



## ARTIST ROOMS

# Vija Celmins

2 February — 6 May 2018

To coincide with *Wilderness*, The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present a selection of drawings and prints by acclaimed Latvian-American artist Vija Celmins (b.1938) drawn from the ARTIST ROOMS collection. Celmins's intense images engage with the natural world; the surface of the ocean, the desert floor, a spider's web or star-filled sky. They focus on something small and individual in the context of vastness, presenting a glimpse into empty spaces that are at once familiar and enigmatic.

Celmins's images are not observed from nature, but are based on found images from old magazines, books and photographs. The artist began using found photography as source material in the mid-1960s, during the period when she was also engaged in painting and making sculpture based on everyday functional objects. At this time, she also became interested in astrology and scientific imagery, including photographs and clippings of planets and lunar surfaces appearing for the first time in the media.

In 1968 Celmins abandoned painting 'to concentrate on the bare bones of making an image, with a pencil',<sup>1</sup> spending the next fifteen years focused on drawing. Her first graphite pencil on paper drawings concentrated on the ocean, allowing the artist to experiment with variations in density and tone and push the possibilities of working in pencil. She continued to draw intense single images of desert landscapes and night skies before putting images together on a single sheet of paper. *Untitled (Desert-Galaxy)* 1974 is an early example of this approach, where Celmins juxtaposes two images to create a dialogue between the night sky and another kind of spatial exploration. With her later *Concentric Bearings C* 1984 Celmins brings together prints from three separate plates on a single sheet of paper to show a falling plane bordered by two starry night sky images of contrasting size.

In 1994 Celmins returned to the subject of night skies with a series of 'charcoal eraser drawings'. In drawings such as *Night Sky #18* 1998 the artist builds a dark surface by applying a layer of charcoal, rubbing it in by hand and repeating before removing areas with various types of eraser to eventually expose the whiteness and light of the paper beneath. During the 1990s Celmins also began to incorporate the spider's web into her work, exploring it serially like the desert, lunar surface and galaxies. *Web #1* 1999 is one of seven spider's web works by Celmins in ARTIST ROOMS. The other web images and the artist's set of four lithographs (*Sky, Galaxy, Ocean, Desert* 1975) are examples of Celmins's wide-ranging printmaking practice.

More works by Vija Celmins can be viewed in the adjacent gallery as part of the *Wilderness* exhibition.

This exhibition draws from the ARTIST ROOMS touring collection of over 1,600 works of modern and contemporary art. The collection is displayed across the UK in solo exhibitions that showcase the work of more than 40 major artists, and this touring programme gives young people the chance to get involved in creative projects, discover more about art and learn new skills. Since 2009, 40 million people have visited more than 150 displays at over 75 museums and galleries.

### Stargazing Party

Tuesday 27 February, 6-8pm

To celebrate the Gallery's 18th birthday, we are holding a special stargazing party inspired by Vija Celmins's images of shooting stars, turning planets and distant constellations. Join us for a special evening viewing of the exhibition before stargazing on our roof terrace.

<sup>1</sup> Vija Celmins in conversation with Anne Seymour in *Vija Celmins: Drawings of the Night Sky*, exhibition catalogue, Anthony d'Offay Gallery London 2001, p.53.