

Roswitha Haftmann Stiftung

Press Release

Zurich, 11 August 2008

Roswitha Haftmann Prize goes to Vija Celmins

The 2009 winner of Europe's most valuable art award, the Roswitha Haftmann Prize, is the American artist Vija Celmins.

The Board of the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation will award the 2009 Roswitha Haftmann Prize (valued at 150,000 Swiss francs) to the American artist Vija Celmins (*1938).

Vija Celmins paints with oils on canvas or draws with charcoal on paper; her imagery is representational and sometimes not without allusions to violence: a gun held by an outstretched hand or a burning man getting out of a car imply a potential threat. Especially her works dating back to the 1960s reflect a world destabilized by the menace of war and domestic political conflicts. However, the works she executed at the turn of the millennium contrast radically with her earlier creations. Reinstating perpetuity and tranquility, they transport the viewer beyond the immediate present with its restless streets and pressures of mass media. The artist redirects her focus entirely to nature and levels her attention at the remote distance. Aided by the photogravure technique to render a generalized representation, night skies have a calming effect and refer to universal laws. If we scrutinize the close-up view of a spider's web, then our fear subsides and turns into admiration of natural phenomena. Celmins' late works are the products of many minute and often repetitive stages of laboriously fixing images on paper. Not only the artist derives inner strength from this creative process, but it also promotes the same depth of concentration and profundity of aesthetic experience in the viewer. It opens up introspections revealing the essence of inner strength and an intuition of the infinite. The artist has a masterly and uncanny way of exploiting widely differing artistic media to the utmost advantage for her creative purposes. In recognition of her outstanding artistic achievement, the Board of the Foundation has chosen Vija Celmins as the 2009 winner of the Roswitha Haftmann Prize.

VIJA CELMINS

Vija Celmins, born in 1938 in Riga, Latvia, lives and works mainly in New York since 1981. Her family emigrated as early as 1948 to the United States. Celmins studied in Indianapolis at the John Herron Institute and completed her Master's Degree of Fine Arts in painting in 1965 at the University of California. She worked as an art teacher in Los Angeles and taught later at the Cooper Union, New York, and at the Yale Graduate School in Connecticut.

Since acquiring her Master's Degree, her work has been exhibited consistently in US galleries

c/o Kunsthaus Zürich
Winkelwiese 4
Postfach
CH-8024 Zürich

Tel. 044 253 84 84
Fax 044 253 84 33

and museums. In the decades following several initial one-woman shows, such as her solo exhibition in the Whitney Museum of American Art (1973), numerous exhibitions focused on different aspects of her art. In 1992, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia organized the first retrospective of her work. Vija Celmins' work had its debut in 1995 in European museums following an invitation from the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris. In 1996 Celmins received the American Academy Award of Arts and Letters and a year later was the recipient of the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship.

A survey exhibition organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1997 brought Celmins' artworks also to Frankfurt's Museum für moderne Kunst and to the Kunstmuseum Winterthur. In New York in 2002 the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized an exhibition devoted exclusively to her drawings. In 2006 Celmins received the Athena Award for Excellence in Painting. In the same year the Centre Pompidou presented a retrospective of her drawings.

Her art is seldom represented in European collections. However, since the 1990s there have been a considerable number of group exhibitions in which her works were present.

Currently Celmins' works can be viewed in the 55th Carnegie International, organized by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

THE FOUNDATION AND ITS PRIZEWINNERS

Vija Celmins is the third female artist after Maria Lassnig and Mona Hatoum to be awarded Europe's most generous art prize. Former prizewinners were Walter de Maria, Jeff Wall, Robert Ryman, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Richard Artschwager, and Douglas Gordon.

The art prize is the result of a venture planned by Roswitha Haftmann (1927–1998). Since 2001, the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation awards prizes every one to three years to a living artist on the basis of the outstanding artistic significance of their work. The attractive art dealer Roswitha Haftmann left the greater part of her fortune to the now highly renowned Foundation. The prizewinner is selected by the Members of the Board, which is made up of the Directors of the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and the Kunsthaus Zürich. Additional members are either individuals nominated in the Foundation's constitution or co-opted by the Members of the Board. Further information on the Founder, the Selection Panel, the art prize and the prizewinners is available at www.roswithahaftmann-foundation.com.

For further information and visual material please contact:

Kristin Steiner

+41 (0)44 253 84 13, kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch