

Vija Celmins: Printed Matter presents a selection of approximately 20 graphic works created between 1971 and 1992 by an artist best known for her images of night skies, oceans and deserts. Although small in scale, the prints suggest vast areas of horizonless space, the meticulous depiction of which wavers between representation and abstraction. Celmins' attention to detail reflects her interest in the perceptual experience of our surroundings. The exhibition is on view from November 6 through December 17, 1993 with an opening reception on Friday, November 5 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Throughout her 30 year career, Celmins has worked in a variety of media including sculpture, painting, drawing, and printmaking. In her paintings, subjects have ranged from everyday appliances, such as hot plates and fans, to menacingly evocative images of smoking guns and war planes. Rendered in gray tones and lacking any contextual reference, these images emit a heightened sense of isolation. One of her sculptural pieces, To Fix the Image in Memory, 1977-1982, consists of 11 small stones that are paired with identically painted, cast-bronze surrogates. The difference between the real and the imitation stones is apparent, but, only after close inspection. It is this process of looking and describing that is at the heart of Celmins' work.

The artist began painting and drawing her favored motifs--waves, deserts, stars--in the 1960s and 1970s. As source material she used photographs that she had taken during visits to the beach or the desert; for the depiction of night skies, she obtained telescopic photographs from NASA. Celmins feels that a photograph "...is an alternate 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."

For her graphic works, Celmins has produced many different types of prints including lithographs, mezzotints, aquatints, etchings, photogravures, and combinations thereof. Some of the works depict cropped vistas of deep, star-studded skies, rippling ocean surfaces or gritty desert floors. In others, the artist has juxtaposed these images with those of an airplane, a three-masted sailing ship, as well as a contour drawing of a chalice by Paolo Uccello, a Renaissance artist obsessed with perspective. The exhibition also includes The View, 1985, a book that contains the writing of the Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz and mezzotints by Celmins.

Despite their obvious here-and-now realism, the images abound with irony. Representations of elements with nearly limitless, physical boundaries are confined within small, two-dimensional views. Compositions are devoid of a central focus and, yet, are rendered in a detailed manner. In feeling, the images teeter-totter between appearing remote and sumptuous. Familiar enough to most viewers, the scenes and/or objects are presented in a way that requires scrutiny, and that poses questions about representation, observation and originality.

Vija Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia in 1938. Her family fled to Germany during World War II, and settled in the United States in 1949. She received her Master of Fine Arts from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1965, and moved from California to New York in the early 1980s. Her works has been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, and the list of group exhibitions in which her work has been included is extensive. In 1992, the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania organized a 30 year traveling retrospective of her paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture. The retrospective exhibition is currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York through November 29.

The exhibition program of the University Gallery is supported by funds from the UMass Arts Council and the University Alumni Association.

The University Gallery, located on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, is open to the public Tuesday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. The Gallery is also open during evening performances held in the Concert Hall of the Fine Arts Center.