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**SFMOMA ANNOUNCES ACQUISITION OF AN IMPORTANT WORK BY
CONTEMPORARY ARTIST VIJA CELMINS**

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) is pleased to announce the acquisition of the 1966 painting *Suspended Plane* (oil on canvas; 16 x 20 in.) by contemporary artist Vija Celmins, directly from the artist's collection.

"We are thrilled to obtain this very important painting for SFMOMA's collection and take advantage of the rare and special opportunity to acquire a work that has been in Vija's private collection for so many years," states Neal Benezra, SFMOMA director.



Vija Celmins, *Suspended Plane*, 1966; Collection SFMOMA; © Vija Celmins

For more than 40 years Celmins has painted or drawn a selective repertoire of images: airplanes, the night sky, oceans, deserts, spider webs, and the surface of the moon. Her first mature works date from 1964, when she was a student at the University of California, Los Angeles. She began to paint the objects in her studio—space heaters, hot plates, and fans—in a highly realistic and detached manner. These works were followed by a series of paintings of U.S. and German World War II airplanes, of which *Suspended Plane* is one of four examples, as well as the strongest. *Suspended Plane* depicts an American B-17 bomber, as indicated by the banded star and numeral 17 on the plane's tail.

For Celmins, who immigrated to the United States from her native Latvia just after World War II, these works represent her experience of war, and their charged and personal subject matter makes them especially meaningful. She describes this body of work, created between 1965 and 1966, as "colored mostly by the chaos of my early childhood in the war.... I relived all these things—the burning houses, the

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airplanes, the Latvian school in Germany, my eraser, my little pencils.” It is also notable that Celmins painted these planes in the midst of another conflict, the Vietnam War.

Suspended Plane is significant in the artist’s oeuvre for being among the earliest instances of her career-long practice of painting from photographs. Since the mid-1960s Celmins has built her entire output on photo sources, a method that began with works like *Suspended Plane*. Like artists such as Robert Bechtle and her friend Chuck Close, Celmins began to paint from photographs as a way of inserting a layer of distance between herself and the canvas. For the airplane paintings, she used found black-and-white photographs, whose gray tones and signs of age she translated into painted marks on the canvas. The viewer is not looking at a painting of a plane, but at a painting of a photograph that Celmins found in either an old magazine or book, and subsequently modified and cropped to fit her own vision.

The title of this work, *Suspended Plane*, alludes both literally and figuratively to its content. In addition to identifying its subject, it addresses the tension inherent in the act of painting from a photograph—the image is truly suspended in paint because it was frozen in time, snapshot-like, from the start. In an interview with Close, Celmins explained, “[W]ith airplanes there is a kind of wonderful place where they really float, and then they become dimensional, and they take off as well as stay flat. I did not realize it then, but now I can see that the subject matter has a kind of internal tension that also exists in the work. The paintings tend to have an internal feeling, as if there was something behind what you see.” In addition, Celmins’ title comments on the object status of the work as a lateral, stretched canvas—literally, a suspended plane.

Soon after completing her airplane series, Celmins stopped painting for almost two decades—from 1966 until 1985—to concentrate entirely on drawing. Since returning to painting, she has focused primarily on images of the night sky and spider webs.

It is significant that Celmins—an artist who has said she will hold a particularly powerful image in her head for years—has kept *Suspended Plane* in her possession for almost four decades. On the occasion of her first retrospective in 1992, the critic Brooke Adams wrote that what was most evident about the exhibition was that Celmins “has kept the best work.” He was referring to just five works in the exhibition that were in the collection of the artist, including *Heater, Lamp #1, Untitled (Desert-Galaxy) 74, Night Sky #2*, and *Suspended Plane*.

Celmins was born 1938 in Riga, Latvia. She currently lives and works in New York.

Suspended Plane is currently on view at SFMOMA and joins her works *Untitled (Ocean)*, 1977, and *Night Sky #16*, 2000–1, already in the Museum’s collection.

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Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: New Year’s Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$12.50; seniors \$8; students \$7. SFMOMA members and children 12 and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings after 6 p.m. admission is half-price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

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