

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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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.

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