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Oral history interview with Vija Celmins, 2009 February 11-October 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Vija Celmins on 2009 February 11-October 15. The interview was conducted at Celmins' home and studio in New York, N.Y. by Julia Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JULIA BROWN: It's February 11. We're in New York at Vija Celmins' studio at home—February 11, 2009. And I just want to start by asking you some questions about your childhood and where you were born and a little bit about your background.

VIJA CELMINS: Well, let me see. I was born, through no choice of mine [laughs], but in Riga, Latvia, in late October in 1938. I can hardly believe it was so long ago, but that's what it was.

I was born to a family that—both my mother and father had been quite poor. My father had been orphaned in World War I because his parents got that flu and died of the flu. And he was, I think, about 11 or so. I think they sent him and his brother and his sister to an orphanage. And of course, Latvia was then under the Soviet Union—I don't know what you call it, a colony or something. And I think they had a very hard time. His two older brothers were killed in the war, fighting with the Russians, of course. And my mother grew up in kind of a sharecropper family that also had five children. And both of them were one of five. People used to have a lot of children, you know.

MS. BROWN: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MS. CELMINS: I have one sister. That's it. I think the middle class quickly cut down on the children [laughs], right? Anyway, so she had a hard time, too. They didn't have enough money to send everybody to school, and she had to drop out in the fourth grade and never had more of an education than that. I think these are all common of being born in Eastern Europe where people were extremely poor and continually bossed around by bigger powers, either the Germans or the Russians, in our case.

And so that's the family I was born into. They were very hardworking. My mother—she told me—had roomed in a small apartment. She had been born out in the country and moved to Riga with a woman named Otilia [ph] who was my father's sister. And there were four girls in there, in the apartment. And she worked as a typesetter. She was maybe about 21. And she met Father through this girlfriend of hers who all shared the rooming house.

And then they married. And they had my sister in 1930. And then I was born eight years later. So I didn't know my sister too well. I just barely remember much about Latvia, not too much.

But my parents then—my father had been taken in after World War I—he'd been taken in by his father's brother, who was a family of bricklayers. And I think he took him under his wing, and he learned the building trade. And he built a house in Latvia for my family. He was extremely hardworking, kind of insanely so, like I think a lot of people were, just real future capitalists. [Laughs.]

And I think they were moving into the middle class. He had built this apartment house, which now my sister and I have gotten back after the—after what was it? 1991 when the Russians let those Baltic countries have their own governments, sort of, I guess you'd call it freedom. I don't know if there was much freedom.

MS. BROWN: Was education very important in your family?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, yes, education very important, even though both of—education very important.

MS. BROWN: For the children? Mm-hmm.

MS. CELMINS: So as I think it was for the people that began to get a foothold in the economy and in the world. These people really had nothing, you know? And they were extremely hardworking folks. And yes, education was very important. And they were little terrorists, those teachers. They were very harsh.

MS. BROWN: What was your early education like?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: What was your early education like?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I was five years old when I left Latvia. And we got on this ship of retreating German troops. I know it's very hard to believe. But the Russians were coming down the last time. And they were fighting, and we felt we were all going to die. The Germans were retreating. And they had these big ships. And they let people in the bottom. People were running, in ships and in trains. Of course, hardly anybody had cars. Everybody still had horses, horse and wagons.

In fact, my mother's father and mother took us to the boat the last minute because my father didn't want to leave. And his brother didn't leave because he said, "We'll just huddle down in the house and wait for it to blow over." But my father had just finished this sort of apartment house in which we had just moved. And he was beginning to rent it out. And he thought it would just be a disaster and that he would lose anything, everything, which of course he did anyway, you know.

MS. BROWN: And when was that?

MS. CELMINS: This was in 1944 in the fall, just as the Russians were coming in. In fact, I think they shot at the ships leaving the port.

MS. BROWN: Did you have much warning, or did you have to leave very quickly?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, no. Everybody knew. The Russians had already been in. The Germans had already been in. They'd already shot tons of Jews and traumatized—everybody was totally traumatized. Now, that's what I remember from my childhood, which might be a little different from the kids growing up just watching a little TV.

MS. BROWN: I think so. [They laugh.]

MS. CELMINS: But now, so much of the world, of course, is so traumatized. I just remember incredible trauma and my mother crying every single day, and my father very angry, and I being always afraid of being left somewhere. And people were dashing around. And then, of course, we landed in, I think, Gdansk. And they took all of these people they had to like Berlin. And of course, it was the end of the war. The Americans were starting to bomb Berlin.

I just remember air raids, trauma, crying. My eardrum burst. There were no doctors. And it was very cold because we only had packages that we put together in a couple of days.

MS. BROWN: Did you have any choice in where you could go? Or were you just going wherever the ships went?

MS. CELMINS: No, no, no. We were now kind of being put in camps. And they took us -

MS. BROWN: Refugee camps?

MS. CELMINS: Refugee camps for the Germans. And they were going to put us to work in what probably now would be like concentration camps. They took us to Leipzig, which was in the East zone. And they put me in a German school. And they had a lot of air raids in
Leipzig. And they let you out when there was an air raid. They made you run home. So I had to run home in these ditches that they had along the road.

So these are my memories, you know? They're memories that I think now, every time I see the TV, which is full of all these disasters in one country after another, I have that in me, that—what would you call it? And then I don't know my sister, who I never really talked to about it because none of us talked to each other about anything ever.

MS. BROWN: That was part of your family culture?

MS. CELMINS: I wonder if that's the East European way [laughs].

MS. BROWN: That was part of the culture back then?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, yes. The children were the children. You treated them like totally different sort of animal. And the parents talked to each other. My parents talked to each other. My mother was just devastated. I had no idea what was happening, you see? And I still don't know. I'm not really a big history reader. But I know a little bit what happened. But, my own experience, from which I probably have functioned and which gave a kind of an emotional tone to my whole life, was one of fear and trauma and I always thought I was going to get caught and put in a camp, in a jail.

I mean, what eventually happened is, in '45, when the Americans were already moving into Germany, I guess, a

bunch of people in Leipzig—who knows what would have happened to us?—decided that they would try to make a break for it. I don't know whether we were really guarded with people with guns or not. See, I don't remember that. But I remember living in these kind of apartment buildings with a lot of little children that I played with, and with all these women sitting around crying. And the fathers were trying to find coal.

It was the winter, the winter of '44, '45. The winter was over, I think, in May in '45. So those six months were really very traumatic. And actually, before that in Latvia, the Russians came in like 1940. I can't remember now. I was only like two years old. But I remember trauma even before that, with fear.

MS. BROWN: So it was the trauma of what you saw? Trauma of the uncertainty?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, yes, just everybody being very afraid.

MS. BROWN: The adults being upset.

MS. CELMINS: Right, the adults being upset.

MS. BROWN: And your having to lose your home.

MS. CELMINS: At one time, these soldiers came in. I must have been around four, but I don't know whether they were Russian soldiers or German soldiers. And we were having like a dinner with people that we knew. And everybody was like scared and hushed. And, there was a lot of trauma, World War II trauma. Millions of people experienced this. And now, almost all of them are scattered all over the world from that because nobody of them could go back.

MS. BROWN: Well, when you left, did your family think you would never come back?

MS. CELMINS: No. Of course we thought we would come back.

MS. BROWN: But you went then to Germany and—

MS. CELMINS: And, the Russians didn't ever retreat from the line that they cut through Germany. They never did go retreat back to Russia. They just kept all those countries, as you know, and moved their troops. Their troops never left. They just stayed there. And they moved into our apartment and into the house and everywhere. And they stayed there for the next 40 years and raised their families.

MS. BROWN: So your family left with just what they could carry, then?

MS. CELMINS: Yes.

MS. BROWN: And you went to Germany first?

MS. CELMINS: Well, we were taken to Germany. And we were in a bunch, like the refugees that were going to go into camps that were going to work. You've got to realize, this was the end of the war. Somebody must have seen that this was the end for Germany.

MS. BROWN: And then how long did you stay there?

MS. CELMINS: And then, when the Americans came in at the end of the war, of course, the Americans bombed everyplace, really. But we welcomed the Americans, of course. I never really knew any Germans until after the war. And of course, nobody could speak German. My mother and father spoke Russian, because when they were young they had to learn Russian in school.

MS. BROWN: So that's what you spoke as a child?

MS. CELMINS: No, no. I didn't speak Russian. I spoke only Latvian.

MS. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. CELMINS: Because in 1919, the Russians let the Latvians have their country back. And everybody wanted to be part of Europe, of course, like they still do. And, everything went back—but the Latvians were like this small tribe of people. Who knows where they came from? I mean, they speak a very old language, and it's not Russian at all. It's old Indo-European language. And there's hardly any of them left now, you know? They're going to be dying out.

MS. BROWN: Do you have a strong identification with Latvia still?

MS. CELMINS: No, not really. I think I have more of an identification with my beginnings. Because I tell you, for

the first 20 years of my life, for sure, I had dreams about those—I had many neurotic problems from this upbringing. And I think my sister did, too, that we had to handle with, obviously, no help. And of course, my mother and father were just terrorized.

So, when the Americans came in, they, of course, disbanded any camps and all. And they fed then the people that were refugees from the fighting areas. And so we lived off of United Nations food, UNRRA. I think it was the United Nations that gave. You had to stand in line, and they gave you food rations.

MS. BROWN: In the period where you still didn't know where you were going to live or where you were going end up?

MS. CELMINS: No. We ended up in Esslingen, where a lot of Latvians ended up, went to Mannheim, I think, and then heard that there were Latvians who were on a truck for about a month, driving around. Now, I remember that. Sometimes singing songs—this was right at the end of the war. And trying to make it into the American zone.

I don't know how those guys did it. They were maybe five families. They had a radio. That's all we had. You couldn't get the thing on the radio. You couldn't get the radio to play. Then people would have a map that they had, all tattered. And they would try to find where the Americans were and where the Russians were and where the Germans were and they were trying to figure out where the fighting was. They would hear and then put in little pins and try to get out of the whole place.

MS. BROWN: Within all that chaos, was your family unit sort of a sense of security for you?

MS. CELMINS: No.

MS. BROWN: No?

MS. CELMINS: Well, yes, I guess so because I was very afraid of losing them. That was my biggest fear.

MS. BROWN: That you would be separated from them?

MS. CELMINS: That I would somehow be lost from them because there were so many people. And there were like Czech people who couldn't speak -

MS. BROWN: And so much chaos.

MS. CELMINS: Nobody could speak anything. I think, actually, probably from East Europe, more people maybe spoke Russian. And of course, nobody spoke English, not a word. And nobody spoke German, not a word. So there was a lot of pantomime, I guess [laughs].

But I had moments, especially after the Americans came in. They were always throwing candy everywhere. And then my father would go in and collect the candy off the street. He wouldn't let me go, because we were always in the basement everywhere, from air raids. And then they would drive through the streets. Amazing. I mean, really amazing when you think of it.

MS. BROWN: And those memories stayed with you to this day?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: And all those memories stayed with you to this day?

MS. CELMINS: Well, of course. But I don't have so many—I have some memories. I always found little kids to play with. I liked other children. I liked to play a lot. I had no toys, nothing like that. You would have to say then that we were finally lucky that we weren't killed, number one.

MS. BROWN: You weren't lost, separated.

MS. CELMINS: That we had decided the last minute to get on these boats, where nobody knew what the hell was going to happen. And that we ended up in the right zone. Because I think the people that didn't had incredibly sad lives and were pretty much—of course, Russia itself was incredibly poor, and had killed so many of their own people with famines and brutal methods. And they were poorer, really, than the East European countries. And they just had a terrible, terrible time of near starvation.

And meanwhile, we at least got things from the troops, from UNRRA, which must be United Nations relief association or something, that set up these centers to feed the people.

And then of course, Germany was just rubble, total rubble. And there weren't any men. You only saw children. You never even saw grownups. I think they were all hiding. Sometimes people lived in the rubble. They lived in some of the rooms.

MS. BROWN: In the ruins.

MS. CELMINS: You couldn't even tell. So I have those kind of images in me. But the thing that I think was the most is that I had like a sense of trauma and being very fearful of what could happen to me and fearful of other people and my parents were quite fearful of strangers. And, I guess we have to say that we're lucky that they were able to guide my sister and I through these traumas.

[END OF DISC 1, TRACK 1.]

MS. BROWN: We are in Vija Celmins' studio, March 11, for the second session of our interview. And we left off last time when you had just moved to California to go to school at UCLA. Is that what you did first when you moved there?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, I went to graduate school at UCLA. And, I removed myself from my family, which I guess was not easy because I think we went through this whole section of talking about how dependent I was on them. And then, I may have to tell you again, I was feeling a little guilty about talking so long about the time I was like five years old [laughs], but I was thinking about it -

MS. BROWN: The beginnings of consciousness.

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: It's the beginnings of consciousness.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, the beginnings of consciousness. But I was thinking that when I went to LA, how prominent my former life was in my life, how I relived my whole life up to then. It was kind of an odd phenomena.

MS. BROWN: What do you mean?

MS. CELMINS: I think maybe because I was alone, really for the first time in my life.

MS. BROWN: You mean, you were thinking about it?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, going over everything, reliving the things in the past. And I think many artists feel this because I've heard it before from other artists. And it's certainly been true of me, even up to this day, that somehow the events of childhood are spread out, you know? Spread out across all your work, all throughout your life. What do you think about that?

I mean, that's not a very unique idea. Maybe not events, but sort of tensions and intentions and a certain kind of a heart that comes from your childhood that goes out throughout your work.

Well, I think of it that way, anyway. And I think at times, especially in LA when I started off doing all those toys and so forth, I mean, I was actually making toys. And even the whole idea of making things, that when you're little how you want to make things so much.

MS. BROWN: Was it a way to ground yourself, in a sense, being in a certain place?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. I think it's a way of building a kind of self. I mean, you're never really sure of what you're doing. But you kind of expand with the work. You build yourself with reaching a certain kind of form that you're happy with, and then having it outside yourself, and then facing another one over and over and over—it's like you're putting yourself out everywhere.

And some people are just so delighted to do it. I'm not one of those people that are so happy to let go of work. Not because I'm totally ungenerous, but maybe [laughs]. I don't know why. I tend to be very secretive. And maybe that's grounded in my childhood, too.

MS. BROWN: And what was it like to show your work to others?

MS. CELMINS: Okay, so I went to UCLA. And the good part -

MS. BROWN: What's the date now? Where are we in time?

MS. CELMINS: We're in 1962 in the fall. And I have taken the plane to LA. And then my father actually gave me

$1800 to buy this white Rambler, which I bought, because you cannot live without a car in LA. And I found an apartment. Somebody that was a Latvian person there—I'm Latvian, so Latvians all over sort of help each other out [interviewer laughs]. And somebody knew a Latvian, and they told me about an apartment. And I got this apartment, and I had my Rambler so I could drive to school.

And then school had no place to work. Most schools now, for graduate students, have these cubbyholes. But UCLA at that time had no place. So you had to work at home, or you had to have your own studio you found in the city.

MS. BROWN: So you just went in for class?

MS. CELMINS: And then you brought the work in, and the teachers came to your place instead of you being there. So we would have crits in the school. So I was totally jazzed up. And I think we talked about that before, how in a way, how ambitious I was.

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. CELMINS: I'm still sort of ambitious. But not as ambitious as some. [They laugh.] But fairly ambitious.

MS. BROWN: But you were sort of diving in to your new life—[inaudible].

MS. CELMINS: Oh, in every way. Maybe diving into my past, diving into what I could do and what I couldn't do, what I thought about painting, what I didn't think about painting, what I was grappling with—I mean, I was grappling with this feeling that I was getting lost and that I was too much into my head, painting about things that I had not really experienced—because I wanted to make that great painting that I felt that the New York abstract expressionists were doing.

It seems so silly now. A lot of students don't even know who de Kooning is anymore. But maybe I was too much in my intellect—so, you know, I went back to a simpler sort of looking, like trying to bypass my intellect with just looking, even though, of course, we know that you see what—

MS. BROWN: What you're thinking about.

MS. CELMINS:—what goes through the head, which is one of the shocking things. I guess the eyes have a certain intelligence themselves. What do you think?

MS. BROWN: You always filter through how you think about what you see or how you feel about what you see.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, but I tried to bypass all that. I tried to bypass my active little brain, which of course was very active, and is still quite active. But by trying to find something that was not of the brain with, of course, a nod to Duchamp, although I didn't know too much about Duchamp.

But going back to, not a stupid eye, but somehow like engaging a more intuitive part like my whole body, like a touch, very small nuances, but not inventing in an obvious way by composing. How I hated composing. Thinking of the picture plane as a kind of stage where you have to put characters in certain ways in foreground and background. Drop that.

Then, thinking also of making strokes expressive, how disgusting. I went through a lot of things we don't really have time to talk about. I have some things that I've written in my notebooks. But I can't—actually, it's tedious to read your notebooks, you know? [They laugh.] The old notebooks—you think, "Jesus, this is what I thought?"

MS. BROWN: Is that when you started to just paint what was in your studio, and what was right in front of you?

MS. CELMINS: I started to paint what was in my studio then. And then I started writing about what I thought about what I saw around, a little bit—in my notebooks and my dreams—I guess I was sort of beginning a life. Maybe how you do when you come out of your family.

I was always very belligerent with my family—they were a strong East European family, the yelling. We never discussed anything. It was like you had to know what to do. There was no kind of psychological thing like there is now with parents and their children. And I hid from them a lot. And I think I hid a lot in my work because I was always in my room drawing.

MS. BROWN: But then when you were in California and on your own, you really had to just make a life that was yours? [Inaudible.]

MS. CELMINS: Well, yes. And then not only that, but I had to see who was doing what, where.

MS. BROWN: So were you very conscious of other artists in LA at the time?

MS. CELMINS: Well, not at the beginning. But I was conscious of the guys who were in the magazines, *Art in America*, like every other kid that came from the Midwest.

MS. BROWN: But the artists in LA weren't necessarily in those magazines.

MS. CELMINS: There weren't too many at UCLA. UCLA, the only person that really became a friend of mine is Tony Berlant. I don't know why, but he did.

MS. BROWN: Was he a student there at the same time?

MS. CELMINS: He was a student exactly the same time. And when I moved down to Venice from Beverly Hills, where I had this apartment for one semester or so, I think I met him. And then there were other people there, but because there were no classes, really, I didn't get to know them for a while. But then I got to know them—I knew Bob Irwin, who happened to teach there one semester. And we became friendly. And we were always fighting about painting because he thought painting was dead.

MS. BROWN: [Inaudible.] But he was still making paintings. Or was he moving out of that then?

MS. CELMINS: He was making paintings, but he was making these weird abstract paintings that were extremely retinal. Maybe he had a little influence on me. I'm sure he did. I think the influence that he really had was that he was so darn devoted.

MS. BROWN: To his work?

MS. CELMINS: To his work. And the other influence I think he had—I've always had all these qualities myself—but that I saw then in others, because in Indiana I didn't see—I was haughty, arrogant in some ways. I thought I knew everything. And then meeting somebody like that, who was already showing at the Ferris Gallery and was pretty well known and so forth, and seeing how devoted he was, that was one thing.

And the other thing that I liked is that he was able to discuss every part of the work, which I have always been able to do myself. But I learned to do, and I learned to look at it, although we're not sure that what you discuss is really what's happening.

MS. BROWN: That's right. It's not always the same.

MS. CELMINS: No.

MS. BROWN: It's not always there.

MS. CELMINS: But I've honestly tried to discuss, when I have to discuss it, the physical part of the work. Not any kind of meanings or anything, but just how I went from one thing or another.

MS. BROWN: Factual parts, yes.

MS. CELMINS: But I'm able to discuss, I think, by now. And he was able to. We had big arguments because I was just starting out my painting life. And he was sort of leaving it.

MS. BROWN: And was he pushing—

MS. CELMINS: And I don't think he was the greatest painter, if I might say so. He's an interesting artist because he did so many things, and he's moved through all these light things and he has a great sensibility. But I don't know whether he was the greatest painter or not, because he was already moving into the shapes, round things that were sort of like sculpture.

MS. BROWN: So did that challenge you, those conversations, in terms of what you thought you should be doing?

MS. CELMINS: No, just made me stronger. I think it made me stronger. I was aware that I could hold my own with this guy. We became friends, of course. And then I became friends with a lot of people who had studios down in Venice. And I think I told you I was pretty friendly with Jim Terrell and with Doug Wheeler. I wonder why I gravitated—well, there weren't a lot of painters, you know? There were not a lot of painters.

MS. BROWN: Was Ed Ruscha there?

MS. CELMINS: In fact, before Diebenkorn came down—well, there were painters. There were guys like Chas Garabedian with a group of people that were—I always think of Chas as being very ethnic. When I look at him, I

see him walking out of the hills in Asia someplace because he's Armenian, because he looks so solid. And he's a wonderful man, a wonderful man.

MS. BROWN: What about Ed Ruscha? Was he?

MS. CELMINS: Well, and then Ed Ruscha much later, because he lived downtown and I lived at the beach. So I knew the guys at the beach.

MS. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CELMINS: Because we were having lunch together. We would meet for lunch. And then we'd go back to the studio.

MS. BR OWN: That must have been wonderful.

MS. CELMINS: And Ed Ruscha was in town. And I think Joe Goode was also in town. And then I think maybe more of an influence was going around and seeing the galleries and seeing how people kind of shaped their work. And I must have been influenced. I do remember a very early show of Ed Ruscha's that may have influenced me. And influences—you have so many influences because I live in that whole world of art. You have tiny influences from the past painting, to things you've just seen. You know, it's hard to really -

MS. BROWN: Did you look at photography very much?

MS. CELMINS: No, no, never looked at photography, never. Never, never, never. Never looked at photography as art. Still hardly ever do, even though I like Robert Frank or whatever. I like some photographers. But never looked at photography as that, no, no.

MS. BROWN: When you were doing the paintings of things in the studio, did you feel like that was a way forward for you, that there was an avenue you wanted to pursue, that you were starting to find your own voice with those paintings? Leaving the abstract work?

MS. CELMINS: I was not thinking of finding my own way. I was just following my instinct, getting up and moving through, moving into my world, making things. When I started using the images, I was quite horrified myself, very defensive. But people saw them. People came by and saw them, and they said, "You know, this is terrific."

Actually, when I had my graduate shows, whenever that was, people came by. This guy John Weber came by, and he was running the Dwan Gallery. And he took a little piece of sculpture that I had made, this little plate with the little sardine on it. I guess that was an homage to the Spanish painting because I loved the Prado. I had been to Europe the year before I went to UCLA, or that summer before, because I'd just graduated from art school.

And then I had some offers to do shows. And one of them was this David Stuart. And I had a show in 1966. I mean, just when I got out. And it was of that work -

MS. BROWN: A show in LA? That was your first show?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, LA. As soon as I got out, I had a show.

MS. BROWN: Wow.

MS. CELMINS: But, I was so upset. I didn't even go until it was almost over.

MS. BROWN: What were you upset about?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. It was difficult to have people looking at your work.

MS. BROWN: Difficult to have it public?

MS. CELMINS: And nobody knew who I was or anything. David Stuart was a pretty terrific guy, a very interesting guy, who had played jazz. And he had been a disc jockey and he collected African art. And I think his main thing was really surrealism.

And maybe I got that show because he was showing also Tony Berlant. And I had a show there. And what happened with it? He sold a few things. And then I took a few things back.

MS. BROWN: The description of those early works was like deadpan paintings.

MS. CELMINS: The work was like a couple of hundred dollars. Pardon?

MS. BROWN: The description I've read of those paintings is deadpan paintings. Was that a—trying to remove emotion from it?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. That was trying to remove what I felt were elements that were no longer of any use, like expressionist elements and elements of composition, of decisions about color. And of course, you always make a million decisions. And then I think I was pretty influenced by Morandi. It sure looks like it, doesn't it?

MS. BROWN: It does, except it -

MS. CELMINS: And that kind of centered—except Morandi was so much more interesting than I was. I had more of—maybe a little Pop art, of making objects—like Oldenburg was—oh! Before that, I was talking about Ed Ruscha. I saw this show of his. It was the goofiest show with these birds that were lying in bed. Have you ever seen that work of his?

MS. BROWN: No, I've never seen it.

MS. CELMINS: Very odd. They would be like a woodpecker and a sparrow lying in bed together. And they were painted sort of realistically. Of course, I've never done anything like this. And I never used images really of live things. But anyway, it was quite amusing. And then I saw another show where he had that *Annie*, the word "Annie"?

MS. BROWN: Yes, mm-hmm.

MS. CELMINS: And of course, I wouldn't ever print on my work, would I? No. And then what else did he have? He had this little Spam thing, a little jar of Spam. And I did a little jar, which I think the McKees [ph] have, of this little can. I can't remember the brand. It was not Coca-Cola—Shasta, little Shasta can, except it was sort of placed in more of a European, old-time space. It wasn't like commercial art—the Pop artists seem to have all come out of commercial art. They were mostly commercial artists that could design books and stuff.

I really came out of Europe. And I remember he had another one which I thought might have influenced me. He had a pencil that had snapped. Have you ever seen that painting of his?

MS. BROWN: I think I've seen that painting, yes.

MS. CELMINS: And then, of course, I made a couple of pencils myself around 1966. But I didn't know who he was. I didn't get to know him until later. And I've never really known him. I think we got a little closer when we were much, much more grown up.

And I realized—oh, I went out to visit his place in the desert once and stayed there all night. And Ed Moses was there and, I don't know, a couple of other people. And I realized kind of what a neat guy he was because he really liked nature a lot, which I do. He had all these books on bugs and birds and everything. And I thought, "Well."

So you realize that his art is kind of very separate, really, from him in a funny way. And you do—I mean, the art is separate. It's like something that is -

MS. BROWN: But your art is not so separate.

MS. CELMINS: No, my art is very separate also. My art is out there. When it's out there, it's certainly not me. But you have to realize that the artist is the instrument. I'm the instrument that the art has to come through. Otherwise, I mean -

MS. BROWN: It's not real.

MS. CELMINS:—that's how it is. It goes through you. And it has a lot of you in there. Everybody's art—either what you think or what you feel—it's like a fingerprint—everything about you. Even though sometimes it's very hard to see the clues, generally, if you've looked at tons of art—I think pretty much everybody can tell when it's my work or not by tiny little nuances, even though I have a lot of people who do work like mine now, especially oceans and stuff.

MS. BROWN: So when you were living out there, did you start then to do the trips to the desert and walking on the beach and so on?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. Well, I had my car. I went out there. First I didn't think there was much going on. Then I began to -

MS. BROWN: Did that start to be a real source and influence [inaudible] experience?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, well, the places around were a source, right, because I began to do things that were recognizable. And then, in this ridiculous way now, that I think of it now, is that I began to like use images that were in accordance with what I thought painting should be. I did it all over space accounting for all the space and accounting for it by little tiny marks, keeping the marks very clean, but sort of organizing and shifting the space very subtly so that it stayed where it was supposed to and didn't look like it was just cut out of a big piece.

All those kind of tedious nuances that my work has come about to be. [They laugh.]

MS. BROWN: But, you see that those are sort of traditional methods to make something extremely radical.

MS. CELMINS: Well, I don't know. Then my methods became less traditional after—when I dropped painting, why did I drop it? Would you tell me that? See, this is what happens when you have ideas. [Interviewer laughs.] You tend to do something that is punishing.

MS. BROWN: So why did you drop painting?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I dropped it because I thought it was like too messy, too expressive, too—

MS. BROWN: Too much material?

MS. CELMINS: Yes—maybe it was about control. I couldn't really control it properly or something. And the pencil seemed like, eye to pencil. Eye, hand, point.

MS. BROWN: Was it more precise? Were you [inaudible]?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. And then most of it is—I'm not a big shader, although I'm doing some mezzotints now, which require this irritating kind of shading. But when I was doing the oceans, I was pretty much doing a kind of skeletal drawing, where the—I thought it was somehow—well, it went through a time. I mean, you can think about it in many different ways. I don't know. You have to tell me what you think. I went through a time when I wanted to throw away a lot of stuff.

MS. BROWN: Why? What was the dissatisfaction about?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. I tend to have purges a lot where I stop. I reject things. It's a kind of a cleaning house every three or four years.

MS. BROWN: Is it a sort of a doubting of your -

MS. CELMINS: A kind of assessment of where you're going—and then I often make changes.

MS. BROWN: You change something you've already made?

MS. CELMINS: And otherwise, the changes are very, very subtle—pardon?

MS. BROWN: Do you mean you change something you've already made? You go back and rework—or you just -

MS. CELMINS: No, no, no. I tend to shift totally. Well, maybe not totally because it all seems to fit together. But anyway, I dropped painting, pretty soon, too. When was it, about 1969? Well, first I did these little—I'd been collecting these little clippings, a very kind of nostalgic, bizarre thing to do. Never thinking. Actually, I'm not that good at thinking.

MS. BROWN: You weren't that conscious of why you were collecting them?

MS. CELMINS: No, I wasn't conscious. I would tear them out of library books, and the library was ridiculous.

MS. BROWN: Just things that interested you?

MS. CELMINS: Things that mostly did with World War II. Where I liked the grays. Most of my work—even though I think somebody looking at it would say, "Well, this is a very thought-out"—most of my work has to have some kind of inspiration. And most of it, the inspiration comes at odd times. And when I get it, then it's like a little light bulb goes on, and I let myself fall for it. Maybe like falling in love or something. Then I chase that feeling.

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm.

MS. CELMINS: And I think that's what that collecting was about.

MS. BROWN: So it was images and -

MS. CELMINS: It's not so unusual. Look at somebody like Cornell, who collected things in a very nostalgic way, except, you see, I had decided that I wasn't going to collage. That was like an intellectual decision, that I wasn't going to collage because I thought that it was not fair or something.

I thought that if you put one image next to the other, you had a story. And I wasn't going to tell stories. That was one of the things I wasn't going to do. And then of course, I never signed my work. I've tried to make it very anonymous, which I'm still doing sometimes. Well, now I sign the prints and stuff. I gave up that kind of tedious thing that you do when you're young, where you're going to say I'm going to do this and this and nothing else, kind of idealistic.

But I have always liked the idea that the work somehow—or not always. But around that time in the '60s, I started to get the idea that the work could just appear and that I would be like a ghost or something. And that I wouldn't be part of the work, that I would not have my giant signature on it—"Picasso" or something—and that also the work would be manipulated in such a tiny way that you could almost not tell that it was made or how it was made.

So even though it was quite clear that this was a pencil, people often—that's my dog. [A dog is barking.]

MS. CELMINS: Hey, what do you see? Hey, Dido!

[END OF DISC 2, TRACK 1.]

MS. BROWN: Okay, I think we're going again now.

MS. CELMINS: Did it go off?

MS. BROWN: I just paused it for a minute.

MS. CELMINS: Oh, for the dog.

MS. BROWN: Were you trying to sort of get the artist out of it?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know.

MS. BROWN: Just to remove the artist out of it?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. You could say there was some kind of a psychological thing there. I don't like to really take apart work psychologically, although you could certainly do it with my work, especially the early work. A lot of maybe s-e-x in there [laughs] like young people's work often has. [Interviewer laughs.] And older people's work. I had this thing where I thought that somehow made the work more magical or something.

MS. BROWN: But it sort of -

MS. CELMINS: I'm still doing it. I often think I'm going to stop doing it. But I have periods where I—use an image. Usually, at that time I started like kind of re-describing—I got this word from Wittgenstein, from reading that biography by Moss. He's really a bizarre, obsessive, interesting guy. And it was talking about re-describing something. And that's how I like to think of it, like re-describing an image and putting it into another world.

MS. BROWN: Which is what you're doing with the clippings?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, which I was doing—which I'm still doing. I mean, another world, meaning not only just the art world, but another world where the work—now, this is sort of mussing about it, like thinking that the physicality of the work is so realized that it becomes a world in itself without you having to reference outside. You know what I mean? Like some people are kind of realist painters, but it's always referenced to the memory of something outside?

MS. BROWN: It's a storytelling.

MS. CELMINS: Where I've tried to maybe -

MS. BROWN: It's pretty complete in itself. You don't have to—it's not a storytelling.

MS. CELMINS: But still another world, though. Kind of a world of making. I mean, that is how you get there. So it's not a bright—it's like I am post-all the great art. We are all like that. Who can do that again? I mean, who can do Titian or something? Or who could be a Cézanne? I often thought, well, if my life had been different and I had been in one place—of course, if that had been Latvia, who knows what would have happened. [Laughs.]

In one place, and I had had no TV and no telephone, and I had just had my hands and my brain and material maybe I would have had a more gentle unfolding of my art that really made sense and had some real—but my art has a lot of breaks in it. It has a lot of breaks, and it has—I do sculpture for a while. I do these really hard-to-do prints. I don't know why I do those. I did a lot of things with just a pencil, then I painted. I did some films when I was in school.

And the work is not about such great ideas about art. The work is like something that I feel is somehow left over to do. See, somebody who was great is Guston, who could still find something in himself. I somehow feel like I do a very little amount. I do a very little amount that would be called maybe art.

MS. BROWN: But you go very deep into it. You go very deep into it, though.

MS. CELMINS: Well, I go deep into it, but it's because that's what I do. People that do art their whole lives.

MS. BROWN: Would you say it has a lot to do with just looking?

MS. CELMINS: Well, certainly it's not for a blind person. Yes. It's a lot about—well, it does encourage you to look, yes.

MS. BROWN: About your looking, though?

MS. CELMINS: And it's about my looking—you know that book that Phaidon did of my work. And I have this little story in there—"Funes the Memorious," a Borges story about a guy who remembered everything he looked at. And his head was like full, and he looked at it so thoroughly that it took so much time to see it thoroughly. I was kind of inspired by that story, especially when I was doing that stone piece, where I was trying to look so thoroughly and sort of obliterate myself totally. There was nothing of me in there except the ability to see. I guess I fell into that part of it.

MS. BROWN: When you're going from drawings to printmaking, was that an adjustment to have less of your direct hand?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, it's a horrifying thing.

MS. BROWN: Your touch of -

MS. CELMINS: I cannot stand printmaking. It is so difficult.

MS. BROWN: The steps that sort of remove your hand from the paper in a way?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I can't even find the words for it. The thing about it is it's extremely physical. And art itself is extremely physical. You can't really tell somebody what a Vermeer looks like. You have to have it in your physical presence, actually.

So it's extremely physical, printmaking, and it's backwards, you have to do everything backwards. But you get to gouge. It's like something which appeals to me. I like that part. Scrape and gouge and make lines with needles. And then, of course, somebody else takes over and does the printing. I don't do any printingI know how they do it, but I just—I could not do that.

MS. BROWN: But you determined the gradations of -

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: You determined the gradations of line and everything?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I determined everything because I make my own prints.

MS. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CELMINS: I went into printmaking only because people asked me to. At mostly Gemini—you have to thank them. And they were some wonderful printers who did a terrific job. Basically what I did at Gemini in the '80s is that I just tried out different techniques, and I had tons of clippings. And some of them were like drawings that were engineers' drawings. And some of them were photographs. And there were tons of stuff. And I just tried out different techniques and stuck them together because I was at that time thinking that I couldn't stand that single surface anymore, and I couldn't compose, but I could put two things together that really I said I would never do. It's sort of a collage, but not a collage.

So that's what happened in the printmaking. It was hard. I like to do things that take a long time and are sort of

hard because then I lose more of myself. And then we see what comes out.

MS. BROWN: How do you deal with the sort of emotion and passion and feeling and with the kind of stillness that art has?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I think what I do is I tend to concentrate an image and have a sort of pressure on it. When they're good, they have more pressure. When they're less good, they're more like nothing, kind of. And I think that has a quality of emotion in it.

MS. BROWN: It does, yes.

MS. CELMINS: And also maybe the fact that I over-finish everything in this horrible way that I detest, but can't seem to change. And make everything so solid that I sometimes can't bear to look at it because it's so finished and so solid and so compressed and so what-it-is and so away from anything.

MS. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MS. CELMINS: And often the work is quite impenetrable, too—closed off. These are qualities that come out that must be things inside me that I really can't stand to psychoanalyze and figure out, because it's not my job to do that. But I have noticed that. And I've noticed that often I don't like it.

Now I've been trying some time to leave a corner undone, like Tony Berlant, who collected these blankets that—they would leave a little place where you could enter the blanket.

MS. BROWN: It wasn't finished?

MS. CELMINS: Right.

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm.

MS. CELMINS: So you could go in and bounce around and then run back out. Of course, the thing that's so wonderful about painting is that you can look at it for a second and turn your back. I like that part. That's what I don't like so much about the guys that do the light pieces and the things that you have to -

MS. BROWN: You have to participate.

MS. CELMINS: - spend all this time. [Interviewer laughs.] And after a time, you say, "I get it. You know, can I leave now?" But no, you can't leave now. You have to stay a little longer. [Interviewer laughs.] I'm just teasing, you know. But with a -

MS. BROWN: Can't we have lunch now?

MS. CELMINS: Can't we have lunch now? [Interviewer laughs.] But with a work of art, especially, I like that quality that, when you look at a work of art, you somehow get an image immediately. And then you have time later, if you have the inclination, which I think maybe only 10 percent of the world's population has to look at it later, closer, or to think about it. Different things reveal themselves, depending on what's in your own head.

MS. BROWN: But in your work, this quality of something being over-finished that you were describing, I mean, that creates a lot of layers. It's really wonderful to -

MS. CELMINS: I know, but I can't stand it really, that thing. Maybe I can—maybe I still have some time to unravel. Maybe it will unravel. I'm finding it very difficult to close up the work so much now.

MS. BROWN: Tell me more about that. What are you doing now? What are you thinking of doing now?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I'm doing these objects.

MS. BROWN: Drawings of objects or sculptures of objects?

MS. CELMINS: Sculptures of objects and also some paintings of objects.

MS. BROWN: You're doing paintings now?

MS. CELMINS: I can't tell you what I'm doing. That's not a thing we can really discuss.

MS. BROWN: Okay. Because it isn't done yet?

MS. CELMINS: Someplace I read about Brancusi. He said, "Art should be like a well-planned crime." [Interviewer

laughs.] And I believe that.

MS. BROWN: What do you mean?

MS. CELMINS: Like we're meaning—you don't go around saying, "I'm going to, you know, rob the bank."

MS. BROWN: Oh, talking about it, yes.

MS. CELMINS: "And I'm going to use the money for this." [Interviewer laughs.] It should just happen. And then the artist has disappeared. That's the kind of feeling I like.

MS. BROWN: I'm going to stop now.

MS. CELMINS: Oh. That's good.

[END OF DISC 2, TRACK 2.]

MS. BROWN: Thursday, October 15th. We're in Vija Celmins' studio in New York, and we're going to cover some area that we talked about before, and I'm going just to pick up where we were about when you left Europe and came to the United States. Your family was taken in through their church in Indiana. Is that right? And you worked in the United States?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, it was Church World Service brought over refugees. You got to realize that this is only what I remember from everybody talking. The Church World Service—I don't really know what they did except somebody told me that they are people who find sponsors for refugees, and they're still doing it. For refugees from Vietnam and maybe from Bosnia now, or from Afghanistan, now—

MS. BROWN: They find families to sponsor them, the refugees?

MS. CELMINS: They find somebody to sponsor you, and who was sponsoring people? Maybe if you knew anybody in the United States, you could get them to sponsor you, maybe. If you had a family member or somebody, that's how a lot of people come over. Or they did—you know, this was so long ago. It was 1948.

MS. BROWN: So you would have been about how old?

MS. CELMINS: I was nine years old, and I was going to Latvian refugee school, and I was living a happy life. I mean, everything was in ruins—that wasn't really a happy life, I guess. But I was very much on my own always, from the time I was little because my father was trying to—you know, after the war, the United Nations Relief Fund came in and tried to organize everything, and there were lots of refugees.

They set up buildings where they lived and so forth, and they set up the people who—whatever groups found themselves together—made schools for the kids, all that kind of thing, and then we played everywhere. Couldn't speak any German, of course; could only speak Latvian. But I have kind of fond memories of that time, maybe because that's what you do when you get older; you have fond memories of when you were a little kid. [Laughs.]

I was an extremely play-oriented child. I wanted to play with other children all the time. I would make fantasies, and we would imagine we were explorers, and we tried to do—I was not a sheltered child. But I found a sort of a shelter myself as soon as I started reading—I may have told you this. Because when I started reading, I just fell into the books, maybe because the world was so—in my imagination then, the world unfolded.

They were all Latvian books for children really that people had made out of really bad paper then. And I think my father and mother brought a couple of books with them too, but I don't think they were children's books, because I was only like five years old when we left Latvia.

MS. BROWN: Were you from a family of readers? Or was it—

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: Was your whole family involved with reading and education and—

MS. CELMINS: No, they were not.

MS. BROWN: No.

MS. CELMINS: But I think my sister and I read, but I don't really know. My sister was so much older than me—eight years older?—that she had a whole other life that I still don't know much about, because nobody ever talked much in my family about the past or about the future. They just always sort of were working and trying to

survive in the present.

And I don't remember seeing my sister much. She was a teenager. I think she met up with school kids her age, and they just disappeared. And I stayed closer to my mother.

MS. BROWN: And was it frightening to think of moving to a—it must have been—move to a new country?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I had no idea what was happening. I had no idea. I just knew that it was total chaos and much danger, and I was always yanked around by my hand, and my mother was always crying, and we were always having to run into shelters, and I was crying. There was a lot of crying. But I didn't really understand what was happening. There was a lot of crying always, and then I remember the teachers—

MS. BROWN: And what was the crying about, do you think?

MS. CELMINS: We have a lot of sadistic teachers in Latvian school who were always picking on me because I was not your good child. I seemed to be much better now. [They laugh.] I was always trying to cut school and go out into nature. I was born with a lot of—see, I like nature a lot. I used—

MS. BROWN: So even from childhood?

MS. CELMINS:—to go in cemeteries, which was the only nature really around because we were always in cities.

MS. BROWN: So were you an explorer then at a young age?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, I was an explorer, and I made tents out in the grass and the weeds and the kind of woods, and I did the same thing in Indiana when I got here. I was an extreme kind of—I made stories up, and then sometimes I would tell the stories in the school. I was like a storyteller. Or even while I was really little—the stories that were in my imagination. See, I never really saw hardly any painting. Did I tell you the story about how I tried to get my mother to draw for me?

MS. BROWN: No, uh-uh [negative].

MS. CELMINS: I tried to get her to draw for me, because I thought it would be such magic—and my mother had no skills in drawing whatsoever.

Is that still going?

MS. BROWN: It's going perfectly.

MS. CELMINS: It is?

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MS. CELMINS: And I remember—I must have told you this, because I remember being sort of upset that I told you, and now I'm telling you again [interviewer laughs.] I used to try to get her to draw, because I thought there was something kind of magical about it. And of course, in Latvian school, even in the first grade, they'd give you assignments to draw. They don't let you draw like here: Here's a crayon, do something on the paper. They gave you assignments. I tell you, that education system in old Europe was really sadistic.

MS. BROWN: Rigid.

MS. CELMINS: Rigid, hard—you had to write your name. You know, you had to learn how to do script writing. You couldn't print. I didn't get to printing until I was in my 20s in art school and everybody was printing. And—

MS. BROWN: But it, what—

MS. CELMINS:—and we had these lines, and then I would always get a little smudges of ink, and it was just—

MS. BROWN: What was it like for you to go from this situation of chaos to one of so much peace and quiet? To go to Indiana?

MS. CELMINS: Okay, so then when we came through tons of bureaucracy and standing in millions of lines all the time for food and for answers to questions and for bureaucracies of one kind and another and to get all your papers and every—I remember many, many days like that where I had to stand, couldn't go to the bathroom, would pee in my pants, for instance, and holding onto my mother and long lines, waiting for one thing or another. With everything—there were no men anywhere. And then we never saw hardly ever Germans, and there were no German men; in fact—[phone rings]—let me see, I've got—[off mic]—turn that off or something.

MS. BROWN: Okay.

[Side conversation.]

MS. CELMINS: Where was I?

MS. BROWN: You were talking about standing in the lines and the endless process of being processed, I guess.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, being processed all the time, you see, because the Americans were—of course, we were in American zone because that's what everybody tried to get into, to get away from the war. They all tried to get over as far west as they could. Anyway, so, they're the ones who processed everybody.

The German government was gone, and the men were mostly in camps, and the women and the children were huddling and trying to find food—

MS. BROWN: And where was this again? Where were you by this time?

MS. CELMINS: Well, we were in Berlin first, which is really terrible, and then we were in a kind of a camp in—what's that town? In East Germany—Leipzig?

MS. BROWN: Leipzig?

MS. CELMINS: It's Leipzig. And then we ended up in Esslingen, a small town that's sort of south, more toward Bavaria. At any rate, I don't want to go through all that again because it's too much to go through.

MS. BROWN: No, no, but—

MS. CELMINS: It would take hours, and I'm through with section of my life. One of the interesting things about it is that nobody ever talked about anything. I mean, nothing, in my family, and the women would sit around, and I'd be playing—a little girl with whatever kids were there, and they'd all be telling each other horror stories about who got shot, who got raped, what happened; how they had to leave everything; how horrible everything was; who got killed. And they'd all be crying continually.

And I think this happens all over the world, when I think of it now. Can you imagine in Afghanistan and—anyway, so that was my memory of the grown-ups. So I made this world with the other children. We played we were soldiers. [Laughs.] We played. When I got over here, and I learned English, I went through the whole phase of liking American Indians. Then I would make teepees.

MS. BROWN: Did it seem strange—

MS. CELMINS: I would cut school. I planted myself— I liked my little friends; I was not a person who liked to hang around grown-ups. I'd had no idea what they were doing; they were always yelling or crying or making, giving me whippings or—there was always fear—

MS. BROWN: Giving you what?

MS. CELMINS: I'd get all these whippings for not doing things— and I would cut school by myself, with my friends and all. We would do amazing things.

MS. BROWN: And did you do that all the way through—middle school and high school?

MS. CELMINS: I did all the way from the time I was in the first grade. I did stuff like that.

MS. BROWN: All the way through high school? [Laughs.]

MS. CELMINS: And then when I got to United States, and we got into America, brought over by Marine Tiger, which is a Marine ship. When I remember that, like it would make a great movie: this empty, stripped ship with bunks in it for soldiers, and they were full of these people, each in their bunk—all vomiting—came over early in the spring.

The ocean was horrendous, storm after storm; all sick. And the kids were actually probably the best, but I had incredible earaches. My father got the flu, and we had heard—I don't think Ellis Island was anymore around—but we had heard that they wouldn't let us in if we were sick. And my mother was scared that they wouldn't let us in; she was crying and—

MS. BROWN: How much of this experience do you think has come and informed your work and come into your—

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I don't know how it informs my work—

MS. BROWN: Or informed your life—

MS. CELMINS: I think it probably made me tougher or something as a human, but I had so many times when I was so hurt because we didn't have any toys or anything, and I would see other kids have toys, and I wanted them so much. And I didn't have any, and I had to console myself.

So then I was telling you earlier how it was that was so great—that after I learned how to read—of course, they whip you into reading—you have to read when you're seven. You have to read—I have books here, I'll show you—it's like here, eighth-graders couldn't read them. They're like books for eighth-graders some of them. It took me forever because they were so terrible—the teaching methods. But I guess they work—

MS. BROWN: But then—

MS. CELMINS: But once I opened these books, I fell into books. I read. It was like I had these constant friends with me.

MS. BROWN: And has that been true ever since?

MS. CELMINS: And actually, as you can tell by my millions of books, I have lived part of my life through books. Usually great literature, everybody you could get a hold of

MS. BROWN: Now what do you like to read? What—what are—

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I don't know—

MS. BROWN: No, I want to know.

MS. CELMINS:—what I like to read. Oh, and then I also started reading mysteries. When I got married, my husband and I got into—in California—got into Raymond Chandler and all the detective stories—read all of those things.

MS. BROWN: Which all took place there, of course.

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I've read tons of different kind of book. And then I had a whole time when I read poetry. Actually, when I was at UCLA, I read poetry. I read all the Beat poets—Bob Creeley and Michael McClure and Gregory Corso—all those people. And then I went through a section where I wanted to travel. But nobody traveled with me, so I read all these travel books. I loved those books, like Lord Byron travelling through the Hindu Kush. And so I've been everywhere in the world in books.

MS. BROWN: Through your books, yes.

MS. CELMINS: The British have some amazing travel people who go everywhere.

MS. BROWN: Have you read about Richard Francis Burton?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: Have you read about Richard Francis Burton, the great explorer?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, yes. And so I loved all those books. I have an eclectic sort of thing. I often don't read bestsellers, although I've liked Philip Roth a lot because he's just so full of beans, and it's like taking a sleigh ride to read his books. Sometimes they're just—I say, oh, please, not anymore; I can't take this. But his imagination is so rich and so hilarious often that I've often just couldn't help it. I've just enjoyed them no end.

MS. BROWN: And was that hard to shift into English?

MS. CELMINS: I think a lot of things—huh?

MS. BROWN: Was it hard to shift into a different language?

MS. CELMINS: Well, it was very—so we got here and then, I think, the Church World Service brings you over and then they look for places that are willing to take a family. And in Indiana there was this Lutheran church, and we were Lutheran. I'm telling you, we were not in any way seriously Lutheran. We were not a religious family in anyway. But, the Lutheran church took us.

We were the only family in Indianapolis in 1948. Couldn't speak a word of English. They found my father a job as a carpenter. My mother, I think, they placed with a family to take care of their children. They put me in school. I couldn't speak a word of English, so I drew pictures.

Oh, I started to tell you, I got my mother to draw a pansy. I still remember that. She'd take two little leaves like Mickey Mouse, and then one little ear in bottom, like a pansy, and then two little dots and then little things, little eyebrows around the dots. I think now it's amazing I remember that. That was in Esslingen, I must have been about seven, maybe eight. It's like why would I remember that? Maybe because we didn't do that many things together, although I would hang out with her in the kitchen and eat little things whenever—because we got these rations from the Americans. That was our only food.

MS. BROWN: Was drawing pictures something that began to mean something—[inaudible]—for you?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I think it was like some connection with something. Like some kind of a power—like you could have the things that you could draw. Or that it opened up another world.

MS. BROWN: It was your own, something else that was your own.

MS. CELMINS: That was—well, yes. But it's a way of really connecting. I mean, of course, in the long run I think making art is like—you do have to connect with yourself, because you're the one you have to please, as every artist knows. I mean, sure, everybody says the same thing. You have to please yourself first. And then it depends—because you're leaving a trace of yourself and however fucked up that is, and however uptight that is. And then you throw it out there. And then it either flies or it doesn't.

MS. BROWN: And you were saying before I think, when we talked, that—

MS. CELMINS: Course I had no idea like that, but I like the idea that could hold this pencil, and that you could make a dog, then you'd have a dog. You could make a person,—there was some kind of a magic to it. Like another world opened beside the ABCs.

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And besides reading.

MS. CELMINS: And then I always liked looking at the pictures in the books. And then I'd get these little pencils—there was incredible inflation in Germany. And coloring book and pencils would cost like $300.

MS. BROWN: Oh my—

MS. CELMINS: Because of incredible inflation.

MS. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CELMINS: Even more after the war. It was crazy. And whenever you'd get a hold of something like that, I would lovingly redraw everything and color it. Redraw being maybe a key thing here.

MS. BROWN: Yes.

MS. CELMINS: Sort of like possessing that world by—

MS. BROWN: Making it yourself.

MS. CELMINS: By making it yourself.

MS. BROWN: And did you have that in school? I mean, when you in middle school and high school in Indianapolis, did you start taking classes?

MS. CELMINS: Well, no. So in Indianapolis I sat there, I couldn't speak English, so I sat there and then I drew things from my head. And then I tried to—you know, and then I went to the library and I got books, I got ABC books even though I was nine years old already. I was very embarrassed.

I was embarrassed! Then I had these little kids, they would point. They would try to teach me how to talk, as if I was mute. They would point things and then kids pick up language.

I picked up a language, although, I think in a year I could talk. My mother and father took 10 years to really learn how to speak in real sentences without a really broken accent. Especially my mother took a long, long time. But I learned quite quickly. And I think my sister did too. She was already 17, but—

MS. BROWN: And so you stayed in Indianapolis through college. You were right there.

MS. CELMINS: We stayed in Indianapolis because my father then was a carpenter. Then he had a heart attack. Then he built the house himself, like he had in Latvia. He was extremely hard worker. My whole family worked like maniacs. And we all had a lot of energy. Then we had other Latvians that came, and it was a community

after a while.

I just fell into being the one in school who drew everything. Never occurred to me whether I wanted to or not. I was the one who did it.

MS. BROWN: And you drew things that were representational?

MS. CELMINS: Oh yes. I was 9, 10, 11. Oh, and then in high school I had a pretty good teacher. A guy named Doctor Schnellenberger [ph]. This white haired, nice man, who really cared about—he would open up all these books and, say, Cézanne and Gauguin. And he showed us all these books, and then we tried to paint in those styles, you know how you do when you're in school?

MS. BROWN: So you started to see art—in high school you did that?

MS. CELMINS: Of course. And then you try to do the abstract art. And then of course they have these prizes and shows. It seems so tedious to me now. And then I always got all these prizes. I sort of hid in the art and the books maybe is what I did.

MS. BROWN: And is that what led you—

MS. CELMINS: And then the other thing I did was I was an athlete. I ran. I was a high-school champion in running the 50 yard dash. And I also did high jumping.

MS. BROWN: Oh, gosh. So is that what led you, that being the one that drew, is that what led you then to go to art school?

MS. CELMINS: Well, no. I was the one that drew. So I drew the high school paper that came to me, I drew for the paper. I was the one that did all that stuff. There must have been others.

MS. BROWN: But that's why—did you know then that you wanted to go to art school?

MS. CELMINS: But I didn't know any other artists, really. But in high school, then we had these regional shows where you have your watercolors. There's still some back in Indiana I guess. What happened was I just moved into that world and I seized it. And then I went to art school because I got these scholarships to art school.

MS. BROWN: At the Herron School?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. From high school.

MS. BROWN: So then you were really—

MS. CELMINS: And then I went into a world where everybody was drawing and painting continually.

MS. BROWN: Did you love that?

MS. CELMINS: I think it was like a home. And I had a boyfriend that I'd already met in high school, we were really close. And he was very talented.

And we started out having to do, like you do when you're in the first year in art school—it was a conservative, ridiculous school actually. Although, I don't know whether it matters what it was. But it was not your school with Baldessari and Mike Kelley and, you know—

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It wasn't like CalArts.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. [Laughs.]

MS. BROWN: So you learned a lot of technique and—

MS. CELMINS: It was like with these old men who had been doing portraits for the state.

MS. BROWN: So you must have learned a lot of technique then.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. I guess I learned a lot of techniques. Or I don't know whether technique is the right word. You would have a life drawing, and drawing these tired still lives and—

MS. BROWN: But did that give you some skills that you've used since? I mean, that was helpful to know about materials and was that—

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I don't know. Skill, schmill. I don't really have a technique. In fact, I have no technique at all. I did try a lot of techniques. Then, of course, when I was at art school, we all looked at art magazines continually and tried to paint like de Kooning—I wish I hadn't gone to California maybe and come to New York, maybe I would have been a different kind of painter.

Those are the people that at that time, in 1958, I liked the Abstract Expressionists. Not only me, but my boyfriend Terry [ph] and maybe two or three other talented kids who happened to be in that school in our class.

MS. BROWN: That's what you were really drawn to?

MS. CELMINS: That's what we were aspiring to. And of course I went through millions of people, though. I'd see something and I would try to paint like that. And I did these sort of semi-abstract things. I have them all on the computer, terrible looking art really.

MS. BROWN: Were you primarily painting then?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: You were primarily painting then?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, yes. I was painting all the time, that's what we did. We painted. The drawing we only did in life class.

MS. BROWN: And then you went from there to the Yale summer school—

MS. CELMINS: And then—pardon?

MS. BROWN: You went to Yale after that.

MS. CELMINS: I got a scholarship to Yale summer school, that's all. I think they had them from all over the country and it was in Connecticut.

MS. BROWN: New Haven. And that must have been a whole other realm of exposure.

MS. CELMINS: Well, yes, because everybody was better there, number one. And number two, I met some real artists. Artists who made a living from their art. And artists who had a lot of pizazz. Actually Jack Tworkov I think was the head of the program then.

MS. BROWN: Oh he was teaching then? Okay.

MS. CELMINS: And I met, I don't know, *Jon* Schueler—

MS. BROWN: You know, Yale University Press has just published book of Tworkov's writings.

MS. CELMINS: Oh yes, I heard.

MS. BROWN: It's really a beautiful book. It's a beautiful book.

MS. CELMINS: I didn't realize that they were going to read from his book, and I missed it because I had something else that day. And I realized then later that I had missed this nice thing where people read from his book. I think I got the announcement but I'm now living this double life where I am out in the country and here and back and forth—I just, I thought it was just some announcement, I threw it away.

I actually ran into somebody that said—

MS. BROWN: It must have been special.

MS. CELMINS: Yes.

MS. BROWN: Was he one of your teachers at Yale?

MS. CELMINS: I don't think he was one of my teachers, but he brought a lot of people to come and criticize. And I had a sort of a weird thing there—it was like too much for me.

MS. BROWN: It was very intense?

MS. CELMINS: It was very intense. And I'm not that good under pressure. I felt a sort of a pressure to really do some fantastic paintings.

MS. BROWN: Was it competitive or was it just pressure to work?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I think it's always competitive when you're in school. You always look at somebody's work and say, "Damn. He's better than I am." Or, "Why can't I paint like this?" I think it was sort of competitive in a kind of a way like that.

And it was also just wonderful because I met all these people that—I was going to look up this guy Fred Gutsheit [ph] who took some pictures of me at that time that Chuck Close has, and he's here living on the Bowery. And Brice Marden had his baby there and his wife Mimi came, Joan Baez's sister. And David Novros was there, and Chuck Close was there. I think Chuck Close, he doesn't remember but I think we kind of had a little tiny bit of hanky-panky there. [Interviewer laughs.]

And then I had a kind of a little affair with somebody else, a teacher, which I guess I'm not going to tell you all that. And it's the first time I had peyote in my life. That was one of the highlights of Yale summer school. [Interviewer laughs.] It was a wonderful experience. It was sort of like opening up a book. I just had incredible visions. I had never had anything like that, even though I'd probably had quite a few glasses of wine by that time in my life. I don't think I was ever real drunk either. But I still remember that night, going home through these woods in Norfolk, but it's in Connecticut. Not in—there's another Norfolk in—

MS. BROWN: Virginia.

MS. CELMINS: Huh?

MS. BROWN: In Virginia.

MS. CELMINS: In Virginia, yes. So I had a great time. I think I saw then that this was not some private thing, but that this was—that this was, like, you know, these—this was like a real thing you could do in life, you know?

MS. BROWN: Did you feel at that time that you had found your own voice yet?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I already—I just slipped into doing this. I've always made stuff. I know a lot of people make a decision, and a lot of people actually get interested in—I don't know, this was like part of my world already. But I guess I had never been so kind of inspired and saw the fact that it might also have to do with showing and having some kind of a real life in art. I just got the bare inklings of it.

And then when I went back I really tried to make some great paintings, which I could not make. Believe me. And at my last year at John Herron—I got this scholarship to go to various places. Actually, I got one to go to Yale, but it wasn't a lot of money.

We knew nothing. My parents knew nothing about art, zero. But they wanted me to be a teacher, get married, have a couple of children, marry a Latvian to keep—I guess you think of a Jewish mom saying you got to marry a Jewish girl. And then I got to marry a guy that was—and I did have a couple of Latvian boyfriends that did not work out.

Anyway, I would say a big part of my brain was in art and always thinking about it, always remembering strokes and doing them and—always, always doing it, really. On my time off I would be in my room painting with the door locked. And I would scream if anybody came in there. I guess in some ways I was really pretty bizarre.

And my parents pretty much left me alone. I just had to clean up things. And then I had these jobs in the summer. But I was not a person who understood anything about business or being a secretary—none of those things that women were supposed to be came into my radar.

MS. BROWN: Were there any models for you for—as other woman artists?

MS. CELMINS: Well, then of course, when I got to UCLA—I mean, there was another whole thing.

MS. BROWN: So you got a scholarship to UCLA?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: You got a scholarship to UCLA?

MS. CELMINS: I got a scholarship to UCLA, but I had to take academic things. So I took philosophy, I took English, I took German like an idiot instead of Spanish, because nobody told me. I thought that I might remember German because I had learned some German—but it was very difficult.

The only thing I liked is—I think I told you all this—reading Goethe, which was wonderful to read. To read in

German, to be able to—in another language—understand the meaning in that language it's—I had Latvian which is totally un-German and totally un-English. English is sort of like German. Anyway—

MS. BROWN: But did you—

MS. CELMINS: It was difficult. And then I painted all the time and you had to get a studio at UCLA. I think I told you this.

MS. BROWN: Yes, you did. Uh-huh. But did you have any role models—other women artists that you could look to ? That you could make a viable life—

MS. CELMINS: Well, then, of course, looking in the magazines, not in front of me, no.

MS. BROWN: Nothing that was—

MS. CELMINS: But looking in the magazines, I remember seeing—who did I see? Who was this painter who really disappointed me later? Sonia Gechtoff. Then there was another one that was not de Kooning's wife—

MS. BROWN: Lee Krasner?

MS. CELMINS: Eleanor [ph]. But she was really not very good artist, but she was a wonderful person. I met her later.

MS. BROWN: Lee Krasner?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, maybe it was Lee Krasner. I somehow didn't hear enough about Lee Krasner, because she was probably taking care—

MS. BROWN: Pollock, yes.

MS. CELMINS:—her boy there. And then she got a little bit more attention later. No, there was another one—

MS. BROWN: Grace Hartigan?

MS. CELMINS: Grace Hartigan—that I looked at. And then, of course, when I got out to California, then I think Georgia O'Keeffe was coming into everybody's radar. And didn't I tell you I went to visit her at her house?

MS. BROWN: No, no, you didn't.

MS. CELMINS: I'm not the kind of person that is a groupie or worships other people or their accomplishment. I tend to like writers. I fall for writers. I'm a great fan of, for instance, Coetzee, John Coetzee. I just love his work, and —

MS. BROWN: I do too.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, he's just a wonderful writer. I met him, too. Well, at any rate—I thought, "oh, Georgia O'Keeffe. And she's living out in this beautiful place." So I drove, actually, with my husband, Pete [ph].

MS. BROWN: Now, when did you marry?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, I got married after I got out of school. But I think I met him maybe when I was in school. He was a writer.

MS. BROWN: You met in school in Indianapolis or in UCLA?

MS. CELMINS: No, no, no, no, no. That boyfriend I had for a long time and we broke apart. That was really heartbreaking, because he went to another college and I went to UCLA and we just were apart.

MS. BROWN: So your husband, you met in California.

MS. CELMINS: I met him some party in L.A. Actually, I had just seen *Jules and Jim*, Truffaut's film. And he looked like the dark one—[interviewer laughs]—even though I liked the light one better, Oskar Werner, whatever his name was, the blond—do you remember that film?

MS. BROWN: I do, but I don't remember the other—

MS. CELMINS: It was kind of a neat film. It had these two guys and one woman. Who was it?

MS. BROWN: Jeanne Moreau.

MS. CELMINS: Jeanne Moreau. And they were looking like they were having a great time. And I met this guy who reminded me of the older guy. I don't know, we got together—

MS. BROWN: And he was a writer?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, in a way, yes. He was getting his Ph.D. in comparative literature.

Anyway, so I went to visit Georgia O'Keeffe and she wasn't home and her sister was home in Abiquiu. And I knocked on the door and I said, "I'm an artist." This is so crazy, isn't it? And she took me through the house. I was shameless really. Somebody knock on my door, I would not do that now. [Interviewer laughs.]

But I mean, I drove from Los Angeles with Pete [ph]. And I drove up there. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I was preoccupied with—

MS. BROWN: Well, it was an example of a life of—yes—

MS. CELMINS: Yes, it was an example of a life. And then I saw a lot of things in her house, which were really inspiring, because it was so elegant.

MS. BROWN: Simple. Stark.

MS. CELMINS: But very elegant. I remember—a skeleton of a rattlesnake that was built into a couch, like an end table. And it had a piece of glass on it and inside was a rattlesnake curled up. And I thought that was, as you would say, "cool." About 20 years ago, you would say "cool"—[laughs]—or 15 years ago. Nobody says "cool" anymore, do they?

MS. BROWN: Oh, sure they do.

MS. CELMINS: So I went through the house. I saw her chows in the backyard.

MS. BROWN: Her what?

MS. CELMINS: Chows, you know?

MS. BROWN: Oh, her dog, yes.

MS. CELMINS: She had these chows—her dogs. I was always a great dog lover and that was my other solace in life, to have dogs around. I loved animals. I don't know, I must have been born like that. I've always loved animals and plants and the wind and the sky and flying and stuff like that.

MS. BROWN: So being in L.A., of course, you had to have a lot more access to nature than you would've had if you'd moved to New York.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. So I had a lot of access to nature. I started—

MS. BROWN: And the sky and the sea.

MS. CELMINS: I had this drop back where I dropped into doing kind of semi-abstract—it's a word nobody uses anymore, semi-abstract landscapes—that word.

MS. BROWN: Do you think that the whole landscape of L.A. was influential, the sea and the sky and the desert being so close?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, yes. I drove around. For a while, I used to paint from the car really hokey stuff. And then I, of course, spent a lot of time in the studio. And I used to kind of paint-draw on paper because it was cheap; I had no money whatsoever. Well, I did have quite a lot from the school, $2,000 a year, on which I lived.

And then, slowly, there—I don't know. Even at Yale—I had this weird thing where I had sort of—I was—when they had that Morandi [ph] show at the Tate—who's that curator at the Whitney now?

MS. BROWN: Donna De Salvo.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. She had asked me to write something, because I had already mentioned before that I had come upon this Morandi [ph] show when I had visited New York maybe the year before I went to the summer school. And I had seen these little paintings that were so fantastic, I thought, because they were so weird. They were small. We were all trying to paint big and we were all gesturing all over and—

MS. BROWN: And your paintings were big, then, too? You were doing the same thing?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, of course. We were all painting big. And then I—was so impressed with these things that have collapsed into this small form. And I was already trying to see—I think I did some. I think I heard Brice [ph] telling somebody once—they said, "well, what did Vija do when she was at Yale?" And he said something, "oh, she did these very, kind of tender little still—" not still lives; I was doing landscapes, but that was only one of the things that I did. I kind of went back to looking.

Maybe I never did, really, get into the Abstract Expressionist. I never could—what couldn't I do? I couldn't resolve the stroke.

MS. BROWN: The big gesture.

MS. CELMINS: The gesture with the painting, even though I learned some incredible things from it, like, the paintings is about itself, which of course, is a modern idea. It's not of something; it's about itself.

And de Kooning was a great one that made a structure out of the strokes that reinforced the two-dimensionality, the thickness of the painting. It's that echo, the structure of the painting—and yet, implied a dimension, like whether it was landscape in his case, or mostly the women. The women began to fragment the portraits that he did so delicately, then they begin to fragment and begin to hang on to the painting, and become the painting. And then they disappeared finally—even though he always had tiny echoes of either landscape or portraiture—well, not always.

MS. BROWN: Well, certainly landscape.

MS. CELMINS: Actually, I like that black and white period where it's really quite abstract.

MS. BROWN: But you—

MS. CELMINS: Another thing I have to tell you de Kooning was—because I got those little books of which I cannot find my copy now. They have these little books that were put out by the big book company. It was, like, paperback books on artists.

MS. BROWN: Phaidon?

MS. CELMINS: Maybe Phaidon. They were little ones. There was one on de Kooning. And I think what I liked is that he was an immigrant, like me. I was an immigrant like my father, mother, like me. He was an immigrant and he came out of really looking at stuff.

I remember I really hated drawing people. I'm not a person that ever—I could never put a person—image of a person in a painting. I did with school, but I can't do that. It's too much out of real life for me with too much baggage, and I can never resolve it. But he came out of that, and then he made these fantastic paintings that were really about himself—that were about themselves, yet they had him in. I just was very inspired.

And then, of course, later, I read about Gorky and I liked him a lot, too. And then I didn't know about, you know, Guston, because for some reason, I think they dumped on Guston, didn't they, until a little bit later.

MR. BROWN: Until later, yes.

MS. CELMINS: And then of course, later, I think Guston became actually—was probably the better painter—[laughs]—over everybody, really. I mean, I began to see—

MS. BROWN: His later work was amazing.

MS. CELMINS:—the world in his paintings. And it was so fantastic.

The thing that was odd about was that unlike Brice, as I like to say, who was a person—or maybe unlike Novaros [ph] over here—I didn't bite that idea of the abstract work and hang on to it. I dropped it when I moved away from it. I thought that I couldn't get anything satisfactory out of it.

MS. BROWN: It wasn't for you. It just wasn't for you.

MS. CELMINS: Well, but I was very talented, I think, because I got—I always—so it isn't like I had a lack of skill, but somehow it came from the outside. And then the other thing was, of course, everybody dropped it. Johns dropped it. All of the Pop artists dropped it—so it isn't like it was so unique to drop it. But I—I retreated into looking.

MS. BROWN: So where did you go from abstraction? Where would you—[inaudible]?

MS. CELMINS: I went to painting everything in my studio, all my food that I ate, all my cups and saucers and my lamps and my shoes and—there's a shoe painting of my shoes out somewhere in Milwaukee or someplace.

MS. BROWN: And the paintings were small?

MS. CELMINS: Well, no. They were life size. They were not small.

MS. BROWN: Yes. But they weren't—wall size.

MS. CELMINS: No, but things were—the shoes were life size, the lamps were life size. I painted a life-size refrigerator. I kind of returned what I thought was a dumber place, and it was dumber all right.

The thing I didn't do in relation to, like, Pop art, is—of course, you know, I wasn't a commercial artist, so I had none of those techniques, like Ed Ruscha does, for instance, or, of course, Andy Warhol, or Lichtenstein. I never could do those techniques, believe me. I tried, because we would have a class in school. I just couldn't do it. And also, because I hadn't grown up in the United States, I didn't have that kind of Pop quality of commercial stuff.

MS. BROWN: It wasn't a parody in any way.

MS. CELMINS: So in a way, when I—when I went back, I had more of that Morandi feeling, that kind of hushed feeling of no movement, but just a little bit of paint movement—

MS. BROWN: There's no commentary.

MS. CELMINS:—and a kind of a—huh?

MS. BROWN: There's no commentary. It's just what it is. There's no irony to it.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, but of course, everything is commentary, isn't it?

So, I mean, I actually did a more—a more kind of Magritte-like, deadpan painting and a painting that was still quite tasty and maybe more European than the Americans are doing.

MS. BROWN: And they're very quiet.

MS. CELMINS: How's that? That was pretty good.

MS. BROWN: Very good.

MS. CELMINS: There's more of a connection, like, even to Velazquez, to paintings that are very still and—

MS. BROWN: It's very quiet.

MS. CELMINS:—kind of not overly rendered, but not under-rendered, and that were—but still had—

MS. BROWN: A lot of texture.

MS. CELMINS:—paint, you know?

MS. BROWN: Yes. A lot of paint quality.

MS. CELMINS: A lot of kind of paint quality, but not jazzed-up paint quality, like I've been trying to do.

MS. BROWN: Were there—

MS. CELMINS: And no style—taking away all the style and letting the image just—letting it just be. I wasn't trying to make it any more mysterious or anything, but I had a lot of gusto there. I just went through everything. And of course, I wanted to make it more interesting, so I painted.

I had this little heater. I painted my heater, which is now at the Whitney. And I painted my hot plate that I lived on for 10 years. I got turned on by looking. And then I thought, well, I will let my hand find its place without letting my brain be too important in the whole process.

MS. BROWN: And when you made those paintings, did you have a feeling then that this is—this is right for me, this is—

MS. CELMINS: No.

MS. BROWN: No.

MS. CELMINS: Never had a feeling anything was right for me. Never have, really.

MS. BROWN: So you just always just—

MS. CELMINS: I'm always—sort of unsatisfied, unfortunately.

MS. BROWN: So you're always going—

MS. CELMINS: Or fortunately, I don't know.

MS. BROWN: Would you say you're always, in your process, doing what you did to get there, that you're always looking for what is the thing that—sort of coming to the thing that you're going to do?

MS. CELMINS: I'm always criticizing my own work. I went through those objects. I decided they were just too stupid and too retro. And I—well, I started doing objects like that letter—

MS. BROWN: The painting with the letter.

MS. CELMINS:—which had another level on it, which had an image on an image, and sort of developed into doing those war things, which—I'm going to have a show at the—de Menil Museum [The Menil Collection, Houston, TX] of two years' work, '66 and '67—

MS. BROWN: Really? Oh, how interesting.

MS. CELMINS:—when I did those works when I was still in graduate school. But I was a very paranoid, shy person at that time. But maybe connecting in some way to the inside—connecting—you know, if you're not connected, it's very hard to keep up the work. If you're not connected, your imagination isn't free. You have ideas and you illustrate them, which is stupid.

And then—so I think I was so alone. I'm always really alone. I guess I'm one of those alone people. But not to say that I'm lonely. And I've always had quite a few friends. And I think out in L.A.—I don't know, I just knew that I had to do something.

I don't know, I was always chasing the painting and trying to chase it. And I did have ideas about it. One of the big breaks was when I stopped painting, which is really stupid.

MS. BROWN: And were you—

MS. CELMINS: A kind of a—a kind of a self-punishment, I think of it now in retrospect. You know, when I dropped painting altogether and started doing the kind of—

MS. BROWN: The drawings.

MS. CELMINS:—drawings, even though they were very painterly, they're very dense and they are really not about line at all.

MS. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's when you started doing the drawings of the ocean and the skies?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, well, because I'd been taking those photographs. I was always doing a lot of different thing—I was taking photographs, I was making little movies. But I was always very shy about saying, come look at what I've done, or anything like that.

MS. BROWN: And why did you—

MS. CELMINS: And then L.A.—I really did them for me. In L.A. there was this whole gang of men who were famous guys. They were—they were like the abstract gang of men here. You know, it was Bob Irwin and—

MS. BROWN: They were the in-crowd, they were the in-crowed.

MS. CELMINS: I mean, all these guys—Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell was probably the hottest thing around. Ed Kienholz was a very heavy-duty—

MS. BROWN: Yes, oh very, very big personalities.

MS. CELMINS: Right. See, one of the things I had—then—I had a few ideas. Of course, in school we all had to do collage. I decided that I was not going to do collage because I—I decided that there was another kind of a relationship that I—I don't know what I wanted. I wanted something more singular.

You know, the collage is much easier to do, you know that, don't you? Because you put together different images. And of course, it's a more Cubist way of constructing—

MS. BROWN: You're not working from a blank—a blank piece of paper.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. And the relationships make for an interesting little poem. And I used to do postcards like that.

MS. BROWN: You did?

MS. CELMINS: And it is fun. Yes, somebody's got all those postcards. Dean Stockwell has some of them. And then I sent—and then other artists, I would send—

MS. BROWN: And did you send them to people?

MS. CELMINS: Huh?

MS. BROWN: Could you send them to people?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, I sent them sometimes to people. Or people I liked a lot, or men I liked.

MS. BROWN: Now, why—

MS. CELMINS: What a person.

MS. BROWN: But how long—

MS. CELMINS: But anyway, I was very ambitious for myself, but I didn't really have a clear goal. So my art, my work kind of meandered. I didn't really have a product or anything. Like, sometimes now you think somebody's got a product and they just make that product.

MS. BROWN: Signature, yes.

MS. CELMINS: And sometimes I myself, especially when people ask me to do things—I just finished this mezzotint which just about killed me of this spider web. It was so difficult—I can't do things for others. I just can't do it. I freeze up. I can't do it. Never could do it.

MS. BROWN: But—when you stopped painting, why did you do that?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. I had some kind of ideas that the painting was—had too much of a life of its own, that it was not enough structure, that it was—that it was too—too tasty. I wanted something more severe, more descriptive of just this flat space.

All this kind of bullshit—I made up for myself. I wanted to be more minimal, I wanted—you know, it's a way of pushing yourself by throwing away things you think are extra. Now, I don't really do that anymore, although I have that tendency in everything, actually. In my relationships and everything, I tend to try to get down to the real nitty-gritty.

But, many times—I wish that I had—the thing that I think I had maybe missing that some other luckier artists had is that they—I threw away, always, a lot of stuff. Instead of kind of being able to reflect and accept what you've done and maybe look at it for a while, I tended to reject it. Thank goodness I didn't throw away everything.

MS. BROWN: Yes, thank goodness.

MS. CELMINS: I tended to have that kind of purge. Now, whether this is from how I grew up in my family or from the fact that I had to leave so many things so many times or some kind of a psychological thing or whether it's just part of my nature, just part of my nature to do that, that's what I've done.

And then I've always had a very hard time starting again, and picking up threads and putting them together with a desire to make something, because—I mean, I've had a little trouble with that lately. Of course, I'm like 70 now, so I should be having a little trouble.

And I think it is very difficult when you're older and have had so many shows now all over the world. And I have

reflections of myself, which are irritating. And to be able to find—in an older age, to be able to find that kind of—I mean, it isn't all punishment. I had a lot of joy in making the work. To find that joy again, knowing all I know about the world, and some awful parts of it which we see evidence of every single day, and to be able to reconcile that with—with going ahead and doing something as positive as making something was difficult.

MS. BROWN: Are you willing to talk about what you're working on now or what you're pursuing now or what you want to do?

MS. CELMINS: Oh, no, I'm going through—I'm going through a period now where maybe I'm—little bits and pieces of things, not a big—not any big breakthrough.

MS. BROWN: Are you working—primarily with drawings again or—

MS. CELMINS: No, I'm not—I haven't done any drawing for about three years, except of course drawing occurs in everything, because you have to draw out proportions. If you make an image, I'm drawing the image and always refining the image as a way of drawing. Thinking is a way of drawing.

MS. BROWN: So you've been making—you've been making prints.

MS. CELMINS: Huh? Well, I've started up—in everything, I started making some objects again. And I started doing some prints, all of which are now tangled up together. And then I started some paint—I've started many paintings. I've been having trouble with the paintings. And I think I can see that I'm going to—

MS. BROWN: You said you're making paintings?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, I'm making paintings. Paintings, prints, no drawings, though. I'm thinking more of maybe more color, more—I have moments of great pleasure, which is actually a big part of art. Art is not much. Everybody must know that by now.

And I agree with whoever it was, Susan Sontag or somebody that says that now, just—I mean, people just project themselves in the art. There's certainly no avant-garde. There's fashion and there's everybody projecting or vomiting or whatever you want to call it. Vomiting doesn't sound very positive, does it? [They laugh.] But I meant—but I meant in a good way, vomiting.

MS. BROWN: You mean, expressing themselves.

MS. CELMINS: You know, like here, take this look, you know.

MS. BROWN: Expressing themselves.

MS. CELMINS: Yes, yes, yes. Expressing themselves, or not even—I wouldn't say I'm expressing myself. But I would say— I would not say that my work is expressive.

MS. BROWN: What would you say your subject is? What is your subject?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. It's very difficult to put a category mark. Sometimes I think when you take the whole of it together, you see—I don't even have any words for it. I don't have any words for it. I'm going maybe into a blessed state where I no longer have to reflect on myself.

MS. BROWN: [Laughs.] Isn't that a perfect place to stop?

MS. CELMINS: I mean, yes, it's—[laughs]—yes, that's a perfect place to stop. [They laugh.] Okay. But we didn't really talk much about—[inaudible]—but I could probably talk for hours, so let's stop.

MS. BROWN: Do you want to stop?

MS. CELMINS: Yes, yes, let's stop.

MS. BROWN: Okay.

[END OF DISC 3, TRACK 1.]

JULIA BROWN: Well, can you back up just a moment? I was asking—

VIJA CELMINS: And to—and to make that gesture hers, even though she never made paintings that look as strong to me as, say, de Kooning or Pollock, really. I hate to say it, because—

MS. BROWN: I just was asking about—

MS. CELMINS: But I thought she was pretty good. Huh?

MS. BROWN:—about Joan Mitchell. I was just asking about Joan Mitchell. And you were saying, in a way you thought she was sort of constrained because she stayed within the great-painting, heroic mode.

MS. CELMINS: No, not constrained. Well, I thought that it helped her, because it was a nurturing quality here for that kind of—

MS. BROWN:—that kind of thing.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. And she hung on to it and kept it. And then she went to Paris, where I think she lived with another—with a guy who did that kind of—you see, I dropped out of that whole—if I had come to New York, maybe, and if I had been older and had my friends and kept that group around me, and—

MS. BROWN: You might have been different.

MS. CELMINS:—but I was out there. I was all alone, and I was this woman in a man's world. And they were all doing weird, fetishy things. And there was this whole thing of—well, Johns I loved. I mean, Johns we could talk about for—

MS. BROWN: And what about—what about Bob's work and Jim's work and Doug Wheeler and that kind of work, which is totally different than anything in the East Coast?

MS. CELMINS: I tried that. It was too much building for me. And too much special effects, you know?

MS. BROWN; [Laughs.] Yes.

MS. CELMINS: I think I liked the idea that you could take dust and put oil in it and make a whole world out of that, instead of carpentry and a lot of theatrics.

MS. BROWN: But when you—when you—

MS. CELMINS: But I loved those guys, because we all liked the desert, you see? And we all had kind of a—we all liked kind of cold things.

MS. BROWN: Austere. Do you mean austere?

MS. CELMINS: Yes. Austere, yes. And we liked the desert, and we liked—

MS. BROWN: Austerity with the intensity, because there's a lot of intensity.

MS. CELMINS: Yes. Yes, yes. And I'm pretty intense, too.

MS. BROWN: So those were—they were your—

MS. CELMINS: In—I mean, the work. Very concentrated.

MS. BROWN: Yes, yes. And they were your friends?

MS. CELMINS: And probably that horrible thing, which I have now become, like, overworked and overthought and—I have to live with those tendencies in myself now.

MS. BROWN: But you had a real community there of friends, no?

MS. CELMINS: Well, no. No, not really. I mean, we had our little communities, but they were always fighting with each other. And then I didn't really do that kind of emblem-fetishy stuff that many of the guys got into. And then I was a woman—I think I was a pretty individual kind of artist there, actually. I was not part of that school or anything.

I was not in any kind of feminist imagery. I thought that was really ridiculous. I mean, so—you know, see dog run? [Interviewer laughs.] See? See? I mean, it was loony to think that—that making a picture of a woman was somehow more feminist than making a picture of a man or a cop or a—or a sky or an airplane or whatever or a still— I mean, it just seemed, to me, loony. I could never go with that.

MS. BROWN: So why did you leave L.A.?

MS. CELMINS: Pardon?

MS. BROWN: Why did you leave L.A. and come back here?

MS. CELMINS: I don't know. Because I thought—

MS. BROWN: Is that your—[inaudible]?

MS. CELMINS: Well, I did think that there was a heavier—I thought that there were better artists on the East Coast. Or maybe I remembered something from all those painters that I loved, that were really all New York painters. And I also thought that there would be more excitement than I—and as it turned out, I had such an audience that exploded here for me. It was incredible. I had no idea that people actually went and looked at art so carefully and actually saw things that I didn't have to tell, which is also amazing. You don't have to —

MS. BROWN: So you felt you got a very serious audience here.

MS. CELMINS: I began to build a serious audience here and connected with Europe. People from Europe came, and they also liked my work a lot, although, Europeans liked a lot of people's work from L.A., Bruce Nauman very early and Baldessari quite early. And they supported—

MS. BROWN: Tintarell [ph]?

MS. CELMINS: And—yes. Even though I don't think they ever really understood the best painters. I don't think they ever really understood Guston too well and I don't think they understood de Kooning so well. I don't think they understood a structure they—I think that the painters in Europe always remained much more decorative and not as interesting.

MS. BROWN: Have you—have you had much of a reception in Asia for your work—interest in—no?

MS. CELMINS: No, no, no.

MS. BROWN: Because I would think there'd be a kind of—that quality of a sort of purity and clarity would go well.

MS. CELMINS: I don't know whether my work's so pure. But no, I don't think so. Well, maybe I had some—I had some interest maybe from Japan, but I don't make enough work to have that many shows, so I never really—I had some interest from these women in Korea that had galleries, that everybody seemed to have shows there because they sold everything. But no.

I think I remain pretty much a northern artist—a northern artist, not a southern artist that is—and not an Asian artist and not a—I think I have a northern quality in my work. I was thinking now, because I own a house in Merida, of maybe—when I think of my work in Merida, I think, "oh, you know, so much of the mind, really," because even though I'm always putting the mind down, it seems to be in there everywhere. [They laugh.] Can't get rid of something. That's the part about when you make something. I always think it's very hard to lie in art. Sooner or later, somebody sees—

MS. BROWN:—what you're thinking about.

MS. CELMINS:—everything you've done.

MS. BROWN: And they see what you're thinking about.

MS. CELMINS: And everything that's been in your brain. Well, we hope so, actually. [They laugh.] And at the same time it's scary—that somebody is going to decipher and grasp something that maybe you never even thought of, but that came out of the time that you made the work.

MS. BROWN: I'm going to—

MS. CELMINS: Now, that's a good time to stop. [Laughs.]

MS. BROWN: That's a good time to stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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