Her move to New York had a similar motivation. Celmins and her family had spent three months there in 1948, on their way from Europe to Indiana. They had stayed in a hotel on East Twenty-third or Twenty-fourth Street (she's not sure which), and her clearest memory is of the used comic books that she persuaded her father to buy for her from sidewalk venders—they helped her learn English words. A dozen years later, on a summer scholarship to the Yale School of Music and Art, in Norfolk, Connecticut, she met a number of East Coast art students who were headed for the M.F.A. program at Yale. Celmins had been accepted by Yale, but U.C.L.A. offered her a bigger scholarship. What would it have been like, she sometimes wondered, if she had gone to Yale and then to New York, as so many of the Norfolk students did? In the summer of 1981, she was invited to teach at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, in Maine. While there, she went to New York and negotiated a temporary studio swap with the artist Barbara Kruger—Celmins's new studio near Venice Boulevard for Kruger's loft on Leonard Street. The artists she spent time with in New York that fall (Joel Shapiro, Chuck Close, and Richard Serra, among others) impressed her as being more focussed and more ambitious than the L.A. variety. Within a few weeks, she had decided to stay and began looking for a place of her own.

Her first New York show was in 1983, at the McKee Gallery, on Fifty-seventh Street. Celmins kept putting it off because, David McKee said, "she could never finish those damn stones." The show included pencil drawings of Saturn with its encircling rings, and new star fields, larger than the galaxies she had done in the seventies—some of them coupled with an image of Marcel Duchamp's "Rotary Glass Plates," a mechanized sculpture, made in 1920, that she had seen reproduced in a book when she was at U.C.L.A. ("Both are spinning things, trying to find their bearings, like me," she explained.) In the middle of the room was a large plaster slab holding the eleven stones and their painted bronze duplicates, which she had finally finished. They were laid out in carefully randomized order. In two places a matched pair were close together, but the rest were separated. The piece puzzled and intrigued viewers. "Some people thought she had travelled the world and found eleven identical stones," McKee told me. The work's quiet power—its ability to capture and hold people's interest—was never in doubt, and Celmins's title for it, "To Fix the Image in Memory: I-XI (1977-1982)," was every artist's ambition. Edward Broida, a major Celmins collector, bought the piece and donated it in 2005, along with sixteen other works, to the Museum of Modern Art. Everything else in the show was sold, to museums



Celmins makes her spiderwebs in charcoal, creating images through erasure.

VIJA CELMINS, "WEB #5", 1999, © VIJA CELMINS, COLLECTION OF RENEE AND DAVID MCKEE

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or important collectors. McKee had raised her prices, against strenuous objections from Celmins. "Every time I'd suggest a price, Vija would say, 'Too much!'" he recalled. "But the reviews were good, and she had been embraced by the New York art world."

"Barrier," dated 1985-86, is the first major oil painting by Celmins since 1968—the first one she kept, at any rate. It's large by her standards, six feet wide and just under six feet high, and it ushered in a long and magisterial series of night-sky paintings. Like her oceans, the night skies are without centers or boundaries, each one an unbroken field of white dots of various sizes, against a black background. Celmins is rarely satisfied with her work—a 2006 note in her diary reads "I have not yet made something that TOTALLY pleases me"—and she wasn't sure that she wanted "Barrier" in the San Francisco retrospective. "She felt it was too large and too square," according to Ian Alteveer, the co-curator. "Barrier" made the cut in San Francisco, but it will not be included when the show comes to New York. It lacks the complexity and the ravishing beauty of the night-sky paintings that Celmins did later. When I told her that some of these give me a feeling of deep, infinite space, she said, rather kindly, "I think the reality of the paintings does not emphasize that. I like big spaces, and I wrestle them into a small area and say, 'Lie down and stay there, like a good dog.'" But Celmins has also said that her early work projects out toward the viewer, and the night skies draw you in, so what does she know?

Celmins also made paintings of her earlier subjects—the oceans, deserts, and galaxies that she had done in graphite—but from the early nineties until quite recently night skies have been her main focus. Her layered painting process has become increasingly complex. After getting the initial image on canvas, she covers each star with a tiny drop of liquid cement, and when that hardens she paints the image again. She may repeat this process twenty times or more, sanding the entire surface, before she lays down the next layer of ivory black mixed with burnt umber, ultramarine blue, and sometimes a touch of white. When she decides that the background is sufficiently developed, she scrapes out the cement and, using the smallest sable brush, fills the little holes with white paint mixed with cerulean blue, or sometimes raw umber or yellow ochre. "I ruined a lot of paintings by sanding," she told me. "It scared me. But it's like building a relationship. You do it again and again, and you sense that the thing is beginning to have a form that looks strong. And all the time you're thinking, and making decisions. The making, the devotion to making, is what gives it an emotional quality."

Since 1996, a number of museum shows in Europe have made Celmins's work better known there, perhaps, than it is in this country. Although her exhibitions have always been well received—when I asked if she had ever had a negative review, she thought for a bit, but couldn't come up with one—the work may be too reticent to attract a wide public. One show that pleased her a great deal was a 2014 retrospective at the Latvian National Museum of Art, in Riga. She had been back to Latvia before, with her sister, Inta, but this was a gala homecoming, attended by dozens of proud relatives she had never met. Several of her Latvian cousins travelled to San Francisco last December for her opening there. "I feel closer to them now," she said. "I write to them and send pictures."

Last fall, Celmins told me that she was "getting sick of black paintings that you can't get into, and have that closed-off look." She added, "I'm trying to switch to something lighter." What that might be is not clear. She has done reverse night skies—dark stars on off-white backgrounds—and she has made paintings of the covers of two old books, the sixth edition of Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" and a much older Japanese volume that she bought on her only trip to Japan, in 2003. For the past eleven years, starting in 2007, she has also been working on a series of three-dimensional slate writing tablets. She found the first one, a nineteenth-century schoolchild's slate with a wooden frame, in a secondhand store in Sag Harbor. Since then, she has tracked down several others, or received them as gifts from friends, and her dear friend Edward Finnegan, a sculptor, who died while she was installing the San Francisco show, made a number of replicas for her, some of them quite large. "I think I remember having a tablet as a child," she said. "I had to redo the first one, because I fucked up the surface, but I thought, Gosh, this is such a handsome, complicated, beautiful thing."

As Celmins enters her eighties, she feels that her attitudes may be changing. "I've been opening up a little, letting my hand show more," she told me. "My hand isn't quite as steady, my mind is not as steady, my eyes are not as steady. I'm allowing things to happen, hopefully." A few years ago, she bought a house in Mérida, Yucatán, thinking that she "could sort of be Gauguin and go there in the winter." She hasn't spent much time in the house, but Mérida is a popular haven for Mexican artists, and she talks about selling the house and buying a smaller one that's closer to friends. Celmins, like many artists, covets real estate. She still owns some land in New Mexico, near Taos, which she bought in 1977 but never built on.

David and Renee McKee retired and closed their gallery in 2015. Celmins is now represented by the Matthew Marks Gallery, whose roster includes Jasper Johns, Robert Gober, and Charles Ray. Her first show there was in 2017, and, as usual, everything was sold. "Painting in Six Parts," six images of the same stretch of ocean, the first one done in 1986 and the five others between 2012 and 2016, went to the Glenstone Museum, in Maryland, whose founders, Mitchell and Emily Rales, also bought several other works in the show. "I had a lot of trouble painting oceans, and I thought I could never do it again, because they were so tedious," Celmins told me. "Then I thought, *Can* I do it again? And I went on a roll. It was sort of like living your life over."

Her work is still priced well below that of Jeff Koons, Gerhard Richter, and other market superstars, but she has more money than she needs. Celmins is looking into buying a new car, maybe an electric Toyota or a Tesla, because it's supposed to be less harmful to the environment. I like to think of her and Raymond on the Long Island Expressway, sparring over behavioral issues while the Tesla drives itself. "I'm lucky to be alive, and to still make work," she said to me the other day. "And I have a lot of energy." ♦

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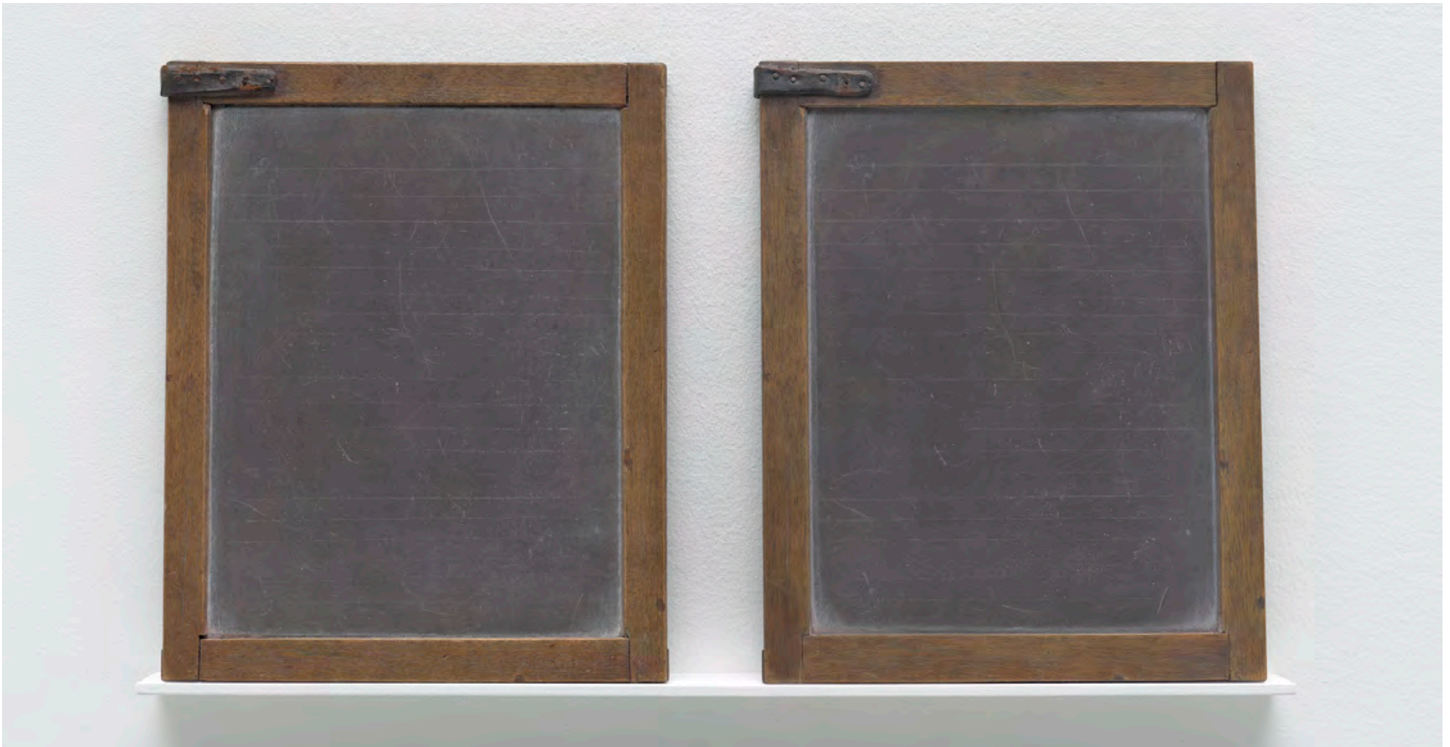
ARTFORUM

BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND

JORDAN KANTOR ON THE ART OF VIJA CELMINS



Vija Celmins, *Blackboard Tableau #12*, 2007–15, leather, acrylic, alkyd oil, and pastel on wood, found tablet, each panel 11 × 8 ½".

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Left: **Vija Celmins,** ***Blackboard***
Below: **Andy Warhol,** ***Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*****, 1964,** synthetic polymer paint and silk screen on wood, 17 1/8 × 17 × 14".

Right: **Vija Celmins,** ***Heater*****, 1964,** oil on canvas, 47 1/8 × 48".

CAN'T WE JUST START OVER? Make a new beginning and do it all again, only better? This sentiment, echoed in some form in so many conversations today, is—as most students of art history will know—as much one of modernism's motivating myths as it is a refrain of contemporary malaise. The fantasy of a fresh start is fundamental to how innumerable artists have imagined what it means to make art at all, and, by extension, how it might promise to make the world more like one they would wish to inhabit. The powerful image of the blank slate is so persistent in part because it is adaptable to almost any situation, era, or agenda. Time and again, however, it fails to deliver on its ostensible promises. Ultimately, a completely new beginning proves as elusive as the avant-gardist fictions of originality and invention with which its fantasy is so deeply intertwined. This doesn't mean starting anew is a useless or ignoble goal. Just because you know you'll likely fail doesn't mean you shouldn't try; that's what it means to commit to the quixotic, utopian cause of art, right?

These are some of the many thoughts Vija Celmins's recent Blackboard Tableaus evoke, made as they quite literally are of blank slates. Pieces such as *Blackboard Tableau #12*, 2007–15, typically consist of paired objects: a child's antique miniature blackboard and a copy of that item, which the artist has had fabricated (by a furniture-maker friend) and then herself painted to look as much like the ready-made object as possible. Displayed together, these found slates and their handmade twins invite close looking and inspire their viewers to attempt to distinguish original from reproduction. The Blackboard Tableaus quickly transcend our marveling at the artist's mimetic skills, however, and compel us to consider the central paradox they embody: that the blank slate, presented here both literally and figuratively, is anything but blank. Celmins's painstaking reproduction of the blackboard's surface—its scratches and its particular shade of cloudy gray, remnants of decades of writing and erasing chalk—constitute the majority of her artistic labor in these pieces. Her careful attention to remaking the patina of the found object underscores the proposition that even when one wishes to wipe the slate clean, traces of the past inevitably remain. The beginning is always already occupied by the inescapable presence of history. Try as we might, there is no tabula rasa here.

The urge to begin anew is one of the primary engines of Celmins's limpid artistic practice, which spans the past five decades and media ranging from painting and drawing to sculpture and printmaking.

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Left: **Vija Celmins, *Comb*, 1969–70,** lacquer and epoxy on wood, 75 × 14⅛ × 2⅜".

Above, from top: **Vija Celmins's *Comb*, 1969–70, drying in her studio, Los Angeles, 1969. Vija Celmins, *Hot Plate*, 1964,** oil on canvas, 25 × 35".

The more time Celmins spends on a work, the less it reveals its madeness, and the more her handiwork is submerged.

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As early as the chronological beginning of her career, in 1964, Celmins imagined that to begin meant to start over. Setting up her first studio in Los Angeles after graduate school, she sought to set her education and preconceptions aside, in order to paint objects close at hand from direct observation. She later described this first body of work: "I thought I would sit down without all my theories and aesthetics . . . to start in a more primitive place with just my eyes and my hand."[1] Of course, the desire to get away from theory, and back to the "more primitive" eye and hand, is itself highly theory-laden, and Celmins's works from this period suggest, as do the Blackboard Tableaus, that to begin at all is to engage with the past. Signal pieces from this time, such as *Envelope* and *Hot Plate*, both 1964, are naturalistic depictions of humble, quotidian objects, but their fluent paint-handling, limited palette, and shallow pictorial space also evoke art-historical precedents. The work of Morandi, Manet, and, further back, Velázquez, looms large, haunting and inspiring these canvases. Again, as much as the artist would like to paint simple objects in her studio simply, Celmins's early canvases also evince strategies closer to home, namely those of an emergent, deadpan American Pop. Though accomplished through radically different means (and intentions), Celmins's 1964 *Heater* is cousin to another object on a studio floor that an artist transformed into art that year: Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*. The fact that these works are figurative at all, and depict anonymously produced industrial objects to boot, brings them together, especially when they are viewed against the backdrop of the immediate tradition of gestural abstraction from which their makers were both, in their own ways, distancing themselves.

Celmins's stated desire to put her theories aside and Warhol's infamous wish to "be a machine" betray almost oppositional affects and ideas of artistic subjectivity—Celmins sought the immersive depth of close looking, while Warhol denied its very possibility. But both participate in the larger cultural tactics of artistic self-negation that define some of the best American art of the 1960s and '70s. Tired of the overblown claims to individual expression that permeated the discourse of the previous generation, many artists emerging in the wake of AbEx sought to circumvent the personal and expressionist dimensions of artmaking altogether. One strategy for doing so was to limit one's subjective decision-making to as few moves as possible, to subvert one's personal taste and bury evidence of one's artistic hand.[2] Anti-invention was an ideal. This context helped establish the parameters of Celmins's practice and has strongly informed it ever since. In her earliest works, this strategy included, more specifically, restricting her color palette, centering her imagery (as opposed to artfully composing it), and painting single objects chosen for their convenience rather than symbolic content. Within a few short years, Celmins had radicalized this removal further, using photographic sources as the models for her drawings and paintings and subsuming the facture of her earliest paintings into slick, uniform surfaces. Technically, she was making images in much the same way—her process remained, fundamentally, that of observational rendering—but now the objects she was painting "from life" were photographs. From the mid- to late '60s, Celmins preferred anonymous black-and-white imagery taken from newspapers and magazines. In painting from photographs, Celmins relieved herself of the burden of inventing what to paint, for once she settled on an image, her work was constrained to something like copying. She eagerly sought such limits. "The image is just a structure I don't have to think about."[3] With the model chosen, Celmins could focus on what she was most interested in: the slow, manual work of making the object.

LABOR IS A BIG PART—perhaps the primary part—of Celmins's creative process, and her works across artistic media share the characteristic of being highly wrought, even if almost invisibly so. A painting can take years for her to complete, involving dozens of campaigns of applying paint and scraping it off to start again. Ironically, the more time Celmins spends on a work, the less it reveals its madeness, and the more her handiwork is submerged. This is, of course, part of the point; Celmins has evocatively described her desire for her paintings to be as smooth as Formica.[4] There is an airtight quality to Celmins's art, which can be both unsettling and compelling. Take *Comb*, 1969–70: At seventy-seven inches high, this painted sculpture enlarges its model from hand-held to human size but otherwise looks completely unchanged. It is as if this exaggeration of scale has happened without human intervention, by magic. By using lacquer in the sculpture—which settles under gravity during the drying process to erase any manual brushwork—the artist creates a glassy surface that entirely masks her touch. Should we need reminding of the central tensions at stake in Celmins's approach, the sculpture itself brings home the thesis, with the word HANDMADE spelled out at the comb's top. Some of the power of this work in particular—and of Celmins's oeuvre as a whole—comes from the frisson of knowing that it was made by hand but finding scant evidence of that fact before us. (This distinguishes her objects from the countless examples of contemporary artwork today that incorporate digital fabrication. In these, lack of facture signifies something completely different.) This tension of the present but invisible hand is Celmins's central contribution in art's long and extended dialogue with mechanical reproduction. Her work transmits the energy of its human origin, but it doesn't resolve into the specific "expressive" subjectivity of a particular individual. The human behind the hand remains present, but mute and aspiring to anonymity.

In much art of Celmins's generation, as emphasis on the artist's hand (and by proxy, her persona) receded, materials came to the fore. In Celmins's case, this is perhaps most evident in the large number of works on paper she made from the '70s on, after she began an extended hiatus from painting. In interviews, Celmins has repeatedly described her Galaxy and Ocean drawings in terms of the married physicality of paper and graphite, rather than of the particular imagery. Her interests are primarily material; she notes that these works "came out of loving the blackness of the pencil," and that in them, she wanted

Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean Steps #2)*, 1973, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 11 ¼ × 98 ⅜".

Kantor, Jordan. "Beginning to Understand." *Artforum* 57, no. 5, January 2019, pp. 166–73.

Top: **Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Double Desert)*, 1974,** graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 12⅝ × 24⅛".

Bottom: **Vija Celmins, *To Fix the Image in Memory I–XI*, 1977–82,** acrylic paint on eleven bronze objects, eleven stones, dimensions variable.

Kantor, Jordan. "Beginning to Understand." *Artforum* 57, no. 5, January 2019, pp. 166–73.

Right: **Vija Celmins, *Suspended Plane*, 1966,** oil on canvas, 18 × 28".

Far right: **Vija Celmins, *Burning Man*, 1968,** oil on canvas, 20 × 22½".

Though you may find yourself asking which of her sky paintings is a better *painting*, you rarely ask which is a better *image*.

to let "the material be the material."[5] *Untitled (Ocean Steps #2)*, 1973, is a tour de force of this impulse and exploration. Here, across a suite of identically sized sheets of paper, Celmins serially rendered the same photographic images of a rippled ocean surface—beginning again seven times—using pencils of increasing softness (and hence darkness) as she moved from left to right. Systematically working her way through the graphite grading scale—the taxonomy of *H*'s and *B*'s that denotes relative hardness—Celmins creates a portrait of her materials. This is a work about the *how* of making rather than the *what* of the image. Like an old-school photographer experimenting with the zone system—or a designer adjusting a contrast slider in Photoshop—Celmins seems to test how the image holds up at different tonalities. Importantly, each of these varying tonalities is predetermined and ready-made: a function of the divisions of graphite available in commercial pencils, rather than of her own artistic taste.

Immaculate, hands-off technique and systematic, nonaesthetic material exploration are two strategies of anti-invention central to Celmins's practice, but so too are copying and repetition.[6] For Celmins, copies are never perfect, just as repetition never yields precisely the same results. The slippage, however minor, between two nearly identical images is the space the artist has explored her entire career, and undoubtedly accounts, at least in part, for her interest in working with the same image more than once, in repeatedly starting over. Works such as *Untitled (Double Desert)* and *Untitled (Double Coma Berenices)*, both 1974, exemplify her impulse to close the gaps between original and copy. In each, paired drawings on a single sheet of paper depict the same image at two sizes. (The larger drawing is almost, though not exactly, double the surface area of the smaller.) This presentation not only has the effect of letting us appraise the image at two different scales—it also argues for the fidelity of Celmins's commitment to a dispassionate reproduction of the source image. If, in a single image of a nonspecific referent, such as a desert floor or a starry sky, the artist were to fudge the rendering of a specific detail, we would never know. By doubling the image, however, Celmins holds herself, and encourages us to hold her, to a standard of maximum faithfulness to the source image, proving to herself as much as to her viewers the rigor with which she expunges personal, expressive, and arbitrary decision-making from her process. In the end, the energy Celmins spends closing the gap between original and copy leaves a paradoxical remainder: Ultimately, because they are discernibly handmade (while one always recognizes a photographic source in Celmins's work, one never mistakes her drawings for photographs), the gap between source and artwork emphasizes a lurking human presence.

This strategy becomes even more radicalized in *To Fix the Image in Memory I–XI*, 1977–82, a signal work consisting of eleven painted cast bronzes presented alongside their original stone "models." Here, it is as if Celmins has taken the initial assignment of Western aesthetics—to imitate nature—literally. As in her subsequent Blackboard Tableaus, Celmins eliminates any conditionality in her dedication to quasi-mechanical reproduction that might linger in the exercise of the doubled drawings. That is, while one might be able to make two drawings based on the same photograph look enough like *each other* to convey the idea of an erased personal style, presenting your copy alongside the ready-made model itself sets the bar even higher. In these works, we no longer have to take Celmins's word for it—that is, we no longer have to accept the rhetoric of the dispassionate photographic style in which she renders things—since the model is there to inspect as well.

CELMINS'S IMAGERY is as notable as the ways in which she uses it, and similarly focused and cool. At first, Celmins worked from a relatively diverse selection of images, encompassing photographs of warplanes and fiery disasters, but beginning in the late '60s, she limited herself to a much narrower range of subjects, including the parched desert floor, the ocean, the starry sky, and spiderwebs. It is significant that all these forms can be said to be unauthored; they are found in nature, not made by human hands. Celmins rarely says much about her imagery. She even once described it as "almost nothing."[7] But by saying the image is almost nothing, Celmins is, of course, saying quite a lot. This almost-nothingness is a means to an end. Her discrete images of this iconography, while technically based on different photographs, are strikingly generic: The stars and webs are all so similar as to make their aesthetic variety irrelevant. While they may, strictly speaking, be individual, unique images,

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Top: **Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Double Coma Berenices)*, 1974,** graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 12 1/2 × 24".

Bottom: **Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Web #1)*, 1998,** charcoal on paper, 22 1/4 × 25 1/2".

Celmins's imagery is coolly hands-off, but it is far from lifeless.

they might as well not be. Though you may find yourself asking which of her sky paintings is a better *painting*, you rarely ask which is a better *image*. This extreme and functional interchangeability is another dimension of her overall artistic program of limits and anti-invention. By deciding more than forty years ago that she would draw imagery from a few select things, Celmins effectively freed herself from having to spend any time or energy agonizing over what to paint. Similarly, by choosing imagery that is almost exclusively visually nonhierarchical (with detail and incident spread equally across the image frame), Celmins circumvents relational composition. Two of the central decisions in exercising aesthetic taste—what to paint and how to compose it—have been headed off at the pass.[8]

Further, a loose system seems to connect the photographs from which she chooses to work. Celmins's source images—which recall her explorations of the gradation scale of commercially available graphite in work *Untitled (Ocean Steps #2)*—catalogue the visual possibilities afforded, and determined, by the technology of the camera. Beyond the obvious fact that her work is based on photographic images, its specific typology reflects the range of focal lengths of a camera lens as it zooms out from close-up to infinity: The Webs are the close-ups, the Deserts and Oceans explore the expanding mid-range, and the Galaxies and Night Skies depict the infinitely distant. Indeed, some of the Night Skies are based on images sent back to Earth by the Hubble Space Telescope, a camera fitted with a huge lens capable of capturing some of the most remote objects possible. (A more recent image, *Shell*, 2009–10, presents the opposite end of the spectrum, depicting its subject in extreme close-up, in a detail only available through a macro lens.) Even in using natural imagery, Celmins exhibits supreme reserve. We see the world—and, indeed, the whole universe, small to large—through the technical mediation of a cool camera eye.

While Celmins's steadfast commitment to strategies of anti-invention comes out of, and participates in, specific artistic discourses that emerged in the '60s, the long view of her career allows us to see that her unique contribution has been to probe issues of origins and beginnings. In her work, renewal and self-erasure are complementary, not mutually exclusive. That is, for Celmins, to start over is not to replace one agenda with another—in effect, to heroically or hubristically impose one's individual will on a new vision of the future, as many avant-gardists strove to do—so much as it is to imagine a state of mind (or of body, even) without an identity or expressive agenda. By minimizing the artist's hand, Celmins deemphasizes the

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individual but not the human per se. As a result, she displaces the model of the expressive subject, whose valorization has so often been at the center of artistic production, with something altogether more modest and appealing. Celmins's imagery is coolly hands-off, but it is far from lifeless (a characteristic ascribed, without prejudice, to Warhol). Rather, in form, subject matter, and technical execution, Celmins evokes the smallness, and potentially even the wonder, of a person in the face of larger forces. The artist's imagery of oceans and galaxies, specks of dirt and grains of sand, the thin filaments of spiderwebs and the surface of an eggshell dotted with so many pores indeed constitutes an iconography of the infinite; however, her artistic treatment of these subjects refuses recourse to the expressivity or pathos that typically attends the sublime in art.

As her practice enters its second half-century, Celmins has brought these issues to the fore even more clearly, introducing a new literalism into her work—remaking physical blank slates that stand for, among other things, figurative blank slates. This literalism poignantly recalls her earliest work, the observational still lifes that launched her career. If the paintings of a heater, hot plate, and lamp lying about her studio revealed a twenty-six-year-old artist asking what it means to fashion a personal practice unbound by "theories and aesthetics," what does a mature master's work like *Darwin*, 2008–10, tell us? Here, in a small oil painting depicting a splayed-out early edition of the famed naturalist's *On the Origin of Species*, we see Celmins circling around even bigger ideas. The work raises the question not of what it means to be an artist, but of what it means to be a human. Back to the beginning, indeed. □

"Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory," curated by Gary Garrels and Ian Alteveer, is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The exhibition is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through March 31; travels to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, May 4–August 4; and the Met Breuer, New York, September 24, 2019–January 12, 2020.

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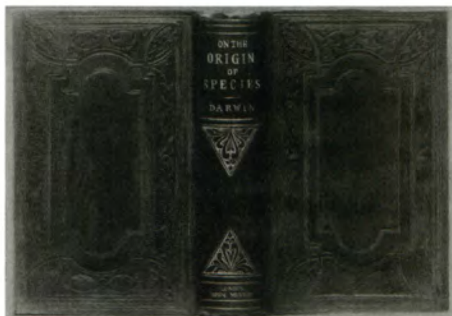
For notes, see page 214.

Below, left: **Vija Celmins, *Darwin*, 2008–10,** oil on canvas, 14 × 20".

Below, right: **Vija Celmins, *Shell*, 2009–10,** oil on canvas, 18 × 13".



Kantor, Jordan. "Beginning to Understand." *Artforum* 57, no. 5, January 2019, pp. 166–73.

Frieze

Where the Water Used to Be

VIJA CELMINS AND THE ART OF RECKONING WITH SILENCE
BY SARAH MANGUSO

THE BEST MINIMALIST ART suggests the landscape after a great fire: it inspires a deep interest in what's left. It shows us that, despite its spareness or severity, it is still a long way from silence.

Trying to get to that unkillable core in my own writing, trying to capture pure states of being, I remove the decorative and trivial marks, scour away almost all of the words I begin with. I want to bear witness to what's left when there is almost nothing left; to tell a story by describing the negative space around it.

Having spent her career gradually and methodically erasing meaning from her art, Vija Celmins has developed an intimacy with the great sterilities of the physical universe. The shared human insignificance, the shared living moment set against a background rigorously scrubbed of human reference, is what she gets us to.

In a 2007 interview with Simon Grant, Celmins said: 'When I was a student, we were all interested in abstract expressionism. We wanted to do big, great paintings. However, later on, when I was living on the West Coast, I dropped it and started making paintings that were based on what I could see. I tried to forget what was in my mind; I had been thinking too much about the work and inventing too much, and it seemed to mean nothing.'[1]

Politics, philosophy, ideas: those were the first things she got rid of. There would be further abandonments.

Celmins's early works, made while she was still a graduate student at UCLA, use colour – blue for the flap of *Envelope*, orange for the coil of *Heater* (both 1964) – and are painted directly from their source objects. By 1965, she had begun painting from newspaper clippings

Manguso, Sarah. "Where the Water Used to Be." *Frieze,* no. 203, May 2019, pp. 164–69.

and restricting her palette to grey tones, her subjects to grey subjects: a rhinoceros, a locomotive, a truck, a pistol, clouds.

Was she reacting against the bleaching, blasting light outside her Venice Beach studio? The truck looks pinned onto the canvas; the rhino possesses the typical noble stillness of the large animal in art. (Patiently, the giant wears his paint, though I ought not to personify him; compositionally, he resembles the truck.) What's consistent is a loyalty to grey.

While Celmins was working solely from photographs, her source materials were sometimes mediated doubly, triply. Images were transmitted by a satellite, printed and clipped from newspapers, then photographed, then painted. She was not painting the sky; she was making a painting in which an image of the sky remained as an obscure relic, multiply removed.

In 1966, she turned to clippings of fighter jets. The planes, the same size as the rhino and the truck, hover in the foreground, surrounded by grey that isn't quite sky. The paintings preserve the newspapers' printing errors and other artefacts as dots and lines and smudges, which defangs and distracts from the horrors of war. In a 1991 interview with Chuck Close, Celmins drew a connection between these planes and her childhood in Latvia during World War II[2], but society and history aren't her subjects: she is interested in showing us something beyond the human world.

PREVIOUS SPREAD
Untitled (Ocean), 1977, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 25 × 33 cm. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © Vija Celmins

THIS PAGE
Heater, 1964, oil on canvas, 1.2 × 1.2 m

Then, in 1968, at the very moment the personal became political, Celmins switched from grey paint on canvas to graphite on paper and started to render the meticulous oceans for which she is best known. Still in Venice, now closer to the beach in a new studio, she drew without touching the paper with her hand, gridding her source photographs and working from the lower right to the upper left. Never using an eraser, always maintaining this purity of process, she left her paper immaculate, almost unmarked by evidence of human intention.

The ocean is pure energy, pure movement, but depicting movement isn't central to these pictures. Celmins wasn't interested in depictions, nor was she interested in beauty. She was interested in forms so large that you don't have to think about them, you just have to believe in them.

In a 2003 interview with Susan Sollins, Celmins said: 'In my quest for clarity, I decided that I was going to do everything with just a pencil. You call them drawings; I don't even call them drawings […] I don't even call them things. They are like areas that are made – concentrated on – thoroughly considered.'[3]

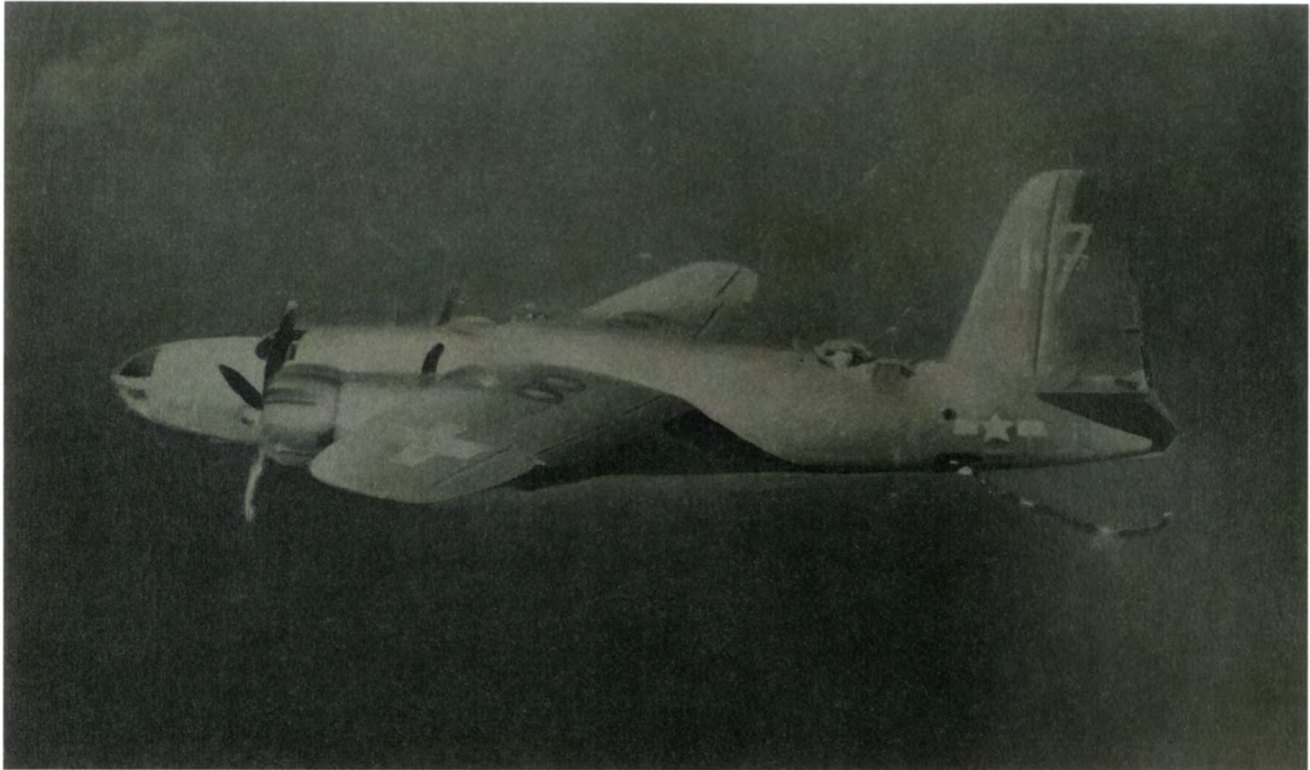
Ocean Steps (1973) places her subject at an even greater remove: the work consists of seven drawings of the same source photo, each one in a different graphite hardness from 8H to 3B. By the 1970s, she'd also begun to mark some of her ocean drawings with a thin white 'X', running corner to corner, just visible enough to remind the viewer that, while the ocean isn't the subject of a foreground, it isn't just a background, either. It's not even an ocean anymore, but the source material for a drawing. She is making objects, not pictures of objects.

To Fix the Image in Memory I–XI (1977–82), which lends its name to Celmins's current retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, is one of her few sculptural works. The piece includes 11 stones and 11 bronze-and-acrylic reproductions of those stones scattered on a white platform. With this cluster, Celmins gets very close, closer than in her paintings and drawings, to making human effort practically invisible.

More representative of her output are the deserts drawn from her own source photographs, which were taken in Arizona and New Mexico during and after the ocean pieces. (A child will remind you that oceans and deserts are the same thing, really; the desert is where the water used to be.)

In the 1980s, Celmins moved to New York and began to work from photos of the night sky, layering and sanding black paint to create depth. At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where 'To Fix the Image in Memory' was first presented, a final gallery was covered by a skylight-studded ceiling, light suffusing

Manguso, Sarah. "Where the Water Used to Be." *Frieze*, no. 203, May 2019, pp. 164–69.



Suspended Plane, 1966, oil on canvas, 46 × 71 cm

the space, as if to show us what Celmins has been up against, armed with graphites and greys. In some of the paintings, there's a hint of blue or umber in the pinpoints of starlight, which are actually tiny drops of liquid rubber, sanded and layered alongside 20 or more strata of surrounding paint.

The word 'timeless' is taken to mean 'eternal', but Celmins isn't chasing timelessness, exactly; she's documenting the effect of the violent interaction of her subjects – an ocean, a desert, a sky – with geological, astronomical time, against which human life is almost invisibly minute.

She is interested in what things look like when the human element is gone. Perhaps the work expresses a wish to disappear or to be considered apart from the biography of its maker. Or it expresses a wish for intimacy with something unknowable – whether because it's too vast or too far away or too formless.

An artist is asked to provide narratives all the time. Why this instead of that; why now instead of earlier or later; what changed and why, always why. But an artist's career doesn't consist of acts and their inevitable consequences. It's just thing after thing, work after work. I don't believe that Celmins had to start with discrete subjects – planes, guns, a rhinoceros – in order to get to the ocean drawings. I don't believe that her one experiment with panelled work must be viewed after her non-panelled work. I don't want to be told that an artist is always looking to make something bigger or better, or searching for a means to repudiate

"Perhaps the work expresses a wish to disappear or to be considered apart from the biography of its maker."

everything she's done so that she can begin again as an amateur. What I do want to see is what remains the same, despite the necessities of maintaining a dynamic career.

For the full extent of her career, Celmins has worked toward expelling distractions and retaining as little as possible in order to express what can be expressed. She clings to no distraction, no decoration, no bankrupt aesthetic or formal convention. In her spare, quiet, severe works, I see compulsive attention, deep curiosity and an abiding interest in physical infinities.

Subdued, redacted, subtextual, tacit, constrained art

Manguso, Sarah. "Where the Water Used to Be." *Frieze,* no. 203, May 2019, pp. 164–69.

invites us to *ascribe to* or *project onto* or *read into* or *imagine during* whatever text or artefact is already there. Constrained art is variously described as arrogant and timid, wise and lazy, efficient and grandiose. Constrained art is often taken as a gesture toward wanting some reductive, all-purpose truth, but we mustn't automatically project an imagined eloquence onto it, either.

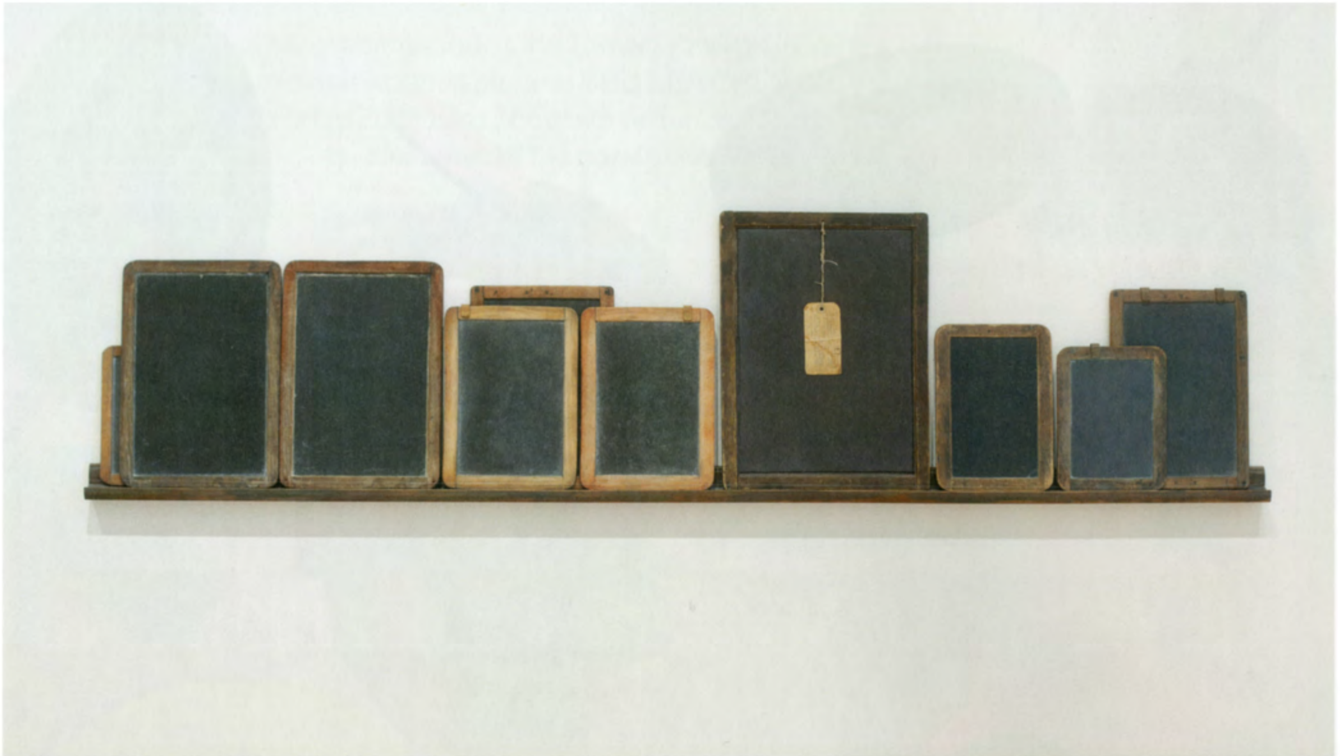
"Celmins stands at the lip of the abyss, her ultimate subject the great sterility that outlasts all life."

Celmins allows us, as witnesses, to jettison much of what we're supposed to think about when we look at art: the biography and psychology of the artist; the concept and meaning expressed by the art. She began with lamps and toasters; continued with guns and planes; and then got to oceans, deserts, clouds, the moon, the sky, the stars. She now stands at the lip of the abyss, her ultimate subject the great sterility that outlasts all life. But there is something more to Celmins than her processes of restriction. There is a furious fullness about it, despite the general emptiness. That fullness is the promise that one can look into the abyss and live.

After 2000, Celmins renewed her interest in objects. She collected children's school slates and had facsimiles fabricated. She exhibits the real and the facsimile side by side, having scratched up the imitation to match the original and, in so doing, reminds us that a blank slate is not blank but as littered as the night sky. These works are iterations of deep space in solid objects. In a 2010 interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, she neatly lists the media of these not-quite-blank slates: 'school kids and time'.[4]

To Fix the Image in Memory I–XI, 1977–82, 11 stones, 11 made objects, bronze and acrylic paint, dimensions variable

Manguso, Sarah. "Where the Water Used to Be." *Frieze,* no. 203, May 2019, pp. 164–69.



Sometimes I wonder if I've been too vehemently tidy in my own writing, if in trying to get rid of the chaos, to block intrusion by non-deliberate things, I've sent them all away forever, and if my affinity toward silence has finally made everything go away for good. But, when I look at the apotheoses of Celmins's work, I see an artist developing a means of dealing with silence. It consoles me that, even then, after eliminating so much from her process, art-making is still possible and necessary – that, after all of the oceans and deserts and skies, she's drawing again, using eraser on charcoal, applied with her hands, making images of deep, almost empty space.

Up close, as she describes them, the drawings, like all art and all life and the infinite sky itself, are 'just dust'. ●

1 'Thinking Drawing', *Tate Etc.*, issue 9, Spring 2007, https://bit.ly/2V4mS2V, accessed 26.02.19
2 'Vija Celmins Interviewed by Chuck Close', 1991, in William S. Bartman, ed., *Vija Celmins*, 1992, A.R.T. Press, New York, p. 20
3 Susan Sollins, *Art: 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season 2, 2003, https://bit.ly/2OszTRf, accessed 26.02.19
4 'Vija Celmins with Phong Bui', *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2010, https://bit.ly/2HTA0nD, accessed 26.02.19

SARAH MANGUSO *is the author of seven books of poetry and prose, most recently* 300 Arguments *(2017) and* Ongoingness: The End of a Diary *(2015). She lives in Los Angeles, USA.*

VIJA CELMINS *is an artist based in New York, USA. Her retrospective 'To Fix the Image in Memory' was shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, USA, from December 2018 to March. It is on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada, until 5 August and will open at The Met Breuer, New York, in September.*

ABOVE
Blackboard Tableau #1, 2007–10, three found tablets, seven made objects, wood, acrylic paint, alkyd oil, pastel, string, paper, graphite, dimensions variable

BELOW
Night Sky #16, 2000–01, oil on linen mounted on wood, 79 × 96 cm

Manguso, Sarah. "Where the Water Used to Be." *Frieze*, no. 203, May 2019, pp. 164–69.

PREVIEW → EXHIBITIONS

The slow and meticulous work of Vija Celmins zooms into view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Artist's retrospective encourages viewers to take their time when looking in the modern age

NANCY KENNEY
14th December 2018 13:04 BST

Vija Celmins's Suspended Plane (1966) © Vija Celmins and courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Vija Celmins is perhaps best known for her obsessive, minutely detailed images of ocean waves and the star-filled night sky, and indeed throughout her career she has repeatedly returned to those subjects. Yet, such pieces are notoriously hard to come by: the artist works at an exacting pace, and museums and private collectors hoping to acquire her paintings or drawings have had to bide their time.

So it seems fitting that the retrospective opening this month at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has also been in long gestation—ten years, according to Gary Garrels, senior curator of painting and sculpture.

The show, including nearly 150 works, encompasses roughly half of what Celmins has produced over the last five and a half decades. It underlines how the Latvian-born artist, 80, resists easy categorisation, although some see links to Conceptualism and Minimalism. Once she came into her own, Garrels notes, Celmins opted for an overwhelming concentration on the object being rendered. Whether it is the ocean, a desert, a spider's web or a blackboard slate, "there is this sense of discipline and acute consciousness of just being in the present, of looking with an intensity that's not typical", he says. This is particularly true today as "we're bombarded with hundreds of images constantly and we tend to scan".

After finishing art college in Indiana in the early 1960s, Celmins decided against migrating to the East Coast and instead enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles. There she rejected the gestural painting of the Abstract Expressionists and instead began making painstaking paintings of things in her studio: an envelope, a lamp, a hot plate, a space heater. She then moved on to mostly

Vija Celmins's Untitled (Ocean) (1977) © Vija Celmins; Photo: Don Ross, courtesy the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Kenney, Nancy. "The slow and meticulous work of Vija Celmins Zooms into view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art." *The Art Newspaper*, December 14, 2018.

monochromatic paintings and drawings of subjects photographed for newspapers and magazines, such as fighter planes.

The show also focuses on many of the grey yet luminous ocean drawings Celmins began in the late 1960s, along with images of deserts and lunar surfaces. Along the way she gained broad recognition among her mostly male peers on the California art scene—a rarity for women at the time. But still restless for what New York had to offer, Celmins decamped for the city in 1981 and has lived there since.

Two galleries in the show will be devoted to the artist's paintings and drawings of the night sky dating from the late 1980s to 2001. Other highlights include her Blackboard Tableau #1 (2007-10) and To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI (1977-82), an assemblage of found stones along with painted bronze casts of them, which inspired the subtitle of the show.

Vija Celmins's To Fix the Image in Memory I–XI (1977–82) © Vija Celmins and courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Garrels hopes visitors will "become aware of [their] own process of observation" by zeroing in on each work. "To let it saturate our consciousness is such a refreshing experience," he adds.

Support for the exhibition was provided by the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, among others. The show, co-curated with Ian Alteveer from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, will travel to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Met Breuer next year.

• *Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 15 December-31 March 2019*

Kenney, Nancy. "The slow and meticulous work of Vija Celmins Zooms into view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art." *The Art Newspaper*, December 14, 2018.

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

ARTFORUM

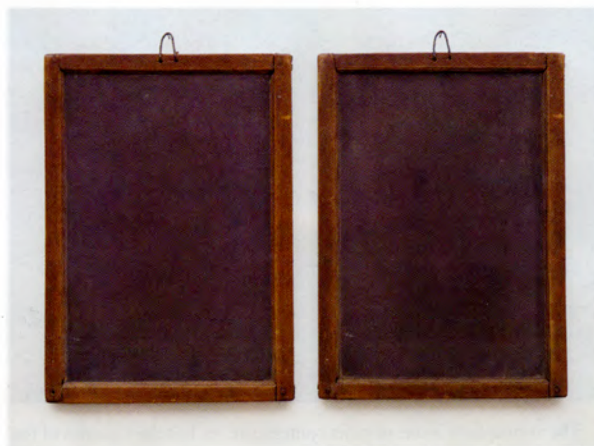
Vija Celmins

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 skyscapes 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 × 10".

Hudson, Suzanne. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* April 2018, p. 189.

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*

Hudson, Suzanne. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* April 2018, p. 189.

The New York Times

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 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."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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."

Kennedy, Randy. "Conjuring Sea and Sky With Her Brush." *The New York Times,* February 10, 2017, p. C19, p. C24.

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 backlighted, 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

Painstakingly wrought images, so realistic that they can be mistaken for photographs.

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.)

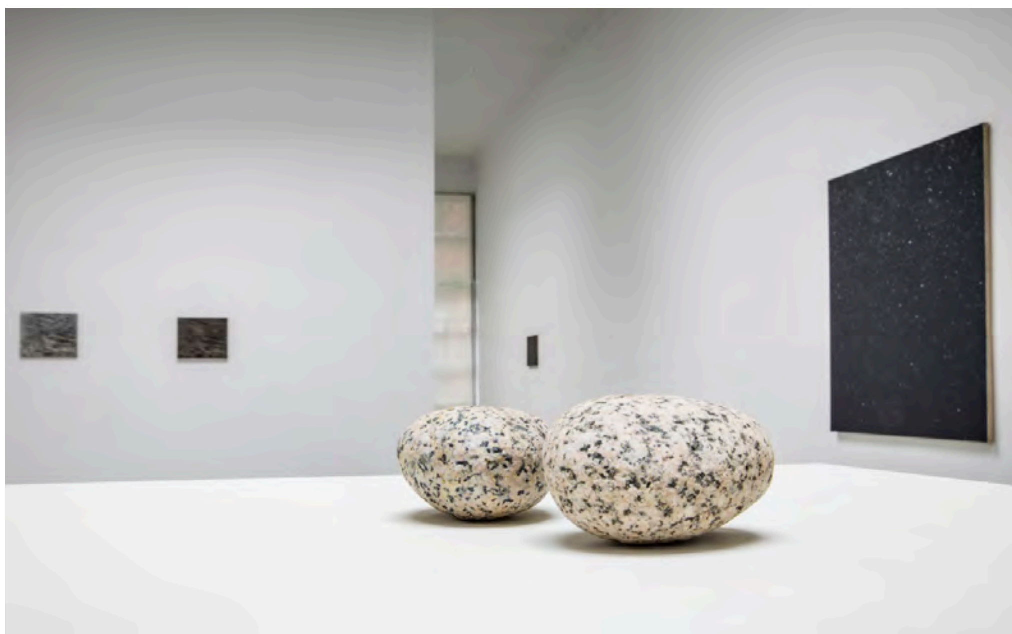
Mr. Garrels, who describes Ms. Celmins's work as "distilled intensity," added that her importance had always been confirmed in his mind by the zealous love of other artists for what she did. "I've worked with Richard Serra, and he doesn't have much art in his loft, but there is a Vija Celmins," he said. 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."

Kennedy, Randy. "Conjuring Sea and Sky With Her Brush." *The New York Times,* February 10, 2017, p. C19, p. C24.

The New York Times



Vija Celmins's "Two Stones" (1977/2014-16), at Matthew Marks. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

VIJA CELMINS

Through April 15. Matthew Marks, 522 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

No natural elements are deeper and darker than the ones Vija Celmins paints: ocean and sky, specifically the rippling surface of the Pacific off California, and the night sky, seen through telescopes, as a dense, soft, pointillist field of thousands of individual stars. She magnifies the vastness of both by leaving out any framing, orienting references — a horizon line, say — to the element we're most comfortable with: earth.

Born in Latvia, Ms. Celmins, now 78, has lived in the United States since 1948, having arrived here as a refugee after World War II. And in a tradition going back to the 19th century, she's a landscapist of a peculiarly American kind, one for whom no visual detail is too small, no thought too big. (Within the context of contemporary art, she could be referred to as a cosmic super-realist.)

She is also a moral philosopher, which the subjects of nonlandscape paintings confirm: images of handguns, fighter planes, raw meat, television sets and, perhaps from her work table, worn-down rubber erasers. The

Cotter, Holland. "Vija Celmins." *The New York Times,* March 31, 2017, p. C17.

erasers are apt symbols for an artist who is a perfectionist reviser, working on single small paintings — adding, subtracting, adding — for years.

This show at Matthew Marks includes a few trompe l'oeil sculptures modeled on real objects. She replicates small found stones in bronze and reproduces their surface markings, speck by speck. Seen together in the gallery, original object and sculpture are hard to tell apart. This is also the case with replicated versions, in wood and paint, of tablet-computer-size 19th-century slate blackboards she has collected. The real slates, also in the gallery, still carry faint ghosts of classroom lessons and calculations written and wiped out long ago. Ms. Celmins's sculptures have the same marks and, in the funny way art works, turn erasures into additions.
HOLLAND COTTER

Cotter, Holland. "Vija Celmins." *The New York Times,* March 31, 2017, p. C17.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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THE NEW YORKER

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. ♦

Schjeldahl, Peter. "The Art World." *The New Yorker,* February 27, 2017, pp. 72–73.

ARTFORUM

Vija Celmins

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

In college, I kept a postcard of a Vija Celmins's graphite wavescape taped to my door. In part, I missed the ocean, but it was also a reminder that the things you love should be done well, and with a care that might even border on obsession. (It's no surprise to learn that a copy of painter Ad Reinhardt's 1953 article "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," with its disciplined promotion of "pure" painting and disavowal of expression, is pinned to Celmins's studio wall.) And at the Whitney Museum of American Art's inaugural downtown exhibition in 2015, Celmins's stark, realist painting of a heater glowing red on a gray ground, which she made in graduate school at University of California, Los Angeles, in 1964, was my favorite work. That canvas referenced a hybrid Pop/Minimalism, humble conditions (an object from her studio), burning ambition, and Manet's reinvention of the still life all at once. Since then, Celmins has steadily, quietly, made a name for herself as an artist who paints and draws with extraordinary precision, continually returning to imagery of patterned perfection found in nature: water, sky, desert, spiderwebs.

The slow burn, the care, the quiet—all were present in her most recent exhibition of paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, her first display of new work in seven years and a small preview of her major retrospective opening at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art next year and traveling to the Met Breuer in New York.

Since the 1960s, Celmins has worked from photographs she takes and collects. Her nearly monochrome matte canvases give up multiple colors when you look at them long enough, especially the "reverse" skies in this show, which feature dark stars spotting a white field—flecks of blue, orange, and brown amid the gray, white, and black. The surfaces of the skies have a smooth, even waxy flatness. The depth of the pictures, despite their lack of evidence of facture, is partly due to the painstaking procedure with which Celmins builds an image: She drops a tiny piece of liquid rubber from a sable brush where every star will be and builds the sky around each bump with black paint mixed with ultramarine blue, umber, and white. Once the rubber has dried, she removes the bump and fills the hole with white until it reaches the same level as the black around it, often sanding the surface at the end. (This procedure still doesn't explain how the stars *glow*.)

Vija Celmins, ***Untitled (Falling Star)***, **2016**, oil on canvas, 18 × 13⅛".

Peiffer, Prudence. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* May 2017, pp. 328–29.

The repetition of subjects lulls us away from content to the representation itself. Celmins has managed to make her extreme realism a form of abstraction, her maximalist detail a kind of Minimalist devotion. The things she chooses to depict also allow for a timelessness that melds with her process. In fact, a suite of paintings of a wave, *A Painting in Six Parts*, 1986–87/2012–16, was based on a photograph that Celmins took from a pier in Venice, California, fifty years ago.

The sculptures in this show boggled the mind. A mottled stone (the kind you might find on a beach) was placed in a vitrine next to its bronze, painted replica. A nineteenth-century slate blackboard in a wooden frame stood next to a double that Celmins had fabricated from wood and paint. (Although the stones sometimes give up their status on sustained looking, I never could guess which blackboard wasn't "real.") These Zeuxis-and-Parrhasius exercises are more than just exceptional feats of copying that recall the original Greek contest of painting. They also bring, with clever subtlety, a new reality to the object they depict: In the case of the tablets, a precise gray monochrome is also the primer surface for a child's drawing and learning.

For all of their reality-shattering precision, Celmins's works contain reminders of the joys of imperfection. The sides of her raw canvases are unpainted, abruptly ending the trompe l'oeil photography effect if we approach them obliquely. And now and again a delightful surprise breaks the systematic sameness of those shimmering stars and shifting waves. In a small canvas in the far room, a falling star slid down the pristine night sky like a smudge of paint. (Even then, it's Celmins leading the charge: I would never think to say a smudge of paint like a falling star.)

—Prudence Peiffer

Peiffer, Prudence. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* May 2017, pp. 328–29.

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

Vija Celmins

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY | 522 WEST 22ND STREET
522 West 22nd Street
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.

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".

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—exacting 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.

— *Alex Jovanovich*

Art in America

Vija Celmins

To walk into Vija Celmins's solo exhibition, her first in seven years, is to enter a world in gray. Detailed paintings of choppy seas and night skies thick with stars—her major subjects since the 1980s—feel immersive even at relatively modest scales because the horizon-less views fill their canvases. On pedestals are small sculptures. These perfect facsimiles of rounded stones suggest dizzying time scales: geologic erosion on the one hand and hundreds of hours work by the artist on the other. Celmins's objects are dense with information, and her gray-scale palettes reveal blues and reds when you look closely. The great *Painting in Six Parts* (1986–87/2012–16), a series of canvases based on a photo she took from a pier in Venice, California, is not so much an example of photorealism as an intensification of vision. Even in a small format it feels like there are too many waves to see. The ocean is exaggerated, as it might be in a memory.

An attempt to capture fleeting memory seems to guide some of the newest works on view, sculptures that pair antique chalkboard writing tablets with exact reproductions of the same. Celmins has re-created all the scratches, dents, and skeins of chalk on objects that might have been found in early-twentieth-century schoolrooms. (The artist was born in Latvia in 1938.) The work is less a demonstration of virtuoso craftsmanship than a display of the struggle to fix ephemeral experience, the impossible task of art. —*William S. Smith*

Pictured: Vija Celmins: *Two Stones*, 1977/2014–16, one found stone and one stone made of bronze and alkyd oil, 2¼ by 8 by 5½ inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks, New York.

Smith, William S. "Vija Celmins." *Art in America,* March 2, 2017.

Flash Art

Vastness in Flatland

TIME MACHINE

Jeff Rian in conversation with Vija Celmins

From Flash Art International *no. 189,*
July–August–September 1996

Vija Celmins (b. 1938; lives in New York) was born in Latvia but grew up in the Midwestern United States. She learned about art from a generation bred in the Great Depression and who believed that art was something crafted with the hand and soul and as timeless and enduring as sky and stone. Celmins was a generation younger than Jasper Johns and a world apart from then-unknown Gerhard Richter, but, like Richter, she found a way to use the photograph as a nugget of reality that she transforms into the flatness of paint. In the early 1960s she migrated to California, where she painted everyday objects and made others, such as a human-size tortoiseshell comb. Then she started painting oceans, galaxies and desert floors — small in scale but vast in intensity — all of which are thresholds of human migration. She quit painting for ten years and made graphite drawings of those same deserts, oceans, night skies, using the "mark" as a guide to clone an integrated surface. In 1977 she began a series called "To Fix the Image in Memory," in which she had eleven stones cast in bronze and then painted them in acrylic to look like the real stones. They're not identical, but it's hard to tell the real stones from the handmade ones. Then she began to paint again, which she does slowly, incrementally, obeying the processes she'd begun long ago of recalibrating physical reality to fit flat dimensions. Celmins denies symbolism, sentiment and idea, and she does not "picture" reality, for her works are hybrids of imagination and reality processed through paint. Yet in her working of surfaces we, as viewers, can find Pythagoras's music of the spheres and an imaginary future, as well as unchanged and unchangeable time.

Vija Celmins: I had a thing for painting as a kid. I went through five years of art school in Indiana. It was very traditional and uninspiring, except for the other students. The biggest influence that I had were the abstract painters from the 1950s, because they wanted to do something impossible — like make a painting that would move you through the paint itself. They were involved with touch. But in the late '50s we were all involved with strokes and gestures. In my twenties I did my first objects — which I always think of as goofy. Like the comb, they don't fit the space they're put in, somehow they fall out. Sometimes the perspective is off, like there is no painting space, only a backdrop. Sometimes the objects seem pushed out, and appear without progression. Later, after I moved to California, I painted everything in my studio — my radio, refrigerator, the heater and so on. Most of those works are gone. Destroyed. Lost. Some of the students from UCLA have them. Then I began making paintings from clippings that I'd collected. I did single images, like the airplanes. I was thinking that I wasn't going to have to compose. Then I stopped painting and took up drawing. The material and the dark and the light of the pencil lead took over. I fell in love with the lead. That relationship lasted until the early 1980s.

Jeff Rian: *Abstract Expressionists showed the painting process, while your work has a surface perfection more like picture-oriented artist Malcolm Morley's or James Rosenquist's: the smallest glitch tarnishes them. Did you somehow combine the two styles?*

VC: Unlike the Photorealists, whose paintings I found really dead and flat, I wanted to bring images back to life by putting them into a real space that you had to confront. I adjusted the image so that it fit on the surface without popping out, so that it was totally flat and natural, and so that all of my strokes were given over just to the image. In Malibu, in maybe late 1968, I had one of those light-bulb thoughts. I used to walk my dog on the beach and take pictures of the ocean — everybody was working from photographs back then, but not so much in LA. It occurred to me that if I were to make an image that was solid looking but still trying to pull you into a picture, there would be a problem. But if I had an image that interlocked with the picture plane, then the problem would be solved. That's when the ocean images evolved. I made a break, and other things opened up: to make it work two-dimensionally, you have to abstract it.

JR: *Your paintings are flat, yet they conjure deep perspectives, timelessness, acoustic space. Do you think about such things?*

VC: You know, when you're in the studio, you can't consciously make that. You make a totally different thing. If somebody makes a rocket, someone else can make it from a set of plans, but I can't tell you how to make a painting and get the same effect. I can tell you formulas, and about flatness, and about compression, but I can't tell you how to make the same painting. It's created in little, unnamable nuances. I wrestle with making the image fit in a small, flat surface. I guess there's a sort of timelessness. The image and the making of the image evolved together. They're traditional, but consciously done.

Rian, Jeff, and Vija Celmins. "Vastness in Flatland." *Flash Art,* May 2017, pp. 84–88.

JR: *Still, your subjects are primary elements — sky, earth, water, home. Traditionally, sky is father, air, remoteness, distance; Earth is mother, home, creativity and fertility; water is elixir, generative fluid — the Muses were water nymphs from whose springs the poets were said to drink. Now we go on vacations to re-create ourselves by looking at water, at sand, at sky, which takes you outside yourself. Also, the elements are timeless in that they register philosophical associations as well as physical sensations.*

VC: But my work is in no way symbolic. It's about making, and about how an image can be flat and illusionary, and how those two are brought together. That's the part where the art is. Skill helps in finding the balance. It's difficult to work with imagery and not have it be totally hokey and stupid. Nowadays assemblage has become a way to deal with subject matter. What I do is build an image in paint. Maybe that gives you the timeless quality, because they are made over and over again. There's a certain amount of skill in holding the image so that it seems correct and full. But they are also very restrained and flat so that you get a sense of time that is captured and held. That's where the paintings come from. But the part that's interesting is the restraint, the total acceptance of flatness; that you're composing something from the three-dimensional world in an abstract space. You sense all those things. It's not idea art. Nor am I like Agnes Martin, who talks about Buddhism and the spirit. That's not my inspiration. I never thought you went to an art museum to say to yourself, "What a great idea!" You go to a science museum for that, or read a book. You look at art to have an experience with things that compress time.

JR: *Can you describe the scale of your paintings?*

VC: One of the reasons that I make small paintings is that I want you to grasp limits. Okay, the ocean is vast and amazing, but the painting has limits: it's a controlled object; you can see what it's made of when you get close to it. At maybe ten feet it goes flat. It lives through your interacting with it.

JR: *So how do you see the viewer's role?*

VC: I'd like viewers to forget that there's an ocean outside of the work. I'd like them to get involved with the work and see that it was made, confined, intriguing, moving, lively and, hopefully, that it's been made from scratch. Then you're really there. The viewer has to participate in the work by looking at it and seeing the changes that have occurred on the surface. Sometimes the audience doesn't see clearly enough to complete it. El Greco, Cézanne, Van Gogh were missed. I come from Latvia, and we Latvians, like Russians, have a very different idea about painting — so different you'd have to write a book to explain it. It's hard to know on what level my art is understood. Right now a lot of younger people are able to see my work in a way that wasn't possible some time ago.

JR: *I'm reminded of Ananda Coomaraswamy saying (I'm paraphrasing here) that art is in the artist and is the knowledge by which things are made. He wrote about traditional art, in which artists used formulaic images and what we call iconography to create images. They can improvise, but only within the formula. They develop skill over a period of time; but it becomes unconscious out of habit. And their works evolve through a kind of calibration process in which adjustments are through conscious and unconscious processes, meaning that you use your skill and way of knowing — whatever that is — to bring art to life.*

Rian, Jeff, and Vija Celmins. "Vastness in Flatland." *Flash Art,* May 2017, pp. 84–88.

Rian, Jeff, and Vija Celmins. "Vastness in Flatland." *Flash Art,* May 2017, pp. 84–88.

VC: Just in making things with a hand and an eye, things happen that your mind couldn't think of. I want to maintain that duality between depth and flatness, keeping the two very close together, so that at one point it looks like nothing, like Formica or like dust and dirt on plastic, then when you look again you see that it was made, that a canvas has been filled up. Everything is close to the surface, but when you step back, it's a galaxy, deep space. A lot of art now is manufactured or made of found objects that are combined together. You have to complete it in your mind. I think there's something profound about working in material that is weird or stranger than words, and is about some other place which is a little more mysterious.

JR: *What about the connection with photography? Richter has said that he wanted to paint a photograph as a kind of object in itself.*

VC: I'm not really into photography or photography-based art. For me a photograph was subject matter apart from myself. Richter is much more conceptual than I am. He has very little tension in his work. He's also diverse and prolific. But he doesn't seem to build his paintings brick by brick. He has an idea, then he creates a "look." Sometimes the look is really masterful. I torture the surface more. I don't like people to read my paintings like photographs that were put in a developer — the developer was a human being. They may look correct, but they're really misshapen and abstracted. In photographs I like subjects — China before the war, places I've never been…

JR: *Richter also seems to use images to elicit memories and associations, which was also something that Pop artists did using commercial images.*

VC: I never really took on the commercial aspects of painting and its use of images, as did Warhol or Lichtenstein or even Richter, who sometimes has a reproduction-like quality in his work. I flounder with how to make the image. The one thing I got from Pop art was that people had the feeling they could do anything. For me it was the possibility to paint anything. I painted my stuff, my clippings. But imagery comes and goes. It's not what painting is really about.

JR: *Walter Friedlander described classical art as being focused on something outside you rather than inside you, and Bernard Berenson described classical art as frontal and timeless and without narrative or an effusion of emotion. Berenson also found a similar classicism in Piero della Francesca and Cézanne.*

VC: Both are balanced: Piero was a magician. His perspective was so critical. Even after you take one apart, something remains that you can't explain. I don't think painting can hold wild emotionalism.

JR: *What other artists do you look at?*

VC: Lots of artists. I like Ryman because he's so sweet. The way he lays out the paint; it's so tender. I used to love Morandi —which you can see in my early work. He had a hushed inwardness and a kind of withdrawal in his objects.

JR: *Your work evokes the silence of a Morandi, although it's somehow much more enveloping, because your echoes run deeper than his works, which are like reliefs or human relics. Yours easily could pre- or postdate us.*

VC: Morandi's paintings are actually quite strange. They all seem to fight for the same space. A lot of artists appreciate Morandi, but is there a Morandi room in the Museum of Modern Art? They push Picasso and Matisse. I understand that, but sometimes Picasso looks sort of quaint. In the Picasso Museum in Paris you see that quaintness. But his art was very connected to his life. When I first started to talk about my work, I would say that I was from Latvia and people would make obvious connections. You don't see Ryman's life story in his paintings.

JR: *To me artists condense things — life, nature, events. You also deal with exteriority in a very interior way.*

VC: I like art and I like nature — I like New York, too, it's very interior. It's a place where you think, where you apply yourself. My longest involvement with nature was working on those stone pieces. I really looked at them. I took five years, on and off, to work on them. Painting them was an experience in looking. The person looking at them now also gets to look hard at them. You're almost forced to. Looking was the only thing that mattered. Sometimes I think my work gets too cerebral, too distilled and refined. I'm going to try to pull away from that. In fact, what we're doing is a little silly, isn't it? Everything that we've talked about is absent until you come face to face with it. A lot of people tend to like the work I did in my late twenties — the objects — because it's more accessible. A lot of articles featured that work. It's hard for me to look at it. I only like the very last things I did — the galaxies, oceans, deserts — and I don't even like those. I just want to be in my studio.

Jeff Rian is a critic based in Paris.

Page 84:
A painting in Six Parts *(detail; 1986-87/2012-16)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Page 86:
"Vija Celmins", Installation view at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York (2017)
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Page 87:
Untitled (Ochre) *(2016)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Next page, from top:
Two Stones *(1977/2014-16)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Blackboard Tableau #14 *(2011-15)*
Courtesy of the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Rian, Jeff, and Vija Celmins. "Vastness in Flatland." *Flash Art,* May 2017, pp. 84–88.

The New York Times

Inside Art

SEPT. 24, 2015

Vija Celmins, "Untitled (Ocean)." Vija Celmins and Matthew Marks Gallery

Changing Galleries

For 50 years, the work of Vija Celmins (pronounced VEE-ya SELL-muns) has been a quietly powerful force in contemporary art. Her drawings and paintings, often of natural expanses like seascapes, desert terrain, starry skies or spider webs, are rendered so meticulously that they seem to tip from verisimilitude into abstraction.

Now Ms. Celmins, 76, will be represented by one of the most powerful galleries in New York. The dealer Matthew Marks said he began talking to Ms. Celmins shortly after her longtime home, McKee Gallery on the Upper East Side, announced its closing. (Its owners said they made the decision because the art world had become an "unhealthy place," with a focus on branding and money that "robs it of the great art experience, of connoisseurship and of trust.")

Mr. Marks, who represents Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Gober and Martin Puryear, said: "I always loved her work and I've known her for a very long time. But she was very loyal, which I respected."

Ms. Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia; grew up in Indianapolis; and worked for many years in Los Angeles before moving to New York in 1981. Her work, which also includes trompe l'oeil sculpture, is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, but her gallery exhibitions tend to be few and far between. Her last solo show in New York was in 2010, and before that, in 2001.

Mr. Marks said he hoped to have an exhibition of new works next spring, but he added that things were still slightly tentative. As to what the new work would be, he added: "Honestly, it's a little too soon for me to talk about. She's holding her cards very close to her chest." RANDY KENNEDY

Kennedy, Randy. "Inside Art: Changing Galleries." *The New York Times,* September 24, 2015, p. C22.

Los Angeles Times

'Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964-1966' at Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Christopher Knight
April 2, 2011

Getting inside an artist's head as she works her way through an essential pivot in her maturing work is an excellent motive for a museum exhibition.

The University of New Mexico Art Museum tried something along those lines in a traveling Eva Hesse show that was seen last fall at the UCLA Hammer Museum, although it didn't quite succeed. The 19 semi-representational oil paintings from 1960 were more like postgraduate student work -- interesting enough, given Hesse's subsequent achievement, but not even close to representing her art's transformational unfolding later in the decade.

By contrast, "Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964-1966" seems right on target. Almost as intensely focused as Celmins' own famously precise, exquisitely crafted work, it looks at a leitmotif that in many ways is the polar opposite of her best known art.

Violence is the recurring subject, not the slow, ruminative quietude of her widely acclaimed paintings and drawings of the untroubled surface of the ocean, desert and far-off moon; stars in the night sky; or the fragile network of a spider's web. These pictures instead show handguns being fired, World War II bombers, a bullet-riddled car, a man in flames and more.

Organized by Franklin Sirmans, curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where the show is now on view, and Michelle White, curator at Houston's Menil Collection, where it opened last fall, the exhibition assembles 12 modest-size paintings and two small painted sculptures, all made during a

tumultuous period in American history. It coincides with her setting aside abstraction for representational painting in1964; the 1965 completion of her graduate education at UCLA; her move into a Venice studio as an independent artist; and her debut solo exhibition at West Hollywood's David Stuart Galleries.

It also coincides with the devastating 1965 rebellion in Watts. The show opens with Celmins' black-and-white painting of the Aug. 20 cover of Time magazine, with its banner "riot" headline and trio of photographs documenting the insurrection in her adopted hometown. Small changes from the magazine signal her work's rapidly evolving direction.

Celmins is pulling the plug on the subjective emotions of Expressionist art. Instead she shows other people's agitation, perhaps partly inspired by Jasper Johns' sober art. (A large 1962 Johns show at Everett Ellin Gallery coincided with her student move to L.A.) Burning buildings, an overturned car and fleeing looters are rendered more loosely than in the magazine's photographs, but her brushwork is by no means painterly.

The only color in the original magazine cover -- a bright crimson logo and wide red border designed to generate graphic oomph on the newsstand -- has been drained away. Instead, "serious" black and gray corresponds to the news photographs' palette.

Celmins is painting mass-media's hyped-up representation of a horribly violent event, but she is doing so in a manner that elevates contemplative dispassion. One result, given an absence of Expressionist exaggeration for emotional effect, is the bare beginning of a taut pictorial tension between the subject (a pictured riot) and the object (a painting).

She was working in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, while the brutal escalation of the Vietnam War and African American and feminist civil rights struggles were prominently featured in newspapers and on TV. She also turned to fierce personal history: Born in Latvia in 1938, she fled with her family during the Nazi occupation, eventually settling in Indianapolis after the war.

Some sense of that displacement registers in the painted 1965 sculptures. One is a child's puzzle, the other a nominal doll house, its gray exterior painted with images of destruction. The home's interior is disconcertingly lined with fur that recalls Meret Oppenheim's Surrealist fur-lined teacup -- cozy yet erotic.

Everything crystallizes the next year, with masterful paintings of World War II airplanes in somber, Johnsian tones of gunmetal gray. The largest, "Suspended Plane," is less than 2 feet high and 3 feet wide. Based on a found photograph of an American B-17 bomber but altered in the number of visible engines, it contains a strange anomaly: The airplane is aloft, high in a hazy sky, but its propellers have stopped.

The plane is suspended in space. A "suspended plane," of course, is also a pretty good thumbnail description of a painting that hangs on a wall. In the 1960s wake of the 1950s Abstract Expressionist juggernaut, Celmins is redefining painting.

Knight, Christopher. "'Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964-1966' at Los Angeles County Museum of Art."
Los Angeles Times, April 2, 2011, p. D1.

The implied tension between subject and object that bubbled up in the Time magazine painting now starts to hum with the precision of a tuning fork. Another painting, "Flying Fortress," presses on.

Here the anomaly is lodged in a disturbing illusion: The airplane's tail section is breaking apart from the fuselage at 30,000 feet. Pure abstraction was the "flying fortress" that protected the prerogatives of the institutional avant-garde; but what was touted by abstractionists as the primacy of the picture plane was coming apart at the seams by the 1960s.

Celmins' "picture plane" uses the intersection between painting and photography with the precision of a strategic weapon, shooting down avant-garde art's long-standing prohibition against representational imagery. The two-dimensional flatness of the picture, which abstraction was said to respect, also survived in a painting that records a photograph's flat surface.

The war machinery and other grim violence depicted in these paintings arise from the times, as well as from the artist's personal history. But Celmins is directing them toward art's stultifying constraints and suffocating taboos. She pries open a space for contemplation, using art's own power to advocate for what is inevitably excluded.

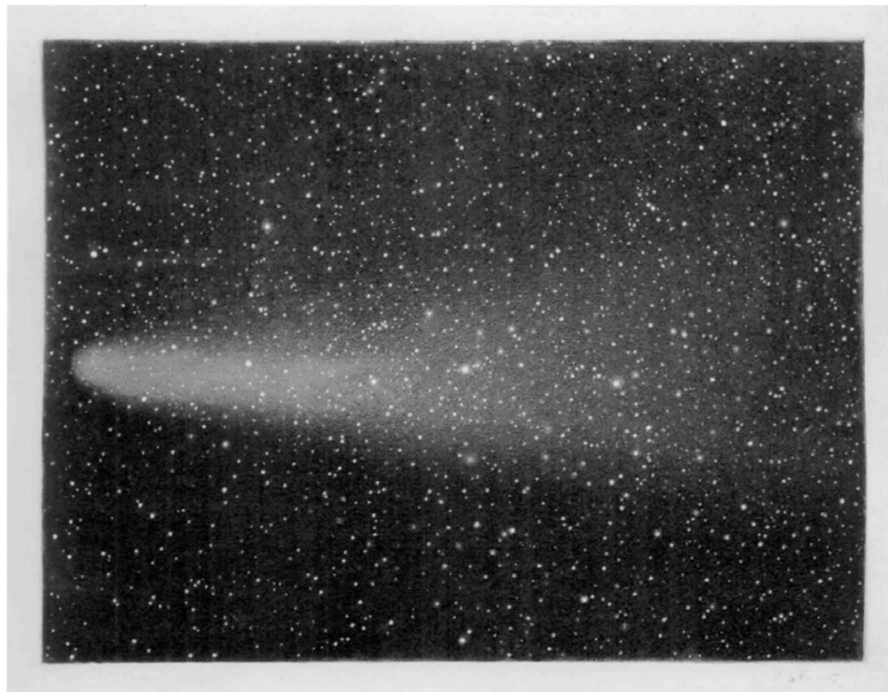
The exhibition comes with a handsome small catalog, which has a few factual glitches. Pasadena Art Museum curator Walter Hopps became director in 1963, not 1962, and the Campbell's soup can paintings that Andy Warhol showed at La Cienega's Ferus Gallery were not silk-screened.

More troublesome is its academic repetition of the mistaken assumption that Pop art functioned as a critique of popular culture. In fact, Pop used mass-media images and techniques to critique art culture -- just as Celmins' marvelous airplane paintings so brilliantly demonstrate.

Still, this is a smart and satisfying exhibition. Like its tumultuous social era, Celmins' breakthrough work turned existing conditions upside-down. "Television and Disaster" shows how.

MODERNPAINTERS

REVIEWS



VIJA CELMINS, ***UNTITLED #10*, 1994–95**. CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 17 1/8 X 22 IN. COURTESY MCKEE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

LOS ANGELES

VIJA CELMINS: A DRAWINGS RETROSPECTIVE

HAMMER MUSEUM

Vija Celmins has claimed that she likes to work with "impossible images, impossible because they are nonspecific, too big, spaces unbound." This survey of 65 of her drawings, which originated at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, in Paris, spans the '60s to the present and showcases her mastery of impossible images and then some. It is fitting to view the show at the museum overseen by her alma mater, UCLA (Celmins received her MFA in 1965).

At the entrance, one of her mesmerizing "night sky" drawings, *Holding on to the Surface* (1983), defines in its title the terms of what has always been important to her. Out of its weighty deposits of graphite on a meticulously prepared white acrylic ground, Celmins has extracted numerous weightless "moments," making light material and tangible. From the catalogue we learn that another possible reason for the segregation of this work from the rest of the show is its square format, which she abandoned because she found it "too still. Too heroic . . . and too symmetrical." Celmins's commitment to a horizontal format also proves to be a stabilizing influence (emphasizing the landscape's orientation keeps the viewer earthbound).

Celmins's ability to substantiate and maintain such a consistently moving experience over 40 years is striking, particularly when we're reminded (by the earliest work presented here) of some of the traps into which her enterprise could have fallen. The first room of trompe l'œil drawings from the late 1960s charts the influence of Magritte and Pop art, as well as the steps that Celmins clearly took from the beginning to resist relying on either mere attitude or cult of personality. For example, *Letter* (1968) teeters on the edge of being a too-sweet conceit: a letter from her mother (addressed in proper cursive to "Miss Vija Celmins") has been rendered as if it were a specimen, the envelope dropped on a muted gray ground at a casual angle, casting shadows around its crumpled edges. A closer look, however, reveals two key features: the five "stamps" present a cobbled-together image based on the attack on Pearl Harbor and have been collaged onto the surface of the drawing. Surrounded by six other drawings from 1967–68, mainly renderings of clipped newspaper photographs that also deal with World War II (the story of Celmins's childhood flight in 1944 from Latvia to Indianapolis, where her family settled in 1948, is well documented), *Letter* remains a compelling example of Celmins's early work, despite its threat of sentimentality (which fortunately never returns to her work).

The 1969 moon landing had a profound effect on Celmins's practice. She first incorporated pictures of the moon into earlier drawings such as *Moonscape* (1968). Celmins soon expanded her conceptual reach by making pairs of drawings that remove any direct reference to their photographic sources. *Untitled (Double Moon Surface)* (1969) looks as if she merely took the image from its earlier companion drawing, slid it a bit, and redrew it as precisely as the first. Here it's important to think about the implications of there being no "blur" in her work: unlike Richter, Celmins is unwilling to let go of the surface.

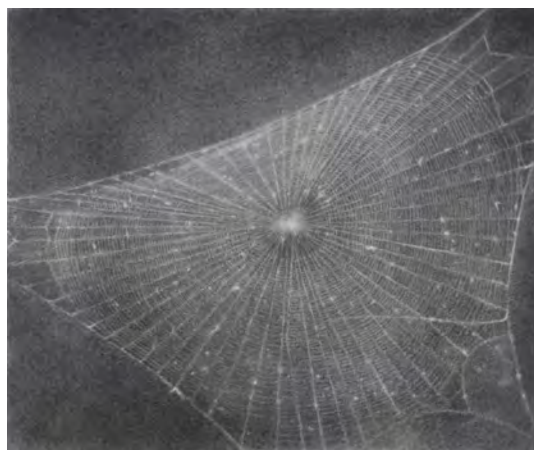
Celmins's drawings of the ocean are her best-known works, and they expand the range of her interest in nonspecificity by incorporating into the work a surface that is anything but still. Because of their familiarity, I found myself focusing more on their idiosyncratic moments. *Untitled (Ocean)* (1969) for example, for the first time brought to my mind images of water from early-20th-century-American painters like Winslow Homer and John Marin—East Coast rather than Venice Beach, but nonetheless connected in terms of a layered and graphic sensibility, and even, I would say, made with a similar sense of adventure.

It's a sense of adventure that makes Celmins's work thrilling, but it is the restraint of her vision that intensifies it. Take, for example, the side-by-side presentation of four of her drawings of the Coma Berenices galaxy from 1973–74, repeated images of the same patch of massive sky done in various tones of gray, capturing surfaces ranging from foglike to bulletproof. They are hard to look at all at once because of the atmospheric effects that they instigate on the paper and in the eyes. To revise the words of Michael Fried, presentness, even when delirious, can still be grace. —TERRY R. MYERS

Myers, Terry. "Vija Celmins: A Drawings Retrospective." *Modern Painters,* April 2007, pp. 96–97.

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

The New York Times



THE WEEK AHEAD: Feb. 4 - 10

By Randy Kennedy
February 4, 2007

The artist VIJA CELMINS is nothing if not disciplined. When she decided in the late 1960s that painting no longer provided fertile territory for her explorations, she abandoned it for almost two decades. "In my quest for clarity," she said in one interview, "I decided that I was going to do everything with just a pencil."

While it may have been painting's loss, it meant a relative wealth of Ms. Celmins's obsessive trompe l'oeil works in graphite: long-gestated and almost heroically restrained renderings of the surface of the moon and the ocean, the night sky, and objects and photos in her studio. These works form the heart of a drawings retrospective that opened Jan. 28 at the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, the only American stop for the exhibition, which originated at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The show represents a homecoming for Ms. Celmins, who, after emigrating from Latvia, lived in the Venice section of Los Angeles, for two decades before moving to New York. It features more than 60 works, including well-known charcoal drawings from the 1990s of spider webs and, once again, the sky filled with what seems to be an endless number of stars. Through April 22, 10899 Wilshire Boulevard, (310) 443-7000.

Throughout her career Ms. Celmins has worked from photographs, often -- in her thoroughly controlled way -- using them as biographical tools. A more explicit link between photography and memory is explored at the Guggenheim in New York this month in "FAMILY PICTURES," a show that focuses on the representation of children and families in contemporary photographs and video. Drawn from the museum's collection, the exhibition features artists like Rineke Dijkstra, Catherine Opie, Loretta Lux and Gregory Crewdson, whose work varies from the flatly documentary to the elaborately staged, both relying on and subverting the age-old tradition of domestic portraiture with a camera. Through April 16, (212) 423-3500.

Photo: "Web #1" (1998), a charcoal drawing by Vija Celmins. A retrospective of Ms. Celmins's drawings recently opened at the University of California, Los Angeles. (Photo by Collection of Anthony d'Offay, London)

Kennedy, Randy. "Vija Celmins: Hammer Museum, Los Angeles." *The New York Times,* February 4, 2007, p. C4.

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TATE ETC.

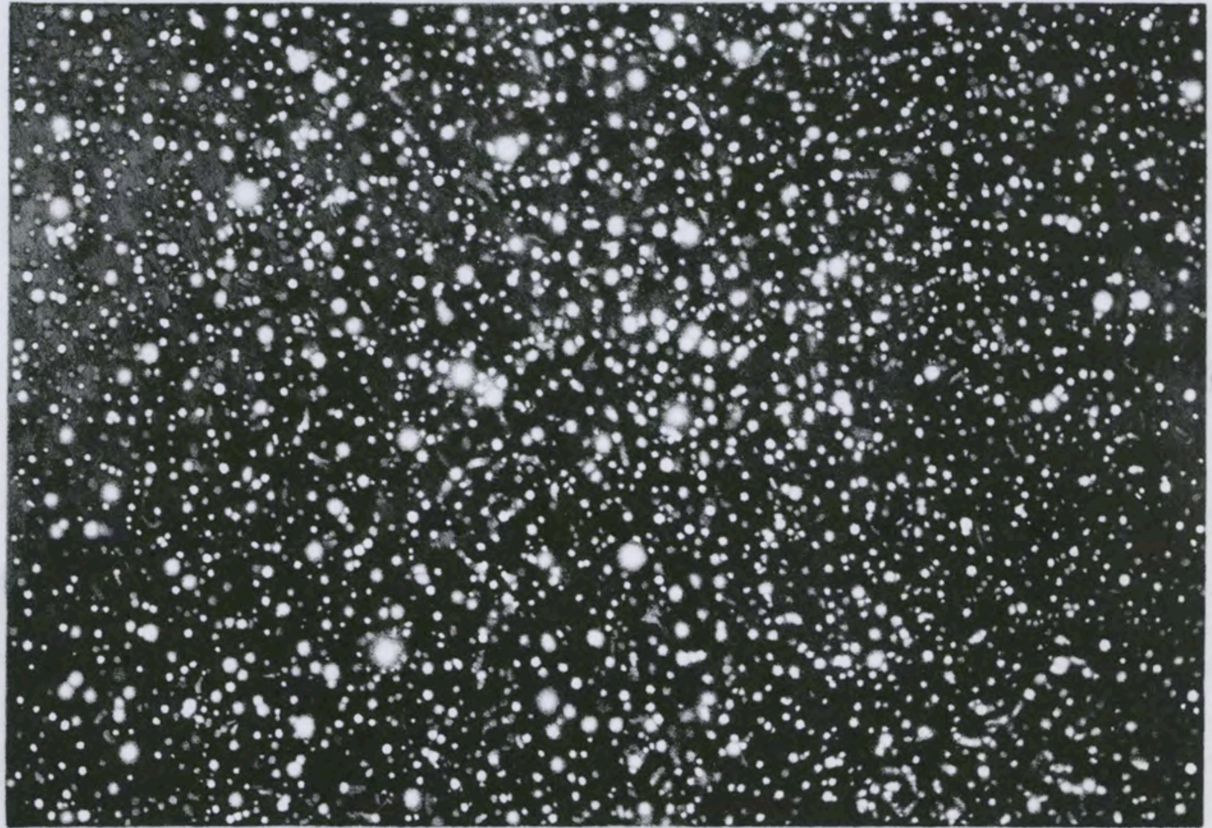
Interview: Vija Celmins was born in Latvia in 1938, fled with her family to Germany in advance of the Soviet army in 1944 and emigrated to the USA in 1948. Since the early 1960s she has made intricate black-and-white drawings of a small range of subjects – seascapes, night skies, the desert floor – some of which have taken a year to complete. Her work has been variously described as "elusive", having a "hallucinatory calm" and existing in "a timeless autonomous realm". This exclusive interview coincided with her drawings retrospective at the Pompidou Centre, Paris

THINKING DRAWING

BY VIJA CELMINS AND SIMON GRANT

Grant, Simon, and Vija Celmins. "Thinking Drawing." *Tate Etc,* Spring 2007, pp. 88–95.

Vija Celmins
Star Field III
(1983)
Graphite on
acrylic
ground on
paper
53.5×68.5cm



Vija Celmins
Bikini (1968)
Graphite on
acrylic ground
on paper
34×46.5cm

Grant, Simon, and Vija Celmins. "Thinking Drawing." *Tate Etc,* Spring 2007, pp. 88–95.

VIJA CELMINS

When I was a student we were all interested in Abstract Expressionism. We wanted to do big, great paintings. However, later on, when I was living on the West Coast, I dropped it and started making paintings that were based on what I could see. I tried to forget what was in my mind; I had been thinking too much about the work and inventing too much, and it seemed to mean nothing. So I thought I would try to get to some other place that was a little more primitive, maybe more old-fashioned, without really thinking. I was trying to find a touch that was mine and not that of some other famous artist such as de Kooning or Gorky, both of whom I admire. I painted everything in my studio – spoons, forks, my food, cups, a lamp, the toaster.

SIMON GRANT

Why just things in your studio? What about outside? Because Venice Beach, where you were living at the time, is a nice place, isn't it?

VIJA CELMINS

Yes, but artists in Los Angeles didn't sit outside in the smog on the freeway, painting. I did drive around at the beginning and try to do landscape – not really from looking, but more from what I knew about how a painting should look. I was not used to looking outside the painting itself and the studio. I wanted to be an abstract artist really, but to revitalise my work I started painting the things around me instead.

SIMON GRANT

I'm curious why you chose the indoor objects, because a lot of other West Coast artists, such as James Turrell, were interested in the light…

VIJA CELMINS

Well, I got interested in light a little bit later when I became more sensitive to the landscape of the West. However, I was basically a painter with the baggage of brushes and turpentine, paint tubes and a two-dimensional support. My return to still-life was inspired by a desire to look outside my head to paint what I could see. There were so many artists working with objects in the early 1960s – Warhol, Oldenburg, Johns, and Morley with his photographs. I also liked Morandi's fascination with objects, and I remember the shock in his work of finding something so small and modest, but yet having such a powerful presence. I looked at Magritte's paintings also. I started going through my photographs and newspaper clippings that I had collected – images of Second World War planes, a nuclear explosion at Bikini Atoll, an airship – and I made drawings of those.

Source material for **Vija Celmins**'s early drawings (1991)

Grant, Simon, and Vija Celmins. "Thinking Drawing." *Tate Etc,* Spring 2007, pp. 88–95.

SIMON GRANT Were they intended as memory pictures?

VIJA CELMINS Maybe anxious memories, I guess. Memories from my childhood in Latvia and Germany. These were partly autobiographical works. I think I was reliving and thinking about who I was, maybe, and the images that were in my head. Also, the Vietnam War was going on, which at the time I was crazed about.

SIMON GRANT Yes. You took part, along with Donald Judd, Eva Hesse and James Rosenquist, in the mass demonstration, the 'Artists Tower of Protest', that was put up along La Cienaga Boulevard in Los Angeles in 1966…

VIJA CELMINS I did march and yell and protest. And some violent images did come up in my work.

SIMON GRANT At first glance they seem photorealistic, but…

VIJA CELMINS Well, I found the work of the photorealists a bit dead, but I got interested in the photograph. I used the photograph as a guide, so I would not have to worry about the image. They are images within an image within an image – drawings of two-dimensional images. I was trying to bring the images back to life by putting them in a real space that you confront. I don't think anyone else was making work like this at the time, not clippings of disastrous events. Now they look a bit ridiculous to me.

SIMON GRANT Why ridiculous?

VIJA CELMINS They look almost too contrived. Of course, I didn't really think like that at the time. I remember thinking that the making of the image was reason enough to do it. It was about finding a touch; a way that the image could sit on the surface. The whole point for me was that even though art has been through a million things, I wanted to get in touch with something more primitive than my wandering and skipping brain.

SIMON GRANT In this period you chose what seem like male subjects – airplanes, a gun, a nuclear test explosion…

VIJA CELMINS I think I felt that these images belonged to all of us… they were our images. However, I must have been interested in Freudian, phallic imagery of some sort, right? There is a photograph of me taken in 1966. I had been working on a large sculpture of a pencil stub, which is sitting beside me, along with a nude mannequin that someone had brought over for me to decorate for a show… that photo would have inspired Freud! I think many young artists have sex on their minds, and I think I did too. The drawing of the gun [*Clipping with Pistol*, 1968] came from the fact that a friend of mine had been attacked and her boyfriend gave her a gun, so I wanted to do a picture of it. I did some paintings, and then got interested in gun magazines, tore out some clippings, did this one drawing and then lost interest.

SIMON GRANT You did paintings, but then you decided to stop, and to concentrate on making drawings. What happened?

VIJA CELMINS I raced through many object paintings, being unsatisfied with the conventional space they had. Then I had a realisation that the image and the support should unify, and the way to do it was with a pencil. I thought the precise point would be a better and clearer recorder of my touch. So I went ahead making all of my art with a pencil. It was stupid, in a way, because the drawing took me out of a richer life in painting for some fifteen years. At any rate, I started drawing the photographs and clippings I had collected. I loved the images brought back from space, which were showing up in magazines, and I myself had been taking

Grant, Simon, and Vija Celmins. "Thinking Drawing." *Tate Etc,* Spring 2007, pp. 88–95.

photos of the ocean in Venice. I had been thinking of making a film about the surface of the sea, and had been inspecting it through the camera. I did make several short films, one of my light bulb, which hung above my table in the studio… That one, I still have. But mostly I was deadly serious about the drawings, as you might be able to tell by looking at them.

SIMON GRANT — So, in fact, you *were* actually interested in light, as well as doing things in your studio?

VIJA CELMINS — I think I've always been interested in light. It is what makes the images. The dark graphite and the light of the paper unfold together. I made them in a deadpan way – and spoke of them as having "no composition/no gestures/no artificial colour/no distortion/no angst or effort showing/no ego/deadpan paintings. I know nothing, I compose nothing". Sort of silly, thinking about it now. Though I remember at the time that I had this feeling that no matter what I did, just to present the facts, there was still something in the work that was mine, that came through the making. Later, maybe twenty years later, I thought I had found some kind of touch, not really a stroke, but a touch, but now I believe it is more like a sensibility that you present. What do you think?

SIMON GRANT — I think it's a tone. There is a mixture of restraint and a feeling of the energy that's gone into making them.

VIJA CELMINS — I think the restraint comes, maybe, from my own nature, from wanting to hold something back in the work, and from the fact that I had rejected so many things. I had rejected gesture and composing – obviously, I'm composing, but in a very toned down way. I'd given up colour. I'd given up a big size, which we all wanted so badly. I'd made some very big things before I dropped the scale down. I'd been very inspired by Ad Reinhardt's 1953 essay *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, in which he saw a new way for painting, based primarily on negation and reduction. It was beautiful writing from a frustrated but intelligent man trying to find in words what art might be. I think I took much of it to heart, and I thought: "What is me?" So I threw away a lot of the stuff that naturally went into painting. I wanted to make it lean. I did a talk with Chuck Close in a book for Art Press, in which we discuss our relationship with using a recognisable image in our work. He is really involved in systems of perception… me too. Though my work is more varied. As you can see, the work gets a little flatter as time goes by. For instance, in the later ocean work from 1977, the image lies close to the paper, and describes the surface of that paper as much as anything.

SIMON GRANT — What's the difference between the earlier ocean works and the later ones?

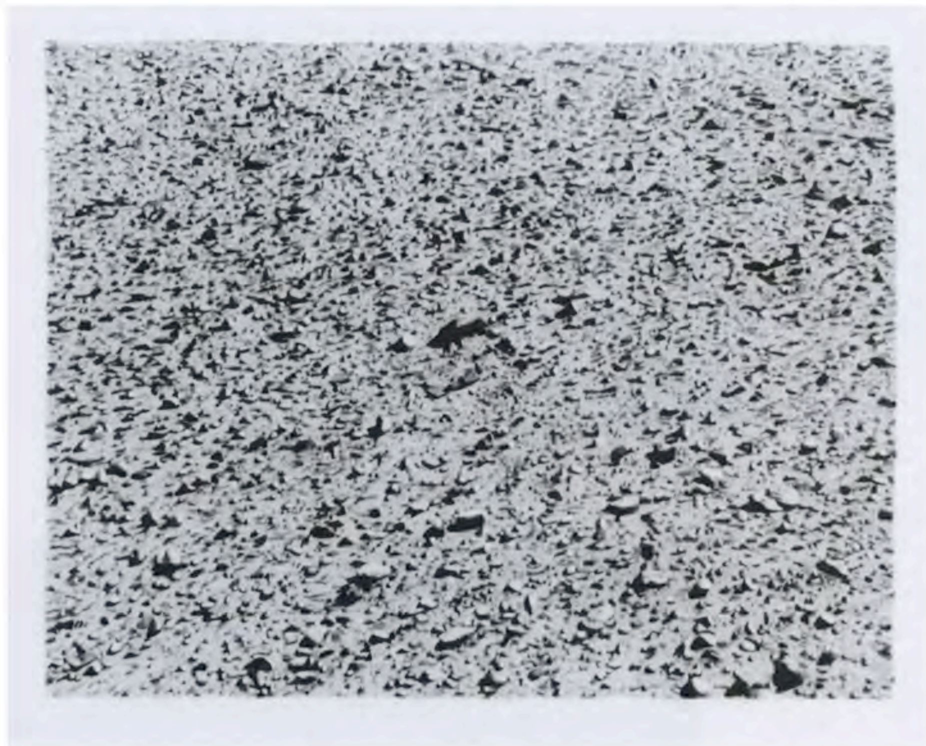
VIJA CELMINS — The earlier work has these big Baroque dark "holes" in the waves. The waves are more like objects and make a more animated, pictorial space. The later work is a larger view, but made with smaller waves, more even and regular, with the tone of the pencil kept in check. The image is more flat with a slight indication of perspective.

SIMON GRANT — Why did you keep repeating the image of the sea?

VIJA CELMINS — I thought that if everything were stable, what would come out more was the differences in pencil, and the very subtle differences in my mood and in my handling of space.

SIMON GRANT — So, in your own head, you had always intended to see them as a group?

Vija Celmins
Untitled [Regular Desert] (1973)
Graphite on acrylic ground on paper
30.5 × 38 cm



VIJA CELMINS

Yes. I think if you can stand to look so hard, you will see many repetitions and series from one room to the next. In the work of the 1960s and 1970s, the image is concentrated and projects out into the room, inviting you in and pushing you away. In the later dark night series and webs, the work comes into view only when you are close to it… it invites an intimate inspection. You see what a player the charcoal itself is. In the earlier work, the image itself, and not how it is made, is stronger and these drawings work best at a distance. I like to think that part of my interest in how a work projects came about from spending a lot of time in the desert, where space is often shifting and appears flat at certain times, and is very illusionary. In the late 1960s I used to hang out with Doug Wheeler, Jim Turrell and Tony Berlant. None of them was a painter, but we all loved the desert. At first, you don't see much, but after spending some time, your perception sharpens, space shifts and changes, and there is this incredible gorgeous light. There is light, of course, in all this work. Maybe in the galaxies it shows up more?

SIMON GRANT

It's definitely a different feeling. You get a very good sense of intimacy with the desert and ocean works. The galaxy works are more intensely made.

VIJA CELMINS

The material, charcoal and pencil and paper are bigger players in the night sky pieces. The work is much more abstract, and even though your mind says this is a deeper space, I think the uniform nature of the graphite sitting on that surface keeps you engaged in the flat plane. There really is no depth to it.

SIMON GRANT

How are the pencil marks actually made?

VIJA CELMINS

The graphite is just laid on bit by bit, as dense as it can go. The white spaces – the stars – are patches of the paper that have been left blank; I have drawn around them.

SIMON GRANT

Some of the pencil marks are so thickly laid on, it almost looks like paint.

Grant, Simon, and Vija Celmins. "Thinking Drawing." *Tate Etc,* Spring 2007, pp. 88–95.

VIJA CELMINS

Yes. *Star Field III* (1983) took about a year to do. This is a terrific drawing, though I thought I would go crazy if I did another. I did do three, then I stopped drawing totally. As you can tell, even though I try to keep my brain out of things, I'm always beating up the work with a relentless criticising of it. I went back to painting, and did a series of paintings that looked very much like this drawing – dense, layered, very physical. I used to say they looked like a rubber tyre or Formica, they're so closed off and over-finished. I didn't get back to drawing for about ten years, until around 1994.

SIMON GRANT

Did your approach to the work change?

VIJA CELMINS

Yes. I started to use charcoal dust to make some pictures, and I started using an eraser, which I never used before. Some – such as *Untitled no. 14* (1997) – are done with an electric eraser along with other erasers, which is why there is a slightly mechanical quality of recording the stars. I got so crazy working on these, so I relieved this by doing the very corny image of cobwebs.

Vija Celmins
Web #5
(1999)
Charcoal on paper
56×65cm

SIMON GRANT

Why cobwebs?

VIJA CELMINS

Well, first, I found some scientific images of webs at the natural history museum. Very exciting. I thought these webs described the space I always wanted to describe – a surface that has small facets that rigorously account for and record every intersection; a lived on surface. Also, it was an emotional image that would draw people in, so the carefully accounted for space was contrasted with an emotional melancholic image. You know, I like that combination of contrasts – a sort of double reality.

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SIMON GRANT — You use the word emotional. Many also describe your work as beautiful.

VIJA CELMINS — Well, you can never really go to beauty like that in your work. I never think of it; sometimes it comes later. I like to think that I neutralise and re-describe an image, and pin it into its new space.

SIMON GRANT — However, it is by your hand; it's been mediated through your touch.

VIJA CELMINS — Yes, through my sensibility. It's also a record of a relationship that I've had with a set of materials, the making. I try to make the work in a way that has some integrity. I want the flatness to be really real. The image, of course, is not real – it is not the ocean, or a spider's web, or anything. I want the image to find a relationship with the other reality of the plane. It is integrity in a thought-out way, so that you can accept both of them at the same time.

SIMON GRANT — How is it, seeing more than 40 years worth of drawings together after such a long time?

VIJA CELMINS — Some of it I like, other parts not. There is a feeling of surprise and a bit of wonder. I am a bit detached from it. I see some things that I would not ever do again – like that kind of quality where I tend to close up an image and not let you in, making it too concrete. They almost seem like sculpture. I think to myself, couldn't I get a little more air into the pictures? When you look at them, don't you want to come up for breath?

SIMON GRANT — That tension and intensity is one of the good aspects.

VIJA CELMINS — It seems like this show is a real eye test… with so many things going on. I've done my part, obsessive as it is. People looking at it have to take it someplace else, they can make the work live.

'Vija Celmins: A Drawings Retrospective', Pompidou Centre, Paris, until 8 January, then tours to The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 28 January – 22 April. The catalogue includes an essay by Jonas Storsve and a text by Colm Tóibín.

Simon Grant is editor of TATE ETC.

Vija Celmins working on *Night Sky #22*, 2000

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The New York Times

ART REVIEW

With No Hidden Agenda, The Process Is the Point

By GRACE GLUECK

A stretch of choppy, brooding gray sea, a patch of starry night sky and a layer of rough desert floor are images that keep recurring in the work of the Latvian-born artist Vija Celmins, a painter, sculptor, photographer, draftsman and printmaker.

But does she think of them as meditative statements or metaphors for, say, the mysteries of the cosmos? No way. "I have no messages in my work," she said in a recent interview. What interests her is process, playing with the challenges and possibilities of a picture's plane.

Although Ms. Celmins is best known for intricately worked drawings and paintings whose intensity holds the viewer's gaze, she has produced a limited number of prints — fewer than 50 intaglios, lithographs and woodcuts — in part because of her drive for reworking until she is satisfied. Her imagery here, like that in her other mediums, is restricted to a very few motifs, revisited over and over again.

Now, the first retrospective of her graphic work, "The Prints of Vija Celmins" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, organized by Samantha Rippner, assistant curator of drawings and prints, encourages a comprehensive look at her production. It is an occasion because Ms. Celmins's slow, perfectionist approach to printmaking has given her work a polished artistry that is a pleasure to behold, from the infinite pains she takes in drawing and technique to the exacting placement of the image on its surrounding sheet of paper.

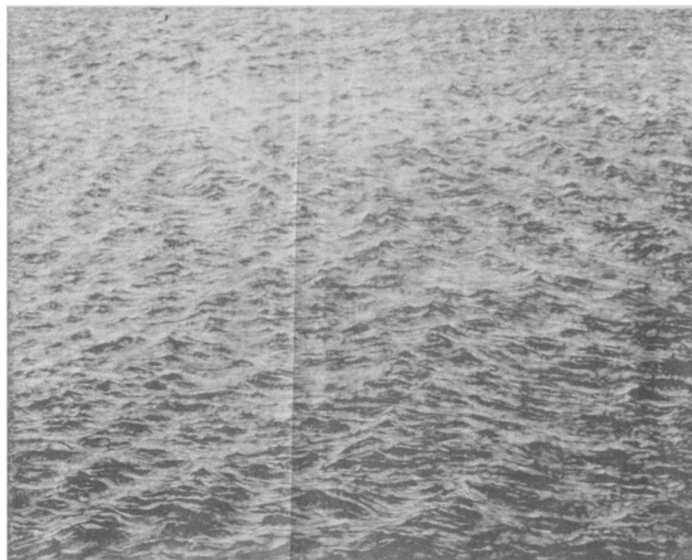
Working from photographs that she mostly makes herself, or other secondary sources, Ms. Celmins uses traditional print techniques — etching, lithography and so forth — rather than pursuing innovative measures, to produce her distinctive graphic results. Her most characteristic prints are those of the ocean and the star-filled night sky.

More recently, she has added another natural phenomenon, spider webs, to her repertory, but these seem less compelling than her more familiar imagery. In earlier work she combined her own motifs in dialogues with "found" pictures — a drawing by the 15th-century Italian painter Paolo Uccello, a photograph of a Jovian moon, a news shot of a falling plane, a picture of Marcel Duchamp's "Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)" of 1920.

But it's the ocean and sky images to which Ms. Celmins has been most devoted, and which she has used to push her printmaking skills to the max. She stresses that their subject matter is the photographs she has taken rather than the ocean itself. The prints, whatever the technique, look very much alike, but they are subtly differentiated by the artist's urge to try new approaches.

The ocean prints go back to 1970, when Ms. Celmins, after first exploring the subject in a series of graphite drawings, made a lithograph at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles.

In most of them, done in a variety of techniques from drypoint to wood engraving, the compositional space is entirely filled by a densely worked image of evenly lighted but restless gray water made of the most intricate strokes. The angle of viewing may be slightly varied, but the hypnotic rhythms of the water in its



Metropolitan Museum of Art

"Ocean Surface Wood Engraving 2000" by Vija Celmins.

"The Prints of Vija Celmins" remains at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, (212) 535-7710, through Dec. 29.

Glueck, Grace. "With No Hidden Agenda, The Process Is the Point." *The New York Times,* November 1, 2002, p. E38.

continual heaving remain a constant, implying — whether the artist intends it or not — the eternal nature of the universe.

(In a 1970 drawing of the subject, one of the few drawings in the show, Ms. Celmins placed a very faint white X in the center of the composition, defiantly defacing her signature image and also canceling the illusion of distant space by asserting the two-dimensional nature of the sheet.)

The galactic skies that are also a Celmins specialty date back to the 1970's, too. The most spectacular is "Strata" (1983), a big, gridded work done in the highly labor-intensive technique of mezzotint, whose inked plate is a rich black surface that must be scraped or burnished where lighter tones are required.

For this sizable print, 25 small plates were glued side by side to an aluminum backing, then Ms. Celmins scraped openings on the surface to create a myriad of twinkling stars and outline the geometric grid. The grid was important as a register of the printmaking process, and it also stresses the flatness of the picture plane, holding the eye back from a perception of deep space.

In the 1980's, when she started working with Gemini G.E.L., a Los Angeles print atelier, Ms. Celmins took along an assortment of "found" images, culled from books and magazines, that were different from her usual sea, sky and earth motifs. Among them was a reproduction of Uccello's famous perspective view of a chalice, set in illusionistic space that is different from the flat plane in which she usually works.

In images of sea, stars and sand, Vija Celmins seeks flawless technique.

Because of the two types of space they occupied, she put the Uccello drawing together with one of her sky images, in an aquatint and etching called "Constellation — Uccello" (1983). She tried the pairing idea with other images, including the Jovian moon and a reverse sky image, in which the sky is white and the stars little pepper sprays of black ("Jupiter Moon — Constellation," 1983).

The best of these combinations is a triple play, "Concentric Bearings D" (1985), one of a suite of four intaglio prints on the same theme. This one includes Duchamp's 1920 rotary construction, a starry night sky and a falling plane, an image taken from a wartime photograph that reminded Ms. Celmins of her European childhood in the chaos of World War II.

Why link them? The idea was their similar spatial gyrations; the plane spiraling down, the rotary device spinning, the stars turning, in what the artist describes as "a similarity of events" that holds the work together. If their format of stepped-down rectangles comes off as a bit textbookish and rigid, that's a minor blip in an overall body of work that demands and merits close attention.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE ART WORLD

DARK STAR

The intimate grandeur of Vija Celmins.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

If I were stranded on a desert island and could have only one contemporary art work, it would be a picture of a starry sky, a spiderweb, or a choppy ocean by Vija Celmins—a smallish painting, drawing, or print that is sombre, tingling with intelligence, and very pure. I imagine that the work's charge of obdurate consciousness would give my sanity a fighting chance against the island's lonely nights, insect industry, and engirdling, unquiet waters. Celmins, who is sixty-two, is the least well-known major figure of a generation that includes Edward Ruscha in Los Angeles, where she spent formative years, and such old friends as Chuck Close and Brice Marden in New York. Her low profile becomes her. An art-lover's artist, she inspires proprietary passion in her admirers. She seems as immune to public fame as the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, whose hushed still-lifes move the world one solitary viewer at a time. Her eight paintings and six prints in a beautiful show at the McKee Gallery, which will run until June 22nd, represent the artist in top form, casting a hermetic spell that can seem at once too deep and too obvious for words.

Celmins is a painter of nature who operates at a considerable distance from her subjects. She works from clippings of reproduced, usually black-and-white photographs, some of them decrepit or blurry, and builds her labor-intensive paintings with many glazed and sanded layers of alkyd or oil on wood-backed linen. An early pioneer of Photo-Realism—like Close, and akin to the great German Gerhard Richter—she has convincingly demonstrated that photography, far from being the "death of painting," can give the medium a foundation on which to reëstablish its exclusive powers. The force of her work

COURTESY McKEE GALLERY

"Web I" (2000): Celmins's spiderwebs are symbols of a spirit that operates beyond the frontiers of normal perception.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Dark Star: The intimate grandeur of Vija Celmins." *The New Yorker,* June 4, 2001, pp. 85–87.

does not come through in reproduction: you have to be there. With subtle effects of texture and captured light, her starscapes at McKee register as physical objects even as they convey infinity. You see that the "stars" are dots of white and gray paint and not distant suns, and that grayish washes are something more tangible than the nebulae or the fogs of terrestrial light which they suggest. You may reflect that each picture represents a tiny fragment of even the visible firmament, but its integrity makes for a satisfying sense of wholeness. This is a miracle of every successful painting: a world at a glance. Celmins's starscapes dramatize it with their intimate treatment of the largest possible subject. The double sensation of humility and grandeur is at once thinner and sharper in her superb prints. To evoke the spongy blackness of deep space she employs the rare technique of mezzotint, which is produced by burnishing a uniformly roughened copper plate. Her woodcuts of rumpled ocean surfaces stun. Their enraptured precision recalls the musical tapestries of Philip Glass, and, I like to think, brings a collegial smile to the spectral lips of Albrecht Dürer.

Celmins was born in 1938, in Riga, Latvia. In 1991, she described her childhood to Chuck Close: it was, she said, "full of excitement and magic, and terror, too—bombs, fires, fear, escape—very eventful." She went on, "It wasn't till I was ten years old and living in the United States that I realized living in fear wasn't normal." A church agency brought her and her family to America. They eventually settled in Indianapolis, where she attended art school. In 1961, she won a scholarship to Yale's summer-school art program; there, she met Close and Marden. Travelling in Europe, she was astonished by her first face-to-face exposure to Velázquez, in the Prado. "I remember remembering those paintings for a long while," she told Close. After moving to Los Angeles, in 1962, she began to paint moody, oddly Velázquez-like still-lifes of things in her studio—a lamp, a hot plate, a space heater—and a view of the freeway from a snapshot that she took in her car. (That sun-bleached roadscape strikes me as the all-time, definitive Los Angeles painting.) Early memories reemerged in images of fire and violence. Celmins also made poetically desolate grisaille paintings from old news photographs of Second World War aircraft. One showed a bomber aloft with stilled propellers, and with indistinguishable objects spilling from its rear door. It may be the loneliest picture I've ever seen. All of Celmins's art feels at once depressive and furiously game.

Celmins, who lives by herself in New York, is the sort of loner who has innumerable chums. She is a dog-lover, a bird-watcher, a hiker of remote deserts, and a bedevilled perfectionist. She postponed her current show once and nearly put it off again. "I was working thirteen and fourteen hours a day," she told me recently, in a tone less of complaint than of appalled surprise. "It's so hard, you know?" Her struggles with artist's block are legendary among her friends. Often, her way of dealing with it is to impose some exceptionally gruelling, low-yield task on herself. During one such period, in the nineteen-seventies, she embarked on a not quite pointless sculpture project. She cast small, found stones in bronze and painted the casts. Displayed in pairs, the natural and faux stones at first appeared to be identical. On closer inspection, they revealed minute distinctions. It took her five years to complete eleven sets of the stones, which she collectively titled "To Fix the Image in Memory." No mere trompe-l'oeil stunt, the work seemed haunted by a fact of difference that the artist's skill had pounded down to an almost subliminal wisp. When Celmins returned to painting, she treated images as she had the stones, rendering them in ways that are both meticulously faithful and utterly artificial. Like a detective in love with crime, Celmins both exposes and dotes on our readiness to embrace illusion.

As Velázquez did—with his realistic and yet ineffable grays—Celmins operates at and beyond the frontiers of normal perception. Her painterly nuances slither into visual equivalents of sounds that only dogs can hear. (I haven't mentioned her use of color, because I almost never consciously notice the cerulean blue, yellow ochre, and burnt umber that, according to her, often infiltrate her night skies.) She once wrote in a journal, "My eyes were honed in nature. I practiced seeing the desert." And, yes, she has studied Tibetan Buddhism.

Her show at McKee is satori material. It is a glum sight when you enter: clenched, dark, blocky little canvases, widely spaced in a big white room. Approaching one, you make out an image of stars or a spiderweb. Coming closer, you discern that it is a painting. (The show made me grateful for my bifocals.) These pictures of timeless subjects take lots of time to see. I had been perusing "Night Sky #17" (2000-01) for a long while when I began to wonder about the delicate gray haze that spills from its lower right. Might that be an intruding glow of city lights? It might, I realized. With a melancholy thrill, I was struck by the homeless, cold vastness of space.

Celmins's spiderwebs amount to self-portraying symbols of her spirit as an artist. Embedding ghostly gray lines in dirty black grounds, they pay tribute to creatures that, like painters, toil in two dimensions. That she paints them from reproduced photographs minimizes any sentimental guff about nature's splendor. She divorces the subject from experience, then returns it to experience as painting. The photographs she works from are variously imperfect, and so are the pictured webs. We think of spiders as precise geometricians, but their craft—which need only withstand the thrashing of a trapped fly—is not that demanding. Spiders drop or cross silky stitches continually, and make ungainly supporting cables when required. The aim of their fragile, iffy labor is to assure that that there will be future generations of spiders to act in the same way, repeating an old, old pattern with infinitesimal variations. Celmins's web pictures do for time what her starscapes do for space: they make its unknowable extent *felt*. A spider's—or a painter's—fleeting stab at perfection is a negligible stitch in an unbounded fabric. Its only significance lies in our own momentary, mortal gaze as we reckon with eternity. ♦

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Dark Star: The intimate grandeur of Vija Celmins." *The New Yorker,* June 4, 2001, pp. 85–87.

ARTFORUM

Dave Hickey

Dave Hickey is an art writer who lives in Las Vegas. His essays have most recently been collected in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues, 1997).

Opposite page, clockwise from upper left: **1. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1995–97,** mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Joshua White. **9.** Clockwise from top left: **Philip Argent, *Bug*, 1997,** oil and acrylic on canvas, 62 x 50". **Ingrid Calame, *fsstCK*, 1998,** enamel on aluminum, 48 x 48". **Jennifer Steinkamp, collaboration with Jimmy Johnson, *Phase=Time*, 1999,** screen 32 x 11'; room 39 x 38 x 24'. Installation view. **Monique Prieto, *Lovethink*, 1999,** acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72". **5. Vija Celmins, *Suspended Plane*, 1966,** oil on canvas, 16 x 27". **2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #13*, 1978,** gelatin-silver print, 9½ x 7 9/16". **7. Howard Arkley, *Illuminated Space*, 1999,** acrylic on canvas, 70 x 54". **3. Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse IV*, 1998,** weatherproof steel, 12' 3" x 26' 6" x 32' 6"; plate thickness 2". Approx. overall weight 40 tons. **4. David Reed, *#212 (Vice)*, 1984–85,** oil and alkyd on linen, 24 x 96". Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. **6. "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective," 1996–97.** Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. **8. Giambattista Tiepolo, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, 1754,** oil on canvas, 40¾ x 30¾". Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.

1 "Robert Gober" *(Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997)* Gober's installation, with its penetrated Virgin, subterranean tide pools, and waterfall stairwell, is my icon of the decade. In its intellectual rigor and plangent availability, it's as close as we're likely to get to the refinement and generosity of a seventeenth-century sculptural occasion. We may speculate on its wry deconstruction of Duchampian aesthetics, or we may, as one of the museum guards did, make a gesture indicating the flow of experience through the pipe and through the Virgin, and simply say, "*Clemencia, Señor.*"

2 "Cindy Sherman: Retrospective" *(Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1997–98)* Asked about the proliferation of artists who mimicked his style, Willem de Kooning said, "Hey! They can only make the good ones." (Meaning: Great artists have the privilege of failing.) Cindy Sherman, the most plagiarized artist of the last twenty years, should understand this. She can make triumphant work (and not many can), and she can crash and burn. Sherman's ratio of triumph to disaster is about ten to one, and since one triumph is worth a hundred disasters, she is, by my calculation, the artist of the fin de siècle.

3 Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* *(Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998–99)* Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* belong on a Top Ten of the last half-century as the apotheosis of aesthetics as kinesthetics—the ne plus ultra of "you had to be there" art. As much sculpture for the inner ear and the pit of the stomach as for the eye, the ellipses invest the viewer in their presence with a level of acute physical self-consciousness that, at this moment, is all the more glamorous and exotic for being totally unavailable on the Web.

4 "David Reed Paintings: Moving Pictures" *(Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1998–99)* Gertrude Stein said, "Anybody is as their land and air is." The sheer, dazzling *appropriateness* of David Reed's painting retrospective installed in his hometown of San Diego makes her point. Just as Stein moved to Paris to be an American, David Reed, clearly, moved to New York to be a Californian. Everything impudent about Reed's paintings in Manhattan—from the fluid, stress-free gestures to the crisp fields of hot color—takes on iconic intensity in Reed's native land and air.

5 "Vija Celmins" *(Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1992–93)* Oscar Wilde complained about the difficulty of living up to his blue china. I saw "Vija Celmins" at three of its venues; in each case, both the crowd and the institution were hard put to live up to the devotional eloquence of Celmins's work. It daunted people into silence and made the spaces seem tatty, smudged, and insubstantial. For all the work out there designed to make us feel less than moral, there's too little art like Celmins's, which shows us a way of being human that is stronger, quieter, braver, and less needy than we know ourselves to be.

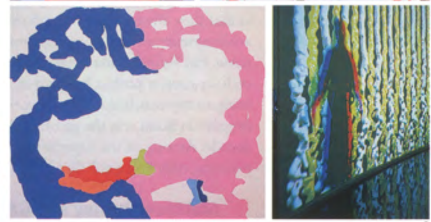
6 "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective" *(Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996–97)* It could have been a fucking disaster: Ellsworth Kelly vs. Frank Lloyd Wright in a battle of eccentric autocrats. Kelly gracefully forestalled this eventuality by mounting his retrospective at the Guggenheim as a subversive homage to its architect, matching every nuanced curve and angle in Wright's building with a nuanced curve and angle of his own. In doing so, he established himself as the pivotal figure in mid-century American art—the master of an expressive, intellectual practice that never dissolves into concept or devolves into angst-ridden nostalgia.

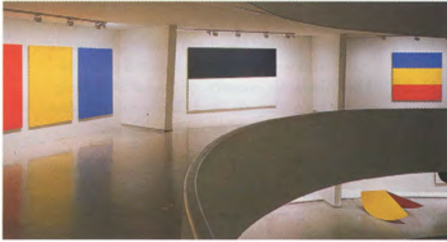
7 Howard Arkley *(Karen Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles, 1999)* Arkley's goofy-smart paintings of petty-boo suburban paradise have ranked high on my list of secret pleasures in recent years, and I was looking forward to more. Unfortunately, two weeks after the opening of his first show in LA, Arkley died of an overdose in Australia. The show at Karen Lovegrove, happily, sadly, was just splendid, at once fresh and austere. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, dammit.

8 "Giambattista Tiepolo: Master of the Oil Sketch" *(Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, 1993)* Tiepolo is the artistic patron saint of deadline *litterateurs* like myself. With knowledge in his body and magic in his hand, Tiepolo did it fast, did it great, and never looked back. As a consequence, the exhibition of his oil sketches at the Kimbell was as wonderful a lesson in trusting your own talent as a book of Wilde's essays.

9 LA Spring (as in Prague Spring): Part I In recent years, the art world has been admitting young artists one at a time, cutting them out from the herd and quickly transforming them into high-dollar Vanity Fare. The dam broke this spring in Los Angeles. Dozens of bright young things mounted so many bright young shows that one actually moved from gallery to gallery, from month to month, with heady anticipation. Among the standouts: Kevin Appel, Philip Argent, Linda Besemer, Ingrid Calame, Jane Callister, Fandra Chang, Steven Criqui, Sharon Ellis, Jeff Elrod, Jason Eoff, Jack Hallberg, Jim Isermann, Kurt Kauper, Penelope Krebs, Laura Owens, Aaron Parazette, Monique Prieto, Michael Reafsnyder, Adam Ross, Brad Spence, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Yek.

10 LA Spring: Part II Even more amazingly, the LA scene suddenly has depth as well as breadth. The surf is up for frosties, too. During the past year there has been a steady stream of solid to splendid shows by my insouciant contemporaries. Among them, Peter Alexander, John Baldessari, Larry Bell, Tony Berlant, Mary Corse, Joe Goode, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, Ken Price, Edward Ruscha, and Alexis Smith. It's almost like being in love. □





Hickey, Dave. "Best of the '90s." *Artforum,* December 1999, pp. 112–13.

PARKETT

Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE: *You were talking about trying to make something that wouldn't be easily consumable, and about muteness, resistance, silence, dumbness...*

VIJA CELMINS: Yes, well, those words all come to mind.

JS: *And does that have something to do with the vast expanses in the images you use? I know you don't really want to talk about images.*

VC: I like to work with impossible images, impossible because they are nonspecific, too big, spaces unbound. I make them specific by taking this vast thing and wrestling it into the painting. I sort of stumble from image to image. They have no great meaning for me except that the images are fragmented little units that engage the eye. For a long time now paintings have been mostly assembled images which seem to have a storytelling effect. I work with a single image. At first I tried to come to terms with this by painting single objects in my studio, like my lamp, hot plate, heater. But I was not happy with rendering and the amount of illusionism. After shifting to rendering art photographs of single objects, like the airplane painting, I began making the image and the mark develop together. I did a ten-year series of water and desert graphite pieces which were very "skeletal" with adjustment of marks but no rendering of forms, apart from surface description. As I worked I kept wanting the things to be denser so I began painting again mainly to explore this notion of density. This is when the idea of "filling up" came as a way of making a rich and complete form.

JS: *When I think of your process, I am reminded of the threshold effect, how at a certain point two plus two no longer simply equals four but instead yields some qualitative change: critical mass is achieved. You have, what, eighteen layers in the painting you're working on?*

VC: But it looks like just one right now. Do you sense the layers?

JS: *Yes, I sense the layers but, for instance, number nineteen may or may not do the trick. So is there something about the accumulation of layers that's magical?*

VC: I don't know whether magical is the right word. There's something a little despairing about it. It's like an art without a big projection of ego or style. There are a lot of things missing. There's something more pessimistic about making art than what I learned in art history class. The attitude is rather I'm going to do it by beating my head against this surface, and I'm going to build up these layers until the painting can't hold them without cracking, and then I'm going to leave it. That's my activity now. I think in the last paintings that I did, which were the really dark skies and star fields, the surface of the painting was getting so dense that you couldn't quite see what

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JEANNE SILVERTHORNE is an artist and writer living in New York.

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the original surface was and then you tended to be drawn right into it and see that it is a made flat surface, and that the painting space is totally closed off. That's the crucial doubleness. Recently I tried these charcoal drawings which were supposed to be really easy as a kind of escape from that relentlessness.

J S : *But they weren't?*

V C : They ended up being as hard to do as the paintings. I found that the charcoal has an incredible liveliness. You breathe on it and it disappears. And it's sort of like dust so I've had a little more trouble accepting the dust and being able to work with it. I think I may have tried to form too much of an image with the dust. But I've always liked dust. I was going to make a dust piece once a long time ago.

J S : *And what would that have been like?*

V C : When I was in L.A., I found my studio by driving down the street. I saw this little tiny sign that said FOR RENT. I stopped and looked in these giant store windows and there was a big expanse of dust on the floor. It was all gray and went back for about ninety feet and I thought "This is the place for me." I was going to have rooms of dust and you'd have to look through telescopes to inspect them. But when I do something that has an idea behind it, I always get discouraged. When I get down to making things, ideas sort of slip away and I tend to end up doing the same thing. If I do something very idea-like, often I feel it fails. I did this little web because I thought that this spider is doing what I'm doing: he's making a two-dimensional plane out of little pieces, and I thought, well, this is an homage to the spider. And then, of course, the surface is also my surface. But then after I made it I didn't think that I was able to transform the web enough. I'm thinking in the back of my head that maybe I can try it again. But a lot of people seemed to respond to the web, perhaps because it's such a relief. My idea of painting a single image over and over on the same canvas is not really what I would call a "brilliant" idea. It is an act of trying to reach some physical presence beyond "idea."

J S : *Isn't that something that happens as one gets older?*

V C : Things get more complicated, or you get more sensitive to all kinds of things and you can't move from there because you are still interested. Paintings remain fascinating. You want to be near them because they live in experience. My intention is to make a fat, full form. Between the tangible, flat canvas and the volume of all those things like memory, and actual three-dimensional space, and how we experience the world, is where the chance to build the form comes. It looks like a narrow space from the outside, but once you get in there and start to work it gets bigger. And I expect a lot from that space. I consider it a challenge. I think that somehow the limitation squeezes more meaning out of the work. So I like painting because it is flat.

J S : *When I saw TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY, I was amazed at the wizardry of the making. And then I looked at the drawings of the night sky....*

V C : They were really closed off ones, very dense.

J S : *But there I was. I'd just been on the desert floor, and I look up and I am floating in the universe. I had this sensation of incredible neatness. I don't mean neat like "Wow!" I mean tidy, perfectly satisfactory.*

V C : It never occurred to me that the work would be seen that way.

J S : *Well, there's one person's experience for you. I thought, here's something that satisfies my sense of craft on the one hand, and yet is smart and emotionally powerful. And that was the neatness of the package.*

V C : I thought TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY was always sort of nagging at me. It was too much like a lesson.

J S : *How so?*

V C : I actually thought that the piece questions art making. It has no style, no projection, no personality. I've always thought that my three-dimensional work was work which fell out of a painting. Where I couldn't stand the tension of having always to work against that lack of dimension in a painting. Anyway, I had been very down and I thought that the rocks were the very basis of starting again. And it got me painting. I hadn't painted for years. So that piece was very fruitful for me. It got me out of myself. It's a piece that's very primitive about making. It doesn't have any kind of transferred space, it doesn't have the tension that you have in the two-dimensional plane, it doesn't have composition, it doesn't have any kind of expressiveness at all.

J S : *Yet it was deeply expressive, perhaps not in the touch or gesture but in the mood of it.*

VC: Well, yes, it was expressive in that it was so thorough. You know thoroughness can be expressive, can indicate commitment. If you see something thoroughly enough, so thoroughly that it fills up your entire mind, that's imagination. That's not just copying.

JS: *Can you talk a bit about photography?*

VC: Some photographs I like but I don't like a whole lot. They come and go really fast. For me, a photograph is subject matter outside myself.

JS: *When I brought up the issue of time, and the paintings as a kind of depository of time, you were resistant. But you keep talking about the problem with images being that they go by so fast.*

VC: That's because I like to think that time stops in art. When you work on a piece for a long period it seems to capture time. The paintings that I like to see (like Piero della Francesca) have a stillness, a compacted time that opens your eyes. When you pack a lot of time into a work, something happens that slows the image down, makes it more physical, makes you stay with it... Don't you think that this is kind of corny?

JS: *I think that everything is corny.*

VC: Well, the impulse to make art is sort of romantic. I don't think that there has been any real progress, do you? I think that there is discovery in work and moments that seem to come together whether by purpose or intuition.

JS: *What interests me is the narrow space of this archaic pursuit.*

VC: I don't think it is an archaic pursuit. I think I have great faith in people painting forever. Using machines to make art, I mean, it's expressive, but I have never felt it to be as expressive as something that has to be totally constructed from scratch with unnameable nuances, where everything counts because everything has to be actually made.

JS: *Is that why you said that until recently you avoided composition because there were too many decisions?*

VC: Yes, too many decisions! I don't compose with shapes but by adjusting marks to the picture plane. Most of my work depends on subtle touch. I like it when there is very little obvious invention visible. The image is just a structure I don't have to think about, like Jasper Johns's flag.

JS: *So you are saying, "I just found this. Don't blame me. I just did a little adjusting"?*

VC: Yes, you smart aleck.

JS: *And Johns?*

VC: Well, whereas Johns's images started out flat and emblematic and he enlivened them with brushwork, wax, newspaper, and so on, my images tend to start with space and perspective in them and I adjust them so that they relate to the two-dimensional plane. I flatten them out so that there is a balance between what is right there in front of you and a bigger implied space.

JS: *What interests me is that while there may be seemingly very little space left in this tradition, it is still a space. It's attractive precisely because it is "troubled."*

VC: The question is, do I want to push that space somewhere interesting? It is complicated. It is not just the history of how painting has developed; there is a pressure on the physical thing to be something other than exactly what it is. There are all kinds of impulses, all kinds of experience but it's the translation that's the interesting part.

JS: *When I was talking about this narrow space and I asked you if it was big enough to turn around in, I meant, for instance, is it big enough for you to get rid of your demons?*

VC: I don't think the work can hold the demons.

JS: *How do the demons appear?*

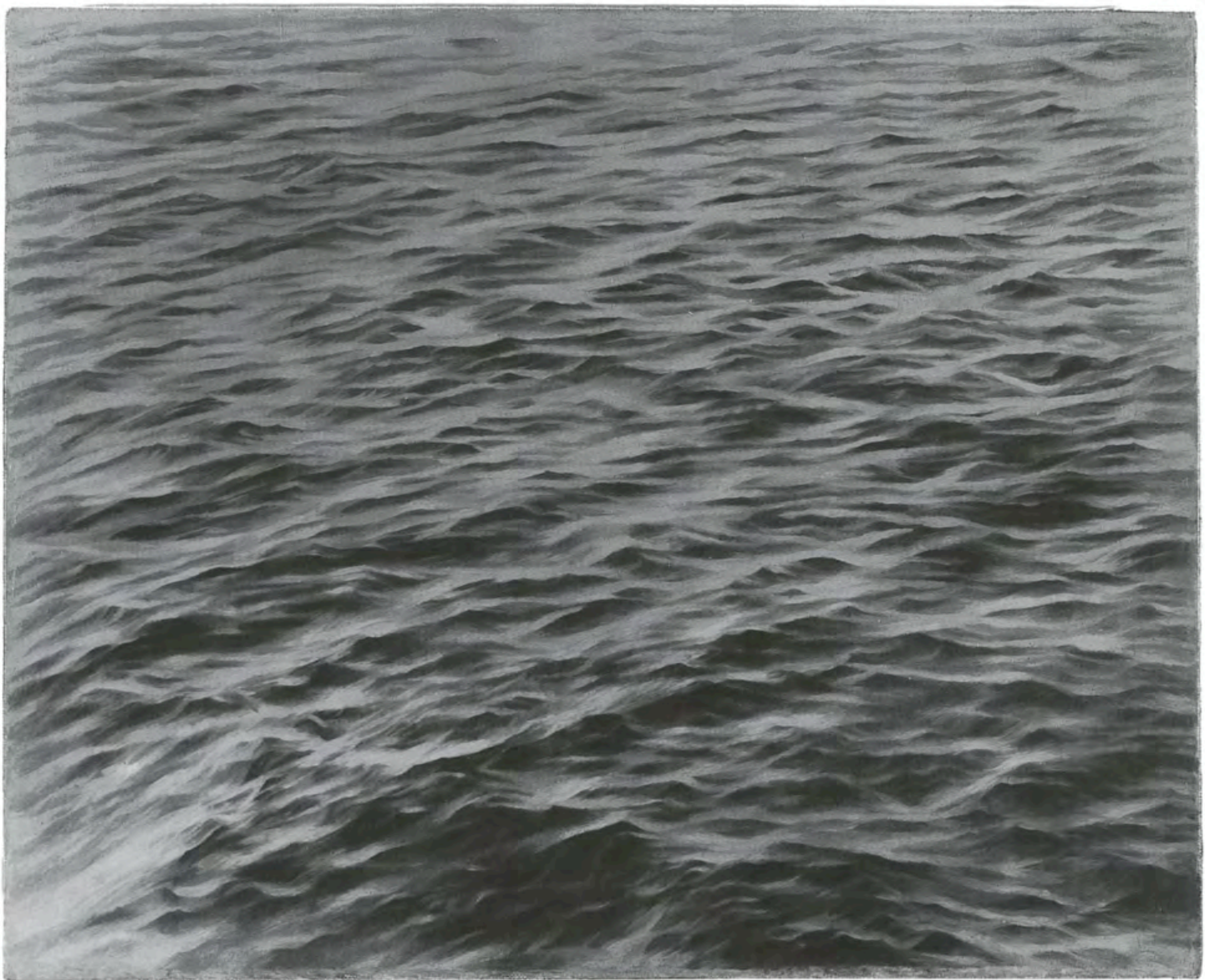
VC: They may be apparent in a kind of a restraint or compression that some of my work contains, and a kind of rigor or thoroughness that can almost be aggressive. Perhaps this is my own illusion. I think that there are things that float around in the work on a mute complex level, but there are not direct emotions in the painting. I don't think that there are a lot of things like that from the world that can be transferred into the paintings.

JS: *I think you're right that a painting can't hold that much. But I do think that what does hold all "those things that float around" is a certain context in which we see painting. I think the artist pours in all this stuff that leaks out of the painting and evaporates on the surface, and viewer and maker sort of meet there in this somewhat uncommunicative way, in something like good faith.*

VC: Painting is very specific, but it is not specific to things that you can say.

Silverthorne, Jeanne. "Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 40–47.

VIJA CELMINS, UNTITLED,
1990, oil on canvas,
15¼ x 18¾" / OHNE TITEL,
Öl auf Leinwand, 38,7 x 47,6 cm.
(PHOTO: SARAH WELLS)



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Vija Celmins im Gespräch mit Jeanne Silverthorne

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE: *Du hast gesagt, dass du etwas zu machen versuchst, was nicht leicht konsumierbar ist, und auch von Sprachlosigkeit, Widerstand, Stille, Stummheit war die Rede...*

Vija Celmins: Ja, das sind alles Wörter, die mir dazu eingefallen sind.

JS: *Hat das irgendwas mit den weiten Flächen in den Bildern zu tun, die du verwendest? Ich weiss, dass du eigentlich nicht über Bilder sprechen willst.*

VC: Ich arbeite gern mit unmöglichen Bildern, unmöglich, weil nicht bestimmt und fassbar, sondern unermesslich gross, grenzenlose Weiten. Ich mache sie erfassbar, indem ich diese unermessliche Sache nehme und sie in das Gemälde hineinzwänge. Irgendwie stolpere ich von Bild zu Bild. Abgesehen davon, dass es fragmentarische kleine Einheiten sind, die das Auge in Bann ziehen, haben die Bilder keine besondere Bedeutung für mich. Schon seit langem sind Gemälde meist aneinandergereihte Bilder, die offenbar eine erzählerische Wirkung haben. Ich arbeite mit dem einzelnen Bild. Zuerst versuchte ich mich damit vertraut zu machen, indem ich einzelne Gegenstände in meinem Atelier malte, die Lampe, die Kochplatte, den Heizofen zum Beispiel. Die Wiedergabe und das damit verbundene Mass an Illusionismus befriedigten mich jedoch nicht. Als ich mich dann darauf verlegte, Kunstphotographien von einzelnen Objekten nachzumalen, wie etwa beim Flugzeug-Bild, sorgte ich dafür, dass sich das Bild und die verwendeten Zeichen gemeinsam entwickelten. In zehn Jahren schuf ich eine Serie von Wasser- und Wüsten-Graphitarbeiten, die sehr «skelettartig» anmuteten, mit entsprechend angepassten Zeichen, doch abgesehen von der Beschreibung der Oberfläche ohne Wiedergabe von Formen. Bei meiner Arbeit spürte ich immer wieder den Wunsch nach grösserer Dichte und begann schliesslich wieder zu malen, hauptsächlich, weil ich mich mit diesem Begriff der Dichte auseinandersetzen wollte. Damals entstand auch die Idee des «Auffüllens» als Möglichkeit, eine vielfältige, vollständige Form zu schaffen.

JS: *Angesichts deiner Technik fühle ich mich an den Schwelleneffekt erinnert, daran, dass an einem gewissen Punkt zwei und zwei nicht mehr einfach vier ergibt, sondern zu einer qualitativen Änderung führt: Die kritische Masse wird erreicht. Das Bild, an dem du arbeitest, besteht mittlerweile aus wieviel, achtzehn Schichten, oder?*

VC: Die sehen aber im Moment nur wie eine einzige aus. Spürst du die Schichten?

JS: *Ja, ich spüre sie, aber Schicht Nummer 19, zum Beispiel, könnte die entscheidende Veränderung bringen oder auch nicht. Hat das Anhäufen von Schichten etwas Magisches an sich?*

VC: Ich weiss nicht, ob magisch das richtige Wort ist. Es hat einen leicht verzweifelten Aspekt. Es ist ein bisschen wie eine Kunst ohne grosse Projektion von

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Ego oder Stil. Vieles fehlt. Kunstwerke zu schaffen ist irgendwie pessimistischer als das, was ich im Kunstgeschichtsunterricht gelernt habe. Meine Haltung sieht eher so aus: Ich versuche zum Ziel zu kommen, indem ich mir an der Oberfläche den Kopf einrenne, ich trage Schicht um Schicht auf, bis das Bild fast darunter zusammenbricht, und dann höre ich auf. So sieht meine Arbeit momentan aus. In meinen letzten Bildern, von ganz dunklen Himmeln und Sternenfeldern, wurden die Farbschichten so dicht, dass man kaum mehr erkennen kann, welches die ursprüngliche Unterlage war, und so wird man richtig in das Gemälde hineingezogen und sieht, dass es eine bereits durch Auftragen entstandene, ebene Fläche ist und dass die Bildfläche selbst eine vollkommen geschlossene ist. Das ist die entscheidende Duplizität. Um mich dieser Unerbittlichkeit zu entziehen, habe ich es vor kurzem mit Kohlezeichnungen versucht, die hätten mir eigentlich wirklich leicht von der Hand gehen sollen.

J S : *Das war dann aber nicht der Fall?*

V C : Sie waren schliesslich genauso schwierig wie die gemalten Bilder. Ich stellte fest, dass Kohle unglaublich lebendig ist. Du bläst leicht drauf, und schon ist sie verschwunden. Sie ist ein bisschen wie Staub, und das hat mir Mühe gemacht. Ich glaube, ich habe aus dem Staub ein allzu bestimmtes Bild zu formen versucht. Doch ich habe Staub immer gemocht. Ich wollte nämlich schon vor langer Zeit einmal ein Werk aus Staub machen.

J S : *Und wie hätte das aussehen sollen?*

V C : Als ich in L.A. lebte, habe ich mein Atelier gefunden, als ich eine Strasse entlangfuhr. Plötzlich sah ich dieses winzig kleine Schild mit der Aufschrift ZU VERMIETEN. Ich hielt an und blickte durch die riesigen Schaufenster, und da sah ich auf dem Boden diese enorme Staubfläche. Sie war ganz grau und bestimmt 30 Meter breit, und ich dachte: «Das ist der ideale Ort für mich.» Ich wollte Räume aus Staub gestalten, die man sich durch ein Teleskop hätte ansehen müssen. Doch immer, wenn ich etwas mit einer bestimmten Idee dahinter machen will, verliere ich den Mut. Wenn es um die konkrete Ausführung geht, verflüchtigen sich die Ideen irgendwie, und ich lande wieder bei dem, was ich immer tue. Wenn ich mich sehr eng an eine Idee halte, misslingt meiner Meinung nach die Sache oft. Dieses kleine Netz habe ich gemacht, weil ich dachte, dass eine Spinne dasselbe tut wie ich: Sie formt aus kleinen Stückchen eine zweidimensionale Ebene, und das sollte, na ja, eine Hommage an die Spinne werden. Und natürlich war die Fläche auch meine Fläche. Doch nach der Fertigstellung fand ich, dass ich das Netz nicht genügend verwandelt hatte. Ich trage mich mit dem Gedanken, es vielleicht nochmals zu versuchen. Doch viele Leute scheint das Netz angesprochen zu haben, vielleicht, weil es eine schöne Abwechslung ist. Meinen Einfall, ein einzelnes Bild wieder und wieder auf dieselbe Leinwand zu malen, würde ich nicht unbedingt als brillant bezeichnen. Es ist einfach ein Versuch, eine Art physische Präsenz herzustellen, die über die reine Idee hinausgeht.

J S : *Hat das nicht etwas mit dem Älterwerden zu tun?*

V C : Die Dinge werden komplizierter, oder man reagiert empfindlicher auf alles mögliche und kann sich nicht davon lösen, weil man nach wie vor daran interessiert ist. Bilder behalten ihre Faszination. Man fühlt sich von ihnen angezogen, weil sie durch die Erfahrung leben. Ich möchte eine runde, satte Form hervorbringen. Der Raum zwischen der realen Fläche der Leinwand und der Fülle der Dinge, wie Erinnerung, tatsächlicher dreidimensionaler Raum oder die Art, wie wir die Welt erleben, ermöglicht es, die Form zu gestalten. Von aussen wirkt dieser Raum sehr eng, aber wenn man erst einmal eingetreten ist und zu arbeiten begonnen hat, erweitert er sich. Ich erwarte viel von diesem Raum. Er ist für mich eine Herausforderung. Ich glaube nämlich, dass durch Beschränkung irgendwie mehr Bedeutung aus der Arbeit herausgeholt werden kann. Ich mag das Malen, weil es zweidimensional ist.

J S : *Als ich TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY (Das Bild im Gedächtnis verankern) sah, hat mich die raffinierte Machart verblüfft. Und dann schaute ich mir die Nachthimmel-Zeichnungen an...*

V C : Die waren wirklich extrem geschlossen, extrem dicht.

J S : *Aber genau so war es für mich. Ich kam eben von der Wüsten-Etage, und dann blickte ich auf und schwebte im Universum. Ich spürte eine unglaubliche Erhabenheit und Reinheit, nichts Überwältigendes, sondern*

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etwas, das fraglos in Ordnung und vollkommen richtig war.
VC: Ich wäre nie auf den Gedanken gekommen, dass man dieses Werk so sehen könnte.

JS: *Na ja, ich vermittle dir hier eine mögliche Erfahrung. Ich dachte, da ist etwas, was einerseits meinen Sinn für gutes Handwerk anspricht und dennoch raffiniert und emotional eindringlich ist. Es war die Reinheit des Ganzen.*
VC: Ich hatte das Gefühl, TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY nörgle ständig irgendwie an mir herum. Es war mir zu sehr wie eine Lektion.

JS: *Wieso denn?*

VC: Eigentlich glaubte ich, das Werk stelle das Kunstmachen in Frage. Da ist kein Stil, keine Projektion, keine Persönlichkeit. Ich dachte immer, meine dreidimensionalen Werke hätten sich aus der Malerei ergeben: Immer dort, wo ich die Spannung nicht ertragen konnte, die entstand, wenn ich in einem Bild gegen das Fehlen der dritten Dimension ankämpfen musste. Jedenfalls hatte ich ein echtes Tief, und die Steine waren die eigentliche Grundlage für einen Neubeginn. Und sie brachten mich wieder zum Malen. Ich hatte ja schon seit Jahren nicht mehr gemalt. Dieses Werk erwies sich als wirklich lohnend, denn es bewirkte, dass ich aus mir herauskam. Es ist in der Ausführung sehr primitiv. Da ist kein übertragener Raum, es fehlt die Spannung, die bei einer zweidimensionalen Fläche entsteht, es hat keine Komposition und auch keinerlei Expressivität.

JS: *Und dennoch war es ausgesprochen expressiv, vielleicht nicht in Stil oder Gestus, aber ganz bestimmt in bezug auf die Stimmung.*

VC: Nun ja, es war insofern expressiv, als es gründlich war. Du weisst ja, Gründlichkeit kann expressiv sein, kann Engagement zum Ausdruck bringen. Wenn du etwas wirklich gründlich ansiehst, so gründlich, dass es deinen ganzen Geist erfüllt, dann braucht das Phantasie. Es ist nicht einfach ein Kopieren.

JS: *Kannst du ein bisschen was über die Photographie sagen?*

VC: Gewisse Photos gefallen mir, doch viele mag ich nicht. Sie kommen und gehen in rascher Folge. Für mich ist eine Photographie etwas Gegenständliches ausserhalb meiner selbst.

JS: *Als ich über das Thema Zeit sprechen wollte und über Bilder als eine Art Aufbewahrungsort für Zeit, hast du dich widersetzt. Doch du sagst immer wieder, das Problem bei den Bildern sei, dass sie so schnellebig seien.*

VC: Das kommt, weil ich mir gerne vorstelle, dass in der Kunst die Zeit angehalten wird. Wenn man lange an einem Werk arbeitet, scheint es sich der Zeit zu bemächtigen. Die Bilder, die mir gefallen (jene von Piero della Francesca zum Beispiel), haben etwas Bewegungsloses an sich, einen komprimierten Zeitraum, der dir die Augen öffnet. Wenn du viel Zeit in ein Werk hineinsteckst, geschieht etwas, was das Bild verlangsamt, es körperlicher macht, dich dranbleiben lässt ... Findest du das nicht etwas sentimental?

JS: *Ich finde alles sentimental.*

VC: Nun, der Impuls, ein Kunstwerk zu schaffen, ist irgendwie romantisch. Ich glaube nicht, dass es da einen echten Fortschritt gegeben hat, oder doch? Ich glaube, es geht um Entdeckungen durch Arbeit und Momente der Begegnung, die sich willentlich oder intuitiv ergeben.

JS: *Mich interessiert der enge Spielraum dieses archaischen Treibens.*

VC: Ich finde nicht, dass es eine archaische Angelegenheit ist. Ich bin fest davon überzeugt, dass die Menschen immer malen werden. Kunst maschinell herzustellen ist zwar auch expressiv, aber ich finde nicht, dass es dieselbe Ausdruckskraft hat wie etwas, was in unfassbaren Nuancen Strich für Strich aufgebaut wird, wobei jedes Detail von Bedeutung ist, weil es wirklich einzeln gemacht werden muss.

JS: *Hast du deshalb gesagt, dass du bis vor kurzem Kompositionen verschiedener Dinge vermieden hast, weil zu viele Entscheidungen damit verbunden sind?*

VC: Ja, viel zu viele Entscheidungen! Ich komponiere nicht mit verschiedenen Körperformen, sondern indem ich Zeichen auf die Bildebene abstimme. Die meisten meiner Werke sind in der Ausführung sehr subtil. Ich mag es, wenn nur sehr wenig offenkundig Ausgedachtes sichtbar ist. Das Bild liefert einfach eine sichtbare Struktur, über die ich nicht nachzudenken brauche, so wie Jasper Johns' Flagge.

JS: *Du sagst demnach: «Ich habe das bloss gefunden. Dreht mir daraus keinen Strick. Ich habe es nur ein bisschen geändert und angepasst.»*

VC: Ja, du kluges Kind.

JS: *Und Johns?*

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V C : Nun, während Johns' Bilder zunächst flach und emblematisch waren und er sie dann mit Pinselstrichen, Wachs, Zeitungspapier und so weiter belebte, hat es in meinen Arbeiten am Anfang meistens Raum und Perspektive, die ich später in zweidimensionale Verhältnisse umwandle. Ich verflache sie und stelle so ein Gleichgewicht her zwischen dem, was sich genau vor unseren Augen befindet, und einem grösseren, mit einbezogenen Raum.

J S : *Ich finde vor allem folgendes interessant: Obwohl in dieser Tradition nur noch wenig Raum geblieben zu sein scheint, ist es doch noch ein Raum. Und er ist gerade darum attraktiv, weil er «gestört» ist.*

V C : Die Frage ist, will ich aus diesem Raum etwas Interessantes machen? Die Angelegenheit ist kompliziert. Es geht nämlich nicht nur darum, wie sich die Malerei entwickelt hat, da ist auch noch der physikalische Aspekt, dass hier etwas dem Druck ausgesetzt ist, etwas anderes verkörpern zu müssen, als es eigentlich ist. Es gibt alle möglichen Impulse, alle möglichen Erfahrungen, interessant ist jedoch die Umsetzung.

VIJA CELMINS, TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY, 1977–82, detail, stone and painted bronze / DAS BILD IM GEDÄCHTNIS VERANKERN, Detail, Stein und bemalte Bronze.

J S : *Als ich über den engen Raum sprach und dich fragte, ob er gross genug sei, um sich darin zu bewegen, da meinte ich unter anderem: Ist er gross genug, dass du dich von deinen Dämonen befreien kannst?*

V C : Ich glaube nicht, dass das Werk die Dämonen bändigen kann.

J S : *Wie treten die Dämonen denn in Erscheinung?*

V C : Vielleicht in einer Art Zurückhaltung oder Verdichtung, die in manchen meiner Werke spürbar ist, und in einer Art Strenge oder Gründlichkeit, die beinahe aggressiv sein kann. Vielleicht ist das meine persönliche Illusion. Ich glaube, es gibt Dinge, die auf eine stumme, komplexe Art und Weise in einem Werk gleichsam unterschwellig präsent sein können, aber es sind keine direkten Emotionen im Bild enthalten. Ich glaube nicht, dass es viele Dinge dieser Art gibt, die in ein Bild übertragen werden können.

J S : *Ich finde, du hast recht, ein Bild kann nicht so vieles enthalten. Aber ich glaube, es ist der bestimmte Kontext, in dem wir Bilder sehen, der all die «unterschwellig präsenten Dinge» enthält. Der Künstler füllt all das hinein, was dann dem Bild entströmt und an der Oberfläche entweicht, und dort begegnen sich Betrachter und Künstler, in einer eigentlich nicht sehr kommunikativen Weise, aber mit einem gewissen gegenseitigen Vertrauen.*

V C : Malerei ist etwas sehr Genaues und Umfassendes, doch sie ist es nicht in dem Sinn, dass erschöpfende Aussagen über sie möglich wären.

(Übersetzung: Irene Aeberli)

Silverthorne, Jeanne. "Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 40–47.

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PARKETT

Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation

Given its classical Aristotelian definition, imitation refers to an action guided by the imagination more than it does to some material procedure. This is why children can "imitate" adults long before they acquire the motor skills and coordination to replicate or "copy" adult movements. It is also why classical theorists associated "imitation" (not "copying") with the highest forms of art.

If there is a long tradition that links imitation to art, there is an equally strong connection between acts of freedom and conditions of constraint. At liberty to push a line in any direction, you cannot realize freedom, which, like imitation, is a quality of action, a projection and actualization of desire in relation to some resistant force or necessity. When an artist creates a representation, the model provides a major source of resistance. It acts as a check on the reality factor of the imaginative imitation, forcing the artist to establish plausible analogies between what is seen in the model and what, given a different set of materials, can be made to resemble it. Of course, once certain features have been imitated, the model begins to look as if those had forever been the salient ones. Imitative enactment plays on itself, with the gestures of the artist seeming to alter the givens of nature. Thus Vija Celmins states that "sometimes reality has to be imagined."[1] Whatever the artist's imagination sets down on a painted surface is all the more likely to become visible as the real features of nature's surfaces. Reality comes into its own through imitation in a medium.

An artist's successful imitation of nature is no one-way operation, for at least two natures are involved and converge in the enactment—the model's and the artist's. The imitator willfully engages the model and is limited to its range of discernible physical properties, yet imagination extends the knowledge of these properties in all directions. To observe a pattern of dark and light in nature does not prevent an artist from coordinating its rhythms, spacings, and scale with the range of flexibility of a hand and a brush. This is what Vija Celmins calls "invention," a reorganization of something found in nature, refashioned in the studio, and attuned to the artist's mind and body.

Artists have represented Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, but can a successful painting be made from stones? Not of stones, but from stones, or rather on stones, where nature's mineral deposits provide not only the general look of the image created, but also the quality of the surface being painted. Such was the case when, from 1977 to 1982, Celmins worked on a grand sculpture, TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY, which consists of eleven

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Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

stones and their bronze and acrylic semblances. Despite all its apparent boundaries and self-imposed limitations, this complex work calls forth a remarkable freedom both to look and to make. Looking and making, seeing and touching—these are the actions artistic representation requires, because the model (an object of looking) must be assessed in relation to some active means of figuration (the handling or making).

Celmins gathered her stones from the Rio Grande outside Taos in northern New Mexico. First she collected them, choosing specific items because she was attracted to particular shapes, textures, and surface markings ("I noticed that I kept a lot that had galaxies on them"[2]). Next she had a number of the stones cast in bronze, a material closely associated with the central traditions of Western art. Bronze fashioned in the shape of an ordinary stone entails an odd combination of effects: It connotes both expendable idiosyncrasy (why care about the individuality of a stone when there are so many?) and an elitist self-worth (anything cast in bronze must be important). It can be argued that casting, as an indexical process tied closely to a source object, allows little room for creative imitation. Celmins more than compensated for that by proceeding to paint her cast stones with a degree of detail causing them to resemble the natural ones in kind, that is, qualitatively, imitatively. Such resemblance has a "natural" limit in that an artist can't get a brush to make as fine or as varied a set of marks as can nature, which uses the resources of eons.

With all this imitation of the real, not only of stones, but of wave-filled oceans and star-filled skies (other themes of the artist), Celmins has nevertheless developed an "abstract" style. The difference between her painted bronzes and their natural prototypes is to be found in a play of rhythms and counterbalances deriving from a hand that responds to an eye, as that eye in turn responds to the tiniest details of paint. Celmins understands the physical side of art and ties her imitation to the medium, not to some sense of a proper representation. Her imitation is encased in an artist's medium; the medium, too, offers resistance, its own reality.

Celmins's imitation must further exist in a space. TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY consists of all the strange topologies belonging to an irregular set of stones—their surfaces bend and twist in three dimensions, forcing the artist's hand to follow unfamiliar courses, and forcing her eye to compose marks without the benefit of a readily coherent framing edge. Yet she has set her cast-and-painted stones into a delimited environment, which, oddly enough, resembles a framed canvas become horizontal. In her studio a white table-top produced the effect of framing, serving as a support for the sculptural arrangement of freely disposed elements. Containment and limitation became ever more clear when TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY was exhibited within a large glass case.[3] This vitrine establishes a bounded enclosure like a miniature artist's studio—a perfected, self-sufficient environment in which models and representations resemble one another, neither one assuming precedence. Holding model and representation in suspended juxtaposition, Celmins's sculpture renders priorities undecidable.

TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY, like memory itself, belongs to both past and present. It creates a harmony of art and nature (a classical artistic goal, associated with past history), while it inaugurates an infinite semiotic abyss, an interminable play of reference (the type of situation explored by so many artists as the condition of their present). Stone resembles stone, referring back and forth, and yet each betrays its distinct character as either art or nature. Like members of a set of differential signs, each one therefore produces for the other its value. The creator can step away, having set a world to work.

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

VIJA CELMINS, TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY,
1977–82, eleven pairs of acrylic-painted cast
bronzes, and original stones, various sizes /
DAS BILD IM GEDÄCHTNIS VERANKERN,
elf Paare von je einem Originalstein und einem mit Acryl
bemalten Abguss in Bronze, diverse Grössen.

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

RICHARD SHIFF

Vija Celmins und das Spiel mit der Nachahmung

Ausgehend von der Aristotelischen Definition, bezeichnet die Nachahmung eher eine von der Phantasie gelenkte Handlung als einen materiellen Vorgang. Das ist auch der Grund, weshalb Kinder Erwachsene «nachahmen» können, lange bevor sie die motorischen Fähigkeiten und die Koordination beherrschen, um die Bewegungen von Erwachsenen wirklich nachzuvollziehen oder zu «kopieren». Das ist auch der Grund, weshalb Theoretiker der Antike die Nachahmung (im Sinne von Mimesis) mit den höchsten Formen der Kunst in Verbindung brachten.

Während es also eine lange Tradition gibt, welche die Nachahmung mit der Kunst verknüpft, besteht gleichzeitig eine ebenso starke Beziehung zwischen dem freien Handeln und den diese Freiheit einschränkenden Bedingungen. Wenn es einem freigestellt ist, eine Linie in jede beliebige Richtung zu verschieben, wird man sich der Freiheit nicht bewusst, die – wie die Nachahmung – ein Attribut des Handelns, eine Projektion und Verwirklichung des Wunsches bezogen auf einen bestimmten Widerstand oder Zwang ist. Wenn ein Künstler eine Darstellung schafft, ist sein Gegenstand oder sein Modell eine Hauptquelle des Widerstandes. Der Gegenstand (das Modell) funktioniert wie ein Prüfstein des Realitätsfaktors der imaginativen Nachahmung und zwingt den Künstler dazu, glaubhafte Analogien herzustellen zwischen dem, was der Gegenstand zeigt, und dem, was, auf einer anderen materiellen Grundlage, an Ähnlichkeit geleistet werden kann. Natürlich wird, wenn einmal bestimmte Merkmale nachgebildet worden sind, der ursprüngliche Gegenstand nunmehr den Anschein erwecken, als seien diese schon seit jeher seine hervorstechendsten Merkmale gewesen. Die nachahmende Darstellung treibt ein Spiel mit sich selbst, im Zuge dessen die Gesten des Künstlers die Gegebenheiten der Natur abzuwandeln scheinen. Daher die Aussage Vija Celmins', dass «die Wirklichkeit manchmal erdacht werden muss».[1] Was auch immer die Phantasie des Künstlers auf einer gemalten Oberfläche festhält, wird sich um so wahrscheinlicher als das eigentliche Aussehen der Natur darbieten. Die Realität kommt erst in der Vermittlung durch Nachahmung zu ihrer eigentlichen Geltung.

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Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

Eine gelungene künstlerische Nachahmung der Natur ist kein Vorgang, der nur in einer Richtung verläuft, denn im Vollzug der Darstellung sind mindestens zwei Wirklichkeiten im Spiel: jene des Gegenstandes und jene des Künstlers. Der Nachahmende bezieht den Gegenstand bewusst ein und ist auf das Spektrum seiner erkennbaren materiellen Eigenschaften angewiesen, doch die Phantasie erweitert das Wissen um diese Eigenschaften nach allen Seiten. Die Wahrnehmung eines Helldunkelmusters in der Natur hindert einen Künstler nicht daran, dessen Rhythmen, Intervalle und Dimensionen mit den Möglichkeiten und Grenzen seiner Hand- und Pinselbewegungen in Einklang zu bringen. Eben dies bezeichnet Vija Celmins als «Erfindung», eine Neugestaltung von etwas in der Natur Vorgefundenem, das im Atelier bearbeitet wird und eine dem Geist und Körper des Künstlers entsprechende Nuancierung erfährt.

Künstler haben die Niagarafälle und den Grand Canyon dargestellt, aber ist es möglich, Steine zu malen? Nicht ein Bild von Steinen, sondern eines ausgehend von Steinen oder besser: auf Steine gemalt, so dass die mineralischen Ablagerungen der Natur nicht nur das allgemeine Aussehen vorgeben, sondern auch die Beschaffenheit der zu bemalenden Oberfläche. Dies war der Fall, als Celmins von 1977 bis 1982 an einer grossen Skulptur mit dem Titel TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY (DAS BILD IM GEDÄCHTNIS VERANKERN) arbeitete, die aus elf Steinen und deren Abbildern in Bronze und Acryl besteht. Ungeachtet seiner offensichtlichen Grenzen und selbstauferlegten Schranken beschwört dieses komplexe Werk eine bemerkenswerte Freiheit, sowohl was die Betrachtungsmöglichkeiten als auch was den Schaffensprozess angeht. Betrachten und schaffen, sehen und berühren: das sind die Handlungen, welche die künstlerische Darstellung erfordert, weil das Ausgangsobjekt (ein Gegenstand der Betrachtung) zu bewerten ist im Verhältnis zu einer aktiven Methode der Gestaltgebung (der Ausführung oder Herstellung).

Celmins fand ihre Steine am Rio Grande ausserhalb von Taos im nördlichen New Mexico. Zunächst sammelte sie sie und suchte bestimmte Exemplare aus, die durch Form, Oberflächenstruktur und -zeichnung besonders ansprechend waren: «Ich stellte fest, dass ich viele aufbewahrte, die Galaxien ähnliche Zeichnungen aufwiesen.»[2] Als nächstes liess sie einige der Steine in Bronze giessen, ein aufs engste mit den Traditionen abendländischer Kunst verknüpftes Material. Eine in der Form eines gewöhnlichen Steins gestaltete Bronze bringt eine seltsame Verflechtung von Effekten mit sich: ihr eignet sowohl die Konnotation einer überflüssigen Idiosynkrasie (weshalb sich mit der Eigenart eines Steins abgeben, wenn es so viele davon gibt) wie auch die eines erlesenen Eigenwerts (in Bronze Gegossenes ist per definitionem bedeutend). Man könnte geltend machen, dass das Giessen, als ein abgeleitetes Verfahren, das eng an seinen Originalgegenstand gebunden ist, der schöpferischen Phantasie wenig Spielraum lässt. Celmins machte dies mehr als wett dadurch, dass sie in einem nächsten Schritt ihre gegossenen Steine dermassen detailgetreu bemalte, dass sie auch von ihrer Beschaffenheit her, durch die qualitative Nachahmung, den natürlichen Steinen ähnlich sahen. Dieser Ähnlichkeit sind insofern «natürliche» Schranken gesetzt, als dem Künstler kein Pinsel zu Gebote steht, um Zeichnungen von solcher Feinheit oder Vielfalt zu machen, wie sie die Natur, die sich der Ressourcen von Äonen bedient, hervorzubringen vermag.

Bei all dieser Nachahmung von Wirklichkeit, nicht nur von Steinen, sondern auch von wellendurchkämmten Ozeanen und sternenübersäten Himmeln, hat Celmins trotzdem einen «abstrakten» Stil entwickelt. Der Unterschied zwischen ihren bemalten Bronzen und deren natürlichen Prototypen ist in einem Spiel der Rhythmen und Gegengewichte

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

VIJA CELMINS, TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY, 1977–82, detail, stone and painted bronze /
DAS BILD IM GEDÄCHTNIS VERANKERN, Detail, Stein und bemalte Bronze.

zu finden, das von einer Hand herrührt, die sich in ständigem Wechselspiel mit dem Auge befindet, während dieses wiederum auf die winzigsten Farbdetails reagiert. Celmins ist offen für die materielle Seite der Kunst und bindet ihre Nachbildung eng an das Medium und nicht an irgendeine Vorstellung von angemessener Darstellung. Bei ihr steckt die Nachahmung gleichsam im künstlerischen Medium, und auch das Medium bietet Widerstand durch die ihm eigene Realität.

Celmins' Art der Nachbildung eignet darüber hinaus eine Existenz im Raum. Die Skulptur TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY besteht aus all den seltsamen Topologien, die einer unregelmässigen Ansammlung von Steinen eigen sind: Ihre Oberflächen biegen und krümmen sich in drei Dimensionen und zwingen die Hand der Künstlerin, unvertrauten Wegen zu folgen, zwingen ihr Auge, Zeichnungen aneinanderzufügen ohne die Unterstützung eines sich ohne weiteres ergebenden begrenzenden Rahmens. Dennoch hat sie ihre gegossenen und bemalten Steine in einem klar umrissenen Ambiente untergebracht, das, seltsam genug, einer in die Horizontale gelegten gerahmten Leinwand gleicht. In ihrem Atelier erzeugte eine weisse Tischplatte als Träger für das skulpturale Arrangement lose verteilter Elemente den Eindruck eines Rahmens. Einfassung und Begrenzung traten noch deutlicher in Erscheinung, als TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY – ebenso aus Gründen der Sicherheit wie der Ästhetik – in einer grossen Glasvitrine ausgestellt wurde. Die Vitrine schafft einen begrenzten, geschlossenen Raum ähnlich dem Atelier eines Miniaturkünstlers: ein zur Perfektion gesteigertes, in sich geschlossenes Umfeld, in dem Gegenstand und Abbild sich ähneln, ohne dass eines sich über das andere erhebt. Dadurch, dass sie Aus-

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

VIJA CELMINS, GALAXY (CASSIOPEIA), 1973, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 12 x 15" / GALAXIE (CASSIOPEIA), Graphit mit Acrylgrund auf Papier, 30,5 x 38 cm. (PHOTO: ROBERT MATES)

gangsobjekt und Abbild ohne Unterschied nebeneinander präsentiert, macht Celmins' Skulptur die Frage nach der Priorität gegenstandslos.

TO FIX THE IMAGE IN MEMORY gehört – wie das Gedächtnis selbst – zugleich der Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart an. Das Werk schafft eine Harmonie von Kunst und Natur (ein klassisches, mit der historischen Vergangenheit assoziiertes künstlerisches Bestreben) und erschliesst dabei eine unendliche semiotische Tiefe, ein endloses Spiel der Referenzen (die Art von Situation, die von so vielen Künstlern als Grundbedingung ihrer Gegenwart ausgelotet worden ist). Ein Stein gleicht dem anderen, er verweist vor und zurück, und doch verrät er jeweils sein spezifisches Wesen entweder als Kunst oder als Natur. Wie bei den Gliedern einer unendlichen mathematischen Reihe ergibt sich aus dem Wert des einen jeweils der des anderen. Der Schöpfer kann abtreten, nachdem er eine Welt in Bewegung gesetzt hat.

(Übersetzung: Magda Moses, Bram Opstelten)

1) Die Künstlerin in einem Telephongespräch mit dem Autor am 18. Mai 1995.
2) Vija Celmins, Interview von Chuck Close (26./27. September 1991), in William S. Bartman (Hrsg.), *Vija Celmins*, A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles 1992, S. 17.

Shiff, Richard. "Vija Celmins's Play of Imitation." *Parkett* no. 44, 1995, pp. 48–55.

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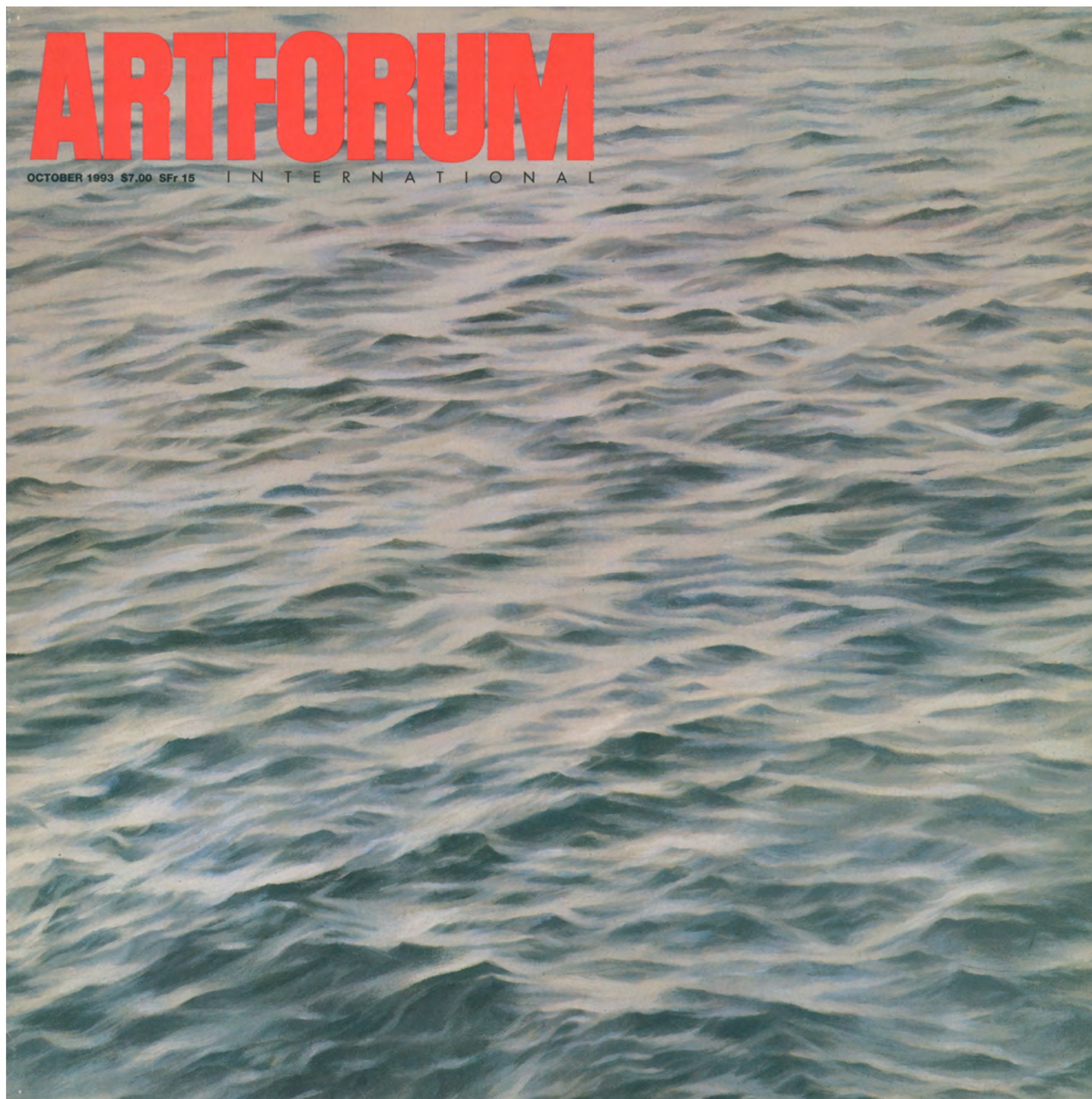

Relyea, Lane. "Earth to Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* October 1993, Cover, pp. 54–59, p. 115.

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ARTFORUM

Relyea, Lane. "Earth to Vija Celmins." *Artforum*, October 1993, Cover, pp. 54–59, p. 115.

Earth to Vija Celmins

Lane Relyea

"Art is still and dead": such is the frostbitten assessment Vija Celmins delivers in an interview published in 1978. In the few essays that have peeked in on Celmins' enigmatic thirty-year career, it's conspicuous how often the artist is quoted, and how eagerly writers turn to her biography (an early childhood in Latvia dodging World War II bombing raids, a pilgrimage west in the '60s to feed her creative development on the Zen chum of the Venice Beach art scene). It's as if, like a spirit called by a medium at a seance, the art can only speak through her. True, something like a clairvoyant's emphatic monotone does characterize the tenor of her work, its prematurely gray palette and impassively photorealistic rendering, yet what she describes are the most easily recognizable objects and scenes: a seascape, a starry night, an airplane, a desk lamp, a fan. Taken as a whole, her imagery can be thought to comprise a kind of halting still life, a homey, unassuming congregation of standard cultural and natural showpieces. Only Celmins has replaced the handicraft and silverware with photographs and electrical appliances, the food and drink with oceans and galaxies.

Perhaps this kinship to the humble genre of still life explains why Celmins' output has proven so elusive. Or maybe she just arrived in the art world at a bad time, falling through the discursive crack between the trenchantly Modernist and the self-consciously post-Modernist. Then again, it's obvious Celmins intends her work to appear lost. The solitary objects and ageless, vacant terrains she depicts all share a location outside of time and place; the point of view her art most often assumes, looking down at the ground or up at the sky, suggests a

Opposite: **Vija Celmins, *Night Sky #2*, 1991,** oil on canvas mounted on aluminum, 18 x 21½".

Relyea, Lane. "Earth to Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* October 1993, Cover, pp. 54–59, p. 115.

traveler brought to a standstill, shaken loose from a sense of direction or destination. Celmins' vision is spellbound, at once alert and paralyzed—she peers at everyday reality through zombie eyes, her forms apprehended with shocking attentiveness even though they seem trapped beneath a layer of dust. The imagery feels buried alive, a breathing corpse. Which is how, for Celmins, it should be. "Still," she says, as if her art were waiting to be aroused, brought to life. "And dead," as if the life it once possessed had been relinquished forever.

Out and about in the material world, Celmins ends up capturing only what feels a little too out there. She typically presents objects laid flat against a neutral background (a blank wall, a clear sky), each pinned to the center of the pictorial field like a lab specimen. Even her many scenes of ocean surfaces, desert floors, and starscapes dispose of artful composition—they appear unescorted by moons, coastlines, trees, any finite shape suited to frame the vast beyond. Instead, Celmins pictures that beyond in specific, discrete patches, zooming in as if with a telescope, as if pointing a finger into these voids. ("Right there," she exclaims to the groping viewer.) Displayed in clinical isolation, and aligned parallel to the picture plane, Celmins' subjects vacillate between the voluminous illusionism of traditional landscapes and still lifes and the stenciled abstraction of maps and blueprints.

Celmins makes art like a detective, only she's on the lookout for the undetectable, applying a mug-shot format to a restless universe that won't be neatly itemized. Blunt and illustrational, her works beg to be identified at a glance, yet what's depicted remains mostly hidden from view—her oceans and cosmoses have no edges to define them; they're literally beyond representation. The spider's web featured in a painting from 1992 epitomizes meticulous craftwork (suggesting Arachne at her spinning wheel, a fitting metaphor for Celmins' mode of production), yet it too eludes objectification; a slow but constant work in progress, the web lacks stable form, an inside and outside. Both concrete and intangible, it is forever remote, something to look at only, that even the slightest touch would ruin.

Celmins' predilection for flighty objects extends back to her earliest paintings of household accessories, from 1964. Take *Hot Plate*: it's rotated so that the cord juts out toward the viewer, as if it were waiting to be clutched, yet the viewer's eye reaches instead for what is too hot to handle, the fire-red coils that recede at an oblique angle. The lamp in *Lamp #1* directly faces its audience, but is switched off—its two bulbs return the spectator's gaze with a compelling though empty promise, like a pair of unblinking yet distant eyes, a dead man's vacant stare. What's more, none of these appliances is in fact self-contained. The electrical cord is emphasized in each painting: it snakes lyrically across a blank background in *Fan*, threatens to poke through the painting's surface in *Hot Plate*, and makes an otherwise sturdy shelf buckle under its negligible weight in *Lamp #1*. To function, Celmins' hardware depends upon the sprawling network of energies these umbilical cords plug into, as each appliance betokens much larger forces, shapeless and mostly unseen—the electricity consumed at one end; the wind, heat, and light generated at the other.

Such tokens as Celmins' art struggles to preserve all seem as if they're about to vanish right before our eyes, like murky reflections seen in hand-cupped water, the imagery waiting to seep through the picture's framed space, its arrested time, to return to an elapsing, amorphous field of ceaseless mobility. From her

By rummaging the far side of heroic achievement, averting her eyes from the roar of the crowd, Celmins discovers a seamless alliance between the opposite ends of the artmaking spectrum, harmonizing the denigrated layabouts of the still life and the trumpeted epiphanies of the sublime. Here representation is assigned tasks it's either under- or overqualified to carry out, braving both backstage trivia (pencils, erasers, lamps) and things so powerful and immense (modern warfare, barren deserts) as to be beyond comprehension.

This page, top to bottom: **Vija Celmins, *Pistol*, 1964,** oil on canvas, 24½ x 34½". **Vija Celmins, *Lamp #1*, 1964,** oil on canvas, 24½ x 35". Opposite page: **Vija Celmins, *Flying Fortress*, 1966,** oil on canvas, 16 x 26". Collection of the Edward R. Broida Trust.

pictures of distant bombs exploding to her exacting sculptures of drafting pencils and erasers, she often inventories what gets lost through use, what melts or disperses into oblivion. Hence the heavy emptiness felt in her work, as if it bore resemblances not so much to things as to the marks left by their disintegration.

This at least describes the disappearing act Celmins pulls in *Pistol* and *Gun with Hand #1*, both from 1964. In each, an anonymous hand reaches in from the painting's right edge to transform a gun—poof!—from an object into an event, a gunshot. Celmins details the action's unfolding (the shooter's clenched wrist, the barrel kicking upward, smoke filling the air), yet the act never resolves: the suspenseful moment remains suspended, as the fired bullet travels a void, unanchored by a protagonist who takes aim or an antagonist who's targeted. Four drawings of World War II aircraft, from 1966, form a squadron of Flying Dutchmen: these planes have no end in sight to their mission; Celmins provides no indication whether they're heading into battle or home from it. The dramas she stages never feature actors, never offer motives or consequences, only the vehicles through which action passes. (Consider her hot plate with nothing warming atop it, or her lamp with no reading material nearby.) What her art ends up surveying is an unending trail of stepping stones, traveling innumerable days between stations.

It's an ever-changing yet changeless landscape Celmins paints, whether her referents belong to history, present-day culture, faraway galaxies, or the deep blue sea. Even the most familiar sights she tours have had the stamp of human import subtracted from them. In fact, by rummaging the far side of heroic achievement, averting her eyes from the roar of the crowd, Celmins discovers a seamless alliance between the opposite ends of the artmaking spectrum, harmonizing the denigrated layabouts of the still life and the trumpeted epiphanies of the sublime. Here representation is assigned tasks it's either under- or overqualified to carry out, braving both backstage trivia (pencils, erasers, lamps) and things so powerful and immense (modern warfare, barren deserts) as to be beyond comprehension.

In this game of hide-and-seek, Celmins ups the stakes considerably with the shy presence in each artwork of her vigilant hand, a labor that also combines the impossible and the mundane, that appears strenuous yet without peaks, like a radio SOS. With all her formidable drafting skills, Celmins favors the modest role of reporter over that of inventor; whether or not they're directly copied from photographs, her images always look as much secondhand as handmade. It's obvious how much coaching Celmins has received from photography—she sweats over her imagery's every inch, bathing each scene in global surprise. Even the objects portrayed often put in a pitch for surface flatness; the crisscrossing strands of *Web*, for example, enwrap the picture plane more tightly than the oceanscapes, star fields, et al. Yet with its threadwork fanning out from a single point, *Web* also plots a system of linear perspective, conducting a connect-the-dots lesson on how to conjure vivid spatial illusion. Celmins' surfaces never manage to report just the facts, to transcribe only the immediate dialogue of pencil lead and pigment worked into paper and canvas. The surfaces always drop out, as the imagery vows to disclose far more than it can possibly make good on.

It's on the foundation of this formal give-and-take that Celmins stages her ashen phantasmagoria. Announcing itself with a step into the literal space of the viewer, only then to step slowly back, the work beckons toward an unspecified destination behind the framed surface, toward a glimpse of the known world's unmapped outskirts. Entering the picture is like boarding a lost train of thought, wandering clear of spotlit landmarks and relevant deeds, into a twilight zone

Relyea, Lane. "Earth to Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* October 1993, Cover, pp. 54–59, p. 115.

where things so ordinary they pass without comment rendezvous with the unspeakable. And at the end of the line, there hangs a sense of deliverance and tranquility at once feared and desired. Celmins' rock-a-bye oceans and twinkle-twinkle starscapes vibrate faintly with the echoes of high-seas adventure and daring space-missions, of risk and discovery. But mostly these calm waters and clear skies evoke primal forms of escape and finality: they promise reassurance, blanketing, submersion, as well as helplessness, abandonment, loss—at once untold contentment and ultimate desolation.

Entering the picture is like boarding a lost train of thought, wandering clear of spotlit landmarks and relevant deeds, into a twilight zone where things so ordinary they pass without comment rendezvous with the unspeakable. And at the end of the line, there hangs a sense of deliverance and tranquility at once feared and desired.

Such extremes comprise two sides of the same premonition, one that haunts all of Celmins' work. Stare again into the hypnotizing spiral of *Web*: there, too, images of a simple domicile and an objectless space, a nest and a void, are superimposed. As she scouts hidden portals through which second nature opens upon the supernatural, Celmins pushes her realism into surrealism. Her six-foot-tall *Comb*, 1969–70, is in fact cloned from a 1952 still life by René Magritte. Celmins' homage to the Belgian quizmaster is fitting: the two share the same easel format, a frank, textbooklike style, a delight in arranging blind dates between the banal and the poetic. But more important, she seems to have picked up from Magritte his knack for provoking visual desire, the way he thinly disguises in his apparently mild-mannered imagery a passionate unwillingness to settle for appearances, baiting the viewer to look beyond the given toward things not yet attained, or that are unattainable, period.

Celmins doesn't need to tunnel far back through art history to find a community sympathetic to her concerns: the art world she spent her formative years in brimmed with high formalism's prehistoric vistas and Pop art's sardonic sales pitches, monuments to the sublime and the mundane. Both styles influenced Celmins, but she also kept both at a distance. Her art has a touch of Pop's friendly display tactics, as well as its *nature morte* pall. But to Celmins' eye, more fetching than Pop's paeans to the new were formalism's declarations of the now. The majority of her early contemporaries, after all, aligned their practices for and against the most celebrated scribe of such declarations, Barnett Newman. Moreover, it was Newman's intention, as it was Magritte's, to whet an insatiable visual hunger; indeed, rather than just hint at a realm beyond appearances, he wanted to give that realm flesh.

It's possible to detect a mild family resemblance between Celmins' work and Newman's. Both artists stand watch over terrains teeming with events yet to unfold, grooming wide-open fields free of just about any compositional demarcations, including horizon lines, fields in which nothing is settled and anything seems possible. Similar to the pulsing stars in Celmins' skies and the waves sweeping her ocean surfaces, the vertical zips in Newman's work scan his pictures like the laterally moving arm of a radar screen. And lording over the work of both are the twin specters of baptism and apocalypse, thematic threads loosely tying Celmins' interest in essentials (earth, air, water, fire) and weapons of mass destruction to the Old Testament quotes Newman used to title his burst-of-light paintings: *Genesis—The Break*, *Abraham*, *The Command*, *Moment*, and so on.

But Newman omits anything that might distract from his canvases' urgency and resoluteness. His pictures demand to be entered with a bold step; backbone isn't just implied but literally pictured, as his hard-edge zips mimic the probing eye movement of someone standing fully erect, facing straight ahead, feet firmly planted. Celmins, though, often provides no ground to stand on: her zero-gravity space shots make it impossible to tell right-side-up from upside-down or sideways. Not only is the viewer cut adrift before such scenes; rather than the light of dawn, what penetrates her dark skies is old, travel-weary light, likely emanating from worlds long ago deceased. When Celmins does touch down on planet earth, it's usually not firm, as in her oceans; when it is firm, as in her deserts, she doesn't lift her head all the way up. And even when she looks straight ahead, her view still feels straitjacketed, as in her images of planes aloft and pistols being fired, where the vantage point is restrained from doing what seems called for, turning left or right, to see what's come before and what happens next.

Each of Newman's paintings wholly contains not only the field but the precise moment of the action. What he depicts is the resounding daybreak of creation, the advent of Time, the first and therefore only Moment, seized but not yet spent. Celmins also portrays the momentary, her imagery's every detail registered with the suddenness of a camera flash. But there's no sense of an absolute beginning in her work: as in her perpetually swaying seas, she instead envi-

continued on page 115

This page: **Vija Celmins, *Freeway*, 1966,** oil on canvas, 17½ x 26½". Private collection, New York. Opposite page: **Vija Celmins, *Web*, 1992,** oil on canvas, 18¾ x 22¼".

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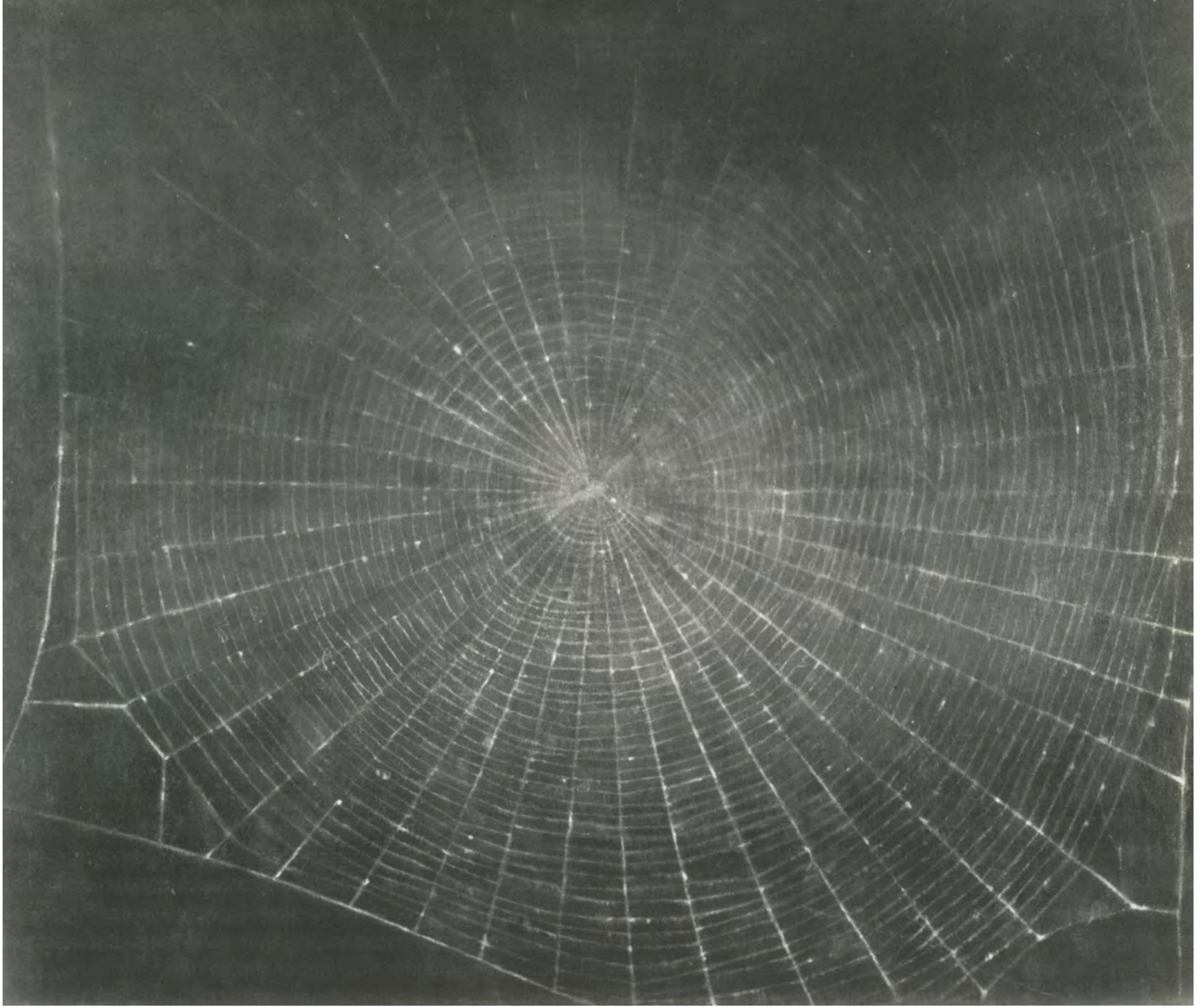

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RELYEA *continued from page 58*

sions time unspooling to infinity, without start or end; it's shown to be an indomitable force that shapes experience rather than vice versa. She describes moments that seem impossible to hold onto; they both pass too quickly and linger too long. Like the smoke exhaled from her gun's just-emptied chamber, they instantly slip into time's boundless continuum only to float there, still moving, resonating, even as they hollow out. Time isn't captured but flows through Celmins' art: invested with an enormous amount of thought and labor, her moments, though on the verge of expiration, still feel absorbing. Celmins gets lost in her work; counting waves, tracking stars, she devotes her eye, her time, to limitless endeavors. She enters time only to lose track of it.

One painting—*Freeway*, 1966—does at first appear to possess completely both its field of action and that action's consequences, to have a beginning and an end. Here Celmins is inside a car racing down a miraculously uncrowded Southern California freeway, looking straight out the windshield at a canvas-wide horizon line and the road's vanishing point. In this image, Celmins should at last know where she's at, and where she's going. But she doesn't. Her point of view sits not behind the wheel but in the passenger's seat; she's just along for the ride. And the car doesn't really speed down the road; it faces a low-hanging sun that bleaches out sky and pavement and turns everything else—other cars, buildings, a distant overpass—into flat, silhouetted shapes that rush toward and press against the windshield, the squeezed scene suggesting a diorama erected atop the proscenium like dashboard. Finally, if at the end of this road lies Celmins' destiny, it is a nameless, unforeseeable one—or so say the freeway signs and billboards angled toward her, which are all painted pitch black.

Celmins' subjects may solicit our attention, but none ever looks back at us. Her scenes announce themselves only to withdraw, not just because their time has passed, but because they themselves don't seem to realize that they're over, completed. They hide their faces as if preoccupied, nagged by questions so far unanswered. Celmins' images look to the heavens, they look for what the tide will bring in; always they confront uncertain fates—not just their own but, in such cases as her bombers and guns, the fates they have yet to visit on others. It's as if her images were shielded by a one-way mirror, the course of events in which they're embroiled foreclosed to us, their tragedies and fortunes at once unreachable and compelling. Like memoirs long kept secret, like letters lost forever in the mail, like a suicide note discovered too late, Celmins' urgent messages seem addressed to no one in particular, delivered belatedly to the living in general with a postmark from the other side. We stare intently, with anticipation and concern, upon the quiet, unburied remains of each image, as if it were Sleeping Beauty.

With pencil and paintbrush in hand, Celmins flicks her wrist back and forth, creates a world, and waves goodbye. □

Lane Relyea is a writer who lives in Los Angeles.

"Vija Celmins," a retrospective of the artist's work organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and curated by Judith Tannenbaum, is currently traveling. It opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in September, and will remain there until 29 November. It can also be seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, from 19 December to 6 February 1994.

Relyea, Lane. "Earth to Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* October 1993, Cover, pp. 54–59, p. 115.

Los Angeles Times

ART REVIEW : The Profound Silence of Vija Celmins : MOCA retrospective underscores her development of a conceptual space of tension and vastness.

December 21, 1993 | CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | TIMES ART CRITIC

The 1960s was a noisy decade. The volume got turned way up, requiring earplugs for the head and for the heart.

Bombs fell, bullets flew. Social unrest blared. So did music. Postwar babies boomed into a raucous youth movement. Culture popped.

Amid this loud and blustering torrent, Vija Celmins fell silent. Deeply, profoundly, gorgeously silent. In the beautiful retrospective of her paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints that opened Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, silence is what is most dramatically heard. It's a mesmerizing sound.

Celmins set aside the thrice-removed agitation of the Abstract Expressionist paintings of her student days, first at the John Herron School of Art in Indianapolis, then in graduate school at UCLA. She began to paint smaller, figurative, gray-on-gray canvases, which depicted in increasingly meticulous terms certain carefully chosen objects in her studio. A double-goosenecked lamp. A space heater. A hot plate. An electric fan.

These domestic appliances, individually isolated against a flat field of gray space, had something in common. The noble function of each was to beneficently alter its surrounding atmosphere. If a hint of color invaded the paintings' cool grayness, it was but a radiant glow of heat or pale light, silently disturbing an otherwise steely environment.

Today, from a retrospective vantage point 29 years later, these canvases announce the arrival of an astonishing painter. Appropriately enough for such an usually distinctive voice, it was a painter who eventually spent perhaps twice as many subsequent years making drawings as making paintings.

The finality with which our common prejudice against drawing--as inevitably inferior to painting--gets blasted to smithereens is among the many wondrous revelations of the retrospective.

It's not that the material differences between oil paint laid down on canvas and graphite laid down on paper are insignificant. On the contrary, they're crucial. When Celmins draws, she carefully prepares the sheet with a ground of snow-white acrylic, in order to make the surface more receptive to the subtle movements of silvery black graphite across the page.

The basic mark of a pencil, made countless times a day by countless people, is here placed on a kind of aesthetic pedestal. The self-consciousness of artistic process is privileged. Celmins' palpably concentrated focus acts as a gently rigorous guide for viewers. It humbly assumes a moral grandeur.

Celmins' transitional paintings of studio appliances date from 1964. (So do two paintings that each show an outstretched hand holding a gun, the moment after it has been fired; a pale wisp of smoke is the only trace of the instantly vanished *bang!*) In 1965, she began to make objects with a more pronounced Surrealist aura: several painted puzzles and some small houses, the latter decorated with images redolent of Rene Magritte and lined with fur, in homage to the famous teacup by Meret Oppenheim.

*

Next came a group of grisaille paintings of World War II fighter planes, which signal the start of her mature work. (She was almost 28.) Each silvery painting is little more than a foot high and 2 feet wide, and each shows a single airplane flying, poised on the ground, burning after a runway crash or even coming apart in mid-flight.

Plainly based on black-and-white photographs (and preceded by a 1964 "studio appliance" painting of a TV, shown broadcasting the disaster image of an exploding airplane), these figurative images make a wryly contradictory joke of a then-raging battle over abstract art. Abstraction was claimed by many to be far superior to illusionistic representation because it was truthful to the flat reality of the picture plane. So, Celmins had her cake and ate it too: She painted illusionistically faithful "picture planes."

The airplane pictures are also mnemonic, nudging to the surface memories both personal and public. Like a series of hitherto locked doors concealing chambers within chambers, Celmins' unassuming paintings open up miraculously.

Born in 1938, Celmins had fled the advancing war in Europe as a child, first from Latvia and then from Germany. Her images of old-fashioned war machines have a distinctly autobiographical edge.

Formally, they also put you in mind of their absent referents, by acutely describing the photographs on which they're based. In turn, those unseen photographs recall the actual airplanes that once flew before the camera's lens.

The tumultuous history of Modernist art is likewise inserted into the stew, by way of the savvy "picture plane" art-joke. So, together, social and cultural space, time and memory unfold.

Significantly, the visual silence in Celmins' early work is set against an endemic imagery of violence. Guns shoot, houses burn, war planes explode. An antique car stands askew, pierced with bullet holes. A burning man flees a car wreck. The Aug. 20, 1965, cover of Time magazine shows scenes of riots in Los Angeles (a rarely seen painting, pointedly added only for the MOCA stop on the retrospective's national tour).

The violence, though, is not sensational, perhaps because Celmins always records the moments immediately after a cataclysmic event. The helplessly silent aftermath is filled up with a level of particularized anxiety, as the space of memory is pressed. How did this horror happen?

One of the surprises of the show is a simple revelation of chronology. In 1966-67, Celmins made four painted sculptures: three Pink Pearl erasers and one pencil, meticulously crafted of painted balsa wood and giganticized. (The two *trompe l'oeil* erasers in the show are each 1 1/2 feet long, the fat pencil nearly 3 feet long). In keeping with her investigations of the silent space of memory, all are shown as having been well used: The eraser edges are worn, the pencil is a stub.

Yet, paradoxically, this sculptural valorization of the rudimentary tools of drawing actually precedes the earliest drawing in the show. It's as if these objects were made to slowly and deliberately shift the artist's focus away from painting and toward the medium that would dominate her work for the next 15 years.

Knight, Christopher. "The Profound Silence of Vija Celmins." *Los Angeles Times,* December 21, 1993, p. F1.

The few sculptural objects that periodically crop up in Celmins' career always occupy an ambivalent relationship to her abundant two-dimensional work. She made a 6-foot-5-inch tortoise shell comb in 1969-70, borrowing the image from Magritte's famous painting "Personal Values." As a mundane object for personal grooming, the comb hilariously brings to life the extreme degree to which "neatness counts" in the artist's own meticulous endeavor.

Between 1977 and 1982, she made 11 small, painted bronze replicas, exact in every detail, of ordinary stones. They followed more than a decade devoted to exquisite drawings of the surface of the sea, the moon, the night sky and the desert.

The sculptures talk to the drawings. Nearby at MOCA hangs a rendering that juxtaposes a pebbled desert surface and a velvety black sky dotted with stars. Looking back at the real rocks paired with their painted bronze imitations, the delicately patterned surfaces suddenly seem to be expansive renditions of the Milky Way, collapsed into desert stones.

In her drawings--and, since her 1986 return to painting, in her canvases--Celmins fuses the surface of the perceivable world with the surface of a piece of paper or cloth. The result is a conceptual space of quiet tension and peculiar vastness, in which surface membranes are an ideal vehicle for journeys into profound depth and the camel passes effortlessly through the needle's eye.

Knight, Christopher. "The Profound Silence of Vija Celmins." *Los Angeles Times,* December 21, 1993, p. F1.

PARKETT

Vija Celmins

"Imagination can fashion a homeland." CZESLAW MILOSZ

Friends had told me before I visited Vija Celmins' studio that she is an 'artist's artist'. Just what does that mean? The label has an odd vestige of nostalgia, visual art's equivalent to the literary 'Man of Letters'. Creative integrity, painterly erudition, an artist who recognizes a heritage in the struggle to resolve art's great formal conundrums: all of these, and more. Like another who was an artist's artist in his day, Paul Cézanne, Celmins does not care for talk of theories or speculation about psychological underpinnings to her work. And it is her "progress in her subject," particularly her later work, which bears some significance to that of Cézanne.

Migrating to the States from Latvia during the last days of World War II, Celmins further displaced herself from her origins by moving to California to complete her studies in the late '60s. It was at this point that her work underwent a transformation, moving from painting abstract subject matter in an expressionist manner to depicting exactly what she saw about her—single objects such as a glowing hotplate, a double-headed lamp, or a TV (HOTPLATE, 1964, LAMP #1, 1964)—in her rather barren storefront studio. Each appliance is centered and squats on a narrow pliable ledge, backed by a wall of softly drifted gray which consolidates the overall monochromatic tone of each painting. Yet the tones are reminiscent of those of a television image in black and white before the button is turned and the colors explode onto the screen. By tipping the subject up to the picture plane, Celmins inherits the practice of artists since the Renaissance, influenced specifically by Velazquez' later paintings such as PHILIP IV, which she was "turned onto" during a trip to the Prado in Madrid. In a portrait of the Spanish king painted around 1656 the Regent is positioned before a densely painted darkness of infinite black space—or is it the intractable picture plane? Following the severity of the school of the Spanish court, Velazquez

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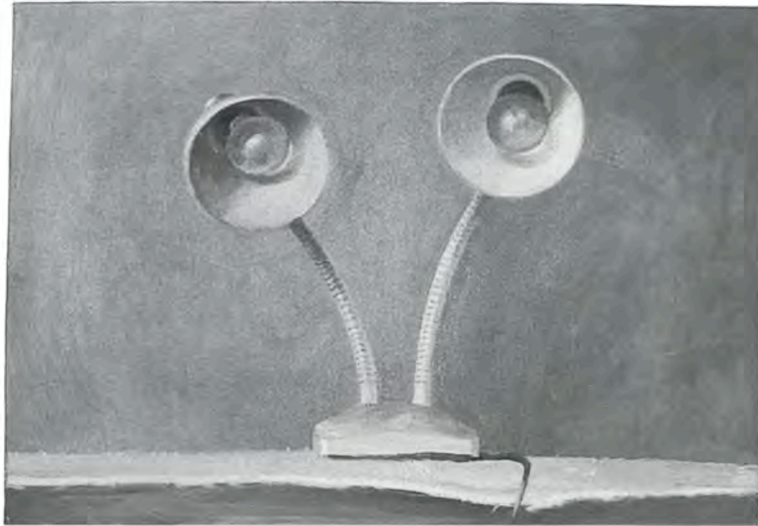
Wagstaff, Sheena. "Vija Celmins." *Parkett* no. 32, 1992, pp. 6–19.



VIJA CELMINS, LAMP: 1, 1964, oil on canvas, 24½ x 35" / Öl auf Leinwand, 62,2 x 88,9 cm.

eschewed theatricality; he conveyed an extraordinary naturalness and achieved even then what was considered a 'lack of style'. Celmins was awed by the effortless nature of his paintings. "It was fabulous. You go up close and see this brushwork which just seems to have collected there. I remember the real somberness of that gray and white." But Celmins' work owes as much to other more recent artists as it does to Velazquez.

These include Morandi, about whom de Chirico wrote in 1922, "He seeks to find and to create entirely on his own; he patiently grinds his colors and prepares his canvases and looks about at the objects that surround him, from the sacred loaf of bread to the clear form of glasses and bottles." And as in so many of Morandi's *Natura Morta* paintings where the frozen appearance of objects has an eerie calm, so the interrupted 'life' of Celmins' paintings SOUP or PUZZLE (both 1964) renders the subject as a petrified image of not only Nature, but the 'nature' of the thing itself. Salvador Dalí considered the motionlessness of Morandi's still lifes as being like small theaters of menace, in which the sense of order is like a luminous mirror image of an earlier disorder. Certainly Celmins felt that her "object paintings came out sort of twisted, with more energy in them than was needed."

Like many of her peers, Celmins was aware of what artists like Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Malcolm Morley were doing on the East Coast. In 1964–65 the latter was embarking on a series of monochromatic images of battleships blown up from photographs at about the same time that Celmins was concentrating on studies of fighter planes—German, Japanese, American—like fragmentary glimpses of childhood memories (FLYING FORTRESS, 1966, SUSPENDED PLANE, 1966). These were prompted by illustrations in old magazines and war books which Celmins ferreted out from L.A. junk stores, perhaps in an effort to come to terms with her peripatetic youth, its impressionable early years backgrounded by the dark potential and actual violence

of killing machines and incendiary devices. Other starkly horrific images in her work followed: a man fleeing the burning wreck of a car, his back and legs brightly burning like a fiery cloak fanning out behind him, the livid red and yellow of the flames startling in their illumination of the otherwise murky darks of the scene (BURNING MAN, 1966). Another bleakly cold vignette marks the stilled life of a driver bowing his head over the wheel of a bullet-ridden car, the steely paint tones shrouding the corpse like a sarcophagus (TULIP CAR #1, 1966). While both of these recall Warhol's earlier disaster silkscreen series, it was the individual sources of these images—printed photographs—which were more significant to Celmins than the emotive effect of the subject matter. "I treated the photograph as an object, an object to scan."

At the same time Celmins was exploring most specifically how to fix an image on a plane in order to reconstitute it within the material and spatial dictates of a painting. She admired Johns for achieving "the surface tension he had in relation to the object," as well as his ability to place the viewer in a riveting confrontation with familiar objects portrayed in a new context. And although Celmins came to respect the work of Pollock—"I used to hate Pollock and then I just started seeing Pollock. I just began to see it and found the joy and control that was there. Then I began to understand some of it"—and that of de Kooning, it appears that it was art such as Johns' that persuaded her that painting is a means of exploring a fuller dialogue with the spectator. This could also aptly describe the crucial change at the end of the nineteenth century when artists moved away from the idea that painting was a means of exploring the artist's personal relationship with the world. "I don't think that the all-overness of American painting—doing away with foreground, middle ground, background, et cetera, started with the Abstract Expressionists. Cézanne recognized and gave value to the space that is in front of you. He did it self-consciously. He brought me this awareness that the work of art involved what is in front of me. I think that the Abstract Expressionists—certainly de Kooning—knew that and used it. However, they added another subject which was the unconscious."

A crumpled illustration of a gun, smoothed to its original torn flatness; a dog-eared picture of a zeppelin; a stamped addressed envelope ripped open at the side and festooned with stamps of burning infernos, a newspaper photo of the devastated wastes of what had been Hiroshima: each small scrap of paper bearing these images was carefully rendered and centered in a series of drawings Celmins made in 1968 (HIROSHIMA, BIKINI). "When I decided to stop painting, the clippings had a wonderful range of grays for me to explore with graphite. Then soon after, I was inspired by the silvery grays of moon photos that were sent back from early space expeditions and printed in magazines and books. A machine had seen the range of grays on the moon and had transmitted them back, they had been photographed and printed in a book. There was a layering and a distancing. So then I thought of bringing them into the real world, the here and now." Not only did this period mark a transition from the turbulent—and inevitably affective—imagery she had been taking issue with, but her switch to pencil allowed her to fully explore the wonderful range of grays that she saw in her source photographs, and to realize that she could have a single image without isolating it in the middle of the paper. And just as importantly, because "layers created distance, and distance creates the opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship with it," it allowed her to "see drawing as evidence of thinking."

Walking her large dog by the ocean in Venice every evening, Celmins began to take photographs of the sea. "Finally I had so many piles of pictures of the ocean, and I became so enamored with that image that I began drawing them." The ocean drawings of the late '60s offer stretches of slightly choppy waves, little swells of water extending to the horizon, the top of the canvas; this is not photorealism, nor simply a mimicry of accurate mimesis. What is happening here as dark and light tones are laid over the surface is an acuity about the look of her pictures of the sea, not about the sea itself. These drawings address the very conventions of picture-making. They are still lifes, the waves frozen mid-swell, using the devices by which the mind tries to fix the visible. Cézanne's achievement in bringing the ideology of the visual—

Wagstaff, Sheena. "Vija Celmins." *Parkett* no. 32, 1992, pp. 6–19.

VIJA CELMINS, GALAXY (CASSIOPEIA), 1973, graphite on acrylic sprayed ground, 12 x 15" / Graphit auf acrylbehandeltem Grund, 30,5 x 38,1 cm.

Wagstaff, Sheena. "Vija Celmins." *Parkett* no. 32, 1992, pp. 6–19.

the notion of seeing as a separate activity with its own truth—to painting, has surely found its champion in Vija Celmins' work. To younger painters even in his own era, his work offered a solution to the problem of preserving sensibility's essential role while substituting conscious reflection for empiricism. But of course the 'solution' has only ever been, at best, partial. Quite apart from the individual artist's skill in manipulating pictorial devices, the seer does not know how her 'looking' ultimately makes objects in art possible. The more one sees, the more one is aware of the paradoxes in perception. So Celmins, within a large series of ocean images, explores radical options in scale calibration and tonal quality (from small rectangular formats to eight-inch by eight-foot drawings), as well as surface density in her experimentation with different grades of graphite pencil (UNTITLED [OCEAN], 1969, LONG OCEAN, 1973).

Numerous photographs taken by Celmins on trips from Los Angeles to the Mojave desert near Death Valley formed the basis for a series of sand and stone images, the vast unchanging sweep of the desert floor providing an equivalent spatial experience to that of the ocean. Simultaneously, her fascination with images of stars and constellations was consolidated by discovering satellite pictures at the California Institute of Technology. This led to yet another series, the galaxies (GALAXY [CASSIOPEIA], 1973). "I began to see that the graphite itself had a certain life to it. So I did a series of images, oceans, deserts, pushing each to its limit. Then I moved into the galaxy drawings. They didn't come from lying under the stars. For me they came out of loving the blackness of the pencil." The pale illumination of the bumpy certainty of the desert's baked rocks with their shadow haloes under an all-pervasive sunlight, has its counterpoint in the darkness and infinite depth of outer space articulated by tiny sprinklings of stars, where finally the pencil's black mark becomes space at the same time as material texture, surface as well as depth. Celmins becomes irritated when people see only the images of her work as projections of their own relationship with, for example, the ocean. "I don't have that kind of romantic thing. Like a Caspar David Friedrich tendency to project loneliness and romance into nature, contrasting nature and grandness with tiny insignificant watchers. I like looking and describing, using the images to explore the making. I feel that the image is an armature on which I hang my marks and make my art."

"All things, particularly in art, are theory developed and applied in contact with nature."

(CÉZANNE TO CAMOIN, 1903)

Around the mid-'70s Celmins started to make double image drawings, a change which came about through the realization that she could simply reintroduce the photograph lying beside the paper on which she was working as another similar, but differently scaled image, like mirror images seen over a distance and compressed within the same frame (DOUBLE DESERT, 1974). "I wanted to make a work that was multi-dimensional and that went back and forth in space and yet remained what it was, a small concentrated area that is essentially flat." In her drawings of fields of stars especially, Celmins builds the space with thick black graphite, "getting it real fat," and lets in pinpricks of light as tiny areas of virgin paper which are like mines to navigate (STARFIELD, 1981–82). "So I thought of it as like building a structure that was dense and multi-leveled. You could maybe say that it alludes to a kind of denser experience of life—that you experience here in terms of graphite and paper.")

During the first half of the '80s, Celmins produced a series of prints, incorporating both double and single images—aquatints, mezzotints, drypoints. Now more layers were being built: one mezzotint of a star-filled quadrant of the cosmos is appropriately titled STRATA. The etching offers both a day and a night of image. It is also a correlative of the impression light makes upon a plate in photography. In the etching, the subjective image is rendered objective by the acids that print the image on the plate, inverted, as a camera obscura inverts the objective scene it portrays. So Celmins' use of traditional

VIJA CELMINS, SUSPENDED PLANE, 1966, oil on canvas, 16 x 27" / SCHWEBENDES FLUGZEUG, 1966, Öl auf Leinwand, 40,6 x 68,5 cm.

compositional devices comes into eloquent play. The impressive ease with which she measures and balances her juxtaposed images engenders an immutable surface tension which is as compelling as the exquisite quality of the print itself.

By the mid-'80s, Celmins resumed painting, again using as subjects the sea, heavens, and earth. "It was because I wanted the work to carry more weight, have more form. I think I'd taken the pencil as far as it could go for me. I had a longing for more dimension than the lead could carry. I feel painting permits a more complicated spatial experience. I like that experience but I felt like a baby crawling on my hands and knees." Her palette offers the same range of darks, cloud-grays, pewter, and gunmetal tones, all mixed from many colors. But unlike a graphite surface which is shiny, the painted surface absorbs light, allowing the colors of the grays to hold images of light and darkness of infinite variety (UNTITLED, 1988, UNTITLED, 1990). The scale of some of the recent work has also increased considerably. And yet Celmins follows Modernism's notable concern for the picture plane.

"Unbrokenness of surface could be seen—by Cézanne par excellence—as standing for the evenness of seeing itself, the actual form of our knowledge of things."

(T. J. CLARK, The Painting of Modern Life, 1984)

It is not surprising that Cézanne's taking to its limits the notion of seeing as having a peculiar access to the thing-in-itself meant that he worked in a degree of isolation from his contemporary community of modernism. But for Vija Celmins the sense of displacement is a poignant one. "Latvia will always be my first home. That's where I was born. In another way the studio is a home because that's where everything happens for me. Czeslaw Milosz said it more eloquently: 'Imagination can fashion a homeland'. That statement is more than true for me." And for this writer, it is the joy of entering that imagination with every "little skid and skip of the lead over the paper, and you see that it's just right there, the paper and the thing on the paper, the physicalness of it" that gives Vija Celmins' tender surface such profundity.

All quotes by Vija Celmins are taken from an extensive interview with the artist by Chuck Close in *Vija Celmins*, edited by Bill Bartman. The book has been published recently by A.R.T. Press, Los Angeles.

Wagstaff, Sheena. "Vija Celmins." *Parkett* no. 32, 1992, pp. 6–19.

SHEENA WAGSTAFF

Vija Celmins

◆ *«Phantasie kann Heimat sein.»* CZESLAW MILOSZ ◆

Vor meinem Atelierbesuch bei Vija Celmins hatten Freunde mir gesagt, sie sei eine «Künstlerin für Künstler». Aber was heisst das? Das Etikett hat etwas seltsam Nostalgisches, eine Art Pendant der bildenden Kunst zum «Literaten». Schöpferische Integrität, malerische Bildung, eine Künstlerin, die sich dem Kampf um die grossen formalen Probleme der Kunst verpflichtet fühlt: all das und mehr. Wie Paul Cézanne – auch er zu seiner Zeit ein «Künstler für Künstler» – hält Celmins nichts von Theorien oder Spekulationen über den psychologischen Gehalt ihrer Arbeit. Und es ist die Art, wie sie ihren «Fortschritt auf dem eigenen Gebiet» verwirklicht, vor allem in ihrem späteren Werk, die gewissermassen auf Cézanne zurückverweist.

Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs wanderte Celmins von Lettland über Deutschland in die USA ein. Von ihren Ursprüngen entfernte sie sich aber noch weiter, als sie in den 60er Jahren nach Kalifornien zog, um dort Kunst zu studieren. Zu dieser Zeit wandelte sich ihr Werk: von der malerischen Abstraktion in expressionistischer Manier wechselte sie zur exakten Abbildung dessen, was sie um sich herum sah – einzelne Gegenstände in ihrem recht kargen Ladenlokal-Atelier, wie zum Beispiel eine glühende Kochplatte, eine Doppellampe oder ein Fernseher (HOT-PLATE, 1964, LAMP # 1, 1964). Die Geräte stehen jeweils in der Mitte auf einem schmalen, biegsamen Sims vor einer Wand aus sanftem Grau, wodurch der monochrome Gesamteindruck jedes einzelnen Bildes noch verstärkt wird. Doch die Farbtöne erinnern an ein schwarzweisses Fernsehbild, kurz bevor der Knopf betätigt wird und die Farben sich über den Bildschirm ergiessen. Indem sie den Gegenstand in die Bildfläche rückt, greift Celmins auf jene künstlerische Praxis seit der Renaissance zurück, die vor allem von späten Velazquez-Bildern wie PHILIP IV

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beeinflusst wurde. Bei einem Besuch im Madrider Prado hatte sie sich von diesem Bild angezogen gefühlt. Das 1656 gemalte Porträt zeigt den spanischen König vor der farbdichten Dunkelheit eines endlosen schwarzen Raums – oder ist es die schwer lokalisierbare Bildfläche? Gemäss der strengen Schule am spanischen Hof vermied Velazquez jede Theatralik. Statt dessen verlegte er sich auf extreme Natürlichkeit und demonstrierte auch damit, was man als «Mangel an Stil» bezeichnete. Celmins war beeindruckt von der Leichtigkeit seiner Malerei. «Es war fabelhaft. Man geht nahe heran und entdeckt eine Pinselführung, die sich scheinbar wie von selbst ergeben hat. Ich erinnere mich an dieses schwere Grau und Weiss.» Doch Celmins Arbeit verdankt anderen, jüngeren Künstlern ebensoviel wie Velazquez.

Zu diesen gehört auch Morandi, über den de Chirico 1922 schrieb: «Er versucht ganz aus sich selbst heraus zu schöpfen und zu schaffen. Geduldig reibt er seine Farben an, bereitet seine Leinwände vor und betrachtet die Gegenstände um sich herum, vom geweihten Brot bis zur klaren Form von Gläsern und Flaschen.» Und wie bei so mancher *Natura-Morta*-Darstellung von Morandi, wo das eingefrorene Erscheinungsbild der Gegenstände eine unheimliche Ruhe ausstrahlt, zeigt auch das unterbrochene «Leben» in Celmins' Bildern SOUP oder PUZZLE (beide 1964) den Gegenstand als erstarrtes Abbild nicht nur der Natur schlechthin, sondern der «Natur» des Gegenstandes selbst. Salvador Dalí bezeichnete die Reglosigkeit von Morandis Stilleben als kleine Drohtheater, in denen der Eindruck der Ordnung wie das leuchtende Spiegelbild einer früheren Unordnung erscheint. Sicherlich sah Celmins, dass ihre «gemalten Gegenstände schief waren, gewissermassen von überschüssiger Energie verbogen waren».

Wie viele ihrer Kollegen hat Celmins die Entwicklung von Künstlern wie Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol und Malcolm Morley an der Ostküste verfolgt. Letzterer begann 1966 eine monochrome Bildreihe von Schlachtschiffen aus vergrösserten Photos. Zur selben Zeit konzentrierte sich Celmins auf Studien von deutschen, japanischen und amerikanischen Kampfflugzeugen wie fragmentarisch aufleuchtende Kindheitserinnerungen: FLYING FORTRESS (Fliegende Festung), 1966, SUSPENDED PLANE (Schwebendes Flugzeug), 1966. Angeregt worden war Celmins von Illustrationen in alten Zeitschriften und Kriegsbüchern, die sie in L.A. bei Trödlern aufgestöbert hatte, vielleicht in dem Bestreben, sich mit ihrer unruhigen Jugend auszusöhnen. Diese für Eindrücke besonders empfänglichen Jahre hatte sie ja

VIJA CELMINS, T.V., 1965, 26½ x 36" / Öl auf Leinwand, 67,3 x 91,5 cm.

VIJA CELMINS, HOT PLATE, 1964, oil on canvas, 25 x 35" / HEISSE PLATTE, 1964, Öl auf Leinwand, 63,5 x 89 cm.

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VIJA CELMINS, UNTITLED (BIG SEA #1), 1969,
graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 34⅛ x 45¼" /
OHNE TITEL (GROSSES MEER NR. 1), 1969,
Graphit auf Acrylgrund auf Papier, 86,7 x 115 cm.
(PHOTO: SCHENCK & SCHENCK)

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vor dem Hintergrund düster drohender und schliesslich auch tatsächlicher Gewalt von Tötungsmaschinen und Brandsätzen erlebt. In ihrem Werk folgten noch weitere schreckenerregende Bilder: ein Mann, der einem brennenden Autowrack entflieht; Rücken und Beine brennen lichterloh, als zöge er einen wehenden Feuermantel hinter sich her; blaurote und gelbe Flammen tauchen das ansonsten dichte Dunkel der Szene in grelles Licht: BURNING MAN (Brennender Mann), 1966. Eine andere traurig-kühle Skizze zeigt das erloschene Leben eines Fahrers, dessen Kopf auf das Lenkrad eines zerschossenen Autos gesunken ist; die stahlgrauen Farbtöne umhüllen die Leiche wie ein Sarg: TULIP CAR # 1 (Tulpenauto Nr. 1), 1966. Zwar erinnern diese beiden Arbeiten an die früheren Unfall-Siebdruckserien von Andy Warhol; doch ging es Celmins hier mehr um den individuellen Ursprung dieser Bilder – gedruckter Photographien – als um die emotionale Wirkung des Gegenstands. «Ich behandelte die Photographie als Objekt, als zu analysierenden Gegenstand.»

Zur gleichen Zeit widmete sich Celmins eingehend der Frage, wie ein Abbild auf einer Fläche festzuhalten sei, um es in die von Material und Raum des gemalten Bildes vorgegebenen Bedingungen einzuspannen. An Jasper Johns bewunderte sie «die Oberflächenspannung im Verhältnis zum Gegenstand» sowie seine Fähigkeit, den Betrachter in eine fesselnde Auseinandersetzung mit vertrauten Gegenständen zu ziehen, die er in neuem Kontext darstellte. Zwar schätzte Celmins auch das Werk von Jackson Pollock und de Kooning. («Zuerst hasste ich Pollock, und dann begann ich einfach, Pollock zu sehen. Ich sah es einfach und stiess auf die Lust und die Kontrolliertheit der Bilder. Und dann begann ich allmählich etwas davon zu verstehen.») Doch scheint Kunst wie die von Jasper Johns sie davon überzeugt zu haben, dass man sich in der Malerei einen tiefgehenden Dialog mit dem Betrachter erschliessen kann. Das bedeutet, dass der Betrachter nicht länger mehr stummer Zeuge eines Dialogs der Malerin mit ihrem Thema ist; vielmehr lädt die Beziehung zwischen Form und Dargestelltem im Bild den Betrachter dazu ein, sich aktiv an der Erfahrung der Malerin zu beteiligen. Dies ist zugleich auch eine treffende Beschreibung jenes entscheidenden Wandels am Ende des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, als die Künstler sich von der Idee verabschiedeten, die Malerei sei ein Mittel zur Erforschung der persönlichen Beziehung des Künstlers zur Welt. «Ich glaube nicht, dass die Auffassung der amerikanischen Malerei vom Bild als einer Gesamtfläche – losgelöst von den Kategorien des Vorder-, Mittel- und Hintergrunds usw. – erst mit den Abstrakten Expressionisten begann. Cézanne erkannte und betonte den Raum, den man vor sich hat. Er tat es im klaren Bewusstsein seiner selbst. Durch ihn kam ich darauf, dass das Kunstwerk das umfasst, was ich vor mir habe. Ich glaube, die Abstrakten Expressionisten – und ganz gewiss de Kooning – wussten dies und machten davon Gebrauch. Doch fügten sie noch etwas anderes hinzu, das Unbewusste.»

Eine zerknüllte und dann wieder glattgestrichene Abbildung von einem Gewehr, ein Zeppelin-Bild mit Eselsohren, ein adressierter Freiumschlag, an der Seite aufgeschlitzt und mit Briefmarken von brennenden Infernos beklebt, ein Zeitungsphoto von den Verheerungen des einstigen Hiroshima – jeden einzelnen Papierschnipsel mit diesen Darstellungen setzte Celmins in einer Zeichnungsreihe von 1968 sorgfältig ins Bild. HIROSHIMA, 1968, BIKINI, 1968. «Als ich mich entschloss, mit dem Malen aufzuhören, boten mir die Ausschnitte eine wunderbare Grauskala, der ich mit dem Graphitstift nachspüren konnte. Wenig später wurden mir in Zeitschriften und Büchern die silbrigen Grautöne jener Mondaufnahmen, die Luna 9 zur Erde sandte, Lehre und Anregung zugleich. Eine Maschine hatte die verschiedenen Grautöne auf dem Mond bereits gesehen und sie dann übermittelt, worauf sie photographiert und im Buch abgedruckt wurden, sodann... Es waren viele Schichten und Distanzen übereinander. Ich wollte sie in die reale Welt zurückholen, in das Hier und Jetzt.» Diese Phase war nicht nur ein Übergang von jener aufgewühlten – und zwangsläufig affektiven – Bildsprache, der sie den Rücken gekehrt hatte; durch die Verwendung des Zeichenstifts konnte sie jener wunderbaren Vielzahl von Grautönen nachspüren, die sie in ihren Photos fand. Und zugleich erkannte sie, dass sie ein einzelnes Abbild herstellen konnte, ohne es in der Mitte des Papiers

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zu isolieren. «Schichtungen schaffen Distanz, und Distanz schafft die Möglichkeit, das Werk langsamer zu erfahren und den eigenen Bezug dazu zu erkunden.» Und das ermöglichte es ihr, «Zeichnen als aufgedeckten Denkprozess» zu sehen.

Allabendlich ging Celmins mit ihrem grossen Hund am Strand von Venice spazieren und begann dabei zu photographieren. «Schliesslich hatte ich stapelweise Photos vom Meer und war so verliebt in dieses Motiv, dass ich es zu zeichnen begann.» In den Ozean-Zeichnungen aus den späten 60er Jahren erstreckt sich das Meer in leicht gekräuselten Wellen, kleinen Wasserhügeln, bis zum Horizont, dem oberen Rand der Leinwand; und das ist weder Photorealismus noch einfach die Mimikry einer genauen Nachbildung. Wenn die dunklen und hellen Töne in Schichten auf die Oberfläche aufgetragen werden, so pointiert dies das Aussehen ihrer Bilder vom Meer, nicht das Meer selbst. In diesen Zeichnungen geht es um die Konventionen des Bildermachens. Es sind Stilleben, Wellen im Aufschäumen erstarrt, erfasst mit jenen Mitteln, durch die der Geist das Sichtbare festzuhalten sucht. Cézannes Verdienst, die Ideologie des Visuellen – die Vorstellung vom Sehen als eigenständigem Vorgang mit seiner eigenen Wahrheit – in die Malerei eingeführt zu haben, hat in Vija Celmins' Arbeit ganz sicher einen Verfechter gefunden. Für die jüngeren Maler, ja selbst für seine Zeitgenossen, bot sein Werk eine Lösung für das Problem, einerseits die fundamentale Bedeutung der Wahrnehmung zu erhalten und andererseits den Empirismus durch bewusste Reflektion zu ersetzen. Doch natürlich war die «Lösung» immer nur allenfalls partiell. Losgelöst von der individuellen Praxis des Künstlers im Umgang mit den Bildmitteln, weiss der Betrachter nichts davon, auf welche Weise sein «Sehen» letztlich Gegenstände in der Kunst ermöglicht. Je mehr man sieht, desto deutlicher werden einem die Paradoxien der Wahrnehmung. In einer umfassenden Serie von Ozean-Bildern erprobt Celmins radikale Alternativen in Mass und Farbgebung (von kleinen, rechteckigen Formaten bis zu 20 Zentimeter x 2,5 Meter grossen Zeichnungen) sowie in der Oberflächendichte, wenn sie mit unterschiedlich harten Graphitstiften experimentiert (UNTITLED [OCEAN], 1969, LONG OCEAN, 1973).

Auf ihren Reisen von Los Angeles in die Mohave-Wüste nahe beim Death Valley machte Celmins zahlreiche Photos; diese dienten ihr als Ausgangsmaterial für eine Reihe von Sand- und Stein-Bildern. Gleichzeitig wurde Celmins' Begeisterung für Bilder von Sternen und Sternkonstellationen noch gesteigert durch die Entdeckung von Satellitenphotos im California Institute of Technology. Und diese führten wiederum zu einer anderen Serie, den Galaxien (GALAXY [CASSIOPEIA], 1973). «Mir wurde klar, dass dem Graphit selbst gewissermassen Leben innewohnt. Ich produzierte eine Reihe von Bildern, Meeren, Wüsten, und trieb jedes einzelne bis an seine Grenzen. Dann machte ich mich an die Galaxie-Zeichnungen. Doch sie waren nicht das Ergebnis irgendeiner Sterngruckerei. Sie entstanden vielmehr aus Liebe zur Schwärze des Stifts.» Das fahle Licht der spröden Starre kahler Wüstenfelsen mit ihren Schattenhöfen unter der gnadenlosen Sonne hat sein Pendant in der Dunkelheit und unendlichen Tiefe des Alls, verdeutlicht durch kleine glitzernde Sterne. Der schwarze Strich des Zeichenstifts wird Raum und materielle Struktur zugleich, Oberfläche und Tiefe in einem. Celmins ärgert sich über Leute, die ihre Bilder nur als Projektionen ihrer eigenen Beziehung beispielsweise zum Meer begreifen. «Ich habe mit dieser Art von Romantik nichts im Sinn. Wie etwa Caspar David Friedrich, der Einsamkeit und Romantik auf die Natur projiziert, der der Natur und Grandiosität den kleinen, unbedeutenden Betrachter gegenüberstellt. Ich liebe es, hinzusehen und zu beschreiben, mit den Bildern den Entstehungsvorgang zu erkunden. Für mich ist das Bild eine Art Anker. An ihm mache ich meine Spuren und meine Kunst fest.»

«Alles ist, besonders in der Kunst, im Kontakt mit der Natur entwickelte und angewandte Theorie.»

(CÉZANNE AN CAMOIN, 1903)

Ungefähr Mitte der 70er Jahre begann Celmins mit ihren Doppelbild-Zeichnungen. Auf diese Neuerung kam sie durch ihre Erkenntnis, dass sie das neben

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VIJA CELMINS, UNTITLED (LARGE DESERT DRAWING), 1974–75, pencil on paper, 19 x 24¼" / OHNE TITEL (GROSSE WÜSTENZEICHNUNG), 1974–75, Bleistift auf Papier, 48,3 x 61,6 cm. (PHOTO: ROBERT E. MATES)

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dem Papier, auf dem sie arbeitete, liegende Photo als Entsprechung in anderem Format miteinarbeiten könne, wie Spiegelbilder etwa, die, wenn man sie aus einer gewissen Entfernung sieht, alle im selben Rahmen erscheinen: DOUBLE DESERT (Doppelte Wüste), 1974. «Ich wollte eine mehrdimensionale Arbeit machen, die zugleich im Raum vor- und zurücktrat und doch blieb, was sie war, ein im Grunde flaches, kleines konzentriertes Feld.» Vor allem in ihren Zeichnungen von Sternenfeldern baut Celmins den Raum mit dicken schwarzen Graphitstrichen auf – «schön fett machen» nennt sie das. (Dabei lässt sie an manchen Stellen das weisse Papier stehen, so dass nadelfeine Lichtflecken wie Navigationsbojen aufleuchten STARFIELD (Sternenfeld), 1981/82.) «Ich wollte also eine dichte, mehrschichtige Struktur herstellen. Man kann darin zum Beispiel eine Anspielung auf eine Art verdichteter Lebenserfahrung sehen – die man dann mit Graphit und Papier erfährt.» In der ersten Hälfte der 80er Jahre entstand eine Reihe von Drucken, zu denen Doppelebenso wie Einzelbilder zählen, Aquatinten, Kaltnadelradierungen und Stiche. Jetzt kommen noch mehr Ebenen hinzu: und so heisst denn auch ein Stich von einem sternenübersäten Quadranten im All folgerichtig STRATA (Schichten). Die Radierung führt Tag und Nacht des Bildes vor. Zugleich ist es eine Entsprechung jener Spuren, die Licht auf einer photographischen Platte hinterlässt. Durch die Einwirkung der Säure, die das Bild in die Platte ätzt, wird aus dem subjektiven Bild ein objektives, umgekehrtes, wie bei der Camera obscura, die ja auch die Szene umgekehrt abbildet. So gerät Celmins' Verwendung traditioneller Kompositionsmittel zum vieldeutigen Spiel. Die beeindruckende Leichtigkeit, mit der sie ihre nebeneinandergesetzten Bilder auslotet und balanciert, ergibt eine unauflösliche Oberflächenspannung, die nicht weniger aufregend ist als die hohe Qualität des Druckes selbst.

Mitte der 80er Jahre begann Celmins auch wieder zu malen; und wieder wandte sie sich Themen wie Meer, Himmel und Erde zu. «Meine Arbeit sollte gewichtiger werden, mehr Form haben. Ich hatte den Zeichenstift als Medium für mich ausgereizt. Ich wollte mehr Tiefe, als mit dem Graphitstift zu erreichen war. Ich glaube, Malerei ermöglicht eine komplexere räumliche Erfahrung. Ich liebe diese Erfahrung, aber ich kam mir vor wie ein Baby, das auf allen vieren krabbelt.» Ihre Palette umfasst wieder dieselbe Skala aus dunklen, nebelgrauen, zinngrauen und blaugrauen Tönen, die alle aus vielen verschiedenen Farben ermischt sind. Doch im Gegensatz zur glänzenden Graphit-Oberfläche absorbiert die gemalte Fläche das Licht und lässt aus den Grautönen Bilder von Licht und Dunkel in unendlicher Vielzahl entstehen (UNTITLED, 1988, UNTITLED, 1990). Auch das Format ist bei den neueren Arbeiten grösser geworden. Allerdings bleibt Celmins dem starken Hang des Modernismus zur Betonung der Bildfläche treu.

«Die Ungebrochenheit der Oberfläche mag – vor allem bei Cézanne – für das Fliessende des Sehens selbst stehen, die eigentliche Form unseres Wissens von den Dingen also.»

(T.J. CLARK, THE PAINTING OF MODERN LIFE, 1984)

Cézanne hat den Begriff des Sehens als besonderen Zugang zum Gegenstand an sich bis an die Grenze getrieben; und so ist es nur verständlich, dass er sich damit gewissermassen isolierte von seinen modernistischen Zeitgenossen. Vija Celmins empfindet ein starkes Gefühl der Entwurzelung. «Lettland wird immer meine eigentliche Heimat bleiben. Da wurde ich geboren. Andererseits ist das Atelier eine Art Heimat für mich, denn da passiert bei mir alles. Czeslaw Milosz hat es besser ausgedrückt: ‹Phantasie kann Heimat sein.› Für mich trifft das absolut zu.» Und für die Autorin dieses Textes ist es die Lust, in diese Phantasiewelt einzudringen mit jedem «kleinen Strich und Tupfer des Bleis auf dem Papier; man sieht, wie es einfach da ist, das Papier und das Material auf dem Papier, in seiner ganzen physischen Präsenz». Das ist es, was Vija Celmins' zarter Oberfläche solche Tiefe gibt.

(Übersetzung: Nansen)

Alle Celmins-Zitate aus einem Interview mit Chuck Close (27. September 1990) und einem Interview mit der Autorin (September 1991).

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The New York Times
Art in Review

Seeing Infinity in Little Dots of White

By ROBERTA SMITH

As an artist, Vija Celmins is loyal in the extreme. For more than 20 years, this idiosyncratic realist has remained true to a handful of meticulously rendered images. She draws and paints endless expanses of star-studded galaxies, calm ocean waves and parched desert floors that all seem to provide fragmentary glimpses of infinity.

At once overwhelming and startlingly intimate, Ms. Celmins's small, visibly handmade images are as abstract as they are realistic. Reticently painted, with tones of gray or black predominating, they can seem virtually blank from a distance, but they reward careful attention with a quiet, almost Zen-like emotional intensity.

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In her show of new paintings at the McKee Gallery, Ms. Celmins (her name is pronounced VEE-ya SELL-mins) pursues her old motifs with a new vigor and also adds some new ones, with results that are both impressive and, at times, a little transitional. The show also includes a selection of the Latvian-born artist's velvety prints made over the past 17 years.

Ms. Celmins, who began her career in Los Angeles in the early 1960's and moved to New York in 1977, made only drawings for many years; she returned to painting in the mid-80's. This exhibition, her first in four years, is only the second time she has shown new paintings here.

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Ms. Celmins seems to revel in images that first trick the eye and then make full disclosure of their pictorial means. In this she has much in common with another maverick realist, Chuck Close, a longtime friend who interviews Ms. Celmins in a small book on her work published this month by Art Press. You could also say her work occupies a midpoint between Vermeer and Jackson Pollock, so clear is her devotion to impeccable description and a pulsating all-over field.

Peer into "Night Sky No. 1," the first painting at McKee, and you may feel you're perched on a hill in summer looking straight up at myriad stars, big and little, near and far, bright and dim. Yet this crystalline illusion can collapse in an instant; move a few inches closer and you are looking at nothing but a field of small and smaller dots of paint, some white, some gray, all carefully dispersed across a matte black surface.

The ratio between natural fact and painted fact, an essential aspect of Ms. Celmins's art, changes radically from painting to painting. To this point the five night sky paintings that constitute the core of the show also form a series of variations on the double theme of painting and nature.

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Compared with the straightforward, almost flat-footed dotting of "Night Sky No. 1," "Night Sky No. 2" might be called flamboyant. Its glowing gray surface conjures a night when gentle, translucent fog expands every star in the sky to a soft blur of light.

"Night Sky No. 3" reverts to a black surface, but its marks are richly varied: some stars have pale aureoles and others are so indistinct that they seem more behind the black than on top of it. There's even a tiny shooting star to be found and an oblong one that suggests a flying saucer. "Night Sky No. 5" continues this kind of complexity in a slightly larger size, while "Night Sky No. 4," another larger canvas, brings us back to the flat-footed simplicity of "Night Sky No. 1." But here the star-dots are uncharacteristically sparse; they seem to take the viewer deep into a galaxy entirely different from the other paintings.

Scott Bowron/McKee Gallery
"Night Sky No. 5" (1992), one of a series by Vija Celmins.

The sense of unwavering focus in Ms. Celmins's work is reminiscent of the obsessively precise black and white abstractions of Myron Stout. As with Stout's chiseled forms, one feels that every molecule of Ms. Celmins's painted surface has been attended to. Her images are more built than rendered, her surfaces more condensed, or rubbed down, than painted, and it is this sense of obdurate physicality that gives her art its power.

In two new images, the artist expands her narrow vocabulary, but not always for the better. In "Desert Surface No. 1," a painting on wood, Ms. Celmins creates the look of a dry desert plain by adding painted cracks to the wood texture with such skill that it is very difficult to tell what is real and what is painted. This kind of trompe-l'oeil effect undermines the visual honesty that seems central to the artist's enterprise.

More engaging is a little gray painting of a delicate spider web, a scaled-down image that nonetheless has its own intimations of infinity. As yet this motif lacks the taut physicality of the galaxy paintings, but it is quite beautiful, silvery of line and light. One can imagine it being built up, in subsequent works, to Ms. Celmins's usual level of intensity.

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Vija Celmins's new paintings remain at the McKee Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, near 58th Street, through April 4.

Smith, Roberta. "Seeing Infinity in Little Dots of White." *The New York Times,* March 6, 1992, p. C29.

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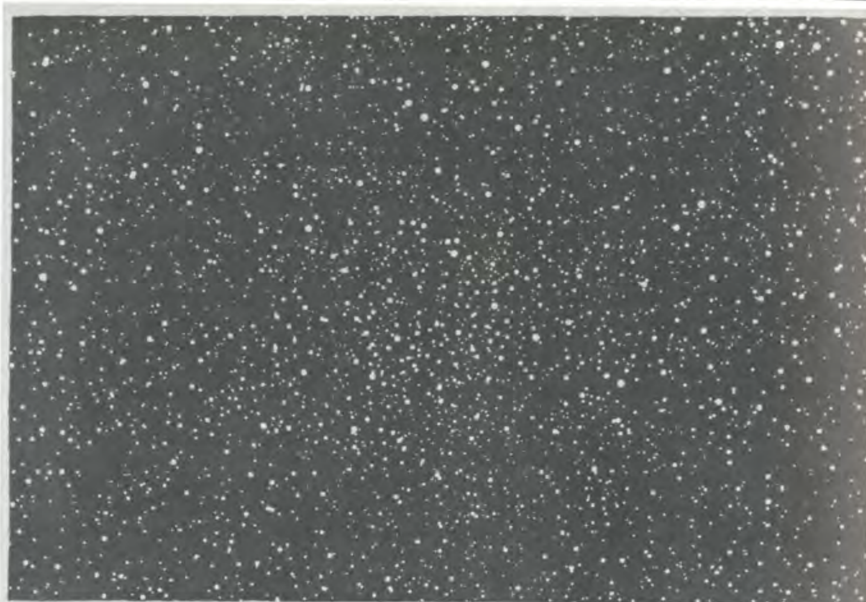
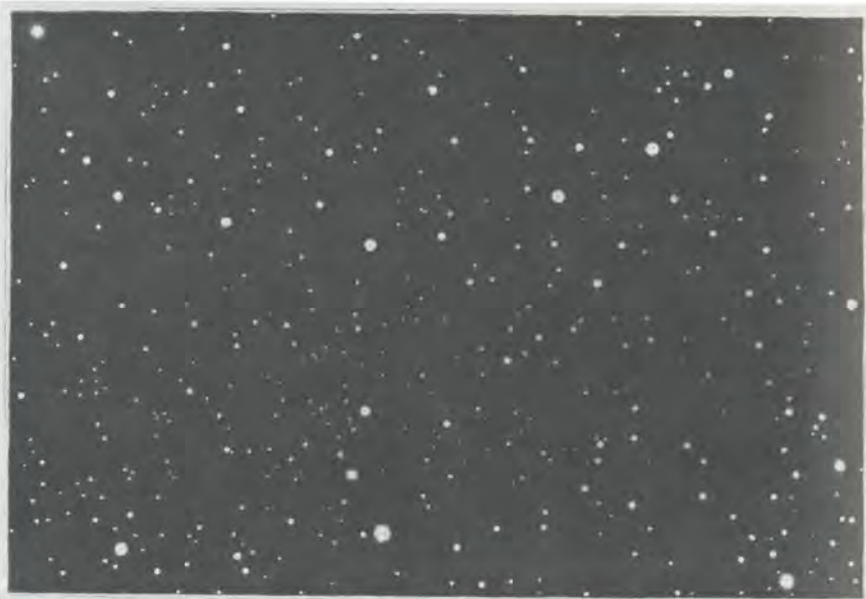
ARTFORUM

VIJA CELMINS DRAWING WITHOUT WITHDRAWING

KENNETH BAKER





Vija Celmins' drawings involve many traversals. The first is always her own transverse buildup of an image on a page. She tends to work from one corner of a sheet to the one diagonally opposite, and favors graphite because she is "interested in having the image collect."[1] People often remark upon the impersonal qualities of her work, but she believes that "the art is in the making, not in the object," and that her touch gives meaning to what she makes. Her choice of subjects is guided partly by a desire to unite mark, image, and surface, as they are united in her recent "views" of outer space. The darks in these drawings correspond fully to darkness, and the lights, to light.

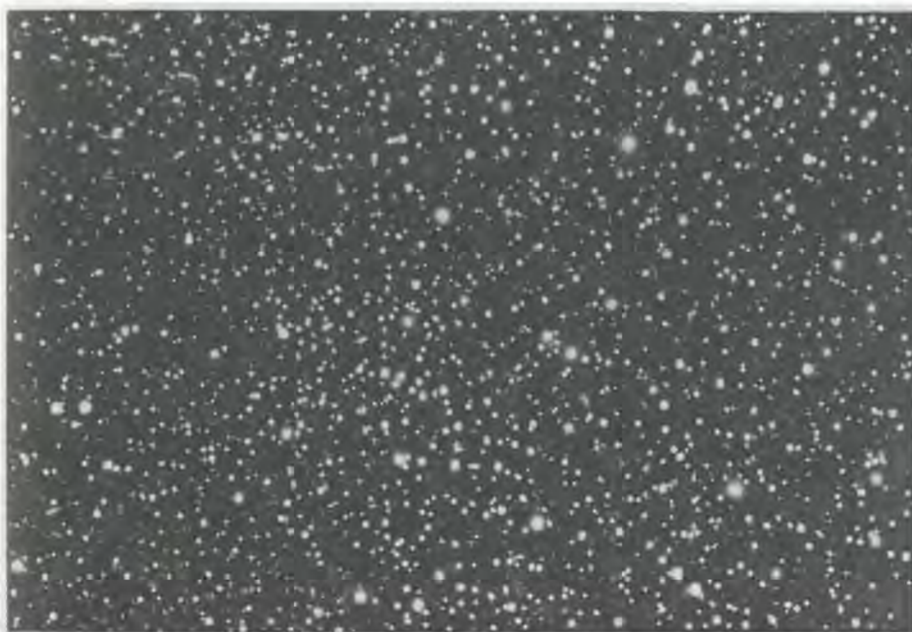
Looked at literally, many of her pictures fall within the landscape tradition: they give the travels of our gaze the imaginative weight of passage through unfamiliar territory, a stretch of sea or a gulf of interstellar space. Her recent "Star Field" drawings present what amounts to a landscape vision updated by transport beyond terrestrial horizons. In these works sky and earth meet at the borders of the image, where the tangibility of the art object eclipses totally the illusion of indefinite depth. Such shifts of focus and sense are what you experience when you look hard at Celmins' art. You can dwell in the spatial illusion of *Moving Out*, 1982, for example, only briefly. The inestimability of the distances it appears to describe casts you back to the picture's very finite dimensions (18¾ by 27½ inches).

Celmins' drawings cannot be taken literally for very long by anyone who has seen them up close. As reader, you come up against one of the surprises of Celmins' art—its resistance to the camera. "You really have to quiet yourself to see how physical they are," she says. This antiphotographic quality of the work is surprising because her subjects are photographs—whether transmitted by unmanned spacecraft, in her earlier works, or taken from earth-based observatories, in her recent "Star Field" drawings—all translated into the material gradations of her own medium. When the finished drawing is photographed, the pictorial information survives, but nearly all of the work's material definition is lost. Any photographic reproduction supplants the drawing's surface with that of the paper on which it is printed, eliminating the work's quality of being "almost like a thing made out of graphite." The drawings make such good sense conceptually, it is easy to underestimate the significance of their physical finish. Yet their material refinement is what turns your attention to basic questions, such as how we should value the labor that produced them.

The photographs Celmins renders are as convincing representationally as pictures in a family album, but space and time diverge in views of the stars as they never do in mundane snapshots. The physical states these photographs record were simultaneous only in the sense that light from all the stars in evidence

Baker, Kenneth. "Vija Celmins: Drawing Without Withdrawing." *Artforum*, November 1983, pp. 64–65.

reached the camera at the same moment. The information emanating from the myriad stars varies enormously because the distances separating them are so great that they are best expressed in light-years. We may wonder whether Celmins was looking—perhaps with Cubism in mind—for a subject that would subvert the temporal consistency we expect representational pictures to have. She admits to being interested in the assumption, or convention, that a "realistic" image describes a single moment of experience. The space photographs she uses undermine that convention in two ways: by their physical incommensurability with the vastness they depict, and by the fact that they represent *no one's experience*, only the smooth functioning of NASA's data-gathering technology. The surface nuances of her drawings, not their illusionistic depths, signify the sensitivities of human perception by making us aware of the workings of our own visual processes.



Above: Vija Celmins, *Star Field III*, 1983, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 21 × 27". Collection of the Edward Broida Trust.
Left above: Vija Celmins, *Star Field*, 1982, graphite on paper, 21 × 27½". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry W. Anderson.
Left below: Vija Celmins, *Moving Out (Star Field II)*, 1982, graphite on paper, 18¾ × 27". Private collection.

Like her images of the ocean surface and the desert floor, the star-field pictures provide Celmins with formats for drawing activity uncomposed by her. Her aim is primarily the enrichment of a surface, not the translation of an image. She chooses images she hopes will "force the viewer to stay in the present moment" while looking at the work by being almost free of references. Yet she insists that the star field pictures "are *our* images. We see them everywhere—in movies, on billboards, on TV, on stamps." In drawing them, she tries "to slow them down so they're not just a cliché in your mind."

People frequently ask Celmins how long it takes her to make a drawing. She says she is tired of explaining that a typical piece requires a couple of weeks of steady work, but she acknowledges that questions of time are pertinent. She sees "a physical accounting for time" in her drawings, and describes the working process as being "like time paid attention to." What interests her more is the experience of time people have while viewing her work. The spans of time suggested by the image are immeasurable in human terms, whereas everyone recognizes that the temporal element of the art object—the sense of time materialized in the drawing process—is labor time. On earth, time is continually being bought and sold, and everyone's time has its price, and its worth. The graphite she uses accumulates so densely that it is impossible to estimate accurately the quantity of labor inscribed in a work. That is why no one can help wondering how long it takes Celmins to produce a drawing. By goading and then frustrating our estimate of the effort they entail, Celmins' drawings challenge us to articulate values that are not convertible to time or money; moreover, they intimate that what makes possible the discovery of other values is the ability to control and intensify one's attention.

The longer you study a drawing such as *Star Field*, 1982, the emptier it looks. What reads at first as an image reveals itself as a technical performance, a kind of graphic obstacle course. Pass through the focal planes of meaning developed by the tension between process and illusion, and you arrive finally at a mute observation of what's there: graphite on paper. Then you can understand the eye's passage into depth in Celmins' drawings as a metaphor for the mind's inability to stand still, to settle upon and settle for the fullness of the present moment. In historical terms, space exploration may be the ultimate expression of the human mind's restlessness. The artist affirms that working on a drawing has the effect of stilling her own thoughts. Viewing her work can have a similar effect. Quieting the attention is one of the ways her art can be used. It is anti-expressionist work in the sense that it tends to steady rather than provoke the viewer.

In Celmins' most recent New York show she titled an ensemble of sculpturelike objects "To fix the image in memory." Moved by "a longing to reexperience a rock, to reimagine it," she had bronze casts made of various rocks picked up in New Mexico and elsewhere. She then painted the bronzes to look exactly like the "originals" and exhibited them in corresponding pairs which, all together, form the ensemble. Rocks seem a natural "subject" for this exercise in verisimilitude because they are so obviously not the work of human hands, and because stone, like bronze, is a traditional sculpture material. They also relate to details of her earlier drawings of the desert floor. The likeness of each painted bronze to its counterpart is so great, you have to look from one to the other again and again to decide which is the replica. The longer you pursue the comparison, the more you recognize the impossibility of focusing absolutely on two things at once. And the more you feel your attention intensify as it struggles with the question of what is real and what is artifice. Yet there is a kind of levity to the ensemble of look-alikes, in their taking representation to an absurd extreme of accuracy, and in the pun that lurks in the process of "casting" stones.

The premise of expressionism is that only the force of intense feeling can awaken us to aspects of life we habitually ignore or repress. Celmins reminds us, through extremes of refinement, that we don't need to play with the fire of emotion to transcend the mundane sensations of life. The stones consolidate the anti-expressionist tendency of her art. Stones are synonymous with stillness, as lead is synonymous with weight, so each of her fabricated stones is a sculptural figure for stillness. The point of the bronze stones' verisimilitude is not to impress, but to frustrate the eye, forcing us to rely upon less physical intuitions. To decide which is a real stone and which a replica, we must be sensitive to each thing's intensity of being, consult our feeling for the energy of its materialization. When such elusive intuitions become central to our experience, the normal priorities of perception are momentarily reordered, without having been disordered by vehement emotion.

Celmins' art shows by its strict quiescence that energy of attention is as much a source of value and of surprise as energy of emotion. And because it demands that we quiet ourselves to apprehend it, her work enables us to complete thoughts about reality that we might otherwise be unable to formulate. ■

Kenneth Baker is a freelance critic who works in Providence and New York.

1. All quotes from Celmins are taken from conversations with the author.

Baker, Kenneth. "Vija Celmins: Drawing Without Withdrawing." *Artforum,* November 1983, pp. 64–65.

Art in America

Of Earthly Objects and

In the beginning, Vija Celmins painted steaming soup and other warm, the detritus of World War II remembered from her childhood. Now graphite drawings which employ an ambiguous natural imagery to symbolize

BY RICHARD ARMSTRONG

Last year's traveling retrospective of Vija Celmins's work revealed an inner logic—chronological, technical and imagistic—that may have surprised even the few people, mostly her fellow Los Angeles artists, who are familiar with her art. Not only does each medium in which she has worked occupy a particular period in her career—painting, the early years of the '60s; sculpture, mostly '66–67; the graphite drawings for which she is best known, the '70s—each also represents a specific advance in her effort to use representational imagery to other than descriptive or narrative ends.

Celmins has moved from two to three dimensions, from painting to trompe-l'oeil sculpture, and back to a flat surface again in her drawings, in a progressive attempt to achieve a resonant balance of image and technique. An intensely self-critical artist, she has gradually eliminated everything she feels to be extraneous: color, gesture, finally painting itself. Likewise, the scale of her work has been gradually reduced as she has moved toward the most perfectly distilled image of reality she can make.

Because of Celmins's allegiance to representation, her work has been identified with a number of contemporaneous styles, primarily Pop and Photo-Realism. But this survey made it clear just how superficial those connections are. Not only does she invert Pop's gregarious sociability to her own introspective purposes; her drawings, which at first glance seem to be Photo-Realist, lack the fixed focus and emulsified sheen characteristic of that style, completely dependent as it is on the luminosity of paint. Nor are the images she works from typical of either style; too lacking in irony to be Pop, they are also

Vija Celmins: **German Plane, *1966, oil on canvas, 16 by 26 inches. Collection Chermayeff & Geismar Associates, Inc., New York.***

Flying Fortress, *1966, oil on canvas, 16 by 26 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Max Isaac, Honolulu.*

Stellar Sights: Vija Celmins

domestic subjects. Then, turning to violence and disorder, she explored
Celmins meditates on oceans, deserts and galaxies; the results are cool
both arrested motion and endless space. Her retrospective covered the span.

***House #2**, 1965, oil on wood with cardboard, 12 by 9 ¾ by 7 inches. Noma Copley, N.Y.*

too fragmentary, isolated and ultimately too abstract to be Photo-Realist.

If anything, Celmins's images are most indebted to Magritte's Surrealist symbols, although she never combines them into the oblique rebuses favored by the Belgian. Rather, she was attracted to his flawless trompe-l'oeil and ferocious iconoclasm outfitted as parlor-bound easel painting. Celmins's images seem to have been chosen as much for their availability, most being close at hand, as for their potential psychological connotations. The early works depict evocative domestic objects; in 1965 these were replaced by ominous or disastrous objects and events. Around 1968 these were in turn superseded by unpopulated panoramas of nature—ocean, desert, lunar and stellar views.

There is a great distance, both physical and psychological, between the first and last subjects of Celmins's work, from the things that surrounded her in a Los Angeles studio to the surface of the moon. That distance is paradoxically amplified by her steady efforts to suppress evidence of her hand; as the image she works from becomes more and more remote, she comes closer and closer to her working surface. Thus, a counterbalancing tendency underlies all Celmins's work; she restrains the subjective aspects of her imagery, even while compressing and intensifying the activity of its making. The exhibition demonstrated her increasing mastery over obvious gesture, specific meaning and finally style itself.

Two external influences flavor Celmins's early paintings: childhood memories of World War II, and Abstract-Expressionist art. Born in 1939 in the northern Baltic country of Latvia, Celmins experienced the war directly, spending her early childhood as a refugee in both the Eastern and Western sectors of war-ravaged Germany. Her family came to the United States in 1949, settling in Indianapolis, where she lived until graduation from art school.

Celmins is thus at the very end of the last generation of American artists to have matured under the sway, however waning, of Abstract Expressionism.

Armstrong, Richard. "Of Earthly Objects and Stellar Sights: Vija Celmins." *Art in America,* May 1981, pp. 100–07.

Comb, *1969-70, enamel on wood, 77 by 24 by 3 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

Three versions of Pink Pearl Eraser, *all acrylic on balsa wood; [left] 1967, 6 5/8 by 19 1/2 by 3 1/8 inches, Newport Harbor Art Museum; [middle] 1966-67, 6 5/8 by 18 by 3 1/8 inches, Noma Copley, N.Y.; [right] 1966-67, 6 5/8 by 19 3/4 by 3 1/8 inches, Joni and Monte Gordon, Los Angeles.*

She recalls having been attracted as a student to de Kooning's paintings; for a while she worked in a similar style. But after devoting an entire year to one painting—the culmination of her Abstract-Expressionist style developed in Indianapolis and at a Yale Norfolk summer session—she decided to set abstraction aside. Making highly colored and impastoed paintings was equivalent, she recalls, to "designing abstract patterns. . . . I could do more interesting ones, less interesting ones, so I gave up."

No examples of Celmins's earliest paintings were included in the exhibition, which began with a work from 1964—a small close-up of a bowl of steaming soup—made after she had moved to Los Angeles for graduate studies at UCLA. The cozy intimacy of such images soon gave way, however, to a series of life-size depictions of objects in her studio—a gooseneck lamp, an electrical heater, a pistol a friend had given her for safekeeping. Centered in an indeterminate gray space, the images are painted in somber oils, mostly grays. The straightforward manner of their presentation, as well as their isolation and reduced coloration, are reminiscent of Jasper Johns. Thought at the time to be simply another California version of Pop, these are not, however, paintings about advertising or the accouterments of consumer culture. Rather, Celmins painted portraits of appliances because they were the only things around that possessed sufficient formal and psychological resonance to warrant sustained attention. She was literally teaching herself to paint from a model again, and these works were the first to go against the grain of the expressionism and manual facility of her previous work.

Socially, Celmins's early years in Los Angeles seem to have been especially bleak. She was aware of the Ferus Gallery and its artists—Bengston, Kauffman, Irwin, et al.—but remained quite separate from their rowdy fraternizing. Only Joe Goode's small paintings from 1962–63 of sketchily drawn houses centered in a field of textured, monochromatic color were similar to her work, but she doesn't recall them as particularly memorable. And it is unlikely that she would have known Malcolm Morley's or Richard Artschwager's early Photo-Realist grisailles.

Celmins's turn away from abstraction brought her innate empiricism to the fore. By 1965 she had begun to look around at her immediate environment, and what she saw, imagined or remembered having seen was overtly horrifying. Her transition from studio-based to outer-world subjects seems to have been, appropriately enough, a painting of a television set, placed in the deadpan, frontal manner typical of her mid-'60s work. The ambiguous serenity of the image is threatened, however, by a picture within the picture: a disintegrating airplane, burning and in a nose-dive, appears on the TV screen. Crashing planes also appear on the surfaces of her first painted three-dimensional objects, made the same year. *House #1* and *House #2*—the first a miniaturization of a two-story house near her studio, the other an approximation of an Indiana wood-frame house—are compendia of Celmins's private disaster imagery. Consuming fires, a hand holding a smoking pistol, war battles, train crashes are all located in a hazy, cloudy gray ground.

Celmins's relative isolation encouraged her introspection. Los Angeles's big-city troves of war memorabilia fed her memories of a childhood which

appears to have been a melange of terror and contentment. She collected newspaper and magazine clippings of World War II scenes and bought war books at junk shops. Images from these sources, interspersed with ominous and sometimes disastrous vignettes related to driving, replaced her earlier, more benign subjects. Small and threatening, the paintings from this period are among Celmins's best work. Still using oils, she perfected a luminous, dispassionate style that could accommodate her taste for details without being overly explicit or Photo-Realist. Single war planes, Axis or Allied, hover in the same nebulous gray space that enveloped the objects in her previous paintings. Meanwhile she also represented more complicated and no less disturbing situations: a bullet-riddled car, the ominously bright headlights of oncoming traffic, a burning wreck with an escaping figure—also aflame and the show's lone human.

Though she never combines her images into the oblique rebuses favored by Magritte, Celmins was attracted to the Belgian's Surrealist symbols and to his flawless trompe-l'oeil technique.

At this point, Celmins began to temper—whether consciously or not—her apocalyptic vision in two ways. First, she began to work from photographs that she herself had taken, beginning with the view from inside her car on the freeway. Making her own photographs provided a less topical, less newsworthy image; it also obliged her to compose and consider space through the mechanical eye of the camera. Secondly, in a reprise of more personal themes, she made a number of painted sculptures, enlarged replicas of such childhood talismans as Pink Pearl erasers, a stubby pencil and a tortoise-shell pocket comb. These carved wooden objects, from two to six feet long and painted in trompe-l'oeil, are the frankest and most startling manipulations of scale in Celmins's oeuvre to date; they are also the last painted things in the exhibition.

Concurrently, Celmins produced a series of very small (ca. 13-by-18-inch) graphite drawings on paper, in which newspaper clippings are rendered illusionistically as small, irregularly cut and crumpled pieces of paper on top of a flat, clean paper ground. In these works, war imagery predominates, although it is beautifully and delicately drawn. Even a carefully reproduced envelope of a letter from home bears unlikely postage stamps depicting a burning house, wrecked and burning airplanes, clouds of smoke, etc. These works seem to be exorcisms of Celmins's attraction to the overtly calamitous; they are also prescient technical exercises in drawing with graphite, pre-

Truck, ***1966, oil on canvas, 16 by 26 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Steinberg.***

Freeway, ***1966, oil on canvas, 17 1/2 by 26 1/2 inches. Collection Harold Cook. New York.***

Hiroshima, *1968, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 13 1/4 by 18 inches. Collection Leta and Mel Ramos.*

ludes to the ocean views begun in '68.

Based upon her own 3½-by-5 black-and-white photographs of the Pacific taken from the Venice pier, the first ocean views mark Celmins's break with the centralized figure-ground arrangement employed in all her previous work. The magnification of her imagery from figure to all-over ground was undoubtedly influenced by her pencil and eraser enlargements made the previous year. As she later commented, "I went to the edge of the whole piece now, and I finally realized that I could have a single image without having something in the middle." With this move, Celmins successfully dispersed the arrested activity of her previous work across the entire surface. This internal magnification was accompanied by a more atomized application of graphite to paper. Her technique became unmistakably pointillist, each image, an accumulation of countless small marks.

With the exception of a few drawings of lunar surfaces, the ocean views uninterruptedly occupied her for the next five years; they comprised the largest part of the exhibition. As they appeared and developed the show became livelier and more engaging. The beginning of Celmins's mature work, the oceans represent one of those fortuitous moments in an artist's career when intention, intuition and skill synchronize.

The beginning of Celmins's mature work, her ocean views represent one of those fortuitous moments in an artist's career when intention, intuition and skill synchronize.

The ceaseless motion of the ocean's surface is an apt visual analogue for the concentrated energy which Celmins had tried to impart to all her prior work. Abandoning specific incidents in favor of more neutral and ambiguous imagery, she arrived at a suggestive, contemplative space. Her subtle alterations of photographic information engender variable spatial effects. Alternately impenetrable and infinitely deep—almost boundless—these drawings can be mesmerizing.

Graphite itself seems to have fostered this ideal integration of technique, image and meaning, as Celmins acknowledges: "It seemed very natural to me to have that graphite touch the paper and be like a point of reality where it touched. No smudging, no making marks, no grading, no manipulating to make sure that it spread out. Every little mark I made was a mark that fit the image and fit with the surface and fit with the space."

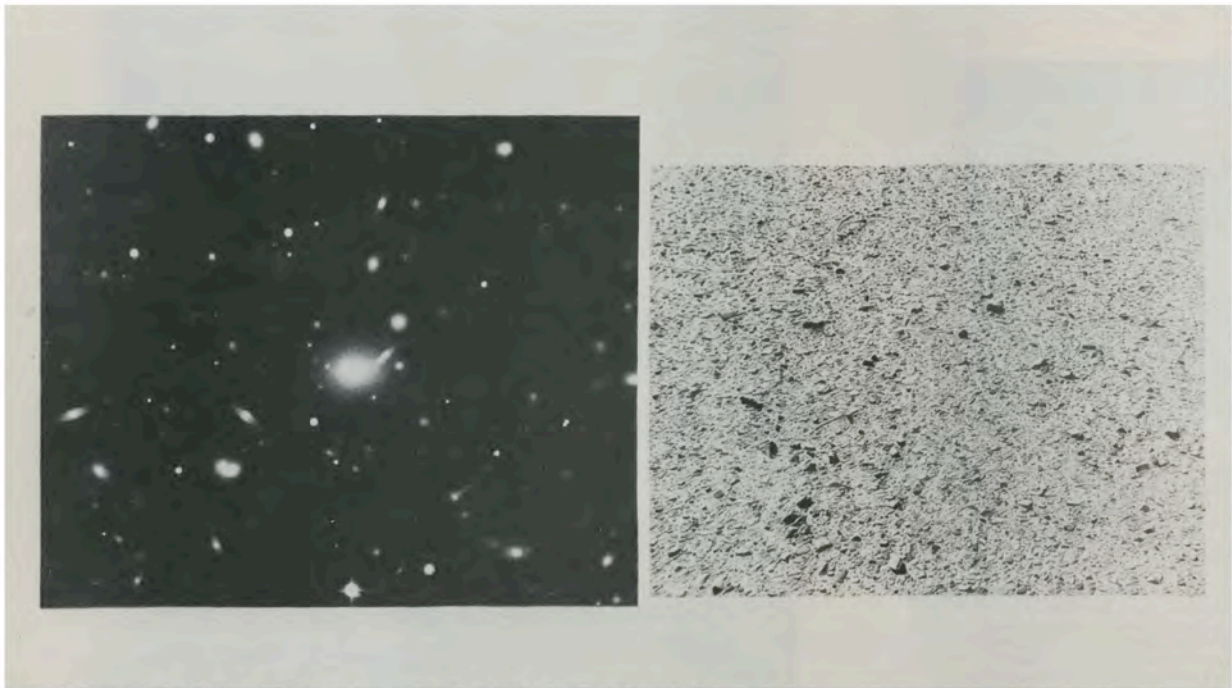
Graphite also seems to have suggested the course of Celmins's subsequent work. She experimented with varying textures and densities, each version of the ocean's

Untitled (Big Sea #1), ***1969, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 34 1/8 by 45 1/4 inches. Chermayeff & Geismar Associates, N.Y.***

Untitled (Big Sea #2), ***1969, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 34 by 45 inches. American Telephone & Telegraph Co., N.Y.***

Armstrong, Richard. "Of Earthly Objects and Stellar Sights: Vija Celmins." *Art in America,* May 1981, pp. 100–07.

Ocean: 7 Steps #2, ***1972-73, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 11 ½ by 98 inches. Collection Riko Mizuno, Los Angeles.***



Desert-Galaxy, ***1974, graphite on acrylic ground on canvas, 17 ½ by 38 inches. Collection of the artist.***

surface conveying a different sensation of movement and light. Her sensitivity to the interaction of pencil and paper became more and more acute. The drawings' tactility, their physical presence, is in constant equilibrium with their significance and legibility.

The drawings of 1972–73 show her in full command of her method. In a series of elongated ocean panoramas she introduced a long, horizontal format in which the image became a rectangular bar on the paper. The viewer is obliged to align his eye with the horizon, and thus to recognize the incontrovertibly planar aspects of the drawings—to admit at once, that is, their representational and abstract values.

Two drawings of the same period, *Ocean: Seven Steps #1* and *#2*, suggest process as subject. In each, seven versions of the same ocean view, each drawn with a softer lead, are joined side by side so that they grow darker from left to right. Frozen frames of the same motion, they become less and less reflective with each frame.

There is a great physical and psychological distance between the early and recent subjects of Celmins's work, between the things around her in a Los Angeles studio and the surface of the moon.

The final section of the show featured several of Celmins's recent drawings, views of the desert floor and variations on star clusters. The deserts advance the abstract character of their ocean predecessors. Celmins's atomized strokes charge the still desert with a sense of arrested motion much like the ocean's. In the change of vantage point from lateral to overhead, Celmins takes full advantage of spatial dislocations; whereas the ocean views have distinct fore-, middle- and backgrounds, the waves diminishing in roughly parallel lines, the desert views are strictly topological, with all parts equal. They enforce a sense of distance between the viewer and themselves; Celmins reduces as much as possible the feeling of an editorial point of view by working from an overhead, antigravitational perspective. For all their graphic detail, the resultant scenes are definitely abstract.

Reversing the direction of her gaze, while maintaining that palpable sense of distance and expansive space, Celmins began working from professional photographs of galaxies. These celestial views are her densest works: thousands of small graphite marks collide and intermingle like particles in outer space. As with the long composite ocean drawings, she again executed panels in series with softer and softer graphites, yielding darker and darker versions of the same galaxy; some are almost opaque.

The most interesting, and perhaps most portentous, drawings of the last period are three double-image works. All done in 1974, two of them juxtapose two differently scaled renditions of the same image, as if to emphasize her interest in their purely abstract nature. The third joins two different images, a desert and a galaxy, of roughly the same size. Synthesizing their radically different spatial treatments enhances the surface/image tension and resolution that Celmins seeks in all her work. The only one of its kind, this drawing stood out as a kind of harbinger.

Working in grisaille, on a small scale, with indistinguishable parts of a vast natural panorama, Celmins has gradually transformed her innately subjective esthetic by making it report on a broader, objective reality. Questioning the conventions of realist picture-making, she has discarded all but its most essential components—the illusionistic image, the plane on which it is reproduced, and the sparest possible physical means for creating it. Arresting and concentrating motion, her work seems to distill the essence of her subjects. As she once remarked, "Everything else is moving. I think art ought to be still." □

"Vija Celmins: A Survey Exhibition" was sponsored by the Fellows of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in cooperation with the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, Calif., where it was first presented. It subsequently traveled to the Arts Club of Chicago, the Hudson River Museum (Yonkers, N.Y.) and the Corcoran Gallery (Washington, D.C.). It was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, with text by Susan C. Larsen.

Author: *Richard Armstrong is a Los Angeles-based free-lance critic and curator, who is currently working on a book about Gordon Matta-Clark.*

Armstrong, Richard. "Of Earthly Objects and Stellar Sights: Vija Celmins." *Art in America*, May 1981, pp. 100–07.

Los Angeles Times

VIJA CELMINS' EXPRESSIONS OF ANXIETY

BY WILLIAM WILSON

Vija Celmins is among the most introspective, illusive and distinctive of Second Generation California vanguard artists. She held her first solo exhibition at the David Stuart Gallery in 1966 but by style and temperament her work attaches itself to the indrawn aspects of the '70s. It meditates and chants its mantra.

Her trademark is a painfully careful drawing of an anonymous rippling rectangle of ocean. Sometimes our mind fools itself into believing that is all she has ever drawn, endless ruminations on a gray sea.

That is far from the factual case as we see in her first overview exhibition. It was organized by the Fellows of Contemporary Art, a free-floating support group, and is on view at the Newport Harbor Art Museum to Feb. 3. It includes 60 works that represent, I gather, a reasonable approximation of her entire output from 1964 to 1977. This relatively sparse production attests to a career moving at a brooding pace and interrupted by long fallow stretches.

But it is not all oceans.

Early paintings are gently atmospheric images of such comforting commonplace items as a bowl of soup, gooseneck reading lamp and glowing electric heater. They bespeak, aside from obvious painterly talent, an autobiographical fondness for simple comfort.

Another note is introduced by a still life painted on wood sawed into a jigsaw puzzle. It hints the artist's preoccupation with the function and meaning of art.

Violence errupts unexpectedly in the image of a hand firing a pistol. The theme extends disturbingly in drawings of crippled World War II bombers, a bullet-riddled automobile with a body inside. A man runs from a car on fire. Pictures are the more distressing because all are rendered with the gentle dreaminess of the still lifes. They are like bad dreams visiting themselves on a peaceful soul.

Vija Celmin's "Big Sea Number 1" is among works in a survey exhibition at the Newport Harbor Art Museum.

Then we encounter a group of model houses. One is lined with fur but has scenes of danger and violence painted on the exterior. Here two halves of a contradiction are brought face-to-face. The houses are clearly the expression of a temperament that senses warmth within and danger without.

The normal psychological reaction to such a situation is a posture of self-protectiveness. In art the dilemma acts itself out as a questioning of what art is for.

In these works the artist continues surrealist preoccupation with the subconscious as the subject of art. She foreshadows '70s trends in art that is frankly narrative and autobiographical with its strength of expressive self-revelation and its pitfalls of neurotic exhibitionism.

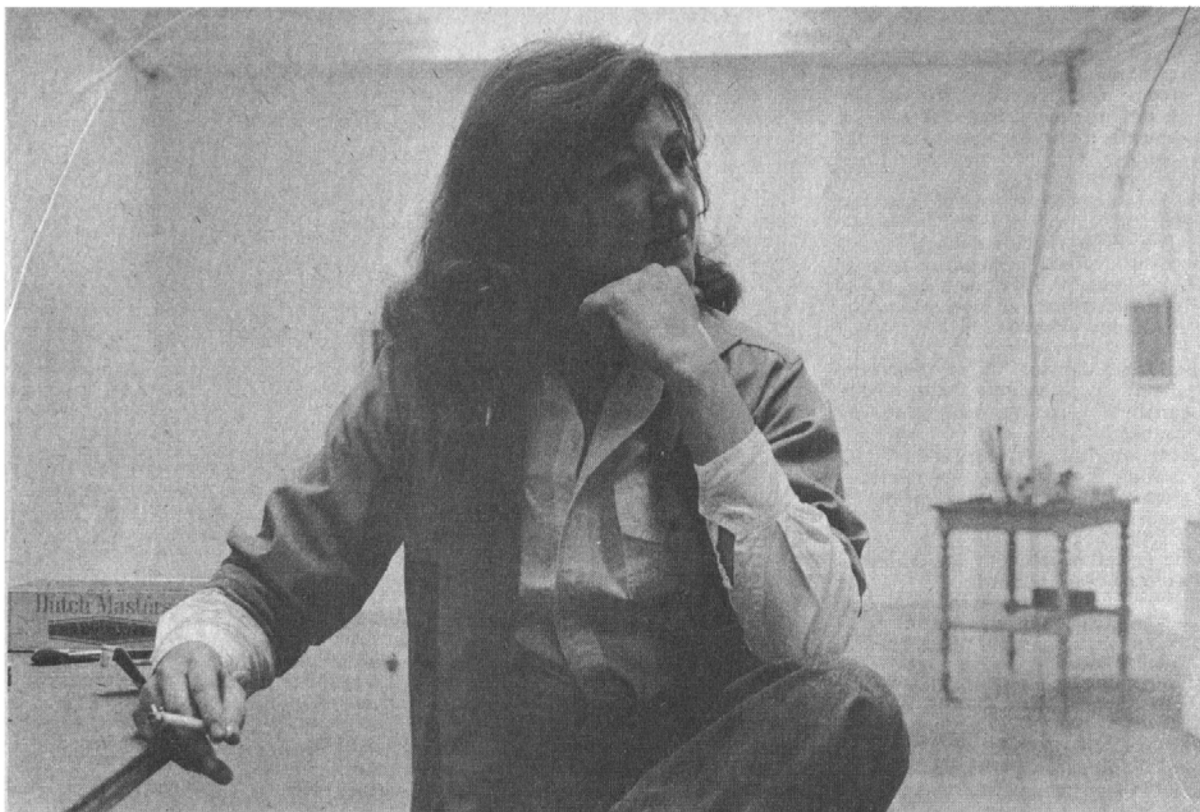
Most vintage surrealists had a capacity for sublimating personal experience into a general thematic statement. In Vija Celmins' work of this period one is acutely aware the work reflects *her* fears, desires and conflicts. Her personal touch is a unique strength that also besets her art with unique problems.

Subsequent work evidences a decision to stave off autobiographical content. A group of oversize, highly realistic common objects includes three huge Pink Pearl erasers, a three-foot pencil stub and a beautifully painted pocket comb seven feet tall. They were understandably mistaken for pop icons when first shown. In present context they seem an attempt to neutralize personal feelings both delicate and passionate.

The bulk and balance of the exhibition is devoted to the artist's familiar ocean drawings and similar renderings of galaxies or sections of moon and desert surfaces. They are rendered with astounding meticulous accuracy but only a fool would mistake them for the objective, deadpan hair-follicle copyings of the New Realists. They are not New Realism precisely because—try as they might—they fail to obtain the neutrality they strive for with quiet desperation. They continue to align with poets like Marvin Harden and the figurative Joe Goode even though Celmins makes poetry in flight from itself.

Vija Celmins' work is about being in a bind. When she draws the ocean straight it has expressive content in spite of itself; when she draws it tricky, in repetition or in long strips, it becomes pure optical acrobatics, which she doesn't want either. It is art stuck between the devil and the deep gray sea. It will finally continue to interest us as a unique expression of anxiety. □

Wilson, William. "Vija Celmins' Expressions of Anxiety." *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1980, p. 78.



Vija Celmins: Photo: Robert Flick

A Conversation with Vija Celmins

Susan Larsen
Los Angeles, January 1978

The following interview with Vija Celmins took place in her Venice studio this year. Vija was born in Riga, Latvia, and came to the United States with her parents as a child in 1949. She studied at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, Indiana, at Yale and at U.C.L.A. Our discussion focuses upon her history as an artist, her working methods, the role of subject matter in her art, and Vija's outlook on the processes of drawing and painting.

Susan Larsen: After high school you went to art school in Indianapolis. What were you doing then? What art did you look at?

Vija Celmins: Some things did make an impression on me. I learned a lot about other artists. I'm from that generation that grew up with all the Abstract Expressionists, whom I still love a lot.

SL: How did you see their work?

VC: I didn't know very much about art, but in art school I learned about it from books, from searching it out. Most of the education I had came from looking at artists in history. I remember once when I was about twenty, I was doing a copy of a Giotto. It was the painting in which the angels are pushing on the air and they are all crying and have tense faces.

SL: You are describing Giotto's "Lamentation" from the life of Christ in the Arena Chapel.

VC: Yes. The angels are all pushing on the sky, they have their hands out. I loved that painting, it was some kind of revelation for me. I got from it a sense of the tension between the plane and the image. It was almost as if the angels were pushing, not just against the sky, but against the surface of the painting. I remember doing a copy of that painting and having it really move me.

Giotto is considered one of the first painters in Western art and he was my first painter too. I went to Padua to see the paintings and they were in restoration, scaffoldings all over and I couldn't see some of it. At other times I copied works of others artists from history who did not move me as much.

SL: You did this in paint?

VC: Yes. Indiana was isolated so I didn't have a sophisticated upbringing in terms of art, it was whatever you could catch for yourself. We used to go to Chicago to see contemporary art and we also went to New York several times with friends from school. I saw De Kooning's work and Kline, Rothko, Johns. And I saw Jackson Pollck's work which I hated and later came to like so much.

I received a scholarship to go to Yale School of Music and Art where they had students from all over the United States. There I had this incredible revelation that I could be an artist. I met some real live artists doing exciting things although I was too shy and scared to really get into it. I met Tworkov and some abstract painters from New York....But I came out to Los Angeles and lived pretty much alone. I was doing a type of semi-abstraction and also some abstract paintings. The artist I mimicked the most at that time was De Kooning. I became involved with those brushstrokes. You know how you fall in love with people, I fell in love with those brushstrokes, the gestures, the way they tied together and made the surface really terrific. Actually, I don't think it really matters who you mimic at the very beginning, it is just getting a toe-

Larsen, Susan. "A Conversation with Vija Celmins." *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art,* October/November 1978, pp. 36–39.

hold on anything you perceive as real.

I was excited about painting then. I always have this thing of stopping and starting. It has been the curse of my life, but maybe in another way it is good. I tend to stop for long periods, I can't just automatically make work. And I tend to reassess and at times I throw out a lot of stuff, which is what I have actually done. I have probably thrown away a whole lifetime of work by now. And then I start all over.

I didn't know where I was going for a while. When I came out here to L.A. I was doing large whitish paintings with a lot of gesture. Then I started doing things on paper with oil because I didn't have money for canvas and I was on a scholarship. Along with this I occasionally did what I call simple painting...like spending an afternoon painting a portrait of a chair, just for kicks. I found big rolls of photographic paper to use. At that time I did the whole "push and pull" thing in painting. When I got out here I was so amazed by L.A., the freeways, the hills and everything that I did things between landscape and the gestures of De Kooning.

SL: When you came to L.A. did you have a sense of people being here already, a group of artists you had heard about?

VC: No. When I came here I didn't know anyone, not a soul.

The exception was that I did have some great dialogues with Bob Irwin who was teaching a semester or so at the school. We tossed around so many ideas...and had many searching and aggressive talks about the nature and meaning of art. I respected him and looked forward to those sessions.I thought I had landed in a desert. But aside from my own agonizing discoveries about the nature of how my own work should develop, any current influences I had came from the East coast.

After the first year out here I sort of stopped. I got to the point where I thought I was way out of hand, that the gestures, the relationships, that kind of tossing myself at the canvas, having it out there and tossing myself at it back and forth...I began to think that somehow it was no longer meaningful to me.

And at that point I was quite good at it. People would say it was good. I would think, "What does that mean?" It became decorative for me, meaningless to me. I could make something that looked really nice but it was meaningless. So I quit.

I went back to what I thought was a real dumb kind of painting. I said, "O.K. what is this? I'm going to do a really old-fashioned thing. I'm going to set an object in three-dimensional space on a table. I'm going to take a canvas and I'm going to see what happens when I see something in front of me and translate it onto a two-dimensional plane with a brush and canvas."

I did it very dead-pan without really composing. I was trying to get back to something I really liked about the activity of painting without all this planning and plotting and putting one shape against another and one line against the other. I wanted to get away from manipulation which I began to think was fooling me.

SL: Was this an effort to put subject matter back into the painting?

VC: No. It was more like a rest from facility, a reevaluation of the whole activity and a turning inward. Many times I was horrified by the results and I gave up worrying what a thing "looked like." I painted almost everything in the studio. I painted the chair, I painted the dishes, I painted the T.V. set. I painted the refrigerator, my hotplate, the table, the cat. I got into painting all of the things that turned on, because the studio was so cold and big...or, who knows, maybe because it was all there.

This is a painting of my lamp and a painting of my heater. These are all oil paintings. At this time I was shying away from color. I began to think more about Johns and Reinhardt. What I liked about Johns is that he had begun to eliminate design by taking on formalized images like flags and targets. This was something I had come to discard also. I also liked the surface tension he had in relation to the object, it felt right to me. The thing I liked about Reinhardt was his positive negativity.

At the time I also had the feeling that I was out here all by myself and I went back into my own past. I began dealing with some images out of my childhood. This was 1964, 1965. I had been collecting clippings. I would roam around the city, I didn't know anybody and I would get little war books because it was kind of nostalgic. I would build little model airplanes to amuse myself. Here is one of the first of those paintings, it is a little airplane that is blowing up in the air. I did a series of drawings from clippings I had all over. There is one in my studio of the blast in Bikini. I did one of the Hindenburg and one of Hiroshima.

SL: Why did you choose those subjects? Did the disaster aspect interest you?

VC: Yes and no. I think it was an intuitive reliving of the war years among other things.

SL: Were they vivid to you?

VC: Well, there they are. Actually it was afterwards that I thought this through. At the same time I was doing these, many other things were going on—since I had given up gestural interlocking shapes and lines and colors. The implied activity of objects in the state of movement may have been a remnant of my physical activity with painting before. I was trying to confront my own nature which I think is one of the unifying things.

There are many solutions. I just have this way of tossing stuff away in an effort to find out what is real in the whole process of painting.

I came to the conclusion that color was really gross, it was too spatial, too violent, too expressive of itself. Besides it was so indiscriminately joyful. The yellows are coming and the blues are going and the reds are ready...I was always very sensitive to light and working with black and white seemed to me to be the purest way of working with light and the absence of it.

I gave up inventing designs, which is actually what I had been doing. I had been designing abstract patterns. I came to the conclusion that I could have millions of variations but it would have nothing to do with anything. I could do more interesting ones, less interesting ones, so I gave up. Of course, I mean I gave up working with these things in the way I had worked with them before. I chose subjects because they related to me, to my life in the past or maybe to a certain state.

I had been doing paintings and one of the things that irritated me was that in painting I had a flat surface and I was sticking an object, like the lamp, in there. One of the ways I tried to minimize this was by keeping a totally even surface, a very deadpan surface without any brushmarks. But still the brushmarks were there and they were really beautiful because I had been painting so long.

SL: The paintings have beautiful creamy surfaces....

VC: I thought, "What is this?" When you have been painting all your life, you pick up a brush with a blob at the end of it and you have to spread it out. Now how you spread it out has a certain meaning. In fact, it can come to be the most meaningful thing.

So I said, "Who needs this? I don't need this." And I gave up paint and I have not painted for a very long time. But I have not given up any of my intuitions or my interest in working with what I think are really traditional painting qualities... painting allows the most possibilities for abstraction. I'm interested in that constant tension and shifting between the feeling of depth and a strict adherence to the reality of the two-dimensional plane. Times when these two are in a certain balance I perceive a projection of another kind of space. It is this which I find exciting.

Anyway, going back, about 1965, 1966, I was still involved with my clippings and started doing them right out to the edge of the surface. This is a painting of a clipping which still has a single image on it, a little car that was shot up in Japan. Now I started doing the clipping itself without showing the edges of the clipping. But it still had a single image on it. I wasn't that interested in the sensationalism of the image but in the relation of that image to the plane.

Later I began using the photograph as the subject. For example, Monet used the haystacks as a subject, but you don't say "Aha, a painting about haystacks!" I was somewhere between painting the object as an object and painting the whole surface itself as a photograph, using the photograph as the subject. This is different than using the subject of the photograph.

SL: Also photographs seem to have a history of their own composition, something intrinsic to photography.

Larsen, Susan. "A Conversation with Vija Celmins." *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art,* October/November 1978, pp. 36–39.

VC: I am not too interested in photography myself. I use the photo but it remains outside my art and is reinvented in completely different terms.

My paintings were all gray now. I had all kinds of spatial things going on and I was trying to unify them to read in a singular way. In retrospect, I think I was really interested in things that moved because I knew what I was doing was totally still and dead. I think art is still and dead. I think I picked up these objects because there were things happening to them. But I was working on a very still surface. So there is a tension between those two things.

SL: You also made an enormous comb at this time, it leaned against the wall.

VC: I had always been involved with painting. Things I did at the time, like the comb, are not really sculptures. They are like paintings, like visions. I did the comb for Magritte, from his painting, "Personal Values."

It was hard work because it is carved out of wood. But it was a relief to do this because it was such physical work. Somehow painting isn't that physical, it is more abstract. I used to have combs like that in my school days. And I did some Pink Pearl erasers. They are also like paintings, I painted all the gray spots, all the little light spots so that when you looked at it you saw an instant vision of a certain time on a certain day, a particular eraser.

SL: I had one in my desk in grade school. It is easy to recall what it felt like, what it smelled like. And here is a pencil, one of those little yellow pencils you have in school.

VC: But I couldn't bring myself to use yellow. I knew it was a little yellow pencil but I made it gray. I think I had the feeling that I was a magician for a while. I could create everything. Actually I now feel quite removed from that work...they look a bit Pop.

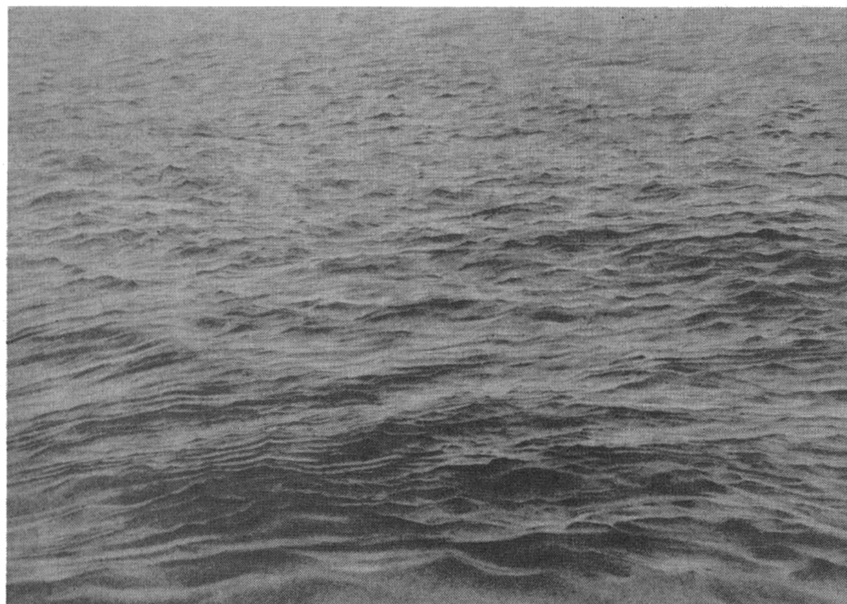
SL: Did you have a sense of Pop Art then?

VC: I guess by that time I was aware of everything...I remember seeing Jasper Johns ale cans in bronze. But I think these works came out of my working with a single, unified image.

One of the unusual things about my work is that it has almost no relation to anything people were doing in L.A. because I was so isolated...maybe we are all isolated here. The only thing I think I got from L.A. is a kind of spatial interest that is not like that of a New York artist. It is hard to describe. It focuses back into space, you read it all over and then it solidifies and projects out. You can't go into the work, you have to stand back and find your relationship to it. It even pushes you back.

After the paintings and three-dimensional pieces I stopped again for a long time. I used to roam around and take photographs. The thing I liked best about that was looking through the lens and inspecting things from a different perspective. I used to go down to look at the ocean every evening. And I had been doing drawings of my clippings. In the way I ordered everything in my life it seemed natural for me to take the photograph and to reinvent it.

Photo: Frank Thomas



It seemed very natural for me to have that graphite point touch the paper and be like a point of reality where it touched. No smudging, no making marks, no grading, no manipulating to make sure that it spread out. Every little mark that I made was a mark that fit with the image and fit with the surface and fit with the space. It just went together...I did many ocean drawings in a rigorous manner.

The earlier works had a loose deep space. As the things progressed I wished to tighten the space between the surface and the image so I made the waves smaller and flattened out the drawing more. I went to the edges of the whole piece now and I finally dealt with the whole unit without having something in the middle. I ordered everything so that it had meaning. I worked a long time on appropriate proportions. The graphite pencil was a very fine point. It was a matter then of maintaining an even tension so that the surface was just lying there. It was a matter of keeping a certain skin, finding a density that felt right. The paper has a skin and I put another skin on it. There is a kind of integrity between the tooth of the paper and the graphite. When all is in balance it projects in a clean and strong way and feels right.

SL: It does feel like something soft rather than a broken surface that someone has dug into.

VC: To dig into the paper is gross. You want to keep it still. Everything else is moving. I think art ought to be still.

Somewhere in this process I got to the point where everything I did, from getting up in the morning, to facing that plain paper, to keeping that kind of tension, was meaningful. These drawings became a kind of record of mindfulness. Before, I had been working with things trying to keep them alive. Now, most of that kind of activity took place before I started to work. I would adjust proportions so that they felt correct in relation to my body. I would do this so that the image felt correct in relation to my looking at it, so that it was not so large that I had to move and roam around in it to experience it and so that it was not so small that it could not project. I tried to find a natural relationship so it could come to life.

Sometimes people think I just sit down and copy the photograph. It is precisely that I reinvent it is other terms that gives it another quality. It is the opposite of being mechanical. It is also not image-oriented. The image is one of the elements to work with. It is neutral but spatial, the graphite is neutral but physical...I'm not an assembler in the usual sense. The work is self-contained, unified but made up of tiny parts.

As I became involved with graphite I began to notice the pencil, the graphite was telling me a lot of things. I would pick up a pencil and work it down until it was useless. I would notice that if another day I picked up another pencil there was a difference and it took a little time. I would do a drawing with an H-pencil and it would have a certain quality and I would do a drawing with an F-pencil and it would have another quality. I explored this quality in a series of scales...fourteen oceans moving from H's to B's. I hit each one like a tone, the graphite itself had an expressive quality. I continued using the graphite in this way in a series of elongated oceans and then a series of galaxies.

SL: In working with one surface do you tend to use the same pencil?

VC: Yes, I tend to use the same one. I did a series of four drawings the same size and image with the only variation being a different grade of pencil. Each had a dif-

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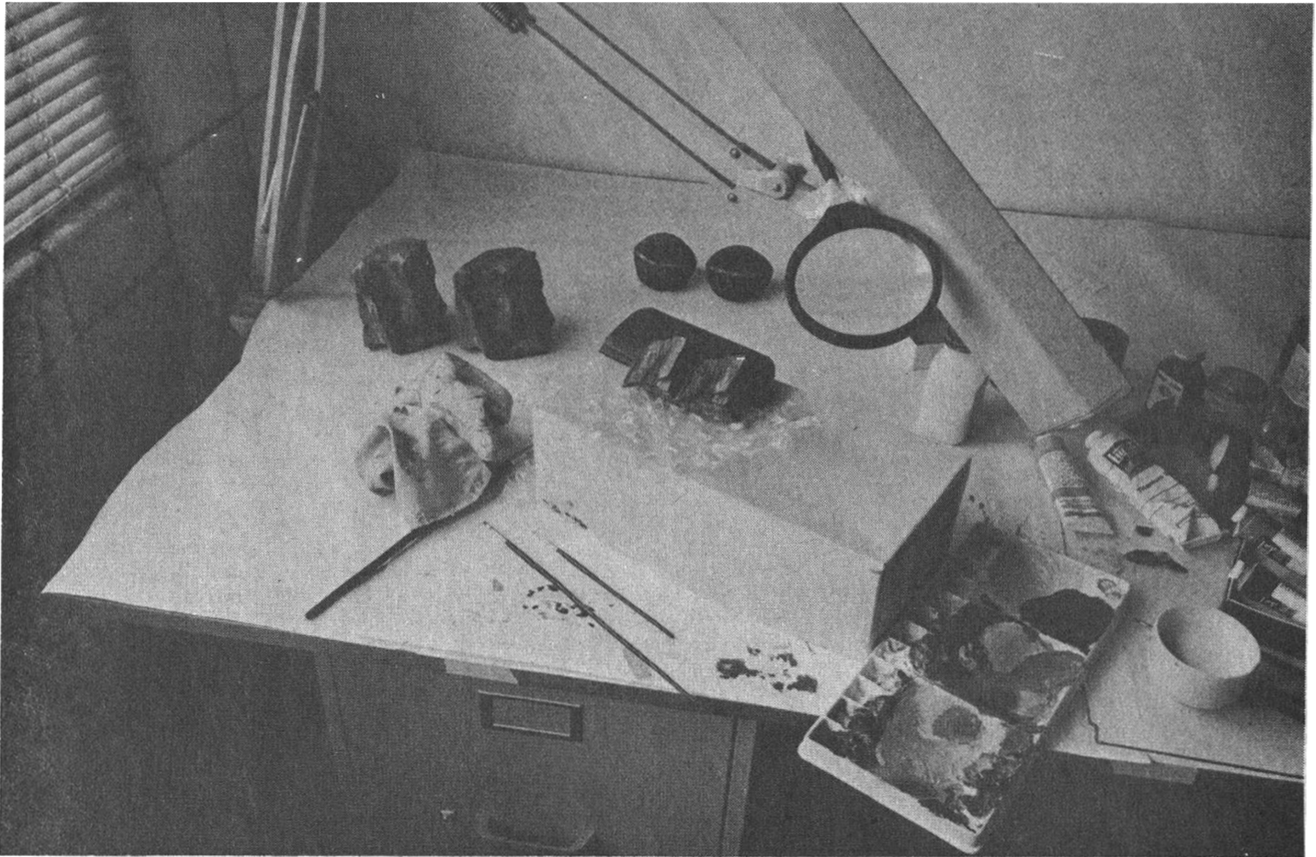

View of Work in Studio Photo: Robert Flick

ferent tone and density and space. I also repeated the same image in different proportions changing the way they projected. Recently I have been putting similar and dissimilar images in relation to each other so that the effect of the whole is more spatially complex.

SL: What did changing just the graphite do to the image?

VC: It changes imperceptibly, there are nuances...every piece has a certain emotional tone which is unified with the graphite tone. I just do them and don't project or trace or anything, so each drawing is also an exploration of my own inclinations and limitations at the time. Whatever I'm feeling in my body comes out in the work and becomes part of it. Some of them are a little up-tight looking, some of them are very expansive, some are very dense. Some of these drawings are about pushing graphite grade to a certain degree, as far as it will go, and then accepting that and what it can do.

SL: The images you choose, waves, galaxies, seem to work in a fluid way, changing slightly each time...

VC: They are almost arbitrary, spatial but kind of neutral and non-specific. I use their illusionism but I'm not interested in making illusionistic pictures.

All of the images I work with are made up of tiny parts, which is a way of breaking up the plane and putting some life and light in it. For me, each time that point touches it is like bringing something from way down up to the surface. It is like being in touch with reality. It's also like pointillism of a certain bizarre kind. It is not about shading something to make it appear in a certain way. All the processes are separated and when they are put together and balanced, they have a certain integrity.

The images I tend to work with form a unit or sometimes clusters of units. One of the reasons I used images at all was that I gave up color and I didn't want to invent little marks. I was interested in working with space and flatness and proportion. But it is not done by manipulation of the image. The image implies that there is a space, but all the things I do to it have to do with the here and now of paper, the pencil and the flat plane. I hope the work becomes specific when I'm through translating it into the present real space.

The whole art media thing and the hustle about art presents it as if you could just gobble it up. Even conceptual works and "environments" are consumed with a materialistic relish. I think art is a quiet thing, you have to look at it a long time. You have to be willing to experience it without a mess of words and think about it. It is not that easy to understand.

SL: Everything that comes along seems to wash over you and change your perception slightly each time...

VC: Sometimes you can feel that about the same thing. I know that I certainly do. Sometimes I just can't stand something and another time i just *see* it. I used to hate Pollock and then I just started *seeing* Pollock. I just began to see it and found the joy and control that was there. Then I began to understand some of it. I like the fact that art is around a long time.

Don't you think, sometimes it seems to me, that there is no progress in art? It changes but is always kind of similar. I have not considered art to be a series of ideas to be illustrated and then thrown away to go to another idea. I'm not interested in showing how I feel on a certain day, or show how I feel about the desert or the ocean. I'm not that kind of artist. I'm not interested in symbolism or psychology or political issues in my art. But I am interested in seeing and ordering things and structuring things, perception with nuances.

Of course it relates to my life, obviously the ocean is here and it came into my work. I have no idea what will come next because everything is open to change. Right now I am interested in the relationships between the image, the surface, how they interact, whether it is open, or closed and dense. The galaxies are so much into their rectangles. They are just so solid, like black tablets...

It's like a wonder. They are little wonders, not big ones. But somehow I just found them. It is an order that I discover, you might say I invent it, but it is as if I discover it at the same time.

S.C.L./V.C,

Larsen, Susan. "A Conversation with Vija Celmins." *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art,* October/November 1978, pp. 36–39.

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ARTFORUM

Vija Celmins, *Untitled*, 1973, graphite on acrylic spray ground, 12" x 15".

MAX KOZLOFF

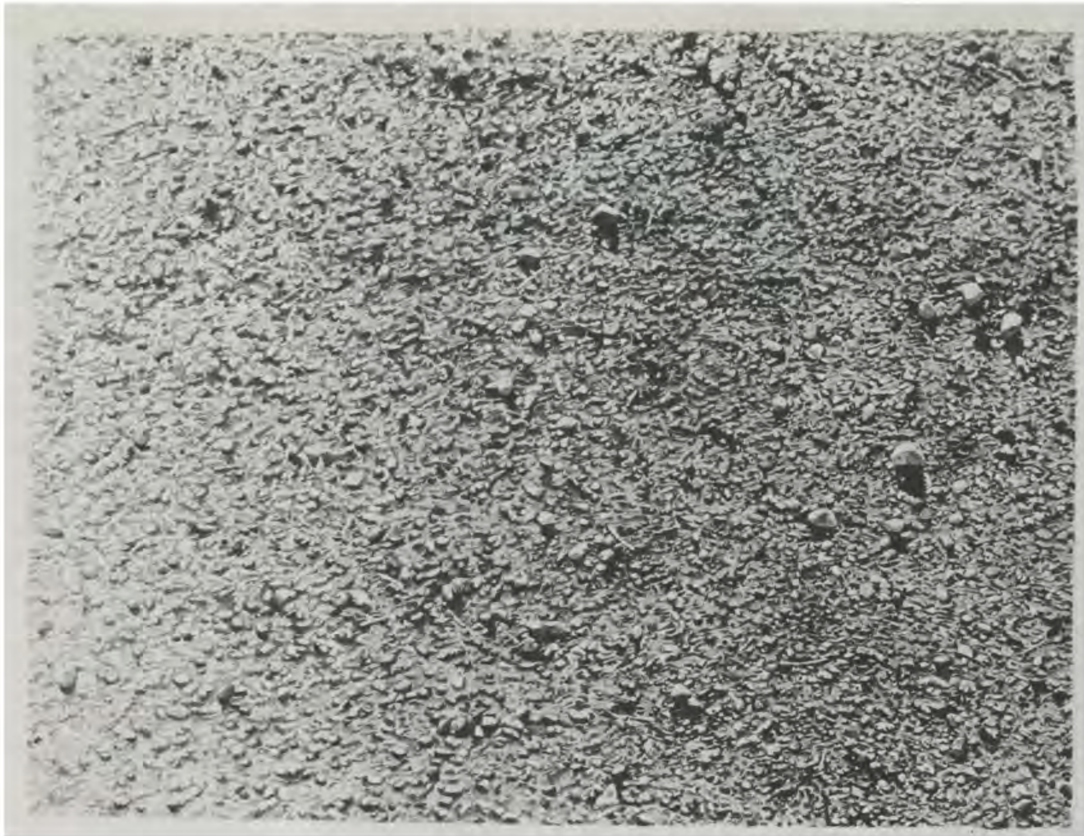
VIJA CELMINS

When one looks at an artist's portrayal of the sea, one is put in mind of what is called a marine, that category of subject matter dealing with an expanse of water so animated by light, space, texture, tone, and movement as to transmit a salty atmosphere of its own. Since the historical rise of landscape, various artists have been sensitized to the dramaturgy of the aquatic — the possibilities, not only of an unstable, but a shifting and translucent horizon — as the setting of a particular mode. To depict a liquid body, whether inviting to contemplate and travel upon or not, is to treat of sensations that are at once fluid, open, and equivocal, with hidden, deepening densities. A landlubber's sense of form may get lost in them.

The pencil seascapes of Vija Celmins, who lives on a Pacific beach at Venice, California, do not summon up one's conditioned responses to the marine genre, though they accurately convey most of the features associated with it. This is not because they lack a skyline — Monet's *Nymphéas* do well enough without one — nor because they are drained of color — Marin's lively aquarelles sometimes have little more. In these drawings, to be sure, the ocean palpably has all the waves, crevices, dips, rises, ripples, shadows, and crests one would expect. Moreover, they heave together with gentle conviction. To perceive and render water is a classically demanding problem and Celmins solves it by copying photographs, so that her ocean *looks* much more like an ocean of record than many of the images of it in her predecessors. Still, it is as if it were a mock-up image, fabricated out of some indistinguishable but evidently fine-grained matter that stands in for the sea. Perish the thought of it ever sparkling or fuming. It is hard to recall any other artist who does this, unless it be Magritte. Thinking of him clarifies the backdrop qualities of these seascapes, but not well enough to explain their suspended veracity. From a painting to a photograph, one moves from an invented world to a visual transcription of an instant in the life of a world that existed. Celmins' drawings seem to confound such a distinction and carry on, trapped between the two states of being. These low swells, breathed upon by a wind that has agitated their upper currents, have been realized by a mind backing away from the weather of outer perception. The surface attributes of water seem to ride over and then sink into what is really at stake — the thousands of blended pencil strokes and shadings, their flowing roughage of grays. Perhaps this is a way of saying that the Celmins copy appears very much an end in itself, utterly dependent on photographic vision, but in no sense an homage to, or finally

Vija Celmins, *Untitled*, 1969, pencil, 14 1/2" × 19 1/4".

Kozloff, Max. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum*, March 1973, pp. 52–53.



Vija Celmins, *Untitled*, 1973, graphite on paper, 12" x 15".

even, a quote from it.

I will admit that in a conversation with this sensible artist, nothing was quite said to account for this effect, or rather, the definite spell that it casts. You are led into the ambiguous space of her waters, pebbled grounds, and star-flecked nocturnes, almost lulled by it hypnotically, through the cunning of graphite. Additionally, she is concerned with illusions of a nature entirely void of any tangent with our needs, our social experiences, and our history. This is how things had looked and will look, one imagines, before we came and after we are gone, the sight of them not mattering. This choice of iconography — though, of course, it amounts to more than that: a diminishing of our egos — is brought off very simply by a selection of photographic images lacking any internal evidence to place or date them. With what rigor she has excluded from her vistas any momentary episode, and even much of the air and the natural light of the kind we know. These absences unsettle because they have been noted by the reliable witness of photography. Such a medium heightens the imaginative grip of her desolating subjects by making them materially credible, gotten, if at some remove, from "out there." It is a perception of the world that seems to have slowed and thickened, not the appearances of nature, but its processes in time. There is a sweet oppressiveness and an unavailing beauty in the random, motiveless change she pictures. Here, Celmins is almost anti-photographic because photographs have a tendency to give anything they materialize a vintage, and to inscribe it in history. On the same page Van Deren Coke recently published a photograph of water taken by Celmins with the drawing from it. The comparison suddenly assures us that the pencil has its own aims, and is far less interested in the wetness and the wrinkles of the scene than the lens (which had relatively small choice, and less presumption in the matter). Pervasiveness and modulation of tone, distilled as patiently, it seems, as her phenomena were shaped, takes over, is all. What she wants the lens to do, I think, is substantiate, with seemingly impartial fluidity, an archaic view of sensation.

To this end, it helps that we have no idea of scale in these intimately small drawings — no idea of our scale in relation to the motif's or the motif's to anything that might adjoin it. And by eliminating scale references, she blurs distance. The eye may be close to those (possibly lunar) stones, all wonderfully relieved by their long shadows on the ground, but the stones and her nebulae, unthinkable thousands of light years away, are often roughly the same size. Her neat, unassuming borders on the sheet vignette the chaff and debris that are her subjects and have well contained the inertia that has strewn them about; all this, however, without locating us in any particular way, whether we are presumably looking up, down, or laterally into the field of vision. Yet I like precisely the understatement of this limbo, the feeling that one can take it as a netherworld or as an actual view by an almost casual blink of mental focus.

At times, though, the artist varies her format. At the Whitney Museum recently, she presented seascapes thinned to a long horizontal band, and therefore so unusual a shape that it called attention to itself. One of these had so much unemployed space above and beneath, that the sea came to be profiled as some new, queer object in its own right. At the distance required to see it whole, the piece could resemble, say, the trunk of a tree. Another drawing had six identical segments, flush against each other and varying only in their rightward, regular darkening of values. Giving over each successive panel to the next softer lead was like taking many photos of the same spot with a progressively smaller exposure. But these self-conscious and external ideas, no matter how clever, make her imagery less plausible, and therefore less enchanting. They impel us to ask, rather than encourage us to forget, *how* the artist conceives the subject. Such a question, under the circumstances, is intrusive. It reminds us of distracting, all too mundane matters like Surrealism or serial art, peripheral to that velvet intensity of her touch, and the refined chaos that precipitates through it. ■

Kozloff, Max. "Vija Celmins." *Artforum,* March 1973, pp. 52–53.

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Los Angeles Times

Mystical Calm in Art Work

BY WILLIAM WILSON

Vija Celmin's hypnotic imagery soaks through her grey paintings-from-photographs at David Stuart Gallery. Complex psychosexual emotions inform pictures of crippled World War II bombers. Enthralled by destruction, she paints fires and explosions. A nostalgia for security is signaled by a fur-filled house and an incomplete picture puzzle of an autumn wood.

Celmins transforms photo-images into memory images whose mood is pervasive and artistically rewarding. The fixed immobility recalls those brilliant moments in Francois Truffaut's films when the camera stops to signal traumatic shock.

Wilson, William. "Mystical Calm in Art Work." *Los Angeles Times,* March 7, 1966, p. C4.