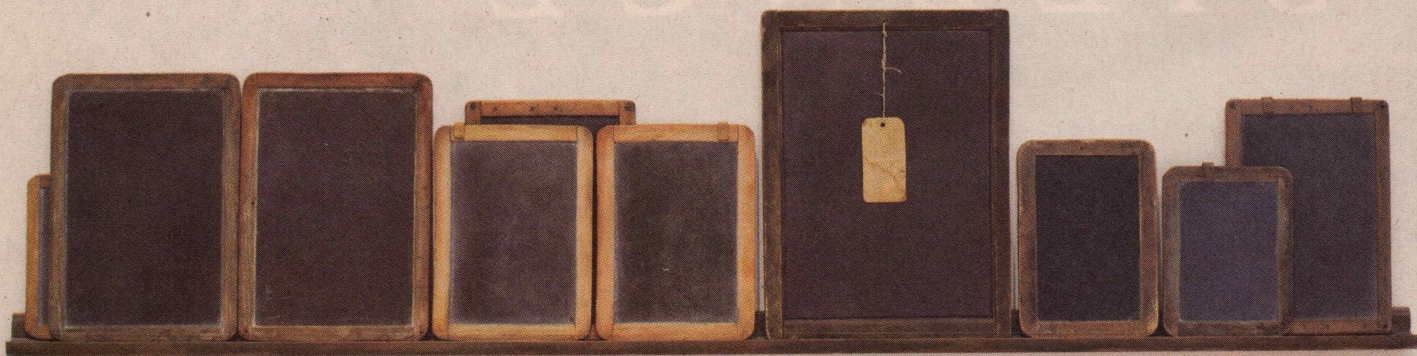




Don Ross / Matthew Marks Gallery

The art of creating visual conundrums

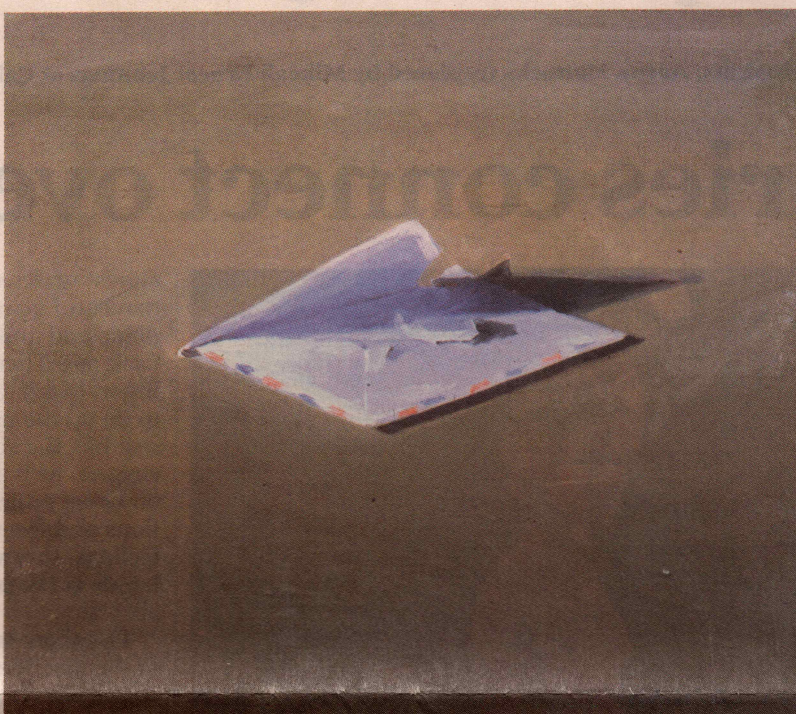
Vija Celmins labors to capture the essence of picture making

By Charles Desmarais

If ever there were an artist who wanted to get it right, she is Vija Celmins. Viewers of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's scrupulously inclusive retrospective, which opens this week and runs through March 31, may be surprised to confront picture after picture of the same subjects with what appear at first to be only minor variation. We slowly reach the realization that they are, instead, evidence of a supremely complex understanding of art — traces of her investigation into the essence of picturing and the nature of picture making.

Be sure to put a lot of time on the parking meter, because this is not a show you can breeze through. If

Celmins continues on E3



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"Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory": 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Saturday, Dec. 15, through March 31. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

Above: Vija Celmins' "Envelope" (1964). **Top:** "Blackboard Tableau #1," three found tablets and seven made objects. **Below:** "Pencil" (1968-70), 5½ feet long.



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Vija Celmins' "Untitled (Ocean)" (1977), graphite on acrylic ground on paper.

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Vija Celmins' visual conundrums

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the exhibition is a meditative experience, however, it is also an intellectually bracing one.

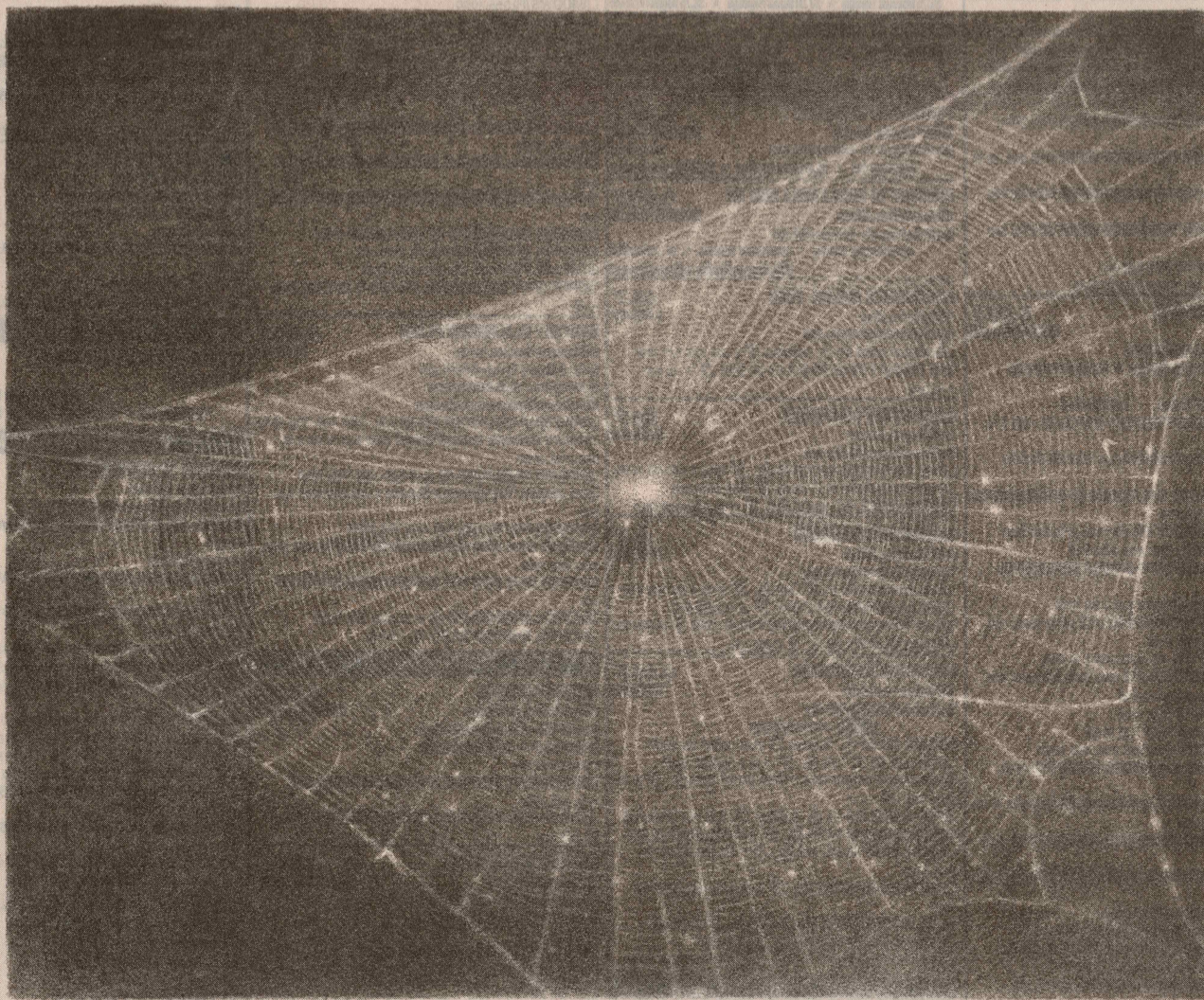
Among the 140 works included in the exhibition, which span her mature career of 54 years (and counting — at 80, she shows no sign of letting up), are at least 40 paintings and drawings of the night sky. Nothing but horizonless sky, dotted with stars and planets.

One might think of observatory records, planetarium projections and astronomical charts, and there is an element of the documentary in certain works with subtitles like "Cassiopeia" and "Coma Berenices." More commonly, though, titles and subtitles give less information about bigger territories, as with works like "Galaxy," "Star Field" and "Night Sky." Though it is apparent that all these pictures are closely observed, the point is not the subject. It is the process of observation and recording itself.

We are reminded of Claude Monet's "Haystacks" series, which were little more than excuses to think through effects of light and color as he watched the changes wrought by weather, time of day and season on a neighbor's field of grain. But if Monet is a starting point, he is only that.

Celmins brings to her work a deeply meditative concentration. She has been compared, as one of the essays in the excellent catalog puts it, to "a latter-day version of Penelope, making and unmaking in a succession of near-infinite labors." Some drawings were repeatedly burnished — sometimes over a period of months — with the graphite of her pencil until they shone like fractured obsidian. At another point in her career, she would start by covering a sheet with a dense coat of charcoal, then describe a vast expanse of stars by painstakingly removing pigment with erasers tailored and sharpened to her needs. Applying layer upon sanded layer of paint, other works were built up until they acquired the hard polish of Asian lacquerware.

After the night skies, the largest series consists of drawings and paintings of the ocean's surface. There are other images like them in design — small patches of desert, spiderwebs, an extreme close-up view of the craquelured glaze of a vase. Not quite squared to the picture plane; evenly scattered



Vija Celmins / Tate Images

Vija Celmins' "Web #1" (1998), charcoal on paper.

with minor incident (choppy waters, pebbled ground); inflected by no more than, say, a glint of reflected light.

The earliest work in the show details her fascination with the problem of mimesis — the artistic tool of imitation and replication. Works such as "Envelope," "Hot Plate," "Heater" and "Fan" (all 1964) take up that topic with illusionistic descriptions of their nominal subjects. And her precisely enlarged sculptural copies of objects with titles like "Comb" (1969-70), "Pencil" (1968-70) and three works called "Pink Pearl Eraser" (all 1966-67) are startlingly disorienting.

She has often returned to the enigma of representation as a challenge, both to herself and to the viewer. "To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI" is dated 1977-

82, and it took her that long to make it (the exhibition catalog, which is excellent, claims in a note that she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship just to continue her work on it). It consists, a wall label tells us, of "eleven stones and eleven made objects (bronze and acrylic paint)." See how long it takes you, if you dare try, to choose which are the found natural rocks, and which the flawless copies.

In other works, she has painstakingly attempted to impeccably reproduce works she herself has made. One of the final walls in the exhibition is devoted to "A Painting in Six Parts" (1986-87 / 2012-16) — six canvases of different dimensions sporting minutely detailed copies that challenge the viewer to distinguish one from

the next.

Almost from the start, the photograph was an essential tool. As a refugee from the Soviet invasion of her Latvian homeland, a wall label tells us, the artist was particularly affected by the Vietnam War. She started collecting images of war clipped from magazines and newspapers, using them as sources for paintings and drawings, some of which could be mistaken for works by her contemporary Gerhard Richter.

Her pictures from around 1966 of airplanes or an "Explosion at Sea" might somehow hide their photographic roots, but the glare from a car dashboard in "Freeway" or the halation surrounding the headlights of "Truck" could only be caught by a lens. By 1968, drawings of torn and wrinkled pic-

es of paper bearing images of a "Pistol," a "Plane" and a devastated "Hiroshima" make clear, as Celmins later said, "The subject was the photograph."

That is true, however, only to a point. One of the primary philosophical questions of art has to do with its dual function as an illusory window, through which we view a subject beyond, and as an object to be valued for itself. Celmins has dedicated her career to consideration of that great dilemma. Ultimately, as this exhibition reveals, the subject is the picture.

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