

The New York Times



Vija Celmins's "Two Stones" (1977/2014-16), at Matthew Marks. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

VIJA CELMINS

Through April 15. Matthew Marks, 522 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

No natural elements are deeper and darker than the ones Vija Celmins paints: ocean and sky, specifically the rippling surface of the Pacific off California, and the night sky, seen through telescopes, as a dense, soft, pointillist field of thousands of individual stars. She magnifies the vastness of both by leaving out any framing, orienting references — a horizon line, say — to the element we're most comfortable with: earth.

Born in Latvia, Ms. Celmins, now 78, has lived in the United States since 1948, having arrived here as a refugee after World War II. And in a tradition going back to the 19th century, she's a landscapist of a peculiarly American kind, one for whom no visual detail is too small, no thought too big. (Within the context of contemporary art, she could be referred to as a cosmic super-realist.)

She is also a moral philosopher, which the subjects of nonlandscape paintings confirm: images of handguns, fighter planes, raw meat, television sets and, perhaps from her work table, worn-down rubber erasers. The

erasers are apt symbols for an artist who is a perfectionist reviser, working on single small paintings — adding, subtracting, adding — for years.

This show at Matthew Marks includes a few trompe l'oeil sculptures modeled on real objects. She replicates small found stones in bronze and reproduces their surface markings, speck by speck. Seen together in the gallery, original object and sculpture are hard to tell apart. This is also the case with replicated versions, in wood and paint, of tablet-computer-size 19th-century slate blackboards she has collected. The real slates, also in the gallery, still carry faint ghosts of classroom lessons and calculations written and wiped out long ago. Ms. Celmins's sculptures have the same marks and, in the funny way art works, turn erasures into additions.

HOLLAND COTTER