

# Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Doug Wheeler & Vija Celmins

**DOUG WHEELER:** Ready? Ok. I'm Doug Wheeler.

**VIJA CELMINS:** Hi. I'm Vija Celmins, painter.

**DW:** That's it.

**LUCAS ZWIRNER:** From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

[SOUNDBITE; **DW:** For me, it's like you can make something that in no way looks or attempts to look like some of these experiences you have. But you can make something that might affect people in the way that you're being affected. **VC:** So you leave a kind of a sensibility when you're . . . in your work that you hope other people can guess by looking at it, without ever meeting, without ever talking to you.]

**LZ:** I'm Lucas Zwirner, and every episode features a conversation. We're taking artists, writers, philosophers, designers, and musicians and putting them in conversation with each other to explore what it means to make things today.

Doug Wheeler is an artist who has made light and space into his medium. His room installations give us a sense of being in a desert, of being surrounded by emptiness, of seeing light as particles as opposed to waves.

Vija Celmins has made paying attention into an art in its own right. She looks at the world with such intensity, and observes phenomena, objects, scenes that we may look at as totally passing, and draws our attention and focus to them through the intense labor of her paintings and works on paper.

**LZ:** Let's go back in time for a second because . . .

**DW:** Okay.

**LZ:** . . . that feels like the place to begin, to how you guys became aware of each other.

**VC:** Okay. I have an easy answer for that, which is I can't remember when we met, exactly.

**DW:** I first met her—but under the circumstances, you don't remember these kinds of situations then. It was that show you saw at David Stuart.

**VC:** I remember that show, but I don't remember meeting you there.

**DW:** Well, just some . . .

**VC:** Oh, because we all used to go to look at whatever's happening.

**DW:** Yeah.

**VC:** There wasn't that much.

**DW:** But it was just, I didn't know anything about you really. You didn't know anything about me. I was just a guy there, and I just came up and said probably something. I remember saying something like, liking your work . . .

**VC:** But we didn't really meet then.

**DW:** No. That, but I'm just saying that was the first time I was aware of you.

**VC:** I wasn't aware of you then. I started, I came from Indiana.

**DW:** Yeah. I know. We got to . . . I don't know how we actually, but when you had your Venice studio across from the—was that the police or the fire department?

**VC:** Police.

**DW:** Police place. And I remember that shape of your space.

**VC:** 01:34 Right. A pie.

**DW:** And we both lived in Venice.

**LZ:** Venice, California, of course.

**DW:** Yeah. And I was on Windward, which has all the columns and all those kinds of things. Where Vija was is a little bit further back from . . .

**VC:** Seven blocks from the ocean.

**DW:** Yeah. So . . .

**VC:** And you were just one block from the ocean.

**DW:** One block.

**VC:** Hardly a block. About what year was that? Was that around?

**DW:** '67 when I went there.

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VC: Okay. So, I went to California, but that was in late '62.

DW: Okay.

VC: And where were you in '62? I'd like to know.

DW: I was downtown LA. I went to Chouinard.

VC: Were you in school?

DW: Yeah. I was in Chouinard. It was . . .

VC: But you weren't at Windward when you were at . . .

DW: No, no, no. We met, though.

VC: And you were married, right?

DW: Yeah, I became married in '65.

VC: Became?

LZ: Became married. Is that what happens to you?

DW: Did you ever know?

VC: I'm laughing. He became married.

DW: No. You probably didn't know her. But anyway . . .

VC: I became married, I think, in '67 or '68. I can't even remember that.

LZ: How long was your first marriage? Was it . . .

VC: Not too long. None of your business. [Laughter]. But not too long.

LZ: Can I ask about Indiana? You were eighteen when you left Indiana?

VC: No. Do we have to say how old I was?

LZ: No, no, no, no. You just say you were end of high school or . . .

VC: No. I was . . . Okay, I was in art school in Indiana, in a school. It was a bunch of, you know how artists are? They're like our people unfortunately, or fortunately, or part of them, or they used to be, or something. We were all misfits in the real world, and we were in this art school where we were all doing various things and going to midnight movies, seeing all those great movies that came up in the sixties . . .

DW: Right.

VC: . . . which was really obviously the same thing and maybe much more accessible in LA.

Well you were born in Globe, right?

DW: Yeah.

VC: You were actually born in the desert, which I really like. The whole . . . Somewhere in the back of you, you must have those kind of images from the very beginning.

DW: Oh, yeah.

VC: When I was born—darn it—in Riga, and spent . . . From my memory, in World War II, my family ran from the Russians, like many of the people that moved ahead of the front when the Russians were moving down. And I had some terrible memories. Of course, I didn't want to use the word terrible because they were just memories.

DW: Yeah.

VC: But now I realize—because so much of the world is just in tatters of refugees—I'm always reminded of these feelings of, really, abandonment and having no one, bombing. And I used to play in ruins and I didn't know nothing. It never occurred to me until much, much later. So I had a very different thing, and I didn't know about the desert until maybe okay, when '64 or '65 that I took my little car and began to drive out of LA. And I first like a lot of people, I thought there's nothing there—what a dope. Many of those spatial things seeped into me in, and I began to love it.

DW: See, scale is everything anyway, regarding space. So it's the fact that you can make something that is in a room, but how you approach it, if you really see, if you really look at this work, then you go into scale, you go into space, and you find yourself there for a long time.

VC: We were influenced by abstract expressionism . . .

DW: Right.

VC: . . . and making those giant works, which people are doing again now. But I collapsed my work real small. It works . . . you're very aware that it's also an object. And that it's a flat object—you're not so aware—but it's obviously part of the work.

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I like distance, myself. I'm a distance person. I like to see hawks. I don't look at close things so much, but I like . . . There's always a lot of distance implied in my work. And you also have to . . . It changes as you approach it—some of the same things. And when I was in LA, god, there was some terrible painting going on, but there were paintings that were . . . there were a lot of different works. I also gave up collage. We should talk about some of the people that you liked and that you knew.

DW: I didn't like very many [laughs].

VC: I think. Oh, you see. There we are, I know.

LZ: I agree that the meeting is one thing, but the group that existed at the time—a "group" is too strong a word.

VC: There were a bunch of groups.

LZ: Right.

DW: Yeah.

LZ: Let's just say the community as a large community and then the subgroups within the community . . .

VC: Right.

DW: Right.

LZ: . . . would be interesting to hear a little bit about.

VC: Okay. So you say what you were aware about, Doug.

LZ: Robert Irwin being one person that both of you knew.

DW: Okay. Well . . .

VC: Oh no, we knew everybody.

DW: Yeah. We knew everybody. But in terms of how deeply you got interacted with them . . .

LZ: Yeah.

DW: I didn't hardly at all.

LZ: But you were really on your own back then, right?

DW: Pretty much. But when I came . . . when I was in downtown LA is one thing.

LZ: Right.

DW: So it's the way it was. And when I went out to the ocean, which was like a dream. Okay. I finally got to where I could actually . . . I had this Puerto Rican ballroom downtown, and it was great in terms of, for me to explore and experiment on a lot of stuff. And I was developing a lot of stuff there. But yeah, I think it was \$90 a month . . .

VC: Yeah.

DW: . . . for that place.

VC: And I found one on Venice Boulevard, an empty giant store, that I rented for \$65 a month.

DW: Until we . . .

VC: I never did . . .

DW: But we would meet, remember? Whenever we would meet, you had Lotsi and I had Zero.

VC: Yeah.

DW: And we walk along . . .

LZ: The dogs?

VC: Yeah.

DW: Yeah. And walk along the beach.

VC: I had a Malamute.

DW: Oh, yeah.

VC: And he had this . . . And then what about Walter?

DW: Oh, that. Well, he was after.

LZ: But you had a German shepherd? Was Zero a German shepherd?

DW: Yeah.

LZ: Yeah.

DW: Big German shepherd—really big, smart, really wonderful. And it was just nice. Vija and I and our dogs and we could walk . . .

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VC: So I don't know what it is. You weren't really a big painting fan, but I think we saw something in each other that was . . .

DW: Well, you see right away . . .

VC: . . . complementary.

DW: . . . to walk with you, how you are when you just look at things. You're like we are both doing that. We're both walking along and talking. Maybe you're not talking, you're looking at things and being with our crazy little animals. And, but it was like I know what she's looking at, the way she's looking at it, what it's doing to her. You could see that.

VC: Oh, you're kidding.

DW: And I do it my own way.

VC: Well, we were friends. So that's how you have a friendship. You see some things that you begin to sense for each other. And of course, the art was always there and really, for me, a great appreciation. And then we had a kind of a threesome with . . . you had various girlfriends . . .

DW: Yeah.

VC: . . . who I met and got to know a little bit. And then we always had a threesome with Rico, who looked out for both of us.

DW: Yeah.

VC: She was always worried about us.

DW: We were like family.

VC: How about Doug? How about Vija? You okay everybody? And we're still doing that. She's about eighty-seven or something.

LZ: Wow.

VC: Eighty-six.

DW: I worry about her now.

VC: Yeah, I worried about her too.

DW: Yeah.

VC: So we had a kind of a thing where we would meet and gripe about the art world.

DW: Well, it was special because, see, we would be doing a walk along the sand, walk along the shore, maybe with no one around. And then we'd go our ways. She would go back to her studio, I'd go back . . .

VC: Right.

DW: . . . to my studio. And then whatever happened after that, maybe we didn't see each other for a while other than when we did in the morning.

LZ: Right.

DW: And that was . . . it was very special.

VC: Because it had a very milky quality because it often had fog. And it had . . . there was hardly anybody there. There were a lot of empty buildings. I used to roam around everywhere in my little car, just for fun. And meeting different people—like Charles Bukowski, I met once—and this . . .

DW: I never . . .

VC: There was this store . . .

LZ: What was he like?

VC: That he was "uuugggghhhh." He was like a old monster. He was not that old, but he was a nasty piece. But kind of a beautiful writer at times.

LZ: Can be.

VC: Really. And he . . . there was this poetry place owned by this guy—can't remember his name now, Robert?—who was also a poet.

LZ: Were there other writers around? I think I've read somewhere you said that Ginsb . . . there were, people were around, that Allen Ginsberg might've been in the . . .

VC: Oh yeah.

LZ: . . . area.

VC: Allen Ginsberg was around. He was in Venice.

DW: Yeah, but I don't remember . . .

VC: And I think he one time used to do these da-da-da. He used to . . .

DW: Yeah. I had no patience for that.

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**VC:** . . . do these marches and things. And then I was always a big reader. I also met Robert Creeley, who . . .

**LZ:** Oh, sure. I love Creeley.

**VC:** . . . was from New Mexico.

**LZ:** The interest in reading and the resistance to narrative is sort of . . . you just see these as completely separate things.

**VC:** Completely separate. But there's an artist and a poet. Where is art? Where does it fit? More in poetry than in use. I never really thought about . . . it's a totally different medium. It's not visual. You can hear it. You can't really hear a painting. You have to have a couple of eyes.

**LZ:** I know it's a complicated topic, but I am also curious about the Turrell connection, you know what I mean? And who was making what when?

**DW:** Okay. I'll . . . he came to my studio in Windward one day, just knocked on the door. I knew of him from John Coplans because some years, or a year maybe before that, John told me about this guy that I think he was at . . .

**VC:** Pomona.

**DW:** Yeah, some school, he said. I can't remember. Maybe it was Pomona. And he said, He's exactly like you. So I remembered the name because somebody said he was exactly like me. So anyway, he showed up and he introduced himself to me and everything, said he had gotten a studio in Ocean Park, and that kind of thing. He was reaching out. I don't go out to meet anybody, do anything like that. But we became friends because he started . . . he was really interested in airplanes. His dad was an airplane mechanic and that kind of thing.

**VC:** Gee, I didn't know.

**DW:** Yeah, he was an A&P so . . .

**VC:** Right. Because I then must have known you, and maybe I met Jim because he was . . . we were, or maybe he was visiting you, and then I met him. And then you were always talking about planes and so forth. And I was listening, and I remember . . .

**DW:** Elizabeth?

**VC:** Yeah, Elizabeth, his wife, who was playing the harp.

**DW:** The harp, yeah.

**VC:** And that he was playing with light coming in from the windows. . .

**DW:** Yeah.

**VC:** . . . and having blinds up and down.

**DW:** Right.

**VC:** So, you know, art is not really that kind of thing like, Who did it first? And, Who got the patent? It's like things are in the air, or they do bounce around. And people pick up on things.

And Turrell came into the art world, because he was a science major some place, in Pomona or something. And he had more connection with different people—not just artists, but people who bought art, and museum people, and so forth. Because sometimes I noticed that he had people over like that . . .

**DW:** He liked to create . . .

**VC:** I don't know.

**DW:** . . . these situations. Like when you talked about what he called the "stoppages," which were the . . . where he used blinds and he would just let light in. But he had a rug—a special kind of rug, or I don't remember what it was, but it was on the floor in his space. And then he would have you come over, and he'd tell you to sit there.

**VC:** Oh, yeah.

**DW:** Remember? And look in this direction maybe, or whatever. And then he would do the things with the blinds. Well, for me, what Coplans was saying is . . . I didn't feel I have to worry about this guy being anything like me. Because he is, it's a whole different kind of thing. And we had . . . our interests were similar in terms of being interested in flying and things like that.

As technological kind of stuff, he was very influenced by Robert Morris, and so it was always object—using light as an object. That's what it felt like. And so when the blind and then the light would come in, there was a motion to it because cars go by, whatever you have. Well this is something you grow up with, and especially as a kid, when you do stuff. And it's . . . you're not saying, Oh, this is an art thing for me.

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LZ: Right.

DW: It's just things you do: play with your surroundings, your environment, what the . . . your world, which is so small when you're young. And then it just keeps getting bigger and bigger from what you understand about it and then how involved you get with it. And I used to really get involved with my environment because my environment, fortunately for me and not you, was that I just had these incredible places.

VC: And I know that, but your father flew.

DW: Yeah, and . . .

VC: So you actually were flying.

DW: When I lived with my father in Globe, Arizona, he was a doctor. He was called the flying doctor of Arizona. So I went to the clinic, and so I waited in the waiting room. And it was always jammed with people. You see, you had all these kinds of people there. And there was this one guy there. It was Jimmy, something like which means "skinny" in Navajo.

But anyway, I recognized him because he was a guy that maintained a number of strips on the reservation. And my dad had gone into a lot of these places. And so it was kind of a surprise to see this guy there. Finally my dad comes out. And he sees Jimmy, and he's very surprised, like, What is he doing here? And, you know, they talk—I didn't hear what it was. And then it's like an urgent thing. But anyway, so he goes, "Okay, Doug, come with us. I'll deal with you later."

And we jump in his Cadillac. And we drive out of town about seven miles to his strip and get in a Staggerwing that he had already called this guy out there to take care of it, get it started. It's a big radial, and we jump in it. Now Jimmy had never been up in an airplane, and we're supposed to go to an uncharted kind of area. And so when we got close and we had to fly about fifty feet above the ground, which is below all those monoliths and stuff out there. And it was . . . the day was drawing down, so the whole ground is like becoming vermilion. And the sky is cobalt in one direction, and the other direction it's fiery and all that.

And he's looking. He's right on the dash. He's just looking out there and seeing. And we see this little Technicolor jumble of stuff, and it was pickups and whatever. We come in there, and there's a two track—you know, a little road—going to it. And there was one stretch that he decides he's going to put down on that.

There's a whole bunch of people up ahead, all Diné people. And we go into this circle that they've been standing around. Now there's a shaman doing a sand painting, and it's the most beautiful thing I had ever seen—never saw anything like that before. And the way they do it is both his hands have colored sand, or it might not be sand. It might be like pollen and other kinds of things. And he would go, and then that's a line. And it would be a perfect line, and he had this whole thing that was a day painting. So he'd started at morning, and he was working on it all day. And I . . . this was on . . . I didn't know what any of this meant.

Jimmy's wife was across, and she's holding a baby who is naked. And it's really cold. I mean, wind, cold. And there's this beautiful day painting, and he finally goes like this, gets the baby, lays the baby on the painting, does lines across him in certain places—some corn, pollen kind of stuff on him. And he's chanting, and people are chanting under their breath.

And my dad, by the way, is standing there with his bag, his doctor's, bag looking really stressed out. And he's with Jimmy who, who's also pretty stressed out. And the shaman finally gets it up, and they are all been chanting and all this stuff. And then he picks the baby up and hands it to the mother. She hands the baby to Jimmy and my dad, and then they kind of rush off to the hogan stairs and they go inside. And everybody leaves. They're all leaving.

And the shaman who did all this goes over and gets his homemade broom that's sort of like this. And he comes back and just sweeps it all away. And so there are all these colors that were the colors on the sand painting, and the wind is swirling and picking them up. And I'm looking at that through this sunset that's in this cobalt. And it was . . . I never lost sight. I never forgot that. And it was like the "particularish participation" of that coloration and the depth and distance.

So that's kind of where my . . . what really charges me. And what I . . . and I did a lot of white paintings that had . . . trying to do some of that—trying to, yeah, you never do. And you're not really even trying to imitate it. It's just . . . a kind of experience of a phenomenological kind of thing that, to me, is . . . It's almost like there's no word for it. It's just unbelievable to me.

So I know that's one of those stories that happened, and it was really special. And the baby had pneumonia, so he gave him a shot and all that. And I found later that it survived and all that. But it was . . . yeah, I never got over that.

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**VC:** And those experiences, see, that you then somehow find their way in your work is what makes the work dimensional. So that other people . . . you don't have to spell it out or anything. You just get the feeling from the whole thing when you spend time in there. That is really fantastic. I mean, you could say you could re-create that feeling, but you were inspired by it. You really feel it, which is really great.

**DW:** For me, it's like you can make something that in no way looks or attempts to look like some of these experiences you have. But you can make something that might affect people in the way you're being affected. That kind of thing.

**LW:** Yeah, so you approach the feeling as opposed to mirroring the exact circumstance?

**DW:** Yeah, sort of.

**VC:** Oh, no. But it comes out of many decisions of how you build the work. So you leave a kind of a sensibility when you're . . . in your work that you hope other people can guess by looking at it, without ever meeting you, without ever talking . . .

**DW:** Exactly. Yeah.

**VC:** . . . to you. I look at Piero della Francesca. I was looking at this painting, *The Flagellation*. You know that painting?

**LZ:** I do.

**VC:** I went to see that painting, and it's such a tiny painting. I always thought it was a giant. Tiny painting, and it has these exquisite things in it that you don't even know whether he consciously ever put any of it in. It's just in the making that . . . it comes through when you're really doing something, and you're on top of it, and you're . . . it's not on purpose like we were talking before. It's not like you say exactly, I'm going to do this for that effect. But it's like your whole body and your whole mind is involved in it and relates to you so.

**LZ:** Doug and Vija, thank you so much for doing this today, being in the conversation. Thank you for . . .

**DW:** Okay.

**LZ:** . . .the history.

**DW:** You're welcome, sir.