the Stewart mode. At the same time, they suggest that the marketing of Martha exemplifies how traditional ideals of the feminine might be reinscribed in the nineties. Unlike many contemporary artists engaged in such critiques, Applebroog works almost exclusively in paint, with only brief forays into other media (most notable are her video collaborations with her daughter, Beth B.). In the perceived aftermath of Minimalism and Conceptualism, expressive painting has been more or less trounced as an ineffectual means of exposing ideology—because of its historical associations with the institutional structures of patriarchy, and so on. Applebroog reclaims painting for politics by insisting on ambiguity. Hers are not simple moralizing images, but queries about personal responsibility in the face of sweeping socio-cultural prerogatives.

Debra Singer

Vija Celmins

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
November 1 - December 22, 1996

Vija Celmins's pictures are so West Coast, with their big skies and oceans and freeways—somehow the way Andy Warhol's are so New York. Celmins being Latvian, and Warhol the son of Czech immigrants, they both may have taken refuge in looking at their sprawling adopted country by painting only what they could see from where they landed, so to speak. One experienced isolation, painting the vacant grays around her, while the other knocked out ambitious faces by the limousine-load. Yet they each insist, politely, on the same thing: that there's no symbolic complexity behind their paintings.

VIJA CELMINS, *UNTITLED (BIG SEA NO. 1)*, 1969, GRAPHITE ON PAPER.

Looking at Celmins's pictures is an uncommonly pleasurable way of spending your time. Usually small and gray, all of her exquisitely drafted drawings and paintings are poised, intelligent—the forlorn lamp and other studio objects from the early sixties, the still-born airplanes of a few years later, the cold flat patterns of ocean surfaces of the eighties, and the more recent night skies of infinite space. They work so hard at being boring, and yet are always inexplicably thrilling. For all their demure, paralyzed quietude, in each case (the artist says) "something is going on." A kind of fuse appears to hiss menacingly behind them: an overheating hotplate; cars belching cubic tons of toxic fumes; waves billowing and crashing, tearing asunder the earth's continents while galaxies explode by the countless trillions overhead. They're as fascinating and yet unspectacular as a ghost town—and just as devoid of people.

It's not merely out of convenience that the work is blocked into series—still lifes, oceans, desert stones, skies. Through them we witness just how long it takes Celmins's subject matter to exhaust her seemingly tireless patience and curiosity, particularly in *To Fix the Image in Memory* (1977-82), in which Celmins has painted indistinguishably identical bronze replicas of a few random stones, each crack or grain of sand lovingly observed, cherished and copied. When the retrospective's latter half turns solely to her strangely repetitious starry skies, we are confused, disappointed even: What does this virtuoso see in countless white dots in an expanse of blackness? What is she looking at up there? By now, however, you trust her, having followed her here: first cloistered in her studio, then taken through the window into airplane-filled skies, then across oceans and deserts and, finally, propelled into space. This is not a Baroque ceiling painter, summoning God in a majestic sky, but someone looking very intently at something we can barely see—someone who sees a vast landscape in stony grayness.

Celmins paints her objects, even stars, in all their pathetic materiality, so it inevitably comes as a relief that she's never painted people. They'd be as unbearable to look at as Warhol's were uniformly appealing. One suspects that Celmins has spent her

life trying to be an optimist, directing her poisonous, unearthly gaze further and further away. What must she see, which we all miss, when she looks at people?

Gilda Williams

"Computer World"

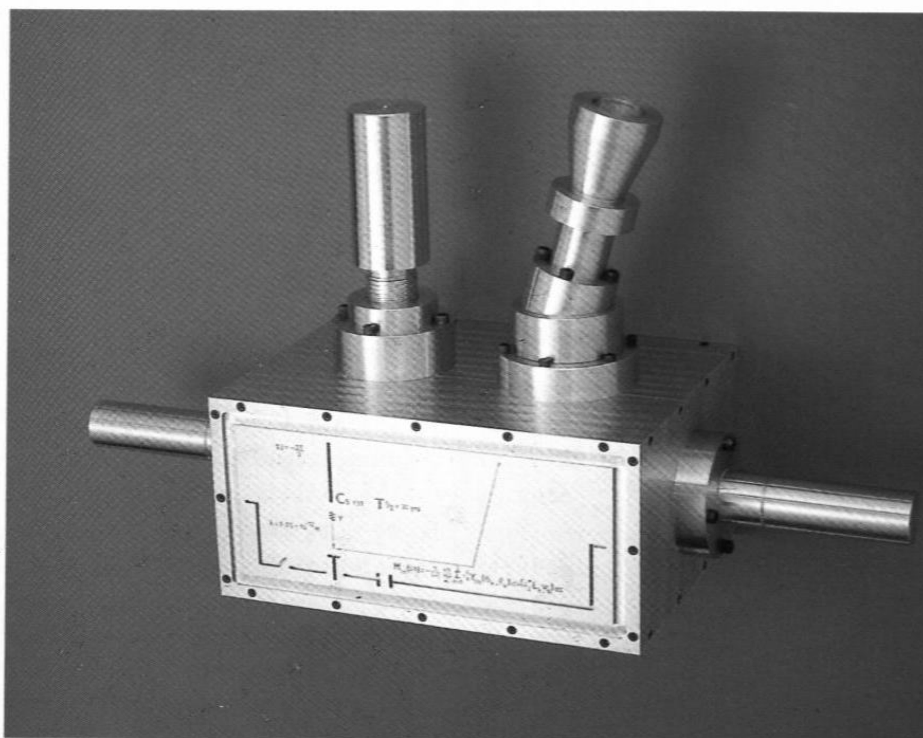
The Tannery, London
November 28, 1996 - January 12, 1997

Round the back of the "London Dungeon" tourist trap, through a long, dripping brick tunnel under a railway, The Tannery can be found. It feels like the wrong decade; this could be the 1940s, even the 1840s. Entering the old brick warehouse does nothing to relieve this time-travel sensation. Apparently, "Computer World" is an ironic title, as there is not one computer in the show. But the title still jars since the show seems to have been transported from some legendary, pre-ironic era. The exhibits' retro-styling seems oddly authentic, not cannibalized. And yet isn't this London, style capital of the nineties?

Inside, Tim Olden's exhibit could be mistaken for ceiling supports, but his metal poles are actually "theremins": a B-movie whine changes pitch as one moves closer, translating proximity into sound. One is drawn to touch them, but fingers soon grow numb from the cold. For all its mundane appearance, this is pure *Star Trek.* Reinforcing such trekkieness are two works from Dante Leonelli's *Neodome* series of the 1970s: large wall-mounted plastic domes glowing with neon lights, whose colors slowly pulse like some nebulous higher intelligence.

Upstairs in this long narrow building are Annabel Howland's viral splatterings. Resembling magnified bacteria, they are actually bank note patterns—though if you enlarge bank notes you'll find that they are in fact riddled with germs. Perhaps obscure diseases to infect only rich tourists? Far more cleansing is Mark Firth's *Box of Random Events,* clicking away to itself, as if popcorn sounds were emitting from its amplifying tube. It's pleasant and calming, or at least would be if it weren't for the fact that this is a Geiger counter measuring the decay of the sculpture's radioactive core.

Running around the gallery's next floor is a 200-foot tube filled with water, Tim Meacham's



MARK FIRTH, *BOX OF RANDOM EVENTS,* 1996, MIXED MEDIA.

Mae West. Inside the tubing is a little plastic pilot with a map on his knees, carried helplessly along in the flow. Nearby, there's Attilo Csorgo's tilted bolt, whizzing around and describing the outline of a glass in the way that helicopter blades form discs; and Mathieu Mercier's three large houseplants, each of which has supporting trellises for its leaves. In another room is Christopher Pauling's "beast." This three-meter cube consists of 27 individually inflating clear plastic units: floor pads trigger various combinations into life, making the work wheeze up and down, like some stranded alien jellyfish gasping its last.

Just sitting there finally, extraordinary and purposeless, is Stephen Hughes's *Gate Crasher,* a luminous resin cast of a meteorite from the British Museum. As in Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* the object appears to be boxed up and stored in yet another secret government depot. This goes for the show as a whole. Both wonderful and sad, it is a retro-*X-Files*—reeking of nostalgia for the future. But in this world of collapsing space and delimited borders, it seems that the days of mysterious objects are over, leaving only hard utilities and facts. The real irony is that computers are now too numerous to be numinous.

David Barrett