The New Criterion

Art November 2019

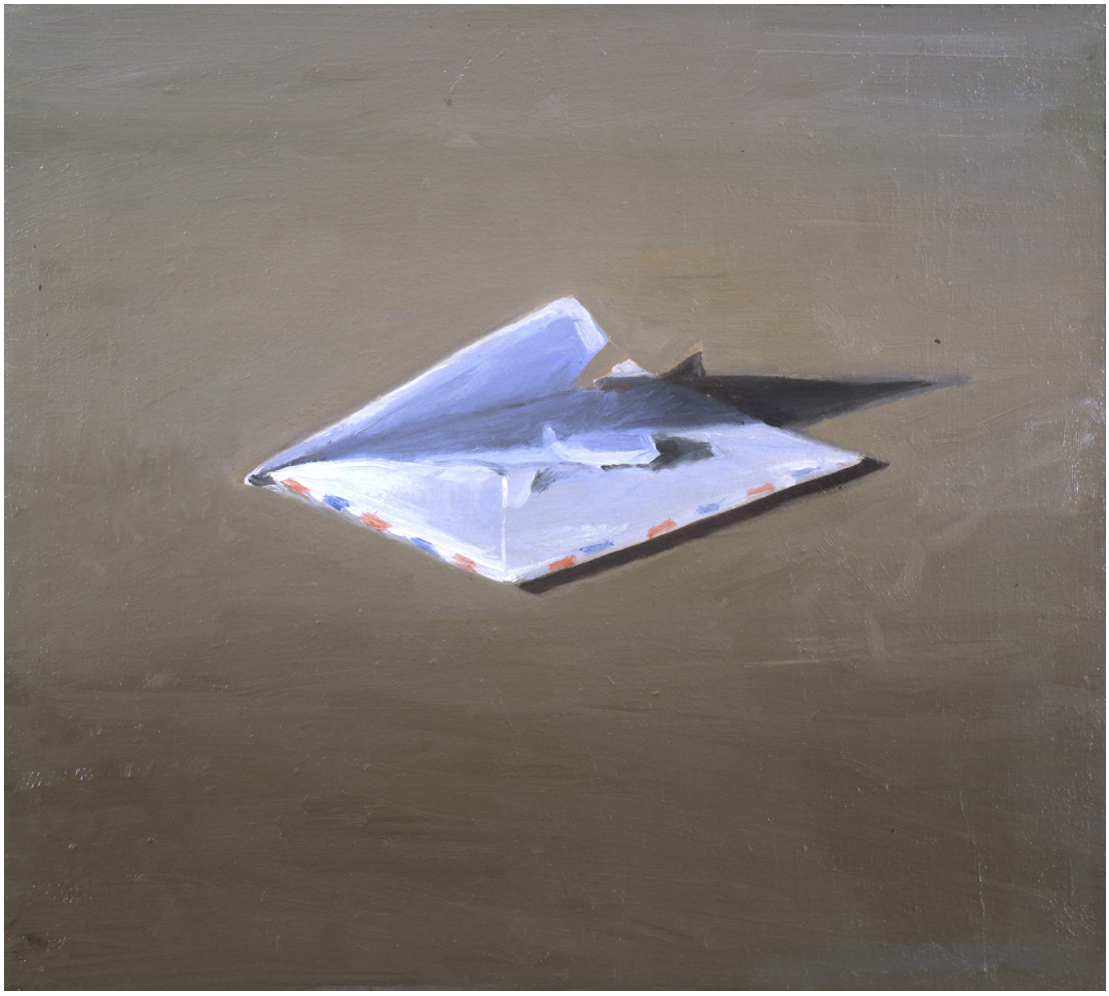
Exhibition note

by *Mario Naves*

On "Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory" at the Met Breuer.

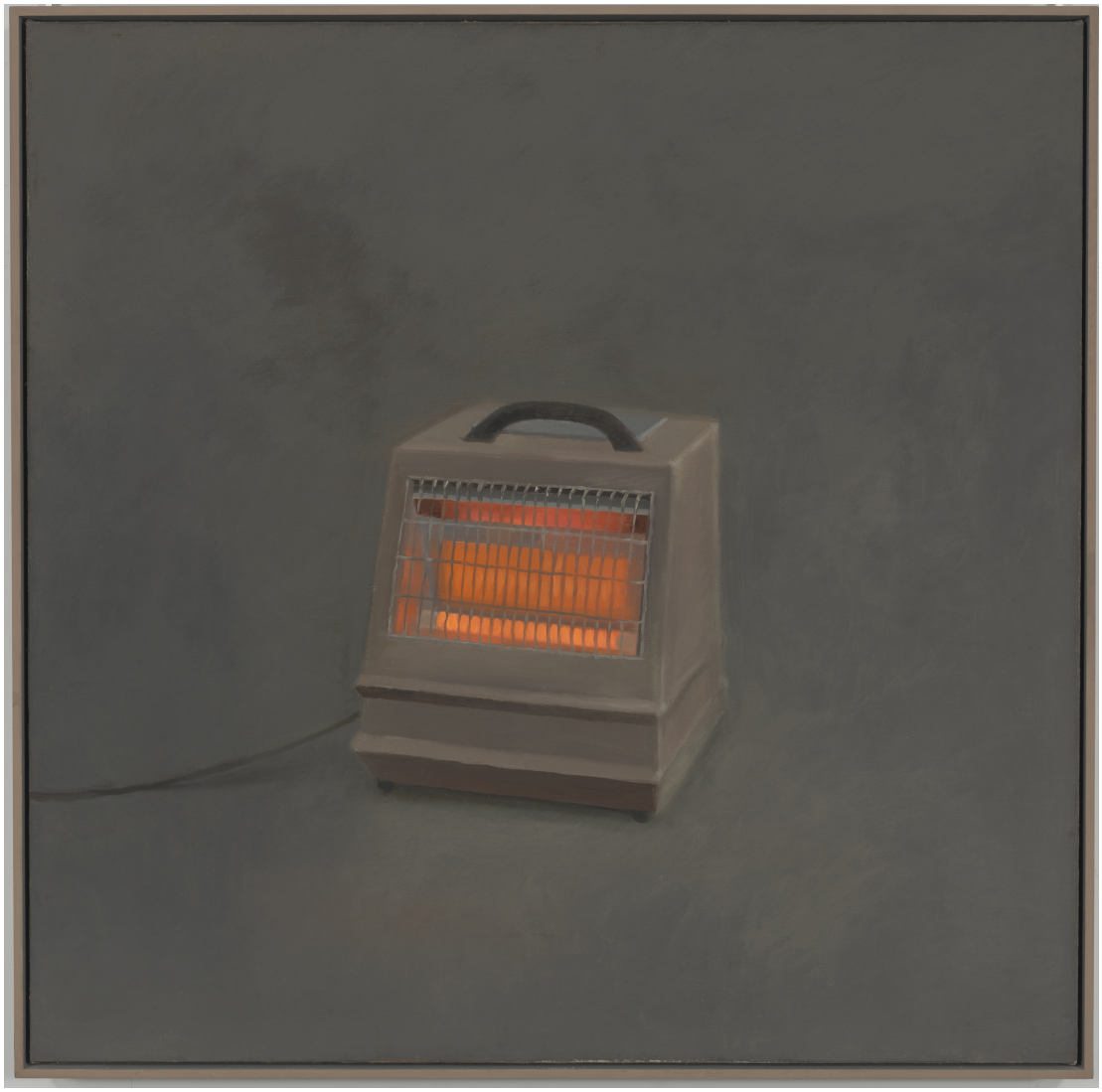
What a curious painter Vija Celmins is, so vexing and dry. Two floors of the Met Breuer have been dedicated to an oeuvre spanning some fifty years and not a lot of acreage. The modest size of Celmins's canvases will come as a surprise to audiences accustomed to the bigger-is-better ethos typical of contemporary art exhibitions. (A smattering of sculptures on display take on a larger scale.) "To Fix the Image in Memory" begins with Envelope (1964), a sixteen-by-nineteen-inch painting sequestered in the entryway to the museum's fourth floor galleries. As we traverse the show, the work stays within easel-painting range; the largest picture measures about five feet square. The installation is spare and, I'm guessing, was a challenge to choreograph. Certainly, you'd be hard-pressed to recall a show that reinforces just how stark and clean and airless Marcel Breuer's Seventy-fifth Street edifice is. Celmins's paintings, drawings, and prints are notably at home in these environs. It's worth pondering what it is that makes a fairly traditional talent simpatico with the proverbial white cube.

Celmins has long been a steadfast, if decidedly under-the-radar, art world fixture—initially on the West Coast and, later, in New York. Born in Riga in 1938, Celmins had an unsettled childhood. The Soviet invasion of Latvia in 1940 forced the Celmins family—mother and father, along with Vija and an older sister—to seek refuge in Nazi Germany. ("History," as the artist later noted, "was brutal.") Having been shuttled from one refugee camp to another, the Celminses came to the United States in 1948 under the auspices of the Church World Service, settling in Indiana. It was the first time, as Celmins told Calvin Tomkins in a *New Yorker* profile, "that I realized being in fear wasn't normal." Celmins attended the Herron School of Art in Indianapolis and found a welcoming niche within its student body. She attended Yale University during the summer of 1961, befriending future art scene mainstays Chuck Close and Brice Marden. Celmins eventually traveled west to study at ucla. As with many artists of the time, she grappled with the legacy of the New York School even as she kept an eye on recent trends.



Vija Celmins, Envelope*, 1964, Oil on canvas, Collection of Helen and Charles Schwab.*

"To Fix the Image in Memory" begins promisingly with the aforementioned *Envelope*, a dexterously executed still life in which understatement vies with painterly sensuality. Comparisons to Morandi are not unwarranted. As we enter the exhibition proper, the focus shifts—not in terms of imagery or composition, but in affect. With two notable exceptions, the images are wan and virtually monochrome, tending toward gray; the painterly approach is detached, muffled. Single objects are set within fields of flattened sfumato. To-the-point titles tell all: *Heater*, *Fan*, *Two Lamps*, like that. Painted from observation, these pictures testify to Celmins's goal of "get[ting] back to some kind of basic thing where I just look, and paint." She was nothing if not dutiful in her ambitions. Too dutiful, really. Absent is any sense of discovery. An unforgiving literalism takes precedence. *Hot Plate* and *Heater* (both 1964), the coloristic exceptions mentioned above, emit heat with appropriate placements of reddish orange in the grills of each appliance. In both cases, it's an effective pictorial fillip, but, in the end, devoid of imaginative reach. Magic? It's not on the agenda.



Vija Celmins, Heater,

Painting from observation didn't last long or, rather, became circumscribed. Three dimensions were winnowed down to two: Celmins began using photographs as source material. *Gun with Hand* #1 and *Gun with Hand #2* (both 1964) are predicated on pictures taken by the artist and depict a bare arm jutting in from the side of the canvas firing a revolver. The lone moment of painterly embellishment is the puff of smoke that gives the images an oddball quietude. *TV* (1964) and *Train* (1965), installed nearby, are similarly centered on time and movement having been stifled. What Celmins does to the photo, whether working in graphite or oils, is far from flashy. Photorealism isn't quite her *métier*. Celmins is less overtly crowd-pleasing—less superficial, too. Images of trucks, deserts, war planes, forest fires, and, in recent years, the cosmos evince a Magrittean sense of displacement and a frangibility that a charitable soul might describe as Chardin-esque. "Redescription" is Celmins's preferred terminology for her use of photography. What might seem a semantic hedge against potential complaints about copying or imitation is, in point of fact, a marker of how an artist can generate poetry through deliberate technique and force of will. Celmins's way with graphite, especially, is admirable in its subtlety and softness.

Vija Celmins, Shell, *2009–10, Oil on canvas, Private collection.*

Resistible, too. As poetry, Celmins's work is distilled and dour—haiku devoid of evocation or resonance. Writing in the catalogue, Briony Fer, an art historian at University College London and a Fellow of the British Academy, cautions against allusions to poetry, preferring "conceptual abstraction" as a more suitable peg on which to hang Celmins's "haptic, creaturely logic." Well, maybe. Minimalism is more to the point, I think, and goes to the heart of the art's metaphorical intractability. Celmins's pictures of pictures hint at provocation and meditation; what they deliver are immaculate dead-ends. Even within the series of drawings devoted to waves and spider

webs—the most evanescent of her subjects—an overriding sense of closure stunts engagement. "What you see is what you see," indeed. Passive-aggressive is the signature M.O. of her generation, and Celmins partakes of its insolence. Abandoning Abstract Expressionism because "there was no meaning in it for me," Celmins pursued an artistic strategy in which "no meaning" was both a jumping-off point and final destination. All of which goes some way in explaining the forbidding purity within which Celmins has barricaded herself, as well as the ready adaptability of her work to the Met Breuer.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 3 , on page 49

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/11/exhibition-note-10994