



Vija Celmins [...] In retrospect I have detached myself from my work somewhat. Now I can sort of see it as if I had nothing to do with it, which is perhaps one of the most interesting things that has happened as I have gotten older – that I am able to look back and say, what is this? So when I'm forced to look at imagery this way, the imagery has an intensity, especially in the early things. They have an ominous, kind of dangerous strangeness.

Chuck Close I think those [early object paintings] are the most violent-looking paintings. What appear to be ...

Celmins **Benign.**

Close That's right. It is the most dangerous hot plate, or the most dangerous heater, or whatever, that I have ever seen. And they are scary for some reason.

Celmins **Oh, I don't know, do you think so? They do have that ominous feeling that there is something going on besides just still lifes. I think that it came about because I had been painting in an Abstract Expressionist manner and I had been trying to make my strokes – the painting space – meaningful. I had tried to do passionate kinds of paintings because I was full of this energy, like I think you were, like we were when we were twenty years old. A couple of years later, I began to feel that there was no meaning in it for me. I lost my way, I rejected it. I couldn't resolve the stroke-making with the essential stillness of the painting. So then I went back to some basic thing, like looking at simple objects and painting them straight, trying to rediscover if there was anything there that might be more authentic. But the object paintings came out sort of twisted, with more energy in them than was needed.**

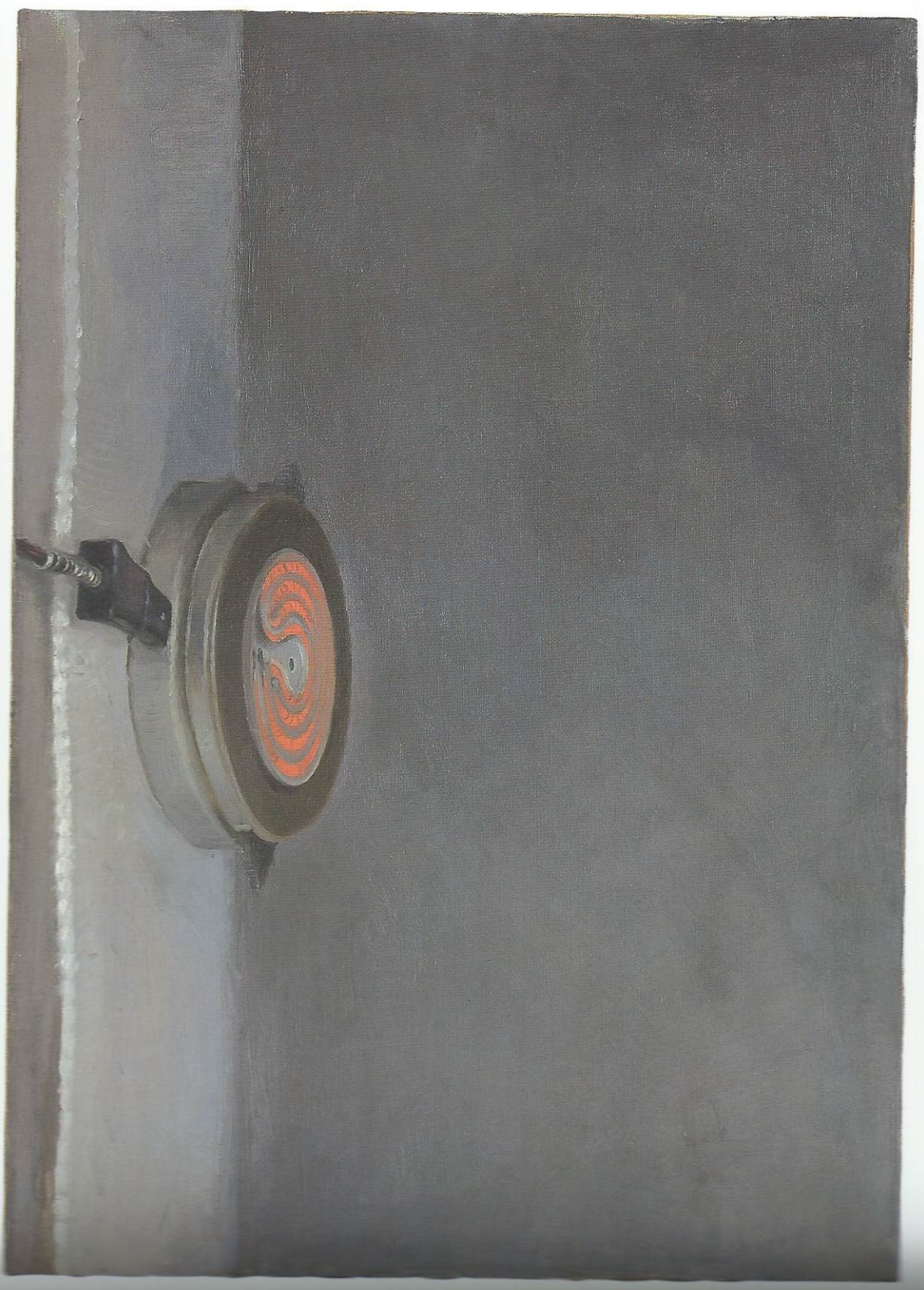
Close Do you think that we rejected Abstract Expressionism because we were coming to it so late, sort of fourth-generation junior Abstract Expressionists? We were imitating the look – it's what we learned art looks like.

Celmins **It was hard not to make it at that time.**

Heater
1964
Oil on canvas
122 × 122 cm
48 × 48 in
Collection Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York



opposite: Pam
1964
Oil on canvas
63.5 x 89 cm
25 x 35 in







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American Art, New Y



Close That's right. Do you feel that you purposely pushed yourself into some corner where you had something more specifically personal to do?

Celmins **The truth is that I have always had a lot of stops and starts in my work. So sometimes it's hard to see a logical development. When I realized that this painting that I was doing was getting so decorative and meaningless, probably for reasons you said – that I hadn't really originated it and received most of this information from magazines – I had to leave it. I had to back up and find a place where I felt more comfortable.**

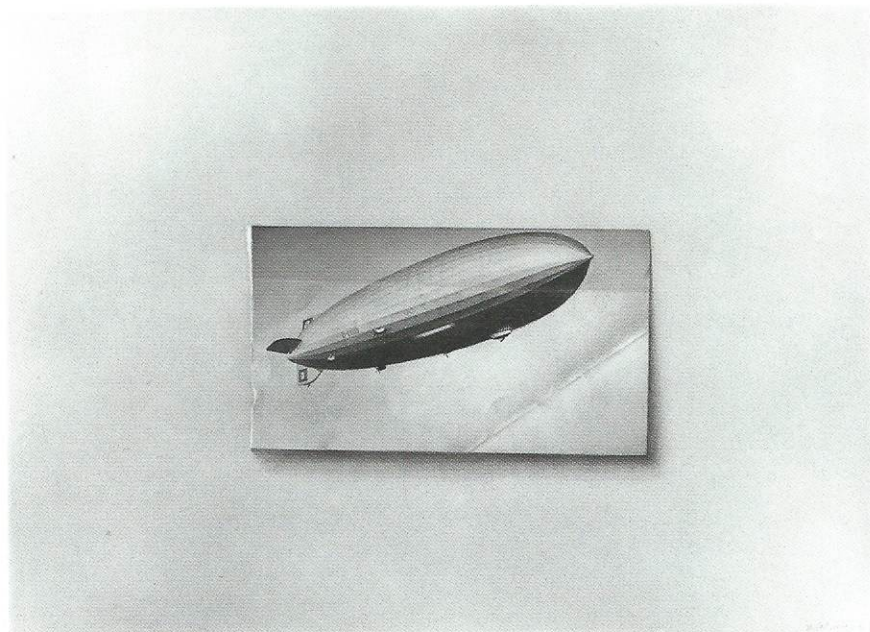
Close In the 1940s and 1950s art magazines were in black and white. Growing up in Seattle, I went over these magazines with magnifying glasses. As far as I was concerned, all these de Koonings and stuff were black and white. I had never seen any of the originals; I didn't know what colour they were. And it wasn't until about 1961, when the magazine *It Is* came out, that I saw the first reproductions in colour to see what these paintings actually looked like. Both of us have spent a lot of time making black-and-white work.

Celmins **I think I probably dropped the colour for other reasons.**

Close Well, me too.

Celmins **I was dissatisfied. As I remember, many people moved on from Abstract-Expressionist painting – so did I. I decided to go back to looking at something outside of myself. I was also 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.**

One of the things that I remember being very struck by was an Ad Reinhardt article. I think it came out in 1957, in *ARTnews* or something. Remember that article on twelve things not to do? I'm just going to read the very first one because I believe that I had never seen Reinhardt's work, and I don't think I've ever been influenced by his painting, but I have been influenced by his writing. He wrote twelve technical rules, or how to achieve the twelve things to avoid – I loved that. No texture, no brushwork or calligraphy, no sketching or drawing. Now you see I drew but I didn't sketch. What I



finally did was to leave painting: forms, design, colour, and, I thought, invention.

I remember discussing this article in Indiana, of all places, in this very traditional studio where older students had their own little, messy workplaces. I remember being inspired to imagine what is art if you remove all these things. What was left was a kind of poetic reminder of how little a work of art really is art, and how elusive it is to chase the part that excites you and turns one thing into something else. And how tiny that part is, and how hard it is to define. So I was inspired to throw away as much as I could.

Close Actually, we were on opposite coasts purging our work.

Celmins Did you do that too?

Close Absolutely, severe self-imposed limitations: I am not going to do this. I can't do that. I am not going to use this material. Get colour out of there.

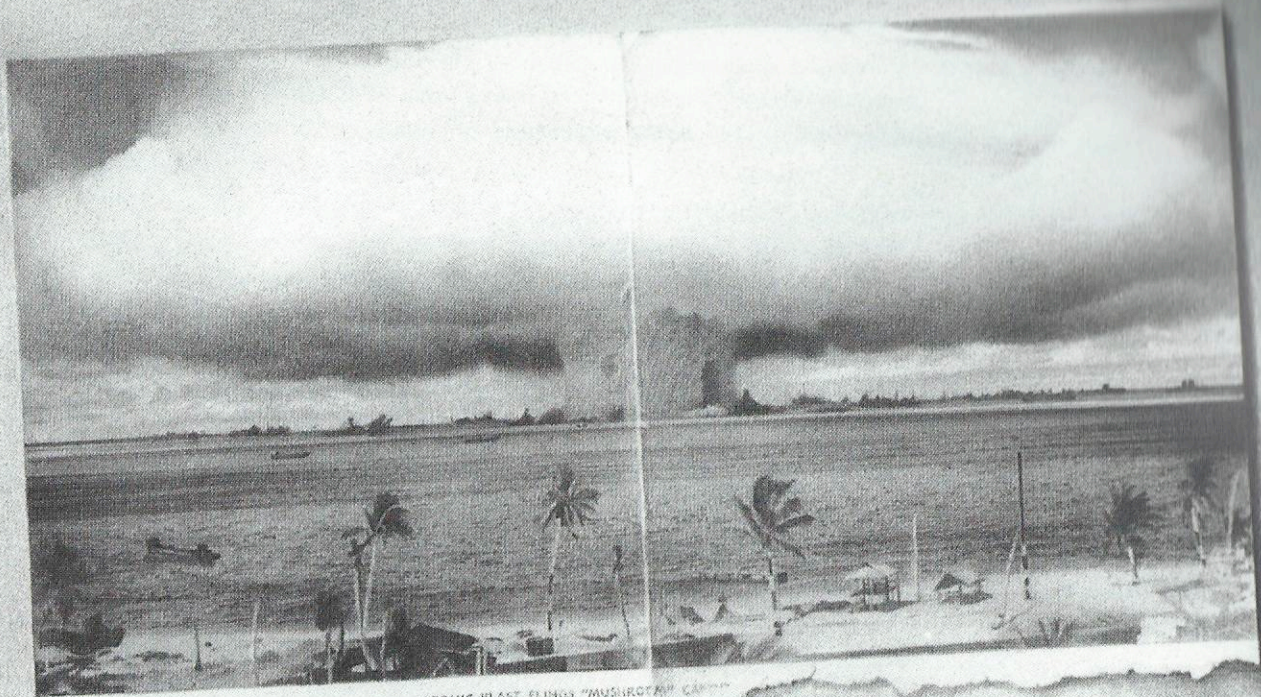
Celmins Were your first things black and white?

Close Yeah, I didn't work in colour for several years.

Celmins There were a lot of changes going on in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Johns, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Morley ... all those people that started doing dumb objects, dumb painting, commercial-art painting, whatever you call it. I began to look at Morandi, too, because he was showing up in magazines [...]

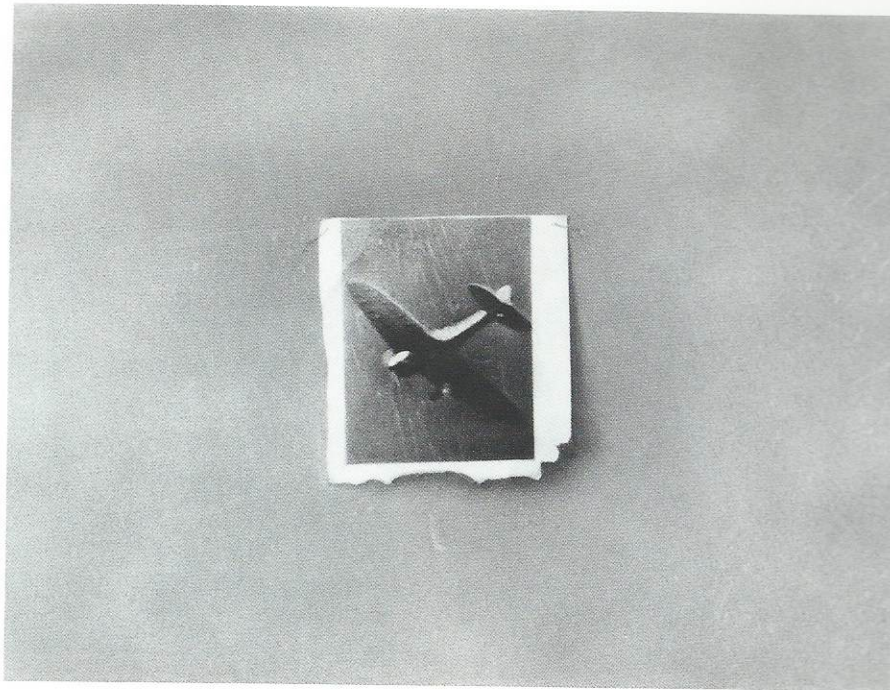
Close As much as your work is purged of a lot – trying to get the handwriting out of there, trying to get the brushwork out of there, get the colour out of there, and all that stuff – it is amazingly physical. There is a tremendous amount of physicality to it. It is not just ethereal. I think that is one of the dichotomies that is really riveting and so engaging in the work. At once they look like they just happened and yet there's this physicality. The drawings are incredibly physical as well.

Celmins Sometimes I'm convinced that there is nothing else but the physical act of making the art. Sometimes I refine it too much which makes it seem ethereal, which of



ATOMIC BLAST FLINGS "MUSHIROTAH" CAP...

After atomic blast in Bikini lagoon, July 25, 1946, people
who come in water, just about the
blast. This photo...



course it's not.

Close You're talking about how conceptual drawing with graphite is. There isn't so much there, just decisions, just a record of decisions having been made.

Celmins That's because I see drawing as thinking, as evidence of thinking, evidence of going from one place to another. One draws to define one thing from another. Draws proportions, adjusts scale. It is impossible to paint without drawing. I see the drawing in your painting, too.

Going back to the object paintings I started in 1963–64, I dropped scale and composition altogether and painted the objects one by one, life-sized: hot plate, lamps, refrigerator, radio ... I made some of the objects three-dimensional like the *Comb*. I think of them as having fallen out of the picture plane. They are not really sculpture.

Close I don't think of your sculpture as sculpture, but more like painting that comes out of the room and occupies the space with us.

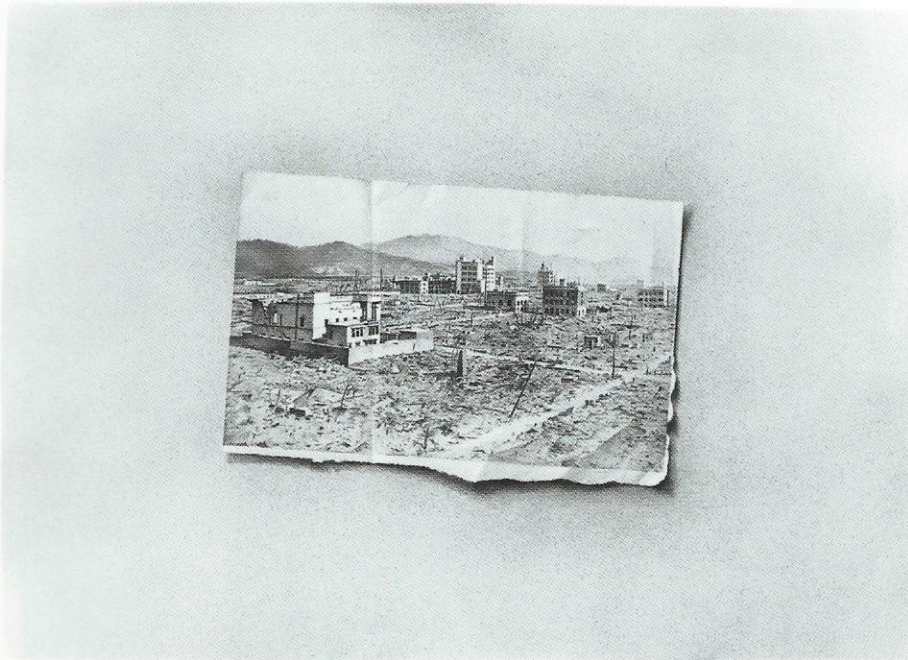
Celmins That's a nice way to put it. I was grappling with what it meant to work on a two-dimensional plane, and come out of it and go back into it.

Close I think all this has a lot to do with artifice and the artificial. In a sense you are decorating a surface with paint, but then there is the desire to actually paint around something. It makes me think of your choice of photographs because you say in your notebook, 'My eyes were honed in nature. I practised seeing the desert.' Some people think that you're not looking if you're looking at a photograph.

Celmins Oh, that's ridiculous.

Close Why do you put this artificial layer between you and what you're looking at?

Celmins The photo is an alternative subject, another layer that creates distance. And distance creates an opportunity to view the work more slowly and to explore your relationship to it. I treat the photograph as an object, an object to scan. Actually, the



first time I used photographs was really because I had been away from my family and was lonely. I had been going through bookstores finding war books and tearing out little clippings of aeroplanes, bombed out places – nostalgic images. At first I painted them, later I decided the clippings were this wonderful range of greys for me to explore with graphite. Then I started to do these moon drawings from photographs taken by a machine that had recorded the range of greys on the moon and had transmitted them back. Then they had been photographed and printed in a book, and then ...

Close There was a layering in between.

Celmins I thought of it as putting the images that I found in books and magazines back in the real world – in real time. Because when you look at the work you confront the here and now. It's right there.

Close So you approach these photographs as an object in the same way as the lamp had been an object?

Celmins Right, I did at first. I think you can see that the whole idea at first was that it might be possible to put something in a two-dimensional plane, or on it, or somehow solve that problem. You can see that the photographs had the same kind of single-object imagery, like the objects that I had been painting earlier. In a way, the photograph helps unite the object with the two-dimensional plane. Although I think that with aeroplanes there is kind of wonderful place where they really float, and then they become dimensional, and they take off as well as staying flat. I did not realize it then, but now I can see that the subject matter has a kind internal tension that also exists in the work. The paintings tend to have an internal feeling, as if there was something behind what you see.

Close The paintings are very lush and, at the same time, they're incredibly restrictive. That is a funny dichotomy.

Celmins I'm always aware of the limits of painting, and have come to think that the limits are what give it more meaning. Of course, one has to find the limits. I painted so



much between 1961 and 1964 that I probably went through five lifetimes of different sorts of painting: Matisse, Hoffman, Gorky, and de Kooning. I think you can also see quite a bit of a Morandi influence, as well.

Close More in the early colour work. It's a world of colour but it's really approached monochromatically. Later, when you got colour totally out of the picture, the viewer fills in the colour in his/her mind. I always thought that black-and-white photographs of war, for instance, were far more scary than colour photographs of war because colour photographs of war always look wrong – the blood doesn't look like blood, it looks like ketchup or something. But in a black-and-white photograph of war you fill in the colour in your mind and make blood blood-coloured. In a way, it's sort of less artificial. By purging the work of colour it actually makes them more naturalistic.

Celmins **Yeah, but naturally I didn't think of that either. What I know is that I didn't just wake up one day and say, I'm not going to use colour. I slipped into it through drawing the photographs, which were black and white, because those were the only photographs available at the time. The second thing is that I do believe I wanted a more sombre note and I thought that colour was an extra, as if I were decorating something.**

Close I understand that. I got rid of colour because I felt I depended too much on it. I'd been told that I had a good sense of colour and all that. It just occurred to me that the colour I was using was learned colour, was art colour, it had something to do with other people's paintings. I could see wanting to get it out because it was reminiscent of a certain kind of art.

Celmins **That's right, though I often think that my thing of removing things was going too fast. Part of it was an intellectual series of decisions to remove stuff arrived at intuitively. Then I think it may just be my nature to throw stuff away.**

Close Let's talk about your nature. At one time, you described yourself as lazy. To look at your work, the last word to describe you as is lazy. When we started talking about compulsion you said that everyone would assume you're a very compulsive person. I don't think you're a very compulsive person, nor do I think I am. A compulsive person is driven



to do things whether they want to do them or not. They have almost no control over themselves.

Celmins **Oh no, I'm not like that.**

Close I don't see you that way at all. I see that you force yourself to behave in a compulsive manner, that is, to sit there and keep doing it. But it doesn't come from some kind of compulsive drive.

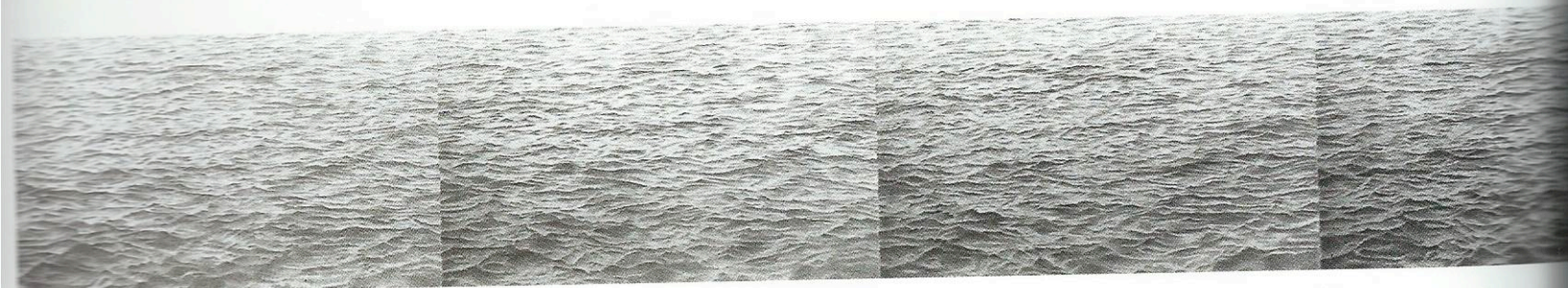
Celmins **No, I don't think it's mindless compulsion.**

Close Do you think that people like your work for the wrong reasons?

Celmins **Who knows why people like work. At a certain point, you're very happy that people look at it at all; in that way it's good. My feeling is, however, that often people only look at the image. I feel that the image is just a sort of armature on which I hang my marks and make my art. The early imagery, especially the war things, had a more specific emotional tension, but most of my later imagery developed without choosing any specific kind of symbolic meaning. I don't use the ocean in any kind of symbolic way. These first broken-surface images were a way to articulate the surface of the drawing in a Cubist way: with individual marks that break up the surface and then build up into a whole.**

Close In your notebook you talk about building a painting: 'I build the work like a house, like a construction. Hah, all the materials put together – When I was young I had mechanical ability.' You could build whatever you wanted [...] I like to think the way I work is almost like knitting a painting, or something like that. I don't think of it as painting in layers, the way you talk about finding a way to get down to an armature for the individual marks to build upon. That's something that interests me a great deal.

Celmins **I have long been interested in building a form in the painting. It's hard to define the word *form*, but I wanted to make a work that was multidimensional and that went back and forth in space yet remained what it was: a small, concentrated area that was**



essentially flat. Who knows why you want to do this. So, in a way, I thought of painting as building a dense and multi-levelled structure. Now I tend to think of it only in physical terms, but you could say that it alludes to a denser experience of life. You have to re-imagine it in other terms, which is lead [graphite], paper, paint and canvas. My feeling is that we all do essentially the same thing. I like to talk about it in terms of structuring because when I'm working, my instinct is to try to build and to fill. To fill something until it is really full [...]

Close The last time we were together we were talking about how important the Abstract Expressionists had been for us – how we thought we learned from de Kooning, what we thought we learned from them. Now, most people looking at your work would not assume these people had played any seminal role in your deciding to make the kind of work that you make. Yet I see it as absolutely integral to what you do.

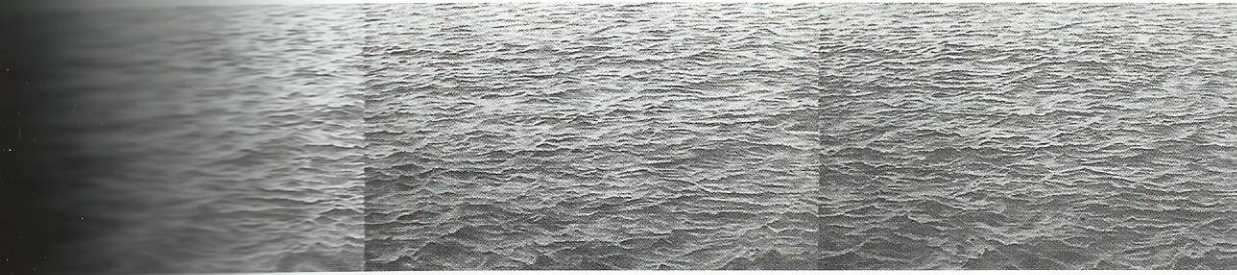
Celmins **Good, 'cause I do too.**

Close Whether it's the all-overness of the American painting: doing away with foreground, middle distance, background, and making the whole surface ...

Celmins **Right, although, I don't think that started with Abstract Expressionists. Another artist I looked at carefully is Cézanne. Cézanne recognized and gave value to the space that is in front of you, here and now. It is not just an illustration of absent events, he did it self-consciously. The mark was a mark on the mountain; and that mark also indicated that atmosphere in which the mountain existed; and, finally, it is also a mark on the canvas. At a certain point I realized that this work, which can only allude to so much outside of itself, nevertheless remains comprehensible only through the organization of that flat arena. This is no limitation but an essential expressive element of painting. I think that the abstract expressionists, certainly de Kooning, knew that and used it. They added another subject, however, which was the unconscious – but, of course, that's the subject you like to keep bringing up.**

Close I'm sorry, I'm the last person in the world to keep bringing this stuff up. I feel like I've really failed you. I hate it when people ask who my subjects are looking at, and what

Ocean: 7 Sheets
1972-73
Graphite on
paper
29 x 248 cm
11.5 x 98 in
Collection
American Art



are they thinking, and who are these people. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There is a transcendent quality to your work and to all great art.

Celmins **What do you mean by transcendent?**

Close It's the magic of art that makes graphite more than just graphite. Look at her face, she's going to ask for another interviewer! I don't see anything corny in that.

Celmins **So look at your work, maybe that's the nature of art. You do one thing and then something else always comes through.**

Close You stack up the bricks, and you build something that is more than just a pile of bricks. That's what you're doing; the approach is bricklaying. It is something that I respond to in your work.

Celmins **I would say that the work, beginning with ocean drawings, is more like that. It really went into kind of a rigorous building, and letting the material be the material. Letting the image be more and more like an armature. In some of these the image is almost nothing. It just holds you and it articulates the picture all over. See, I'm really interested in that. For some reason I'm able to do that over and over again without getting bored.**

Close Well, maybe because I know what it's like to build a picture. I see the delight in what seems laborious and the pleasure that one takes in small things having occurred. I find it very life-affirming, finally.

Celmins **I guess it is life-affirming [...]**

Close Let's talk about the difference between drawing with a pencil and painting. Even the smallest brush is a clutzier, clumsier tool; then you use this very sharp thing.

Celmins **You can pin the drawing to the paper on the point. Each point is like a point of consciousness. So it is like a record of having been there, which is probably what you**

Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)

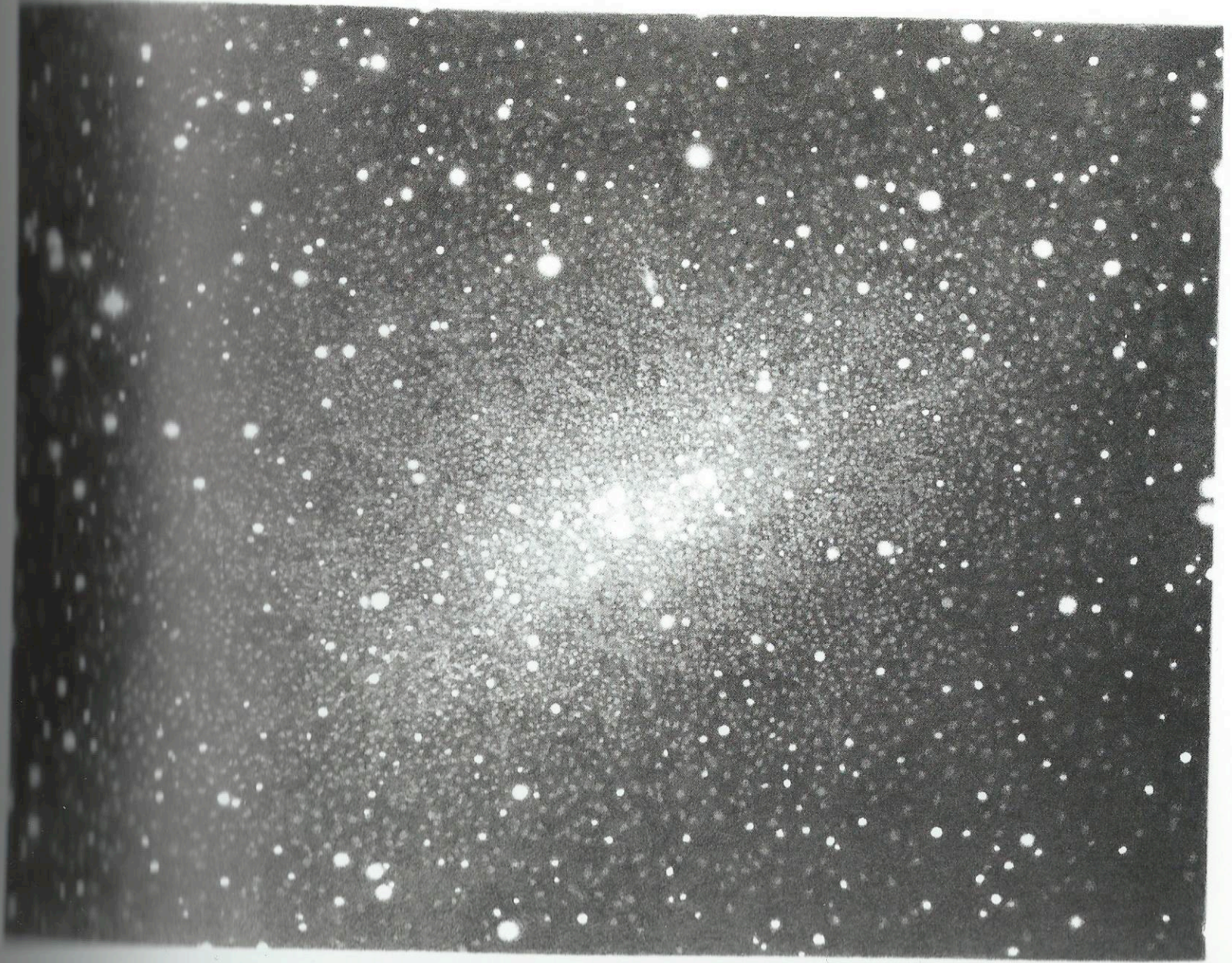
1971

Graphite on acrylic ground on
paper

44 × 58 cm

17.25 × 22.75 in









like because we're both artists. You get to be very intimate with the process of putting down the point of the pencil. I like it at that moment. I like the fact that I didn't have to smudge or erase, or push or pull.

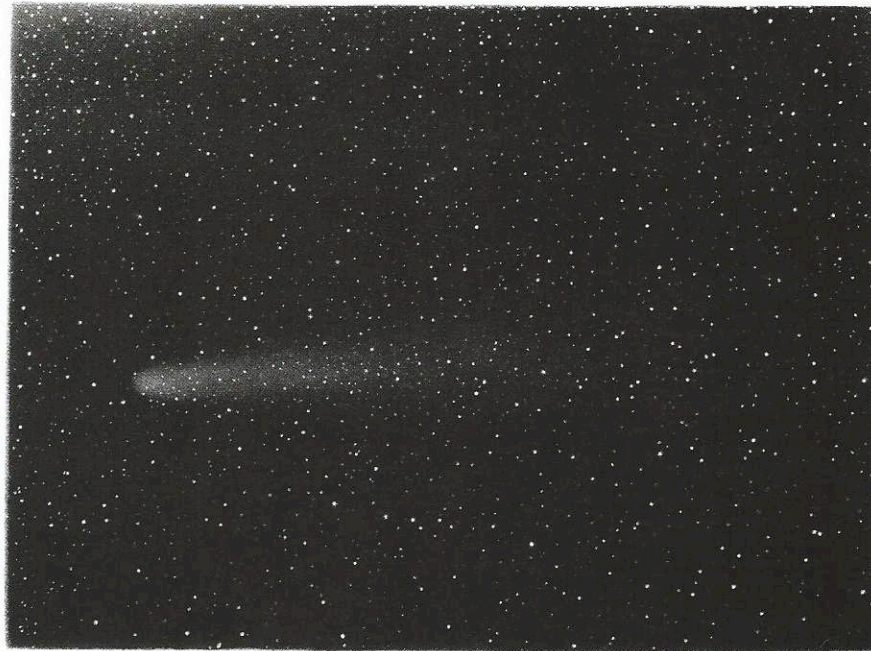
Close So what happened when you came back to painting? I would like to continue talking about the difference between pencil and paint.

Celmins When I started painting again in the mid-1980s, I couldn't finish anything. I painted on this one painting for about six months, scraping off the paint and putting it back on. The paint looked like an old rubber tyre. I layered the paint on dozens of times trying to reach some place in the painting that I could accept, one layer on top of the other. I feel that painting permits a more complicated spatial experience. I like the experience but I felt like a baby crawling on my hands and knees. I should have called this first painting *Start Over*, but I called it *The Barrier* (1985–86) because it was an obstacle to overcome and the overworked surface became a barrier to the image.

Close Do you work all over?

Celmins Yeah, I work all over. But in layers, one on top of the other.

Close Which is the really old, Abstract Expressionist way of working. Slowly bringing the whole surface up at once.



Celmins I went back to painting because I wanted more form, I wanted the work to carry more weight. I have this feeling the work has more meaning when it is fuller and richer and has what I call 'more form'. I think I'd taken that pencil lead as far as it could go. I think all the last drawings were really my wish to paint and I just hadn't switched to the brush yet. They were as heavy as they could be with lead. They were really about mass and weight but they couldn't carry anymore form. I had a longing for more dimension.

Close Another way that I think the painting is different is that every square inch of one of these paintings has paint on it. So white areas are painted as well as dark areas. White is reflecting off the outside skin no matter how much is underneath it.

Celmins There are more possibilities with paint. I like to show the support, yet it is harder to do with paint. I've been leaving the canvas showing on the edges, but that's such a common solution.

Close Somehow the way the light bounces off the paintings is a lot different than the way the light bounces off the drawings.

Celmins These paintings that I've just done are matt, so that they don't have light bouncing off them. In fact, the graphite has more light bouncing off it because it's shiny. The white is not painted on black: both the white and the black develop together. I layer them until they become what I call 'fat', so they're like marble. There are more possibilities with painting because I have a feeling that somehow the form is bigger just because there's more layering. There are more shifts in the work. It just is a more complicated spatial experience [...]

'Vija Celmins Interviewed by Chuck Close at her New York Loft on September 26 and 27, 1991', *Vija Celmins*, A.R.T. Press, New York, 1992.