

David Ambrose on Vija Celmins and Saya Woolfalk

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by David Ambrose



Saya Woolfalk, *ChimaTEK: Combustion Chamber*, 2014-17, Hand-blown glass with mixed media and vinyl decal, 49 x 54-1/4 inches overall, Object: 36 x 22 x 18 inches

At first glance, the current exhibitions by Saya Woolfalk and Vijas Celmins on 22nd Street in New York seem to be light years apart. Celmins working with materials such as oil paint, wood, canvas and bronze to create a delicate, introspective world of surfaces bathed in the light of gallery space and critical admiration, while Woolfalk favors a broad array of technical brio from video animations in darkened gallery spaces to dramatically lit sculptural objects, both real and virtual and computer generated animation. Be advised when you cross 22nd Street to visit these two shows, even space travelers need to look both ways, and by both ways I mean forward and back in time, since both of these exhibitions have a strong sense of history with an eye to the future.

Woolfalk's second show at Leslie Tonkonow Artwork +Projects sees the artist continue to mine a rich cultural vein in a narrative she has created around "*the story of a chimeric she names the Empathics, botanic humanoid beings with the highly evolved ability to understand the experiences of others.*" She builds a world for these beings that is veiled in layers of a social and cultural fabric, an installation so dense with layers you get the feeling it should come with a guidebook. Their existence is the product of collaboration, one the artist has built out of a community of collaborators and while the essence may be on "*labor*", there is an equal importance to the idea "*lab*" or "*laboratory*". These collaborators act as Woolfalk's hands and fingers, helping her to extend her vision beyond the limitations of the personal to include their shared experiences and idea of the communal.

Upon entering the darkened gallery space, we are confronted by *ChimaTEK: Combustion Chamber* (2014-17) a gray vinyl wall decal in the shape of an atom that acts as a key to the show. The bottom circle (particle) of the combustion chamber juts out at an angle perpendicular to the wall like a shelf for an offering dish. Attached to that dish is a triangular wire stand with a series of five small upside down stepped clear glass beakers that are like jewels on a throne that proffer a larger, rainbow colored, ringed, glass beaker that covers a decorated human skull, made of cast resin, as if it were a cake under a cake dish. The skull is tightly wrapped in an assortment of colored fabrics and is buttressed by two rocks that look like pieces of granodiorite. My initial thoughts regarding the design went to the Atomium in Belgium constructed for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair and a symbol of a postwar Europe and its vision of world peace and a new humanism, but Woolfalk's circular particles (which contain the pattern of Egyptian lotus leaves as if dangling in a hanging garden) also has an architectural reference: radial city plans with their utopian ideals of unified ownership of land to benefit the community as a whole.

In *ChimaTEK: Virtual Reality Outpost. Proposed Construction Plans and Sections*, 2016 and *ChimaTEK: Virtual Reality Outpost* (2017), the artist offers a glimpse of her architectural aspirations in a rendering for the construction of a three-story building in Greene County, New York using elevations and a single channel HD Digital Video. The simple three story edifice comes complete with a circular, reflected ceiling plan and six Le Corbusier chaise lounges radiating like spokes (and that radial city plan) underneath it, looking something like a Quaker Meeting House outfitted by Design Within Reach.

In *ChimaCloud Augmented Reality Garment* from (2017) a neutral gray colored mannequin, placed slightly off center on a pedestal, wears a costume that it is both modest and extravagant with ornamentation that appears to be both seek attention and repel it. On the garments front, a large bib with a series of printed geometric shapes appears to hover off the mannequin's chest, while a satchel emblazoned with a sunburst of radiating, concentric circles made of small multicolored dots, like a celestial body one might find in Aboriginal Dreaming, hangs just above the figure's waist. The garment extends to below the knee with an off white layered zigzag pattern, while on the back, it ends in a less modest hemline at mid thigh. As I walked past the figure, I noticed that the figure was not only barefoot, but on its tippy toes and by extending the figure's stance in that manner, Woolfalk has created a pose filled with desire and longing. Feather like petals of black, red and yellow extend from the figure's shoulders.

As one gazes over those shoulders, one can't help but notice it's resemblance to the projected pattern of *ChimaCloud: Venus* (also from 2017) on the main gallery wall behind it. The circular video projection comes with the same overall shape and particle circles that were found in the *ChimaTEK: Combustion Chamber*. In *ChimaCloud: Venus*, a video projects a humanoid deity featuring an actual sculpted head of an antelope, that magically hovers a few feet off the ground arms raised and knees bent as if seated on an invisible throne. The overall shape of the projected pattern on the darkened wall mirrors *ChimaTEK: Combustion Chamber* and as a result, a radial city plan. A dot matrix spills out onto the wall forming circular sector while ambient sound helps further frame the viewer's senses.

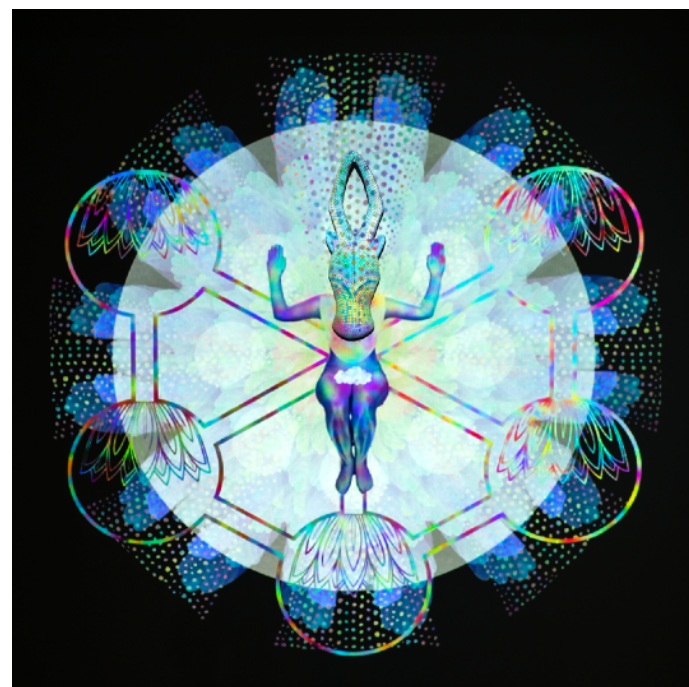


Saya Woolfalk, *ChimaCloud Augmented Reality Garment*, 2017, Digitally printed cotton, linen, silk brocade, 75 x 16 x 16

Much of Woolfalk's work has the feel of a World's Fair and in particular, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition hosted by San Francisco to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal in 1915 and the rebirth of the city after the devastating earthquake of 1906. The Panama Pacific was small-scale Beaux Arts architectural confection in a hodgepodge of styles with buildings and urban spaces such as the *Court of the Universe*, the *Tower of Jewels*, the *Court of the Ages* and the *Court of the Four Seasons*. In the evening, the sky over the exposition was awash in pastel colors, some from a series of 48 searchlights called the Scintillator that lit up the night sky. It is a palette we see throughout much of Woolfalk's work; as pastels tend to be more passive, restful, and peaceful.

An artist who comes to mind is the late Nancy Graves (1939 – 1995) with her ritualistic, scattered bone sculptures, and fantastical maps of earth, ocean floor, weather patterns and solar systems.

In *ChimaCloud Crystal Body A*, *Crystal Body B*, both from 2017, Woolfalk presents two sculptural acrobats in gymnastic poses on low dark pedestals. Each figure is outfitted in a decorative skin of lace appliqué, sequins, and silk butterflies with bejeweled and cloth wrapped resin bones or additional appendages attached or dangling from the figures. The bones in the exhibition seem to symbolize hope and memory, more than threaten death. The two figures, like refugees from a troupe of traveling acrobats wearing their own personal ossuaries, seem to be frozen in time and mid-performance as if their performance took place in Pompeii. But while Woolfalk and her collaborators may appear to be tailors and seamstresses to the stars (celestial not celebrity), these poses also make us aware that feminine can be a verb, and a very athletic one at that.



Saya Woolfalk, *ChimaCloud: Venus*, 2017, Single channel HD Video projection (continuous loop); acrylic gouache on wood, Projection: 90 in diam. Sculpture: 23 x 8 x 3 inches

The Vija Celmins exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery also on 22nd Street is the artist's first in seven years and her first with the gallery. Celmins is a master of the long gaze, but while her gaze may begin with an object and that object maybe a black and white photograph, she is no simple photorealist. Her source takes a back seat to her handling of materials and her desire to breathe life into the surfaces of her work. Celmins work leaves behind more of the essence of the object than what was first captured and recorded by the camera.

The show sees the artist returning to her two primary motifs: the night sky and the ocean's surface, but the first work we encounter is *Blackboard Tableau #12* (2007-2015). This diptych in a niche presents the challenge of trying to separate the made from the found, since each possesses a history, one created before her and one by her. A double frame exists in each of the two blackboards: the wood frame that holds the portable slate and the ghosted frame of a chalk/pastel. Each one hides its answers, but in different ways. In the original, answers were written, learned and wiped away. In the Celmins, the answer exists as the result of the wiping the slate clean. The chalkboards are not as black as some of the night skies we will soon encounter, but their mystery is no less palpable.



Saya Woolfalk, *ChimaCloud Crystal Body A*, 2017, Mixed Media 50 x 35 x 16 inches

As we enter the first large gallery space, *A Painting in Six Parts* (1986-87/2012-16) six oil on canvas paintings made from black and white photographs taken by the artist fifty years ago of the Pacific Ocean from the pier in Venice, California. The six parts come in slightly different sized canvases and while each is mostly monochromatic, there are subtle shifts in value and temperature. We also notice that Celmins does not hide her marks by smoothing her brushstrokes. The crests of these waves appear to swell, perhaps longing for celestial bodies in the night sky paintings on the walls across the room. The six paintings feel like the bottles in a disassembled Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). Each has a surface pattern not unlike the varying speed of application of Morandi's brushstrokes.

Across the gallery is *Night Sky #26* (2016-2017) the largest of the night skies in the exhibition that measures a hair less than five feet high by four and a half feet wide. The richness of Celmins rich, inky indigo ground is interrupted by a series of luminous green and violet stars that emit light the way a Rembrandt halo does, beyond the limitation of the medium and ordinary eyesight. In *Reverse Night Sky #1*, 2014, a negative supplants the image of the black and white photograph. Small dark dot stars raise to the paintings surface much like the flecks of vanilla bean buried at varying depths in off white ice cream and with some of the same milky density.

In *Two Stones* (1977/2014-16) a real stone and Celmins bronze trompe l'oeil painted copy are encased in a single vitrine ending a journey that lasted nearly 40 years. These two pocket sized rocks, like Giacometti's matchstick figures bound for a Swiss pavilion, bring to the surface Celmins privatization of perfection.

As I studied both of the stones, I couldn't help but think of Woolfalk's mannequin on its tippy-toes in its *Augmented Reality Garment* and how neatly these stones would have fit underneath each foot, and by doing so, help balance the figure between natural and artificial beauty in a space all its own. **WM**