

# VIJA CELMINS

## A Drawing Retrospective

by Nancy Spiller

Vija Celmins wishes to be removed from her art. The Latvian born reductionist has obsessively stripped her work down to its most essential elements. The virtuoso results show what a mere pencil laid to paper can do. In "Vija Celmins: A Drawings Retrospective" at the Hammer Museum (Jan. 28—April 22, 2007) she has removed color for black and white, life for photographs, composition for pattern, invention for translation, and by show's end, with spider webs plucked from charcoal fields, removed mark making for erasure.

"I was inspired to throw as much away as I could," she said.

These meticulous and painstakingly rendered images of World War II photographs, lunar landscapes, night skies, ocean surface and evanescent webs are a mesmerizing record of a consciousness in the act of controlling chaos. Celmins puts distance on the horror of war with tender renderings of documentary photos, reduces the ocean's rippling immensity to marks on a measured expanse of paper, captures outer space's depth while masterfully retaining the sense of a two dimensional object.

The show's Hammer run, a coup for chief curator Gary Garrels, is its only stop after originating at Paris' Centre Pompidou. Some 60 drawings spanning four decades hung in chronological order make for a rare opportunity to study the evolution of this important though not widely known contemporary artist's work which some critics, according to Celmins, have dismissed as being nothing more than photographs.

The artist who was in town for the opening of the show in early February, made it clear that she intends them to be seen as that and more. She was quick to correct a question about her drawing from photographs. She prefers of: "It's like saying a painting is from the apple. The photograph is like a second, hovering object. I use them that way. It's a re-doing of the photograph on that day." Celmins' copies go beyond photo realist art to a more distant and far cooler photo reality.

Her drawing of a photograph of a cloud filled sky with a wire laid across it connects her to surrealism. Several pieces of her work are featured in the current Magritte show at LACMA. ("He played a lot of games," Celmins said. "I'm more morose than he was.")

Yet another element Celmins has managed to remove from her work is her female gender. She has long elected not to be identified as a woman artist and nothing in this shows imagery would identify her as such.

"She's an artist," Garrels says. "Her eye, her hand, her perception is the subject of the work," not her gender.

What is feminine is her choice of copying complex photo images that require heroic patience to execute with their repetitive, non-inventive nature, the kind of activity, like sewing or knitting, that is commonly identified as women's work. It makes me think of other obsessive women artists such as Yayoi Kusama with her infinity net paintings of the late '50s and Liza Lou's beaded kitchen and backyard environments of the '90s.

Possibly the greatest influence on Celmins work is her early childhood experiences in the midst of World War II. Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1938, the first ten years of her life were steeped in the war's chaos and horror. The transport ship on which her family fled the invading Soviet forces in 1944 was bombed. "I was always feeling I was going to be abandoned," she said in a museum talk with Garrels the Sunday after the show's opening, "all the people were always crying. It was always chaos and fires. The parents never explained anything." Having escaped that nightmare, the family settled in Indiana, America's heartland, where young Vija took up drawing because she couldn't speak or read English.

Celmins drawings are like an alternative language, an intimate experience akin to books where the reader meets the author's mind on the page, a black and white calligraphy articulating a world of their own.

Celmins came to Los Angeles from Indiana in the early 1960s "a nervous, inward, bizarre person," she said, and got an MFA in painting at UCLA in 1965. As a young artist, she chose L.A. over New York because "I doubted my ability to keep up that (ab-ex) tradition. I decided I had to follow my nose and go where that led me." She felt her early work in abstraction was too decorative. She took a studio in Venice and began doing what she calls her "dumb paintings," the everyday objects that surrounded her like appliances and goose neck lamps, to get out of her head and into more primitive paintings that focused on hand eye coordination rather than ideas.

Celmins began working from World War II photographs when she found herself lonely for her family back in Indiana. Her interest in

war images was prompted, as well, by the Viet Nam war, which she actively protested with other artists in Los Angeles. "It was making me crazy," she said.

The drawings, which fill the show's first gallery, are tender renderings of photographs of horrific realities, the aftermath of Hiroshima, warplanes exploding in mid-air, and an atom bomb explosion. One drawing is of an envelope addressed to her from her mother with a collage of invented stamps featuring explosions.

Humans are not seen in these images, as if to save them from a terrible fate. A photograph of a disintegrating plane is stapled to a surface. It is rendered with a careful softness, capturing the moment before oblivion for all inside.

"The photos distanced the image," she said.

**Magritte played a lot of games, I'm more morose than he was."**

**-- Vija Celmins**

"And made it lie down. I found a cool touch, a scientific attitude toward them. I am just the recorder. I found (that approach) compatible with the surface, flat and still." She wrestled with how to neutralize these intense and disturbing images, she said. "I wanted to put them in a context that was not a life context but transformed into an art context. Though I'm not sure what art might be."

The war images were followed by a series of lunar landscapes drawn of NASA photos from the first lunar landing. These become surreal and almost abstract with squares of pock-marked moon surface set within larger squares of the same.

Celmins' series of sea drawings followed, copying photos she took from the Venice pier. "I like inspecting things through instruments. I like binoculars. I would like to have the kind of vision of binoculars," she said.

"The waves get smaller," she noted. "They became a record of a consciousness. How conscious you can be for a while."

Celmins' oceans are an incessant roiling surface, her waves lack swells to anticipate or survive. The viewer is asked to endure the steady onslaught of the average and never ending. "They project out," she said. "It allows you to go back and forth and see your relation to it. It's always changing. It's alive."