"Vija Celmins: Television and Disaster, 1964–1966" 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.

The exhibition is co-organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and curated by Franklin Sirmans, Terri and Michael Smooke department head and curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Michelle White, associate curator at the Menil Collection.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

Conversation with the Artist
Friday, November 19, 7:00 p.m.
Artist Vija Celmins discusses her work with exhibition curators Franklin Sirmans and Michelle White.

Notes

1. Vija Celmins, interview by Chuck Close, in *Vija Celmins*, ed. William S. Bartman (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1992).

2. Vija Celmins, in conversation with Robert Gober, in *Vija Celmins* (New York and London: Phaidon, 2004), 25.

Cover: Vija Celmins, *House #2*, 1965. Oil on wood with cardboard, 12 x 9 3/4 x 7 inches. Private collection.

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1515 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400
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Vija Celmins
Television and Disaster, 1964–1966

THE MENIL COLLECTION

November 19, 2010–February 20, 2011

Artist Vija Celmins has become internationally known for her intricate paintings and drawings of night skies, ocean waves, desert floors, delicate spider webs, and other natural surfaces and textures that spill off the frame into infinite space. The subject matter of her earliest mature work, however, is quite different. From 1964 to 1966, the years this exhibition examines, her work was characterized by violent themes: crashing warplanes, smoking guns, fires, urban riots, and other images of danger and disaster inspired by reproductions in library books, photographs in magazines, and images on television.

During this time, as she was finishing graduate school in Los Angeles and coming of age as a young painter, her ambition was to purge the surface of her work and remove the diaristic subjectivity and juicy emotive content that had defined the action painting of the New York School, which she had practiced as an undergraduate. For her, making art came to be about the cold, hard facts. Celmins has described the transition: "I decided to go back to looking at something outside of myself. I was going back to what I thought was this basic, stupid painting. You know: there's the surface, there's me, there's my hand. There's my eye, I paint. I don't embellish anymore, I don't compose, and I don't jazz up the colour."[1]

Some of the earliest paintings from this period are variations of a hand holding a gun, each with a cropped forearm emerging from the side of the frame. Celmins had been given a gun and, intrigued by the power of the weapon, asked a friend to hold it so she could take photographs to use as the basis for paintings. The resulting works deliver a compellingly equivocal message. While she captures a dramatic moment of violence, the finger having just pulled the trigger, Celmins blunts the aggressive motion. She lets the smoke hang in the air like a lethargic cloud and, using a calm, centralized composition, subdued palette, and precise paint application, cloaks the work in an airless haze. Celmins has called this the "gentle quality" of the gun paintings.

Following this series of work, the artist created *T.V.*, 1964. On the painted television monitor, an airplane nosedives into a cloud alongside falling debris, seeming to stop midair in the grisaille composition. Framed by the ordinary television casing, the event in the foreground loses any dramatic effect. Rather, the gray image bleeds into the similar color of the background, obscuring the edges so that the blank surface has as much visual weight as the scene of terror. Thus, as in the paintings of guns, Celmins denies the viewer a straightforward reading by creating a discursive relationship between her gentle painting technique, which literally softens the edges, and the heavy content. Faced with contradictory formal clues, the viewer is left with questions about the meaning of the works and the intentions of the artist. Is Celmins making a comment about the media's portrayal of violent events? Is she addressing mortality or condemning violence?

This arresting ambiguity is particularly effective in the paintings of warplanes she began in 1965, inspired by the tiny plastic airplanes that she collected from commercial flights and by the war photographs she covertly tore out of library books. Though the works are not explicitly autobiographical, they reflect the anxieties of a childhood spent in Latvia during WWII. Some of her painted planes, which include bombers and fighter planes, calmly float in the air. The linear body of the plane in *Flying Fortress*, 1966, for example, gracefully hovers above the parallel horizon line. Others encounter more catastrophic situations. They tumble from the sky, explode in flames, and crash into the sea, yet still withhold any clear message.

In 1966, Celmins was also working on a series of paintings and sculptures of toys and games. Like the planes, they relate to her wartime childhood experiences. In the dollhouse sculptures *House #1* and *House #2*, both 1965, Celmins painted fires, plane crashes, and the gun-with-hand motif across the exteriors as though they were benign decorations. A compelling juxtaposition of childhood nostalgia with images of war machines, the works are a meditation on her personal history as well as a reflection on the contentious political moment (both the Vietnam War and the accompanying peace protests, in which Celmins participated, were in full swing) in the United States.

Another toy-like piece, *WWII Puzzle Toy*, 1965, consists of a fragile Plexiglas dome in which glass marbles roll across a base punctuated with round indentations. The form is familiar, the intention of the game being to carefully tilt the object back and forth until the marbles fall into place. Disrupting the familiarity and innocence of this common childhood toy, however, Celmins depicts a plane falling from the sky in a trail of smoke on the base. Here, as in all of her work from this period, she elicits conflicting emotions and readings. Through a poetic resolve, she uses the careful application of paint and formal decisions to turn her hard and straight paintings of difficult images into ethereal representations. "I've always been interested in very impossible images," the artist has said. "Things blowing up, things disappearing in a breath. Things like the sky, which doesn't even exist."[2]