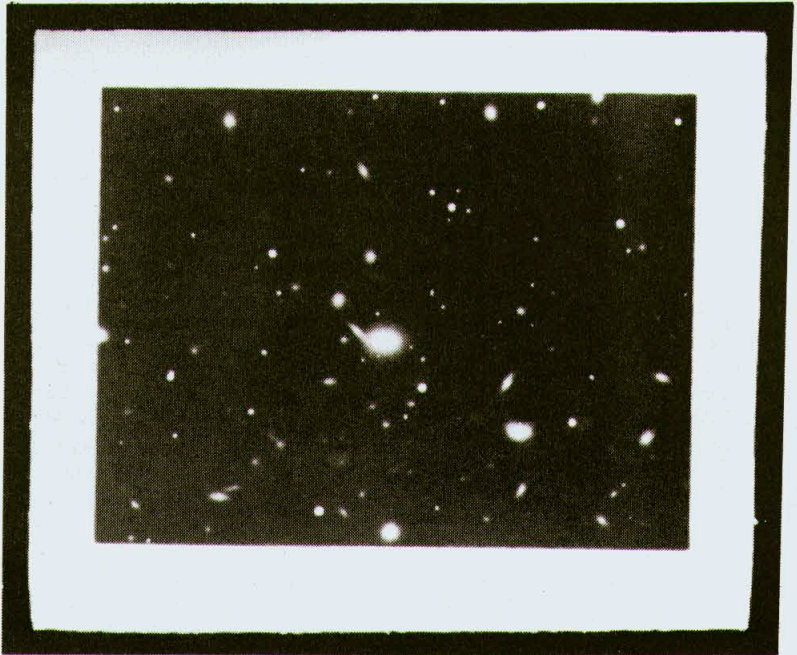


Galaxy, 1972



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Vija Celmins' drawings and lithographs are not just expertly rendered representations of the ocean, the desert and the heavens. They are investigatory works which probe matters of visual perception, tonal modulation, space and scale. The viewer is intended to explore these same issues as well as to augment the experience with whatever metaphysical associations the iconography might suggest.

Celmins works from photographs. They are useful to her in many ways. Once chosen they dispose of the need to make further compositional decisions. With image and line a given she concentrates on articulating the flat surface with thousands of small precise marks. Though she often selects subjects of great physical proportions, Celmins is an artist preoccupied with refining subtle discriminations in surface detail. Her works are so compelling as objects in themselves that the viewer is drawn in close to observe the intensity of the artist's labor. A microcosm of the universe is suggested in the crest of a wave or the shadow of a pebble.

To reduce a three-dimensional object to a range of greys on a flat surface is the essence of black and white photography. Celmins finds in the photograph a perfect starting point for her exploration of tonal modulations. The extent of her interest in such modulations is clearly spelled-out in the extra-wide drawing on view in MATRIX, Ocean (11 1/2 " high by 98" wide). Here Celmins divides one photograph into seven sections. Each section explores an adjacent range of greys. The sections grow progressively darker from left to right. The reason for the unusual dimensions of this drawing become clear. It is less to describe an impressive expanse of ocean than

to give the artist an occasion to explore sequentially within one work her interest in tonal gradations. This drawing also indicates that far from copying a photograph as closely as possible Celmins manipulates and alters the original image to suit her needs.

The four lithographs recently published by Cirrus Editions Ltd. are a colloquy of sorts. Each is based on a photograph of a timeless scene noticeably free of human intrusion. In this suite Celmins further explores tonality not only within each print but also from one print to the next. The clouds are confined to a light range of greys, and the range grows progressively darker from those used in the desert to those in the ocean to the relative density of the galaxy. Furthermore, Celmins has selected four images with different focal points. Each print, therefore, requires the viewer to stand at a different distance from the wall in order to focus accurately upon it. As Melinda Wortz has written in Artweek, "The artist is interested in stimulating active and changing perceptual awareness, as opposed to a simple, passive recognition of a representational image."

Celmins' interests in space and scale have been a constant. Early in her development Celmins created large sculptures of small objects such as pencils and erasers. One of her better known works is a six-foot long comb meticulously crafted in wood and enamel. It is created in the image of an over-scaled tortoise-shell comb found in René Magritte's painting Personal Values (1952), a work in which he is exploring questions of scale. Celmins has also made small renditions of large objects in a series of table-sized

houses. In these works Celmins shares the Surrealist's ability to imbue a common object with an aura of strangeness and mystery.

In all of the drawings and prints in MATRIX Celmins chooses subjects of the largest scale known to man and reduces them to small images. In each Celmins alters the scale and then sets the image apart from its adjacent surroundings with the frosty white borders. The effect is to create a window onto the artist's private world.

Vija Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia in 1939, and came to the United States in her childhood. She attended the John Herron Institute of Art in Indiana and subsequently received an MFA from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1965. Celmins has been a teacher at the University of California at Irvine and an artist-in-residence at the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque. She has been the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Cassandra Foundation. Vija Celmins lives in Venice, California and is represented by the Mizuno Gallery of Los Angeles.

Celmins' work will be seen at the Atheneum again this summer in the United States Department of the Interior's Bicentennial Art Exhibition.

AMK

Works in MATRIX:

Ocean, 1972, graphite on acrylic sprayed ground, 11 1/2" x 98". Lent by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City.

Untitled (Ocean), 1972, lithograph, 28 1/2" x 46". Lent by Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sampson R. Field.

Untitled (Ocean), 1975, lithograph, 16 1/2" x 20". Lent by Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles.

Untitled (Galaxy), 1975, lithograph, 16 1/2" x 20". Lent by Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles.

Untitled (Desert), 1975, lithograph, 16 1/2" x 20". Lent by Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles.

Untitled (Sky), 1975, lithograph, 16 1/2" x 20". Lent by Cirrus Editions, Ltd., Los Angeles.

Selected one-woman exhibitions:
Dickson Art Center, University
of California, Los Angeles '65
(first); David Stuart Gallery,
Los Angeles '66; Mizuno Gallery,
Los Angeles '69, '70, '75; Whit-
ney Museum of American Art,
New York City '74; Felicity
Samuels, London '75.

Selected group exhibitions:
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Thirteen Views of the West '66;
Tampa Bay Art Center 40 Now
California Painters '68; Fort
Worth Art Center Contemporary
Drawing Show '69; Whitney
Museum of American Art, NYC
Sculpture Annual '70; Los
Angeles County Museum of Art
24 Young Artists '71; Inter-
national Exhibitions Founda-
tion Tamarind: a renaissance
of lithography '71-'72; In-
stitute of Contemporary Art,
University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia The Topography
of Nature '72; Museum of
Modern Art, NYC California
Prints '72; Cirrus Gallery,
Los Angeles Prints '75; New-
port Harbor Art Museum, New-
port Beach, California A
Drawing Show '75; La Jolla
Museum of Contemporary Art,
La Jolla, California Uni-
versity of California - Irvine
1965-76 '75.

Selected bibliography about
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