

**Vija Celmins:
 Television and Disaster, 1964-66**

A rare look at a little-known facet of artist's oeuvre

On view at the Menil Collection
November 19, 2010 - February 20, 2011

Exhibition Preview: Thursday, November 18, 7:00-9:00 P.M.

**CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST: VIJA CELMINS AND CURATORS
 APPEAR IN A PUBLIC PROGRAM AT THE MENIL
 7:00 P.M., FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19th**

Houston, October 27, 2010 – Throughout much of her career, Vija Celmins has been known for her captivating paintings and drawings of starry night skies, fragile spider webs, and barren desert floors – quiet, expansive worlds meticulously executed in gradations of black and grey. As a young artist in Los Angeles during the early 1960s, however, Celmins's work was marked by a distinctly different tone, one influenced by the violence of the era and the mass media that represented it. Realistically rendering images from newspapers, magazines, and television, Celmins filled her canvases with smoking handguns, crashing warplanes, and other images of disaster and violence.



Co-organized by the Menil Collection and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ***Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964-66*** explores this essential yet often overlooked period of the artist's work. While recent surveys at the Centre Pompidou and the Metropolitan Museum of Art focused on Celmins's drawings and prints, this exhibition is the first to concentrate on a specific time frame and subject matter within the artist's oeuvre. With nearly twenty paintings and three sculptures, all from a brief three-year period, ***Television and Disaster*** uncovers the technical and thematic groundwork from which Celmins would build her international career.

The exhibition curators are Menil Collection Associate Curator Michelle White and Franklin Sirmans, the Terri and Michael Smooke Department Head and Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA. "In this examination of a brief, early period of the artist's work," said Michelle White, "the unexpected content and emotional weight demonstrates how powerfully Celmins addresses political issues through a quiet poeticism, an ability

that reveals her conceptual strength as an artist and establishes her historical importance in the 1960s.”

Born in Riga, the seaside capital of Latvia, in 1938, Vija Celmins fled with her family to Germany in advance of the Soviet Army’s invasion in 1944. Migrating to the United States four years later at the close of World War II, the family settled in Indianapolis, where Celmins took art classes and graduated from the John Herron Art Institute with a BFA. In 1961, she received a scholarship to attend the Yale Summer School of Art and Music, where she met artists Brice Marden and Chuck Close. A year later Celmins relocated to the West Coast to attend graduate school in painting at the University of California, Los Angeles.

When Celmins arrived in Los Angeles in 1962, the city’s art scene – fostered in large part by the renowned curator (and Menil founding director) Walter Hopps – was realizing its final break with Abstract Expressionism, forging a coolly detached Pop Art aesthetic unique to Southern California. With Hopps’s Ferus Gallery at the epicenter of what *Artforum* magazine called “The Cool School,” artists such as Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and Ed Ruscha offered stylistic alternatives to both Abstract Expressionism’s action painting and New York’s bold version of Pop Art. The city’s artists sought inspiration in found art and the painting of common everyday objects, creating a fluid new language to critique the decade’s increasingly commercialized and media-driven culture.

It was a 1964 group of paintings based on images of violence, however, that proved to be a pivotal turning point in Celmins’s development as an artist. Rather than simply representing a subject on canvas as she had with her common object works, Celmins began painting directly from images culled from television, print media, and personal photographs – a practice she continues to this day. A series of canvases painted from snapshots taken in her studio present a hand holding a six-cylinder revolver in *Pistol, Hand Holding Gun*, and *Gun with Hand #1*. An extended forearm enters the frame from the right or left, as the hand squeezes a life-sized gun smoking from a recently fired shot. Isolated across a placeless tan background, the implicit power and violence of the gun is softened by Celmins’s detached composition and careful brushwork. “The photo is an alternate subject, another layer of distance,” she told Chuck Close in an interview from 1991. “Distance creates an opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship to it. I treat the photograph as an object.”



Also from 1964, *T.V.* takes a similar approach to a violent theme, yet offers a more direct cultural critique. The grey monochrome painting shows a television broadcasting an image of a shattered military airplane falling from the sky, a mediated view of the televised war in Vietnam. The dramatic moment stops at glowing edges of the television set, dampening the immediacy of the disturbing image.

Celmins continues this straightforward, almost factual representation of violence and power as she approaches material more closely tied to her childhood in war-torn Europe. In *Flying Fortress*, *Suspended Plane*, and *German Plane* – all from 1966 – Celmins paints a series of photographs torn from library books showing aircraft from the First and Second World Wars. Rendered in as much detail as the original images allow, the planes float matter-of-factly at the center of the canvas among the clouds, while evoking notions of fear, fascination, and nostalgia. *WWII Puzzle Toy*, a small sculpture from 1965, offers a similar blend of emotions, while bringing the sense of childhood to the forefront. Beneath a plastic domed top, glass marbles roll across a round wooden base covered with indentations. Any sense of wistful childhood familiarity is quickly swept away by the crashing plane Celmins has painted on the base.

Never fully linked to the California Pop movement, Celmins is often overlooked as an important figure in post-Abstract Expressionist art. ***Television and Disaster*** brings to light the artist's ability to appropriate the media of her era – from newspapers and magazines to snapshots and television – to speak to her own background, while offering a distinctive contribution to this cool and aloof aesthetic.

Presented in conjunction with the exhibition and organized by the Menil's Michelle White, ***Kissed by Angels: A Selection of Work from Southern California*** further explores the creative environment that influenced Celmins's early work.

Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964-1966 will remain on view at The Menil Collection until February 20, 2011. The exhibition will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on March 13, 2011 and remain on view through June 5.

This exhibition is generously supported by Lannan Foundation; Karen and Harry Pinson, Janie C. Lee and David B. Warren, Lea Weingarten, Michael Zilkha, Barbara F. Lee, and the City of Houston. Exhibition underwriter Continental Airlines is the Preferred Airline of the Menil Collection.

This exhibition is co-organized by the Menil Collection, Houston and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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