

Fiona Curran

Presentation for Border Control: On the Edges of American Art, Tate Liverpool, May 2017

Between the earth and the sky: planetary borders in Vija Celmins' *Untitled (Desert/Galaxy)*.

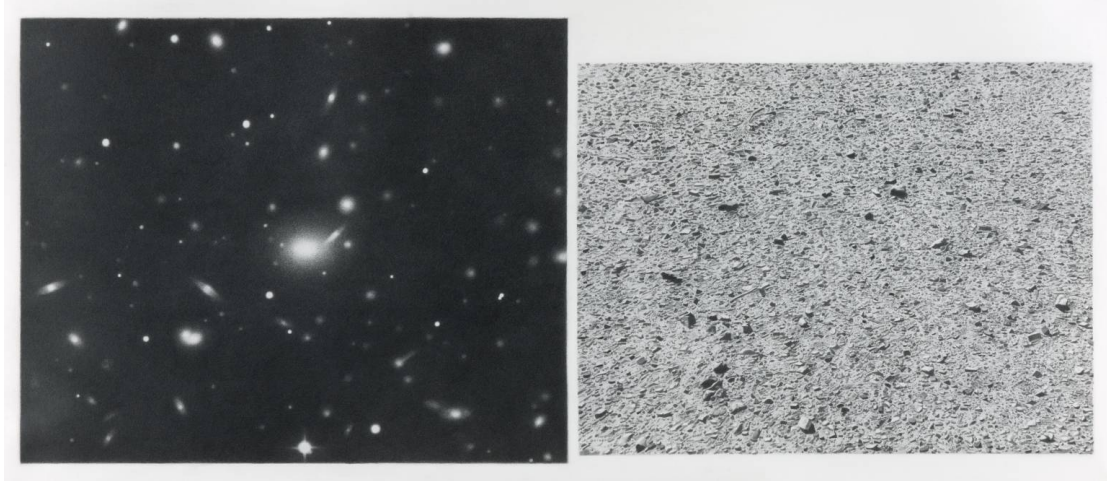


Fig. 1, Vija Celmins, “Untitled (Desert/Galaxy), (1974)

Vija Celmins’, “Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)” from 1974 (Fig.1) presents us with a dual image drawing executed on a single sheet using graphite pencil on an acrylic gesso coated ground. The image, as the title suggests, presents a photo-realist depiction of a dark night sky filled with stars and other illuminated celestial objects, juxtaposed with a close-cropped view of a desert floor from above. The desert view has the sense of someone looking down at their feet as they traverse the terrain. Neither image however, has any horizon line or additional reference point to provide a sense of scale, location or human perspective. Both views are immersive and all encompassing, they extend beyond the boundaries of the finite material image out into an infinite space beyond. And yet, there’s an odd visual disruption to this expanse with the inclusion of a white border surrounding the images and in their discrepant sizes.

Celmins is notoriously elusive about the possible symbolism of her works, preferring, in repeated interviews over the years, to distance herself from any specific interpretative readings and focusing instead on the work’s material construction and the processes of its making. In an interview in Parkett magazine in 1995 for example, the artist refers to her rendition of “impossible

images, impossible because they are *non-specific*, too big, spaces unbound.”¹ Given the nature of her subject matter, which has consistently returned to depictions of the desert, the night sky and the sea, readings of her work have made frequent reference to notions of the sublime, to a vast and indifferent nature that exists in a kind of temporal suspension or duration that is independent of the human. Neville Wakefield, for example, refers to Celmins’ works as “uncircumscribed spaces of pure description”², and Hubertus Butin comments: “Celmins presents precisely those kind of space that are not social constructions, and thus not produced by the social process.”³ These responses are echoed in a number of critical texts on Celmins’ work that reject the notion of a transcendental sublime in order to focus almost exclusively on the works’ material construction and the importance of the artist’s use of photographs in her selection and translation of the original photographic image into a drawn, painted or printed copy.⁴ In this paper however, Celmins’ 1974 work will be revisited in order to re-situate these seemingly ‘empty’ and timeless land and space-scapes back into their social, political and historical context. In the process it will be shown that this dual depiction of sky and desert share a temporal and locational provenance that highlights American cultural and geographical expansionism in the post-war period.

Celmins moved to California in 1962, her early paintings undertaken during this period are characterized by a close viewing of the objects in her studio depicted in a flat, descriptive style. Everyday electrical items such as a heater, a hot plate and a pair of lamps all have a sense of latent menace as they occupy the picture plane at the exclusion of other references. The objects are usually turned on and glow with a curiously charged energy that seems to extend them beyond the

¹ “Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne” in *Parkett*. 44, (1995). 40. (my emphasis).

² Neville Wakefield, “Temps Morts” in *Vija Celmins Works 1964-96*, (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996), 47.

³ Hubertus Butin, “Here, Look At this. And Look At It Again and Look At it Again. Vija Celmins’ Desert, Sea and Star Pictures” in *Vija Celmins – Desert, Sea & Stars*. (Köln, Museum Ludwig Köln, Walter König, 2011), 36.

⁴ See for example, Stepahnie Straine, “Dust and Doubt: The Deserts and Galaxies of Vija Celmins”, *Tate Papers*. 14. (2010); Briony Fer, “Night Sky #19, 1998” in *Vija Celmins*. (London: Phaidon, 2004) and Cécile Whiting, “‘It’s Only A Paper Moon’: The Cyborg Eye of Vija Celmins.” *American Art*, 23:1. (2009).

picture plane into the space we occupy as viewers, this effect is compounded by the depiction of an electrical lead that travels from the object into the surrounding space and out of the edges of the frame. It is impossible to read these images without feeling a sense of heat emanating from them or to fear for the consequences of a precarious electrical item left unattended. When these images from the early 1960s are placed alongside Celmins' subsequent black and white images derived from documentary photographs of scenes of violence and disaster from the Second World War, the LA riots and the Bikini Atoll nuclear tests it is possible to trace a preoccupation with the ways in which violence or the threat of violence can occupy and define particular spaces and sites.

Celmins' biography has a direct bearing on these images. As a child of the Second World War, her family fled from Latvia in Eastern Europe after the Soviet occupation in 1940, spending time in a German refugee camp before eventually relocating to America in 1948. Celmins arrived in the US at the age of 10 having witnessed first hand aerial bombings, death and destruction. It comes as no surprise therefore that in the first stages of her mature career as an artist she should revisit the subject matter of her childhood. This period also coincided with the US war in Vietnam and a turbulent social climate back home on US soil with the civil rights movement, anti-war protests and an emerging environmental movement. There is a sense however, in critical responses to her work, that with Celmins' shift in the late 1960s away from painting such uncomfortable subject matter into drawn and printed depictions of the vast spaces of the desert, sea and sky, that somehow her traumatic past has been left behind or sublimated into the surface qualities and painstaking depiction of these repetitive empty 'scapes'. Neville Wakefield for example, writes:

Celmins seems to find in the concentrated intensity of their rendering a topography of process. Like the desert itself, her depictions of it seem born from pacts of wear and erosion made between the elements. Created slowly over time they demand a similar slowing of perception. Layer upon layer of charcoal and graphite provides a visual density born of minute alterations of pressures and resistances felt between paper and marker. Just as the reliefs, so too the charcoal stasis of Celmins' galaxies and seas transforms them into deserts ...

Celmins' deserts are neither land nor landscape, but geology – time's song – made visible.⁵

Whilst this image of the artist as geologist is compelling in its poetic engagement with a sense of planetary duration, Wakefield's reading may be guilty of the erasure of space by time. In contrast, this paper presents a very specific reading of *Untitled (Desert/Galaxy)*. This reading firmly situates the dual image in terms of 'landscape' – albeit in an expanded sense of that term which includes the extraterrestrial landscape that, whilst existing beyond the boundaries of the earth, nevertheless has a locational specificity in relation to particular earthbound sites.

After moving to California Celmins began to explore the area surrounding Venice Beach where she lived, she would go on regular walks with her camera taking photos of the ocean on her doorstep and driving out into the surrounding deserts in California, Arizona and New Mexico. As well as using her own photographs of the surrounding desert and seascapes, Celmins gathered a number of her photographic resources from NASA's (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) Jet Propulsion Laboratory (known as The JPL) at Pasadena in California, which is located in close proximity to Los Angeles. The JPL began life as a technical faculty of California Institute of Technology in the 1940s, becoming part of the US military during the Second World War when it was involved in rocket experiments and the development of guided missile technologies. Post war it was formally absorbed into NASA in 1958 a year after the Russian launch of *Sputnik*, the first space satellite to enter Earth's orbit which subsequently triggered the onset of the 'space race' and an era of Cold War politics defined by Soviet and American military and technological excess.

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory had a strategic role to play in the development of rocket technologies beyond their military applications into the post-war climate of demonstrable technological supremacy. It played a primary role in the launch of the first US satellite, *Explorer*, which made the original detection of

⁵ Wakefield, "Temps Morts" 47.

radiation trapped by the Earth's magnetic field, as well as contributing to the launch of subsequent monitoring and exploratory spacecraft. Although *Explorer 1* was launched from NASA's Cape Canaveral site in Florida, a number of other probes and monitoring satellites developed by the JPL were launched from nearby sites in California and the deserts of the Southwest. These sites included Edwards Air Force Base and White Sands in New Mexico – location of the original Trinity atomic test in 1945 and the first images of the Earth from space that were taken from a V-2 rocket launched from the site in 1946. Through these early experiments in rocketry and satellite technologies the JPL therefore played a significant role in the Apollo space programme. It was responsible for developing the *Ranger* and *Surveyor* series of robotic probes in the early 1960s that paved the way for the future manned moon-landing missions through image and other data collection of the lunar surface. In the same year that it formally acquired the JPL, NASA also established Goldstone Deep Space Network located in the Mojave Desert in California. Goldstone was set up as a satellite communications site that would develop deep space communications and tracking systems for spacecraft and missiles, the site was managed by the JPL.

The 1960s marked a period of unprecedented technological development and publicly funded investment in the field of space research and satellite and communications technologies through the competing race between the US and Soviet superpowers to demonstrate their military and technological dominance. In response to a carefully orchestrated media campaign that promoted a narrative of extra-planetary exploration for the good of mankind and the “conquest” of space as a new, unknown frontier, public support for investment in space research was initially high. In the US, for example, in a speech to Congress on May 25th 1961 that asked for a commitment to billions of dollars of funding, President Kennedy stated: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth”. In the same speech of this oft quoted first pledge however, there were a number of further requests for funding to also support: secondly, the development of the *Rover* nuclear rocket to provide the means of further space exploration beyond the moon “to the very end of the

solar system itself”; thirdly, to develop and “accelerate the use of space satellites for world-wide communications”; and fourthly, to “give us at the earliest possible time a satellite system for world-wide weather observation.”⁶ The NASA sites recently established in the deserts of California were therefore to take on a strategic significance in the implementation of these goals and the extraterrestrial expansion of US borders.

It becomes evident therefore, that any analysis of this historic era of manned space exploration cannot be disentangled from the rapid development of the computing and information technologies that now shape our day-to-day lives, as well as the expansion of environmental monitoring that led eventually to a greater understanding of climate change. What is equally evident is that the earthly landscapes supporting the growth of these technologies and their extra terrestrial destinations take on a renewed *material* significance that begins to bridge the gap between the earth and the sky, proximity and distance, the present and the remote, and the temporal dimensions of past, present and future, tropes that repeatedly surface in Vija Celmins’ works.

In writing about Celmins’ *Untitled, Desert-Galaxy* Julia Friedrich argues that the images occupy, what she refers to as: “two totally different time frames. While the sand by the dazzling light of the desert sun specifies a “now”, the lights in the heavens are from galaxies that died millions of years ago”.⁷ Stephanie Straine also comments: “this drawing presents two wholly separate images, bringing together the dusty landscape of the extreme west with another extremity, that of outer space.”⁸ It is possible however, to contest these seemingly incommensurable spatial and temporal distances by connecting the photographic image of the constellation on the left, derived from an image in a book bought from the bookshop at the JPL in Pasadena, with the photographic image of the desert floor on the right, taken by the artist herself in the nearby Mojave desert. Both images can be seen to represent a mechanics of seeing, one derived from satellite imaging, the other from the artist’s hand held camera. A

⁶ www.space.com/11772-president-kennedy-historic-speech-moon-space.html

⁷ Friedrich, “Always the same song?” 22.

⁸ Straine, “Dust and Doubt” (No pagination).

number of the illuminated celestial objects that emerge from the dark charcoal ground in Celmins' work (produced through the artist's erasure of the surface) appear to be caught in motion. As well as stars therefore we are left questioning whether the glowing lights, lines and trails are shooting stars, comets, orbiting satellites or other manmade space vehicles. Far from representing an untouched 'natural' realm that transcends the earthbound to present us with a sublime heavenly firmament, this image captures a particular historical period in which space became a new frontier for development and expansion and in which the cosmos became thoroughly militarized.

The French philosopher Paul Virilio has written extensively on the relationship between the military and the role of visual prostheses in extending vision on and *of* the ground through cartographic mapping of territorial space that proceeds outwards in all directions. He argues that the accelerating speed of this mapping and the technical means of achieving it have resulted in a "logistics of perception" that collapses spatial and temporal distances and durations leading to a radical foreclosure of the world in terms of its material extension and an attendant "end of geography".⁹ As the human eye is replaced by a mechanics of seeing there's a loss of the physical dimensions of the human body in space. In this analysis it is not only what is perceived and rendered visible but also that which is beyond vision and outside the regime of perception that is significant. From this perspective a technological will to power is manifested in the pursuit of a technological and scientific 'progress' that is *beyond* geography through the adoption of 'orbital' movement and 'escape' velocity for example.

Celmins' image initiates a moment to visit the deserts of the Southwestern United States in order to understand the material bases that contributed to this developing extraterrestrial vision. This prosthetic vision encompassed views of the cosmos as well as enabling humans to see the Earth from space for the first time, rather than simply to imagine the form and contours of our planet. Celmins'

⁹ Paul Virilio. Interview with John Armitage: "The Third War: Cities, Conflict and Contemporary Art." In *Virilio Now: Current Perspectives in Virilio Studies*, edited by John Armitage. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2011. 36.

image begins to bring into dual focus the complex relationships between landscape, technology and power in a defining period in which, according to Denis Cosgrove, images of the Earth from space were “enormously significant in altering the shape of the contemporary *geographical imagination*.”¹⁰ In his seminal text *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* from 2001, Cosgrove documents a history of global vision from antiquity to the Space Age tracing the visual representation of earth as a unified spherical body to accompanying social, cultural and political transformations. His focus is on the two most significant images of Earth from space taken by the Apollo astronauts on board Apollo 8 in 1968 and Apollo 17 in 1972. In analyzing these two images, known as *Earthrise* and *The Blue Marble*, Cosgrove documents the relationship between space flight, image technologies and geocultural imaginings.

Cosgrove argues that these two images contributed to two contradictory and competing global perspectives, the first, a new “whole-earth” consciousness “appeals to the organic and spiritual unity of terrestrial life” significantly impacting on the burgeoning environmental movement by offering a vision of a fragile planet adrift in a dark void invoking narratives of domicile, care and protection. The second, a “one-world” perspective rooted in a Western, European-Christian tradition signifies “the expansion of a specific socio-economic order across space”¹¹ that “yields an implicitly imperial spatiality, connecting the ends of the earth to privileged hubs and centres of control.”¹² This ‘one-world’ perspective however, achieves a sense of global unity through erasure of social, political and geophysical boundaries, enabling a vision of the globe as an uncontested expanse across which communications, goods and capital can flow.

¹⁰ Denis Cosgrove. “Contested Global Visions: *One-World, Whole-Earth*, and the Apollo Space Photographs.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 84:2 (1994). 271.

¹¹ Cosgrove. “Contested Global Visions” 289-290.

¹² Denis Cosgrove. *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). 263.

The images of Earth from space that emerged during this decade cannot therefore be viewed in isolation from the social-historical, cultural and political conditions of their production and consumption. The competing claims placed on their depictions of a new form of 'universal' landscape image illustrate the complexity of global imaginings and the confluence of landscape, technology and power that emerge when re-entangled with the situated perspectives of *where* and *when* the images were produced, and *who* or *what* they were produced by. As rocket technology developed throughout the post-war period so did visual awareness of the earth via photographic imaging derived from cameras attached to rockets, satellites and held in the hands of the Apollo astronauts. The image of *The Blue Marble* has become so ubiquitous in the intervening 40 years since it was first captured that it is difficult to see it as a deeply contentious political image of the planet. Its appropriation by a huge range of, often contradictory, users from environmental groups to "green" consumer products, transnational finance, insurance and communications corporations, air travel companies and global delivery services, render it as an empty sign whose only residual meaning seems to reside in its depiction of a perceived sense of globality. Cosgrove argues that, despite *The Blue Marble's* appropriation by competing narrative positions, this image of the Earth from space has been doubly constructed as a global image that erases local specificities and political differences and perpetuates a Western ethnocentric position. For Cosgrove, each narrative:

Effectively exemplifies the Apollonian urge to establish a transcendental, univocal, and universally valid vantage point from which to sketch a totalizing discourse...The apparent objectivity of the photography and the positioning of the camera far outside the bounds of Earth seemingly constitute an unchallengeable vantage point.¹³

Celmins' *Untitled (Desert/Galaxy)* can be seen to offer a provocative example of engaging with such a seemingly "unchallengeable vantage point." Through juxtaposing an infinite view of the stars with the desert ground beneath her feet, she re-situates this celestial image back to a specific relationship with the earth, drawing attention to the mechanics of photographic vision alongside the slow act of transcription and translation via drawing and erasure. Celmins' immersion in

¹³ Cosgrove. "Contested Global Visions", 288.

the landscapes surrounding her home and in the images of outer space whose provenance has *also* been traced to the deserts of the US Southwest, introduces a spatial and political perspective that holds these seemingly incommensurable perspectives in view *at the same time*.

Recalling President Kennedy's 1961 address to congress and the fourth of his pledges to develop "a satellite system for world weather observation" alongside "advanced satellite systems for global communication," we find, in the present century, that these two objectives have begun to coalesce. Global communication and data production now shift into the realm of informatic weather systems and "cloud" computing. The whole explosion of extraplanetary and new communications technologies that has developed exponentially since the Cold War period is however, supported by a vast terrestrial material infrastructure that continues to have profound implications for spatial politics across and surrounding the globe. From the use of rare Earth minerals in the production of satellites, computing and smart phones to the increasing presence of space junk now circling the Earth's atmosphere, the seemingly dematerialised realm of contemporary 'cloud' technologies requires us more than ever to re-tether the earth beneath our feet with the celestial skies above us and to recognize the extra-planetary reach of the Nation-state and the absence of border controls in the continued militarization and industrialization of the cosmos.