

Media release, 13 June 2025

Vija Celmins

15 June – 21 September 2025

This summer, the Fondation Beyeler presents one of the most comprehensive solo exhibitions ever devoted to the American artist Vija Celmins (*1938, Riga) in Europe. Best known for her deeply absorbing paintings and drawings of galaxies, moon surfaces, deserts and oceans, Celmins' work invites the viewer to pause, look closely and immerse oneself in their captivating surfaces. Like a spider's web, they draw the observer in, encouraging them to contemplate the tensions between surface and space, closeness and distance, stillness and movement. Organised in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition brings together around 90 works, mostly paintings and drawings, as well as a small number of sculptures and graphic works.

Born in Riga, Latvia in 1938, Celmins became a refugee in 1944 before emigrating with her family to the United States in 1948. She grew up in Indianapolis and later as an art student moved to Los Angeles, then to New Mexico, New York and Long Island, where she lives and works today. Held in the highest regard, her work is sought after by renowned museums and private collections alike. However, opportunities to see Celmins' work in any depth are extremely rare, not least because the artist has made only around 220 paintings, drawings and sculptures over the course of her entire career. Vija Celmins has always worked at her own pace, refusing to bend to the prevailing currents of the art world and remaining resolute in her close attention to her practice.

The exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of a remarkable 60-year career, presenting carefully selected groups of paintings, drawings, graphic works and sculptures. Beginning with a selection of important early paintings of everyday objects from the 1960s, the exhibition culminates in a room of recent masterful paintings of snow falling through a night sky, conjuring up the mystery of the cosmos.

The exhibition opens with a focus on Celmins' paintings from 1964 to 1968, when she was living in a studio on Venice Beach in Los Angeles. Unlike many artists working in the city in the 1960s, Celmins was not drawn to the vivid light and colour of California. Hers was largely an interior world. In 1964, she made a group of paintings of single domestic objects and appliances, including a plate, heater, hotplate, and lamp. Inspired by her encounter with paintings by Giorgio Morandi and Diego Velázquez on a trip to Italy and Spain in 1962, and distancing herself from the bright colours of Pop Art, she used a muted palette of browns and greys, with the occasional jolt of electric red.

Over the next two years, from 1965 to 1967, Celmins made several paintings based on images from World War II and other conflicts that she found in books and magazines; bomber planes suspended in a grey sky or crashed on the ground, a man in flames running from a burning car, race riots in Los Angeles from the cover of Time magazine. Silenced and still, these ominous paintings convey both the memory of war and a more recent reality in which the ubiquity of images has a distancing effect.

From 1968 to 1992, Celmins devoted herself almost exclusively to making drawings. She continued to work from photographs, both found in magazines and taken by herself. Her subjects were clouds, as well as the surface of the moon, the desert and the ocean. She began with a group of drawings of lunar landscapes based on photographs taken by the US moon probes in the late 1960s, which brought close-ups of a previously unreachable place into the living rooms of many people around the world. These were followed in 1973 by Celmins' first drawings of galaxies based on images from NASA telescopes. Such photographs provided Celmins with the impetus, which she has since followed, to create images that turn the tension between the depth of spaces and the surface of the image into a visual experience.

While living in Los Angeles, Celmins went on excursions into the deserts of California, Nevada and New Mexico, where she also lived for several months. Fascinated by the boundless landscapes, she began to depict the silence and the sense of time standing still in drawings. Towards the end of the 1970s, Celmins created a sculpture in which her confrontation with reality took on a new form. *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI*, 1977–1982, consists of eleven different pebbles she had collected in the New Mexico desert, presented alongside their doubles; eleven copies cast in bronze and painted in such a way that the original and the replica are barely distinguishable to the naked eye.

Celmins' images are based on photographs or, in the case of the rare sculptures, on objects as models. The template is a kind of tool for Celmins, allowing her not to have to concern herself with composition and framing. However, she does not make a copy of the original; it is not a matter of photorealism. Rather, one could say that Celmins recreates or rebuilds the original. Her pictures are constructed in countless layers of graphite or charcoal on paper and oil paint on canvas. It is as if Celmins is trying to grasp and capture the incomprehensible vastness by hand. This can be seen particularly in her numerous paintings of the starry night sky, a motif that has fascinated Celmins since her early days.

In 1992, Celmins came across illustrations of spider webs in a book. Drawn to their fragile threads and concentric patterns, she made a group of paintings and charcoal drawings. This exploration continued with a number of paintings of objects with textured surfaces; the cover of a Japanese book, the cracked enamel of a Korean vase, the scuffed surfaces of slate boards picked up in flea markets on Long Island, the pitted form of an eroded seashell – each painting an exquisite meditation on the passage of time.

In the final room of the exhibition, this meditation continues through Celmins' most recent paintings, which are among the largest works she has ever made. Based on photos of snowflakes illuminated in the sky at night, they convey a profound sense of silence and awe.

Alongside the exhibition, the Fondation Beyeler presents “Vija”, a short film by renowned filmmakers Bêka & Lemoine. Over 30 minutes, the film paints a special, spontaneous portrait of the artist, who reflects upon her lifelong practice while opening both the doors to her studio and the drawers of her archive. The portrait takes viewers on a journey among the forms, images and thoughts at the heart of Vija Celmins' unique sensibility.

“Vija Celmins” is curated by Theodora Vischer, Chief Curator of the Fondation Beyeler, and writer and curator James Lingwood.

A richly illustrated exhibition catalogue, edited by Theodora Vischer and James Lingwood for the Fondation Beyeler and designed by Teo Schifferli, is published by Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin. Comprising 208 pages, it contains ‘Notes’ by Vija Celmins as well as short contributions by Julian Bell, Jimena Canales, Teju Cole, Rachel Cusk, Marlene Dumas, Katie Farris, Robert Gober, Ilya Kaminsky, Glenn Ligon, Andrew Winer, with an introduction by James Lingwood.

The exhibition is generously supported by:

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as well as further patrons who prefer to remain anonymous.

The art education programme and the free admission scheme for children and young adults up to 25 are supported by the Thomas & Doris Ammann Foundation, Zurich.

Press images are available under www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/media/press-images

Fondation Beyeler

The Fondation Beyeler in Riehen near Basel is internationally renowned for its high-calibre exhibitions, its major collection of modern and contemporary art, as well as its ambitious schedule of events. The museum building was designed by Renzo Piano in the idyllic setting of a park with venerable trees and water lily ponds. It boasts a unique location in the heart of a local recreation area, looking out onto fields, pastures and vineyards close to the foothills of the Black Forest. In collaboration with Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, the Fondation Beyeler is constructing a new museum building in the adjoining park, thus further enhancing the harmonious interplay of art, architecture and nature

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Fondation Beyeler opening hours: 10am to 6pm daily, Wednesday 10am to 8pm



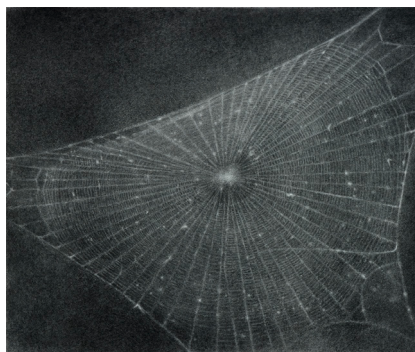
Vija Celmins
Lamp #1, 1964
 Oil on canvas, 62.2 x 88.9 cm
 Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 Photo: Aaron Wax, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



Vija Celmins
Clouds, 1968
 Graphite on paper, 34.9 x 47 cm
 Collection Ayea + Mikey Sohn, Los Angeles
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 Photo: McKee Gallery, New York



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Big Sea #2), 1969
 Graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 85.1 x 111.8 cm
 Private Collection
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Web #1), 1999
 Charcoal on paper, 56.5 x 64.9 cm
 ARTIST ROOMS Acquired jointly with the National Galleries of Scotland through The d'Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund 2008
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 Photo: Tate



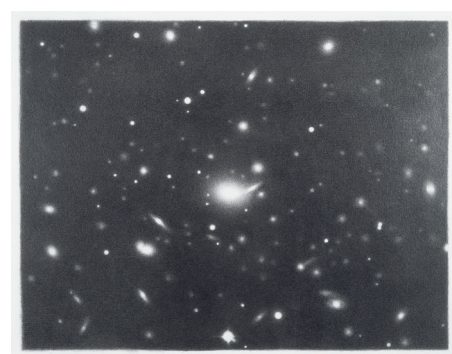
Vija Celmins
Astrographic Blue, 2019-2024
 Oil on canvas, 50 x 33 cm
 Matthew Marks Gallery
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 Photo: Aaron Wax, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Regular Desert), 1973
 Graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 30.5 x 38.1 cm
 Private Collection
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery
 Photo: Kent Pell



Vija Celmins
Desert Surface #1, 1991
 Oil on wood, 45.7 x 54.9 cm
 Mary Patricia Anderson Pence
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Coma Berenices #4), 1973
 Graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 31.1 x 38.7 cm
 UBS Art Collection
 © Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

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We kindly request you to send us a complimentary copy.



Vija Celmins

To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI, 1977-1982

Eleven stones and eleven made objects (bronze and acrylic paint), overall dimensions variable

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Edward R. Broida in honor of David and Renee McKee, 2005

© Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Photo: Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence



Vija Celmins

Snowfall #1, 2022-2024

Oil and alkyd on linen, 132 x 184 cm

Collection Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, NY, courtesy The FLAG Art Foundation

© Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Photo: Aaron Wax, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

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Biography Vija Celmins

Vija Celmins was born in Riga, Latvia in 1938. In 1944, she fled with her family to Germany to escape the Soviet army's advance through the Baltic states and into eastern Europe. She spent the next four years living in refugee camps in Germany before emigrating to the United States and eventually settling in Indianapolis.

While studying art at the Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, she came into contact with contemporary art for the first time. She met other artists such as Brice Marden and Chuck Close while attending the Yale Summer School in 1961. In 1962, she travelled to Italy and Spain, where seeing the paintings of Giorgio Morandi and Diego Velázquez, as well as Giotto's frescoes in Padua, made a lasting impact.

On returning to the United States, Celmins moved to Los Angeles to study at UCLA. In 1963, she moved to a storefront in Venice Beach, which became her studio for the next decade. She had two solo shows in galleries in Los Angeles in the 1960s, followed in 1973 by her first museum show, featuring twelve ocean drawings at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In 1979, the first survey of Celmins' work opened at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in California. In 1981, Celmins decided to move to New York, living in Soho and exhibiting at the McKee Gallery. The decade marked her return to painting after 13 years focussing on drawings and graphic works. She became friends with artists of different generations, including Jasper Johns, Richard Serra, Robert Gober and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Today, Vija Celmins lives and works on Long Island.

From the 1990s onwards, her work received increasing recognition in museums, including survey exhibitions in 1992-93 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and the Whitney Museum in New York, and in 1996-97 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, the Kunstmuseum Wintherthur, and the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. A survey of her drawings followed at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2006.

In 2014, Celmins had her first retrospective in her homeland at the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga. In 2018, the largest exhibition of her work to date, "Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory", opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, before travelling to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

Associated Events “Vija Celmins”

Events

Café conversation “Sky and stars” – in German

Tuesday, 23 June and 15 September 2025, 2:30 p.m.–4 p.m.

Inspired by astronomical photographs, artist Vija Celmins paints fascinating views of the infinite universe. Her atmospheric images of the night sky invite us to reflect on experiences and dreams. A short tour of the artist's exhibition forms the starting point for the storytelling café.

The storytelling café is offered free of charge by the Fondation Beyeler. Personal experiences can be shared in a cozy atmosphere. By listening attentively, new perspectives emerge and personal memories are awakened. This creates enriching moments together.

The café conversation will be held in German and moderated by Monika Hungerbühler. Open to all aged 18 and older. Meeting point: in front of the Restaurant of the museum

Price: CHF 0.–, Participation is free (incl. admission to the museum), online ticket required. Maximum of 20 participants.

Art Breakfast – in German

Sunday, 6 July, 3 August, 24 August and 7 September, 9–12 a.m.

A delicious breakfast at the Beyeler Restaurant im Park, followed at 11 a.m. by a guided tour of the current exhibition.

Price: Adults CHF 80.– / IV CHF 75.– / Visitors up to age 25 CHF 55.– / Art Club, Young Art Club, Friends of the Fondation Beyeler CHF 48.–

Wednesday Matinée “Vija Celmins” – in German

Wednesday, 9 July, 10 a.m.–12 noon

The Wednesday Matinee provides deeper insights into the work of Vija Celmins (*1938, Riga, Latvia) from the 1960s to the present day. The US-American artist's paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures display a visual language that is both subtle and powerful. Following early depictions of everyday objects and an engagement with images of war and disasters, Celmins devoted herself to boundless motifs such as the surface textures of deserts and oceans or night sky galaxies. Her works are produced over many years and unfold their fascinating beauty over the course of slow and precise contemplation.

Price: CHF 0.– (incl. admission to the museum),

The Art of Meditation with Manuela Peverelli

Thursday, 10 July and Wednesday 20 August, 9–9.45 a.m.

Early risers can experience the museum in the stillness of morning and start the day with a guided meditation. In partnership with Sutra House: www.sutra-house.com

Attendees can view the exhibition after the event. Doors open at 8.45 a.m.

Admission: CHF 7.– plus museum admission

Summer Party

Saturday, 9 August, 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.

At our popular summer party, the museum, Kunst Raum Riehen and the adjacent park will be open to visitors all day long. Guided tours of the exhibitions, a wide range of art education activities and a variety of entertainment for all ages will be on offer. The musical highlight of the evening is Joan As Police Woman, who will bring her unique blend of soul, indie pop and R&B to the museum's park. The New York artist, who has worked as guest musician with Lou Reed and Damon Albarn, delivers a powerful performance with emotional depth and stylistic diversity in what promises to be an intensive concert experience for music lovers and new fans alike. Lecture

Price: Admission to the park is free, admission to the Museum costs CHF 10.–.

“Atlas der Sternenhimmel und Schöpfungsmythen der Menschheit” – in German

Thursday, 28 August, 6.30 p.m.

Multi-award-winning literary scholar, writer, poet and translator Raoul Schrott talks about his acclaimed work *Atlas der Sternenhimmel und Schöpfungsmythen der Menschheit* [*Atlas of the Starry Skies and Humanity's Creation Myths*]. The atlas brings together seventeen maps of the night sky from different cultures on every continent, and explains how legends about stars, constellations and works of art have shaped human history.

Price: Museum admission

Screening of “Vija” by Bêka & Lemoine, followed by a discussion – in English

Wednesday, 3 September, 6 p.m.

Renowned film-makers Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, known in particular for their artistic architecture films, have made a film with Vija Celmins for the exhibition. The exhibition itself features a short version of the film, but it will be shown in full at this evening's event. The film offers a unique portrait of the artist. She reflects on her lifetime in art, delving into her archive and her personal memories.

Price: Museum admission

Outdoor excursion “The fascination of water” – in German

Saturday, 6 September, 2–4.30 p.m.

From drawings to the experience of nature: The work series of artist Vija Celmins open up fascinating perspectives onto the elements of water and rocks. In dialogue with one of the Fondation Beyeler's art educators and a ranger from the Landschaftspark Wiese, join us in exploring artworks, park ponds and the neighbouring water conservation area.

Meeting point: 2.00pm Bus station St. Chrischona (Bus 32), then onward by foot. The excursion does not take place at the museum. Participants should bring sturdy footwear and protection against the rain, as well as water and snacks. The excursion will take place in all weather conditions (except in the event of severe weather).

Price: CHF 0.–, Participation only possible with a free online ticket!

Concert under the stars

Wednesday, 17 September, 8 – 9.15 p.m.

Sound artist Mario Scarton plays spherical sounds in the park at the Fondation Beyeler to accompany Vija Celmins's pictures of galaxies. With his synthesisers and keyboards, the Zurich-based musician invites the audience to immerse themselves in the music and gaze at the stars. Harmonious and captivating melodies that allow you to enjoy the moment.

Price: Admission to the park is free

Tours

Storytelling carpet – in German

Sunday, 1 June, 6 July and 17 August, 11 a.m. – 12 noon

Together with their parents, children aged three to six sit on a colourful carpet in front of works of the exhibition, listening to fascinating stories and spinning their own tales. The stories take the artworks as their starting point: close observations, background information or biographical anecdotes are conveyed in age-appropriate form, and the children are invited to look, explore and make up their own stories.

Price: children CHF 7.– / adults: admission fee

Curator's Tour – in German

Wednesday, 25 June and 20 August, 6.30 –7.30 p.m.

See the Matisse exhibition through the eyes of the show's curators on this tour.

Price: CHF 35.– / Art Club, Young Art Club, Friends of the Fondation Beyeler, Museums–PASS–Musées CHF 10.–

Guided tour for deaf and hearing impaired visitors

Thursday, 26 June, 4.30–5.30 p.m.

Visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing are invited to discover the artworks in the exhibition in this signed tour.

Price: admission/free for accompanying person

A Work in Conversation – in German

Every second Wednesday from 26 June, 12.30-1 p.m.

During this brief but intensive encounter with a selected work of art the visitors will learn about the characteristics of the work, the artist, and the corresponding period.

26 June	Bikini, 1968
9 July	Untitled (Moon Surface Luna 9, No.2), 1969
23 July	Untitled (Big Sea No.2), 1969
6 August	To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI, 1977-1982
20 August	Night Sky No.15, 2000-2001
3 September	Concentric Bearings A, 1984
10 September	Web No.1, 1999

Price: Admission plus CHF 7.–

Family Tour – in German

Sunday, 29 June, 27 July and 31 August, 11 a.m.–12 noon

Tour of the exhibition for children ages 6 to 10 accompanied by an adult. This interactive family tour offers a playful experience of art for young and old alike.

Price: children up to age 10: CHF 7.– / adults: admission fee

Guided viewing for visitors with dementia – in German

Wednesday, 2 July, 10.30–11.15 a.m.

This museum tour looks in detail at selected works in the exhibition and, as part of a group conversation, gathers and shares the many observations, thoughts, memories and associations they call forth.

Price: admission fee + CHF 7.– / free for accompanying person

Guided tour for visitors with visual impairments – in German

Thursday, 10 July and 7 August, 4.30–5.30 p.m.

Works in the exhibition are carefully transposed into words.

Price: admission fee / free for accompanying person

Workshops

Sketch it!

Wednesday, 11 June, 23 July and 27 August, 6.30–7.30 p.m.

“Sketch it” provides an opportunity to engage creatively with selected works on display at the Fondation Beyeler. Henri Matisse's deeply expressive paintings and sculptures provide particular inspiration to experiment with various drawing techniques. Participants thus gain a fresh perspective on the original works. All materials provided.

Price: admission fee + CHF 10.–

Open Studio

Saturday/Sunday, 28/29 June, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. each day

Saturday/Sunday, 26/27 July, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. each day

Saturday/Sunday, 30/31 August, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. each day

Saturday/Sunday, 20/21 September, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. each day

The Open Studio workshops are a hands-on opportunity to find out more about the themes and techniques used by artists and to experiment with different creative means.

No registration necessary. Attendance is free and open to all age groups (children up to 12 accompanied by an adult).

Workshop for Adults – Star fields, stones, snow:

Writing workshop in the «Vija Celmins» exhibition with Eva Maria Leuenberger

Wednesday, 23 July and 17 September, 6–8 p.m.

Swiss poet Eva Maria Leuenberger (*1991 in Berne, lives in Biel) guides participants in writing-by-association in the exhibition space. Face-to-face with Vija Celmins' precise paintings and prints, words are found for the smallest grain of sand and the vastness of outer space, the beauty of a spiderweb and the compression of time.

No prior knowledge required. Meeting point: Foyer

Price: admission fee + CHF 20.– (materials included)

Workshop for Adults – Sharp eyes and fine brushes: illusionistic painting with Vincent Kriste

Wednesday, 27 August, 6–8 p.m.

The current exhibition features several fascinating sculptures produced by Vija Celmins (*1938) alongside her drawings and paintings. They bear an uncanny resemblance to real objects.

Basel-based artist Vincent Kriste (*1979) also works with the phenomenon of illusion and trompe-l'œil.

Using a wide array of experimental procedures, materials and techniques, his work is concerned with the very notion of painting itself.

The workshop provides an opportunity to discover Kriste's work on site in his studio and to try one's hand at illusionistic painting. No prior knowledge required.

Meeting point: Entrance of Atelierhaus Klingental, Kasernenhof 5, 4058 Basel

Please note: Unfortunately, the venue is not accessible to visitors with reduced mobility.

Price: admission fee + CHF 20.– (materials included)

Further offers

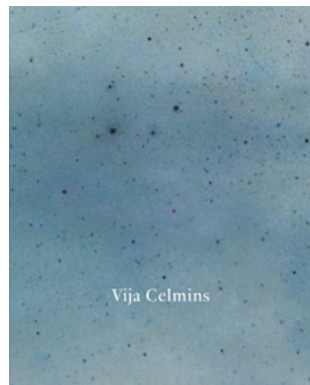
Fondation Beyeler opening hours:

10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, Wednesday through 8 p.m.

Public guided tours and events

Daily programme at: fondationbeyeler.ch/en/programme/calendar

Vija Celmins



Description

Vija Celmins is a master of subtle visual power. She is best known for her captivating paintings and drawings depicting galaxies, lunar surfaces, desert floors, oceans, and spider webs. Her works are not monumental; they are painted with a restrained palette and defy quick vision. But once you get involved with them, your gaze gets caught and they unfold their fascination and great beauty. This catalogue presents all 90 works exhibited at the Fondation Beyeler. Several commentaries by the artist on her works are inserted between the image pages, most of them published for the first time. Contributions by renowned authors and artists including Julian Bell, Teju Cole, Rachel Cusk, Marlene Dumas, and Glenn Ligon open up new perspectives on the artist's impressive oeuvre.

Biography

Vija Celmins (*1938, Riga) emigrated to the United States with her family in the late 1940s. She studied fine arts at the John Herron School of Art in Indiana and attended a summer course at Yale University in 1961 before earning a master's degree at UCLA. She has had solo exhibitions in numerous museums, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Menil Collection in Houston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 1996, she was introduced to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1997, she received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, and in 2023 the Praemium Imperiale.

Exhibition

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel
15 June – 21 September 2025

EDITED BY

Theodora Vischer, James Lingwood

TEXTS BY

Julian Bell, Jimena Canales, Teju Cole,
Rachel Cusk, Marlene Dumas, Katie
Farris, Robert Gober, Ilya Kaminsky, Glenn
Ligon, James Lingwood, Andrew Winer

DESIGN BY

Teo Schifferli

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as well as further foundations and patrons
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