

# Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory

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Number 123, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/92432ac>

[See table of contents](#)

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## Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

## ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

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## Cite this review

Jodoin, A. (2019). Review of [Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory]. *Espace*, (123), 97–98.

l'art, ce récit tout humain. On retrouve donc ce même décalage, cette façon qu'à l'œuvre de Yi d'exister indépendamment de l'humain, non seulement en sa présence physique (*a priori* simultanée à celle de l'œuvre), mais aussi en la façon dont il raconte la création et, dans le même temps, se raconte.

Une ultime œuvre en fait la démonstration. *The Scientists* (2019) est une sculpture d'apparence moderniste qui se dresse dans le fond d'un des espaces de la galerie, de toute son autorité. En s'en approchant, on note d'abord qu'elle est traversée par des fêlures, mais aussi, et surtout, qu'un dispositif électrique au plafond fait qu'un point rouge, s'agitant sans cesse, est projeté au laser sur la sculpture. Cette sculpture représente finalement l'histoire de l'art, fossilisée. Et le point rouge est la métaphore de la vivacité, de l'ironie et de l'indépendance avec laquelle l'artiste la traite.

Yoann Van Parys est un artiste et critique d'art vivant à Bruxelles. Il a cofondé la plateforme éditoriale et curatoriale (SIC). Ses textes ont notamment été publiés dans *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, *ESPACE art actuel*, *Art Press*, *Frog*, *Camera Austria*, *DITS*, *l'art même*, *Flux News*. Son travail plastique a été exposé dans divers centres d'art et galeries en Belgique et aux Pays-Bas, dont Netwerk à Aalst, Lokaal01 à Anvers, Hedah à Maastricht, RAVI à Liège. Il est représenté par la galerie LMNO à Bruxelles.

## Vija Celmins: *To Fix the Image in Memory*

Andre Jodoin

**ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO  
TORONTO  
MAY 4 –  
AUGUST 5, 2019**

*Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory* is a major North American retrospective of the artist's work organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition brings together 110 works, half of which are from private collections. Over 65 of the drawings, paintings, and sculpture are works related to ocean waves, desert floor and star fields. The subjects date from 1969 to the present, and so we can assume that these are the 'main focus' of her work and limit our comments to these.

With the exception of the sculpture, the works generally employ photographic sources and it is necessary to situate photography in relation to Celmins' practice of drawing and painting. The artist is sympathetic to close observation of things and her practice is one of precision making. This comes from Northern Renaissance painting traditions concerned with describing the surfaces of materials such as satin, fur, reflecting metal and so on, techniques involving inflected, curvilinear lines rather than linear perspective. Photography does not lend itself to precision making since, as Lee Friedlander once said, it is a generous medium: it produces a surplus of detail. When Celmins draws from a photograph, she selects details and elaborates the inflections of each point. In this sense the drawing is not a copy. The technique does not employ the photograph's perspective system and the spatial effect is different. To illustrate the contrast of effect, it is useful to compare James Welling's series of gelatin silver contact prints of crumpled aluminum foil from 1980. The images are not dissimilar



to Celmins' ocean waves and star fields. But the amount of automatic detail in the images is overwhelming, so that phantasms of subterranean caves or of deep outer space emerge from viewing these surfaces. Celmins' drawings produce no such response. The precision of the renderings prevents that.

Beginning with the subject of ocean waves, Celmins selected or made photographs that seem to belong to a general type, a seascape for instance. However, the focus in the drawings is strongly on the middle range of vision rather than on the breadth and depth of the ocean. Apart from recognizing the action of waves, we see no definite horizon and



no sharp foreground. In short, no emerging figures. In this proximity, it is even difficult to be sure of a particular mood, like a 'stormy sea.' The drawings do not appear as seascapes, just as ocean waves. When we focus on Celmins's drawing technique we tend to forget the fact that a major part of the artistic practice is simply looking, a practice that is shared with the viewer. Photography is used here not as a template for drawing but as a design element, a compositional device.

As subject matter, ocean waves reflect the passing of time on a scale that human beings wordlessly understand in terms of the transitoriness of life. Each time we look at one of the drawings, it presents a strikingly vivid moment in time. Yet any further characterization of the image feels quite uncertain. In this regard, the curator's text at the entrance to the exhibition makes an acute and helpful remark about the main focus of Celmins' work: "...the image is implied, but falls away, leaving something more abstract—a fresh encounter." Unlike Celmins' other works that produce a *trompe l'œil* effect, we find the images of waves, desert, and stars quickly fade from memory when we are no longer viewing them.

Celmins' work of the 70s and 80s slightly precedes the works of the Pictures Generation artists such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger whose images are derived from Hollywood film and advertising. The tactic of using easily recognizable images is intended to shift the viewer's attention toward an associated chain of images that provokes discussion, whereas in Celmins' approach, the image is the end-point of discourse, not the beginning. We only experience the image on the way to the thing or referent.

If the exhibition works are an indication of the artist's overall production, it appears that Celmins' engagement with drawing desert floors was relatively brief. The dates of the desert images coincide with the work on star fields, all of which began around the mid-70s. Following her interest in satellite produced photographs, Celmins turned to photographs made from the ground, resulting in drawings and paintings grouped under the title of *Night Sky* in the late 80s. These show a decisive turn in the course of her work. The star fields are not a local geographic phenomena like ocean waves or desert rock, but make up a vast theatre seen by people from all points on the planet and across the ages. The scale of passing time is of a completely different order than the ocean waves. The breaking waves offer an image of ceaseless becoming. The cyclical movement of the stars present an image of being, what Mircea Eliade has identified as the myth of eternal return.

As one might expect, the *Night Sky* series of drawings are composed of a rich black background and a multitude of variably bright points of white. The viewer is not entangled in a profusion of lines in the manner of the ocean waves and hence less driven to focus on the virtuosity of Celmins' technique and more inclined to rest in the experience of just looking. For a city dweller, seeing the renderings of night skies may be, sadly, a novel experience. As in the previous ocean waves and desert floors works, the image is difficult to hold in memory and disappears when we turn away from the drawing. This would be true for most gallery viewers, but of course there are people, scientists and enthusiasts, who are trained to recognize star constellations and hold them in memory. The complication is at the heart of the turn in the artist's work. At the connotation level, we are aware that human cultures throughout the ages have observed the night skies and that the stars can convey a vast number of pictures and stories in many languages. In fact, such pictures and stories have come about through the naked eye's careful and prolonged observation. Celmins' practice of close observation connects with this majestic history.

Andre Jodoin is an independent artist working in computer animation. He holds a MFA and MA (Philosophy) from York University and a Certificate in Computer Animation from Sheridan College. His installation works have been shown in artist-run centres and public venues across Canada. He lives in Toronto.