



Vija Celmins
McKee Gallery, New York

A few months back, an amateur astronomer named Yuki Hyakutake spotted an uncharted brightness low in the eastern sky. Intrigued, professional astronomers soon determined that what Mr. Hyakutake saw was an unknown comet, one that had probably not passed within the earth's views in 10,000 years. Although Mesolithic people in the middle and far east did not become skilled in astronomy for another 2,000 years, it is possible that they noticed the comet—perhaps even "enjoyed" it after a hard day of food-gathering and domesticating the dog. However, unlike the orbits of the sun, moon and five planets that eventually symbolized the Mesopotamian week, the comet's disappearance probably thwarted any names or rituals that might have been attributed to the comet. So, for now at least, it is known as the comet Hyakutake.

A lot has happened since then, not the least of which is the development of the desire to drop what we're doing for a few hours and in order to travel to darker, more remote regions to catch a glimpse of a fleeting asteroid. We seek out such phenomena because our daily lives do not often provide us with such vast beauty and coincidence, such sublime contentment and annihilation. Standing before a rare comet or the Grand Canyon, the mortal question "Why am I here?" gets massaged into a more beatific "What difference does it make?" When the answer to that question is "none," or even "a little," what harm is there in going on?

The work of Vija Celmins proposes that it is precisely the flawed, small-scale human redundancy of art that allows us to wrap our arms around the impoderable and commemorate the mundane. By depicting a desk lamp or a bowl of matzo ball soup in aggrandizing terms (i.e. oil on canvas) or rendering the minutiae of a desert floor in pencil, Celmins puts all human endeavor in its place, including her own. And yet, her fine draftsmanship also tends to elevate humanity a little, emphasizing the appropriateness of making things to the best of one's abilities because one needs to; not as a way of mastering something, but as a way to coexist. These are pictures made for reasons beyond the express purpose of being looked at.

Celmins' most recent show was comprised entirely of paintings and drawings of night skies. Most of them have comets streaking across their view and all of them are invented. She begins by making a blank charcoal ground and then erases the stars out of it, one by one. Some get worked into crisp points, others remain nebulous; some seem faint, far away, or dying, while others seem larger, closer, brighter. Unlike the scientific beauty of Renaissance drawings, in which the depiction of light falling on the surface of an object gives it not only form but priority in the natural order of things, Celmins' drawings depict nothing but pure, emitted light. This is the captivation of starlight: it's strong enough to reach our retinas but too weak to illuminate anything. Consequently it activates our brains without giving us anything to contemplate, save for our own stimulated circuitry and its pinpoint impetus, light years away. However recognizable these depictions are as images, it is their effect rather than their subject matter that compels us into them, collapsing time and space into the flatness of paper and the thickness of our heads. And in the space between our face and that surface: an abyss that is too familiar to be learned.

We are gently pulled back from this vortex when our eyes inevitable drift to the edges of Celmins' drawings, where each image dissolves into the same smudgy ephemera that collects on the bottom of your shoes. The closer you look at these works the more likely they will push your attention back out into the room, remind you of the hand that made the image and of your body standing in space. Looking at them, a fugue-like balance is struck between pleasure and accuracy, between the effect of the image and the material that makes it up, between small wonder and smaller fact.

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