

L.A. HABITAT: ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA

BY *Katherine McMahon* POSTED 05/06/16 2:54 PM

Enrique Martínez Celaya in his Culver City studio.

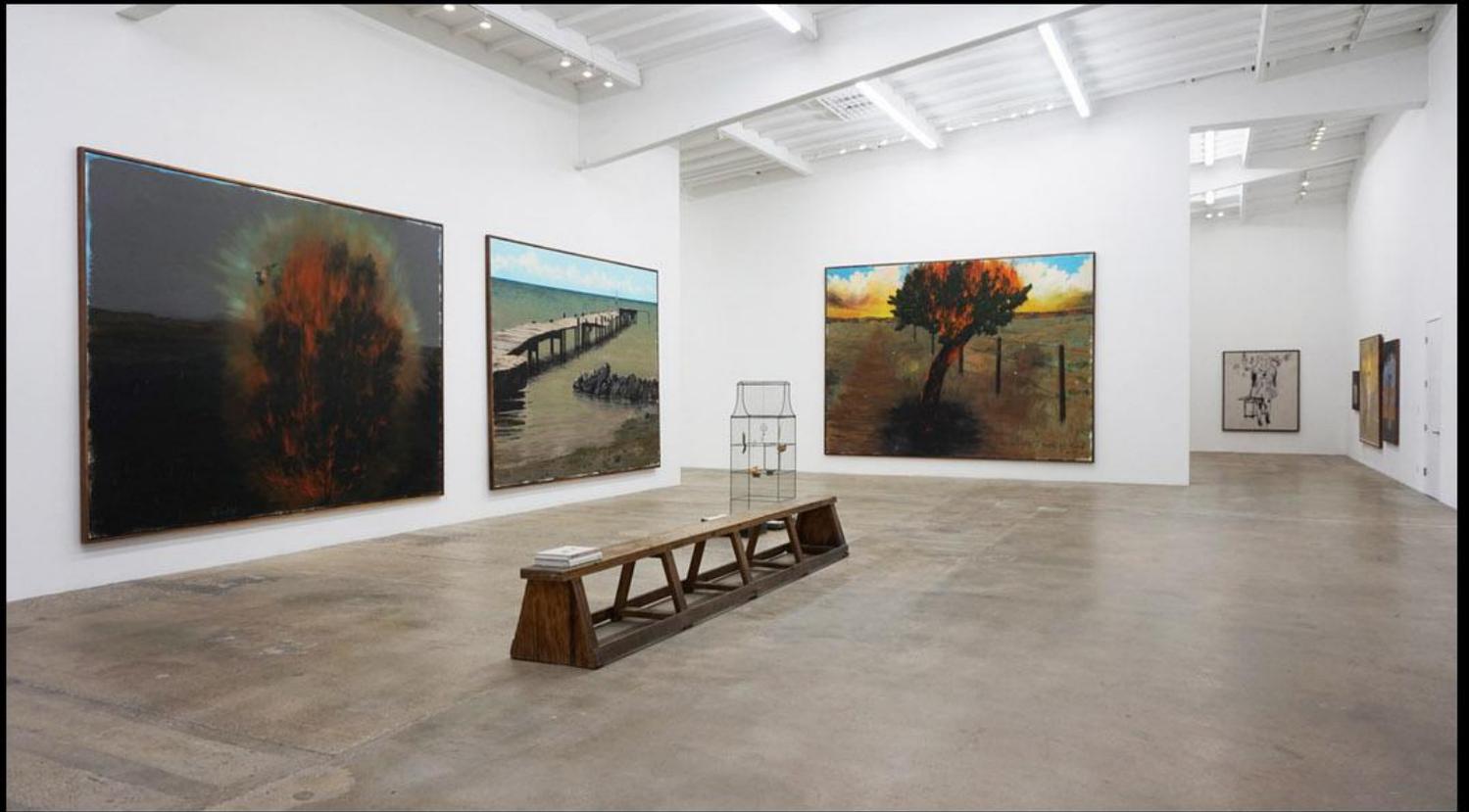
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L.A. Habitat is a weekly series that visits with 16 artists in their workspaces around the city.

This week's studio: Enrique Martínez Celaya; Culver City, Los Angeles. Enrique Martínez Celaya was born in Cuba in 1964 and raised in Spain and Puerto Rico. "Being an undergrad on the East Coast, I hated all the Californians who boasted so much about their state," said Celaya, in his studio in Los Angeles late last year. He initially headed west to pursue a master's in quantum electronics at UC Berkeley. "When I came here," he said, "I understood why so many people were into it." Celaya's sprawling studio, which he has inhabited since 2014, is situated on a nondescript street in Culver City. "It's a city where you can be very public or very private. It's nearly impossible not to be seen in New York if you don't want to be seen. But in L.A., you can disappear or be completely in the middle of everything."

Celaya's career trajectory is somewhat unusual. In addition to making paintings and sculptures, which frequently incorporate slightly surreal figures and depictions of the natural world, he is also an author and trained physicist, having originally attended college to study applied and engineering physics at Cornell. "I always have a couple of things going on at once. I like the variety, everything kind of informs each other," he said. He continues to turn to literature and science for inspiration, and explained that he sees an unbalanced relationship between art and other disciplines. "Despite the market success of the art world in the past 20 years, it's completely irrelevant to any other field of engagement in terms of knowledge," he said. "The art world has become a sort of satellite, only interesting to itself." In addition to his prolific artistic output, Celaya maintains [Whale & Star Press](#), a publisher of art, poetry, and critical theory that he founded in 1998.

Celaya is currently exhibiting work at [LongHouse Reserve](#), in East Hampton, New York, and this summer will teach at [Anderson Ranch Arts Center](#) in Aspen, Colorado. He will be participating in the Roth Fellowship at Dartmouth University, in Hanover, New Hampshire, from August 2016 through June 2017. Below, a look around his studio.



Celaya has been at his sprawling Culver City space since 2014. "It's a city where you can be very public, or very private. It's nearly impossible not to be seen in New York if you don't want to be seen."



The Well, a piece from 2014, sits outside the studio.



Pieces displayed around the studio. "When you look at the work, you're invited into a scene. Everything else on the painting tells you it's not a scene—that it's just a construction, a bunch of markings. It's important not to be painterly, but to create a certain instability in the recognition of these images. In that way, they start to act more like memories. They are elusive. They come and they go."

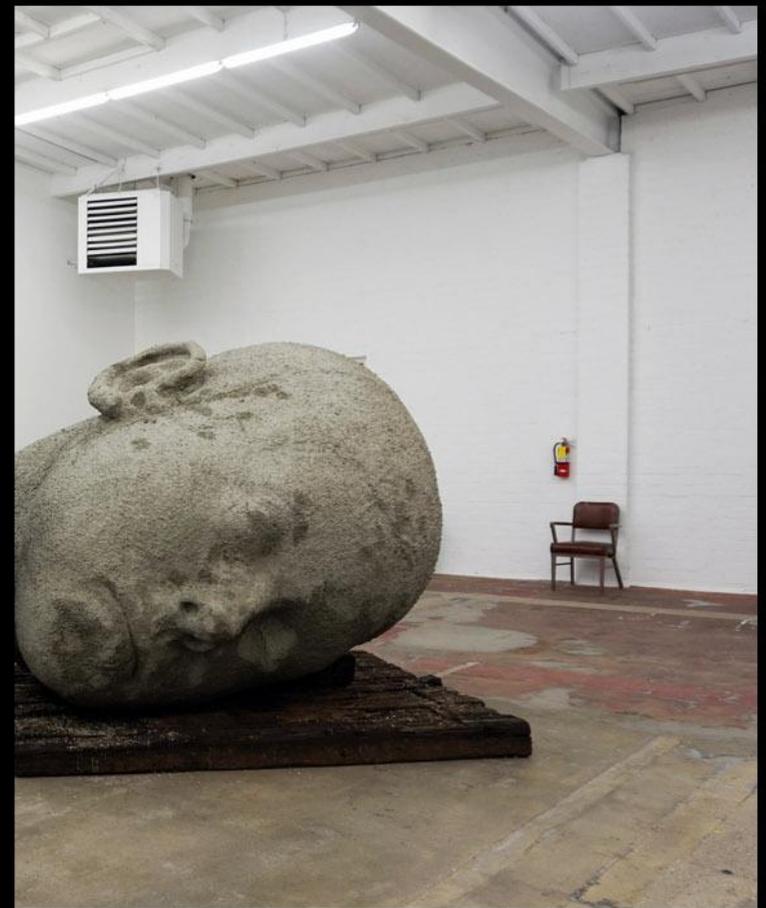


Celaya told me that much of the inspiration for his paintings comes from reading. "When the painting emerges, there's all kinds of information that tells you to not believe it as an image, and other things that tell you to believe it. That tension is not a gimmick—that's my stance towards my imagery," he said. "Putting that forth is the only way I find I can have an authentic relationship to the work."



Canaries that live in the studio. Celaya always listens to music while he's working. "They seem to like Leonard Cohen and Coldplay," he said.

Celaya has collaborated on album covers with artists including the Cowboy Junkies.



The studio's back room. Celaya takes his engagement with philosophy and literature seriously. He said, "I don't want to be a 'dabbler' or a guy who claims some sort of philosophical dialogue, which is derivative and uninteresting to everyone."

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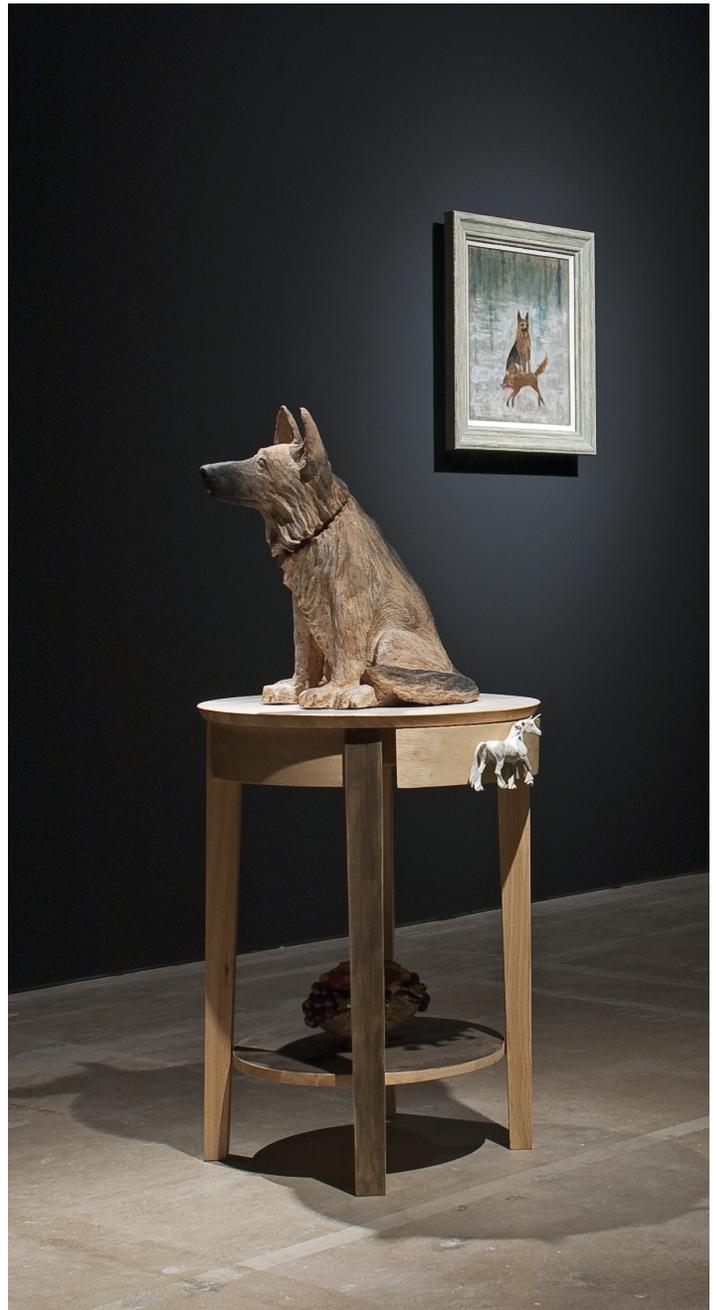
Santa Fe Enrique Martínez Celaya

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Ana Finel Honigman —

Enrique Martínez Celaya's "The Pearl" is an affecting meditation on nostalgia. Martínez Celaya constructs this exhibition like a tightly composed narrative poem involving a small cast of characters—a boy, a fox, a gaggle of different kinds of small woodland birds, and a German shepherd—depicted through paintings, chintzy figurines, sculptures, and installation. Nothing feels extraneous in Martínez Celaya's dreamlike vision of a lost home and distant boyhood. His surreal narrative unfolds through a series of installations that viewers explore from room to room by following a clear hose hung from the ceiling. It is safe to say that this prosaic hose acts as a metaphor for Martínez Celaya's memory, linking him back to his youth and the meaning behind all the melancholy totems in the show.

The exhibition opens with a white cloth curtain near the entrance, on which is projected a film of the German shepherd



devouring a house made of dog food. Although the dog initially destroys the home, he is a protective force elsewhere in the show, particularly for the boy (spoiler alert: the dog kills the fox). The dog is also not the only part of the story that embodies contradictory meanings. A lighthouse, for example, which is first encountered as a tarred and feathered wood sculpture in an installation with a similarly desecrated rescue boat, is seen as a helpful presence in the background of a series of framed photographs hung on an adjacent wall in the same room.

Throughout the installation, the same forces can be alternatively redemptive, protective, and destructive. Fire both cleanses and destroys chairs and trees, while water is also shown to purify and corrupt. In their totality, all of these elements are deftly employed to symbolize change, our tenuous grasp on cherished memories, and the necessity of accepting loss.

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Courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, Calif.

“The Young” (2008), for which the artist, Enrique Martínez Celaya, mixed oil and wax on canvas — a technique he uses for many works.

Layers of Devotion (and the Scars to Prove It)

By JORI FINKEL

SANTA MONICA, Calif.
IMAGINE you’re an artist finishing work for a big gallery show. You’re standing on a ladder trying to reach the top of a wooden sculpture with a chain saw; the next thing you know, you’ve sliced open your left hand. You’ve

severed the tips of two fingers and nearly cut your thumb to the bone. You’ve hit an artery. Blood is spurting everywhere.

This is the scene that played out in June for the artist Enrique Martínez Celaya, when he was preparing for his first exhibition at

the L.A. Louver gallery in Venice, Calif., which opened on Thursday and runs through January 3.

To make matters worse, he had attached the chain saw blade to a grinder for speed.

He credits his studio manager, Catherine Wallack, with thinking



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

The painter, sculptor and sometime scientist Enrique Martínez Celaya beside one of his works in his studio in Santa Monica, Calif.

quickly, pressing his paper-towel-wrapped hand in hers, almost tourniquet-style, to staunch the bleeding and letting emergency paramedics know he was an artist. (Pity the studio intern, three days on the job, who had the unglamorous task of finding the fingertips.)

He also credits his reconstructive surgeon, Jerry Haviv, with skillfully repairing his ligaments and tendons. (Mr. Martínez Celaya says he now has 80 percent function in his left hand — which is not his dominant hand — and expects a full recovery within a year.)

As for his own reaction that day, he described it as strangely calm. “I said to Catherine as the paramedics were taking me away: ‘Don’t throw away the paper towels. I might want to use them in an artwork.’”

It was the reaction of an artist who has often used unorthodox materials like tar, blood, hair and feathers in his paintings. It was also the response of a highly rational, self-disciplined scientist who once worked on the femtosecond laser

as a physicist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island.

Mr. Martínez Celaya is one of the rare contemporary artists who trained as a physicist. He studied quantum electronics as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, until he found himself more and more often sneaking away to paint, something he had considered a hobby.

“I found that the kinds of questions I wanted to tackle were not the questions of physics,” he said. “Art is usually described as a luxury, but I felt the opposite. I just couldn’t go to the lab anymore and ignore everything going on emotionally with me.”

The questions he explores in painting (and in his related writings) belong to religion and philosophy: the meaning of life and death, the purpose of consciousness, and what it means to be good or do good. He is as likely to talk about Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, or Herman Melville and Paul Celan, as Joseph Beuys and Lucian Freud.

Although he shows regularly with John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco and Sara Meltzer in New York (and has a retrospective that will open next year at the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg), he recognizes that he is not exactly of the moment.

“So many contemporary paintings have this wink to say we’re both in on the joke,” he said. “Any time I find myself being witty or clever, I paint over it.”

For instance, the wooden sculpture that cost him so much blood — carved from a single, 4,000-pound log of Paulownia Tomentosa, also known as the Empress tree — has the gravitas of a medieval Pietà. Only there is no body of Jesus, just a stiff girl sitting alone on a big rock in a penitent pose.

“The robe that she wears is too big for her,” he said. “I wanted her to have this awkward, vulnerable feeling.”

The other works in his Santa Monica studio that day, another sculpture and a dozen good-size paintings now at L.A. Louver, are also lessons in isolation — sparse landscapes and astringent snowscapes, boyish figures that seem lost against the wide horizon, and animals holding their own, sometimes with no humans in sight.

The idea of exile and, more broadly, the existential condition of being separated from home haunts Mr. Martínez Celaya’s work. Born in Cuba, he emigrated with his family to Madrid in childhood and to Puerto Rico as a teenager before moving to the United States for college.

Even today at 44, with a wife and three young children, he remains mobile. He has been shuttling for the past five years between Los Angeles and Delray Beach, Fla., a town, he said, that he and his wife picked out on a map. (The current plan is to live in Delray Beach year-round, and he has just sold his Santa Monica studio.) An exhibition of his work last year at the Miami Art Museum was aptly named “Nomad.”

The artist on his style: ‘It’s strange to love painting and be so much anti-painting.’

“Someone asked me a while back why I paint all of these images of coldness and snow,” he said. “I think that’s the temperature I feel inside. Isolation, solitude and loneliness, I’m always feeling the condition of things — or what you could call the illusion of things — being separate.”

He walked over to a painting that shows a thin sliver of a naked boy trapped inside a tall block of ice, an image he worked on for more than two years. Part of what took so long, he said, was the inherent melodrama of the image, more surreal than most of his scenes.

“It seemed like a remarkably stupid painting to me,” he said. “I

even painted pine cones trying to get him out of the ice. I created cracks in the ice, but I couldn't get him out."

For all of the paintings in his studio that day, he relied on the same basic technique. He mixed wax into oil paint (about a 1-to-3 ratio), building up one thin layer after another to achieve a matte finish and translucency of color. ("Shiny paint makes me feel like I can't breathe," he said.) Some paintings have as many as 20 layers.

In the process he often painted over shapes or even human figures so that the finished canvas could contain less by way of content than it once did. One muddy, mountainous painting originally showed a boy sitting off to one corner holding the head of a deer. Now both the boy and head are gone.

In another canvas a boy stands in a deep field of dandelions, his face popping out like an overgrown flower. But the more you look, the less the image yields. There is no expressive or virtuosic brush stroke, and little realistic detail, to flesh out the figure or reveal the boy's age or size. Mr. Martínez Celaya said it was intentional. "There's not enough there to hold you emotionally. You begin to sink into a black hole."

"It's strange to love painting and be so much anti-painting," he added. "I'm not interested in luscious, sexy, virtuosic painting, but the destruction of the image, undermining the certainty of the image."

Near that work hung a darker painting of a horse in front of a forest, tethered to something out of sight. Here too there are signs of a painter making himself less painterly, as well as an empathy for animals. "It's clunky, like I like," he said. "It was hard to paint a horse as aggressively as I wanted. It wanted to be treated better than that."

This painting originally featured a white deer, but he ended up instead making a bronze sculpture of a deer,



Courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, Calif.

"The Unwilled" (2008), a work that features a boy in a block of ice.

which stood near the large western stretch of windows in his studio. From a distance it looked as though the deer was pulling a sled, in a possible reindeer reference.

Only this is no garden ornament. The sled turns out to be a small bronze model of a Rocky Mountain-style landscape, complete with peaks and lakes. And the deer has moments of realism, not to mention testicles.

Still, the creature, now installed in the roof garden at L.A. Louver, remains elusive in many ways. Its bronze surface is highly reflective (waxed, not patinated), and the artist imagines that it will shimmer like a mirage for visitors.

"It's a little like a magic trick," he said, "trying to make something as solid as metal vanish a bit."

Then there are the seams on the deer's legs and torso, where the welding process has etched faint rainbows into the metal. Mr. Martínez Celaya decided not to smooth these seams so he could "expose the sculpture's constructed nature."

And now, after his accident, the ridges have new meaning for him.

He glanced down at the deer's legs, then held up his left hand.

"The seams on the deer look like scars to me," he said. "I feel even more of a connection to him now."



The Leopard, 2005. Bronze, marble, earth and tar sculpture on table. 46 x 67 x 35 in. (117 x 170 x 88,9 cm.)
Courtesy of LA Louver Gallery, Venice, California.

Enrique Martínez Celaya

The Rhythms of Life

CAROL DAMIAN

It may be said that artists and the art historians forge the master keys that open the mysterious locks to our senses, to which originally only Nature held the key. They are complex locks.² Enrique Martínez Celaya is an artist who thrives on such complexities as he explores the media of painting, photography, and sculpture from the perspective of a scientist, philosopher, poet, and intellectual. One may also be tempted to describe his search for the answers to life's meaning as that of an existentialist, an analytic philosopher seeking "truth"

in human existence through artistic expression and creation. The work of Martínez Celaya is informed by his intellectualism and by his sensitive responses to the world around him, especially to nature and family. He studies with the intensity of a German thinker and makes fine distinctions in his work using critical theory that he has mastered as an artist and teacher. These serious pursuits have even resulted in the establishment of a publishing company to create texts and guides to assist his students in understanding the primary sources of theoretical literature.³ A combined

commitment to the production of art and the history of art is what elevates Martínez Celaya's work above the mere application or fabrication of materials.

The quiet intensity with which Martínez Celaya approaches the making of art is best understood after learning his biography. Born in Palos, Cuba, in 1964, he first studied art at the age of eleven with an academic painter. In 1972, his family left Cuba for Spain, where they suffered the extraordinary trauma of exile, a dark experience that would never leave him. After another move to Puerto Rico, the young Martínez Celaya quickly demonstrated his precocious talent as a scientist and earned a scholarship to study applied physics and electrical engineering at Cornell University. He then continued his studies with graduate work in quantum electronics at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was supported by a fellowship from the Brookhaven National Laboratory. He also published poetry, built a laser, and received awards from the Department of Energy and National Congress of Science. He explains his proclivity for science as an escape from the chaos of exile and displacement, as a refuge of precision and order within a world of confusion. Science appealed to him because it was a constant search for truth, the same search that is so evident in his work as an artist. After Martínez Celaya's years of scientific investigation, however, the artist in him finally emerged when he left the PhD program to pursue a Master of Fine Art degree and follow his passion. After living for many years in California, where he taught and pursued his career as an artist, he moved with his family to Delray Beach, Florida, and now enjoys a quiet village life and a view of the sea. It is impossible to discuss the work of Martínez Celaya without recognizing the dual nature of his genius (what is often referred to as "left brain/right brain" sensibilities) and the effects of his life experiences, from the past to the present.

Martínez Celaya uses the process of creating art to understand these life experiences and their effects on his everyday reality. Often, as he begins to layer paint, tar, photographs, drawings, words, and other materials on the surfaces of his canvases, he is not sure what will evolve, or how. He can work on a painting for months, reworking, adding, scraping, and layering—sometimes destroying and beginning again. Some of his most powerful works involve the application of tar and feathers, materials that imply history and violence. Tar is like blood; both are natural, viscous substances, yet Martínez Celaya gives them new meanings as life substances with dark overtones. He also uses blood as a medium with its own unique characteristics. His faith in the medium and the process results in what he describes as "projects" or "cycles" rather than "series".

The publication of his most recent book, *Martínez Celaya: Early Work*, presents an opportunity to focus on some of his latest works (2004–06) within the context of his career (1977–present). The book is divided according to his projects, which have been compiled from his studio archives of photographs, sketches, and reproductions of the works, and they

reveal that, for the artist, "The urgency of certain interests and methods always had their moment. The projects follow the rhythms of life, often mapping my inadequacies more than my strengths."⁴ In the book, the images are organized in reverse chronology, and this decision encapsulates the work ethic of Martínez Celaya, who explains that: [in] conventional chronologies a linear progression is assumed: early activities seem inevitably and almost deterministically to lead to subsequent or later activities that tend to fix the meaning and significance of the past... The organization suggests something else. The past is not causally linked to the present, but is alive, active, and a source of continued reflection and interpretation.⁵

This is an important statement that suggests an evaluation or discussion of his work from a conceptual rather than linear perspective. Certain subjects appear again and again: the boy, children, the sea, trees, mountains, animals, and birds. However, in each project, they take on new meanings with a wide range of emotions and aesthetic expressions.

Boy in Vitrine, 2004. Paint, dirt, tar, straw, pins, hair, steel, plaster, glass, wire and flowers 64 x 17 ½ x 14 in. (162,5 x 44,4 x 35,5 cm.). Courtesy of Akira Ikeda Gallery, Berlin, Germany.

"By their true nature rhythms and tunes are copies of anger and mildness, courage and temperance (with their opposites) and all the other qualities of character."
—Aristotle, *Politics VIII*¹



Tree in Snow, 2002. Oil, wax and tar on canvas. 100 x 78 in. (254 x 198,1 cm.). Sammlung Rosenkranz, Berlin, Germany.

Schneebett, 2004. Installation at the Berliner Philharmonie. Sammlung Rosenkranz, Berlin, Germany.



The boy who appears so often in Martínez Celaya's work may be seen as the artist's alter ego, a vision of self-exploration. He is a monumental presence as a life-size sculpture made of paint, dirt, tar, straw, steel, glass, and flowers (*Boy in Vitrine*, 2004); he is a subtle reflection of the child coming of age (*Boy Raising His Arms*, 2005); and he floats above the ice-blue sea, as rapturous as he is brooding in other works (*Boy and Iceberg*, 2005). The boy appears often: solitary, in shadow,

in photographic reality, in paintings, drawings, and installations. Is he the frightening tarcovered vision in bronze on a marble table in *The Leopard* (2005), who lies there with a gaval in the process of being devoured by a leopard?

Such dark imagery once earned Martínez Celaya the nickname "Prince of Darkness."⁶ His *October Cycle* (2000–02) with its origins in philosophy, poetry, and complex life experiences, was meant to "function as

icons, an aesthetic form that invites contemplation of the transcendent through the immanent."⁷ Martínez Celaya describes it as: [an] extended metaphor exploring the relationship between the seasons and the transition in human life. The large paintings are covered with emulsified tar combined with oil paint and solvents to generate a compelling surface with colors ranging from blacks and browns to warm, rich tones of amber and rose. The imagery of trees, figures, and falling snow emerges as notations of experience—and traces.⁸

What at first may appear as dim and mysterious, as in *Man and Sky* (2002) and *Tree in Snow* (2002), upon close examination reveal traces of white and rainbows beneath the surface that speak more of hope than of darkness and evoke a mood of scientific inquiry transformed into an alchemical ritual. Has the scientist/artist now become the artist/scientist? Martínez Celaya is and has always been both; now, he has substituted instruments of precision for the rituals of a shaman. Art is an act of transformation, like science, poetry, photography, and music—each is significant to Martínez Celaya's aesthetic.

Music is the subject of one of his most provocative projects: *Schneebett* (2003–04) was inspired by the death of Beethoven and reveals the artist's fascination with the genius composer. The project involved an intense period of research and work that concluded with exhibitions in Paris, in Aspen, at the Berliner Philharmonie in 2004, and at the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig in 2006, where the work was installed in a bed of snow. The installation of Beethoven's deathbed at the Philharmonie was based on drawings of the actual bed. It was a refrigerated bronze bed, with its pillow and sheets made of frost; it was placed against a large painting of a snowfilled birch forest, and the horizon line was meant to symbolize the view from the composer's room and the transition from life to death.⁹ Dead birch branches from the nearby Berlin Tiergarten

Boy in Sunset, 2005. Oil and tar on canvas and mirror. 72 x 144 in. (182 7/8 x 365,7 cm.). Collection of Akira Ikeda, Japan.



The Two Worlds, 2007. Oil and wax on canvas. 116 x 150 in. (294,6 x 381 cm.). Collection of Ron and Ann Pizzuti, Columbus, Ohio. Courtesy of the Sara Meltzer Gallery.



completed the effect of a cold, contemplative environment. The cold climate of Nordic places, which has appeared in Martínez Celaya's images of romantic mountain landscapes and floating icebergs, was brought inside: death is winter.

In Florida, there is no winter, and the past few years have forced a change of mood in Martínez Celaya: a lighter palette interrupts the brooding tar paintings that continue to be part of his oeuvre. Two projects, *The Atlantic* (2004–05) and *Shore: "Is Today Yesterday?"* (2004–05),¹⁰ are the first to be presented in his new book, according to his reverse chronology, and may be seen not only as a new direction for the future but also as a summation of the past. *Shore* was inspired by a question asked by Martínez Celaya's three-year-old daughter and by the transitory experience embodied in a camphor tree that he saw one day as he biked along the shore road. A visual commentary on the illusion of permanence, the project is "an environment of works in which children and the landscape articulate concerns of identity, displacement, and mortality." His children play a significant role in his life and his work. However, they are never simply the objects of artistic invention or fatherly pride but important participants in his creative process. In *Shore*, the minimal work has a quiet intensity that marks Martínez Celaya's aesthetic of absence. Figures emerge from beyond a ghostly presence to become phantoms integrated in new environments, with the sand and sea. *Boy in Sunset* (2005) is a large diptych with a mirror. A boy, with arms outstretched, stands against a dark background created from oil and tar; the glow of a sunset forms a halo. He is about to fly and appears like a mythical figure surveying his territory. A mirror disrupts the space, forcing the image into an ordinary space, a studio or gallery, and breaks the reverie.

In *The Atlantic* (2005), Martínez Celaya reveals his relationship with the tropical landscape of Florida, its blue sky and seas and exotic trees that thrive in the



The Mountain, 2003. Oil, wax, varnish, graphite and tar on canvas. 72 x 66 in. (182,8 x 167,6 cm.). Private Collection, Berlin, Germany.

warm moist air. He describes the smell of the place as "a complex Southern mixture of death and melancholia that some around here call excitement." The haunting presence of a small boy appears often in this project. In *Boy Against the Horizon* (2005), a life-size figure made with ink on canvas, the photographic quality of the figure is a counterpoint to the painterly background of the sea. This figure appears again in *The Water* (2005), an elegant abstraction of sea and human form. The juxtapositions of time and space and disparate media lead to a different perception of Martínez Celaya's ideas, which he uses to create a total concept.

A huge diptych, *No Title* (2006), commissioned for the exhibition "The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama," dominated

Martínez Celaya's studio in recent months. Beside the large painting, a mirror of equal size reflects the viewer and his/her space as much as it serves as a dislocating element that visually invades the wall and the space itself. The image of a storm dissolves, with lightning as a metaphor for conscience. It is streaked with a substance that turns out to be blood, which expresses the temporal, yet there is a strangely sublime and calming effect as Nature shows her power. It is not a violent image but rather an oasis of calm and peace amidst the drama of nature.

While he was preparing for exhibitions and residencies in Europe, Japan, and the United States, Martínez Celaya embarked on another project based on the work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam for the Sara Meltzer Gallery in New York City



Boy Against the Horizon, 2005. Ink on canvas. 72 x 52 in. (182,8 x 132 cm.). Courtesy of Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, Colorado.

(May–June 2007). The exhibition's title, "Awaiting a Second Plan," simultaneously confessed failure and hope. This hope was of interest to Martínez Celaya as he explored the philosophical and the poetic through memorializing Mandelshtam's wife as the metaphor for solitude in *The Two Worlds* (2006, Figure 11).

Inspired by the cycles of nature, the works of Enrique Martínez Celaya follow the rhythms of life as sensual references to the illusions of the real and the imaginary. They proclaim the right of art to soar and to invade the territory of the intellect and the scientific with a material literalness that ranges from the luminous and ephemeral to the depths of the obscure.¹¹ I am grateful to Enrique Martínez Celaya for the

opportunity to interview him at his studio and to preview his new book and work in progress.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, Politics, 1340A, in E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen series, 1956), 359.
2. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen series, 1956), 359.
3. Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Guide* (Los Angeles: Whale and Star, 2002), and *Sketches of Landscapes* (*Readings on the Philosophy of Art*) (Los Angeles: Whale and Star, 2002). Whale and Star Press is the artist's publishing company.

4. Enrique Martínez Celaya, in Martínez Celaya: *Early Work* (Delray Beach, FL: Whale and Star, 2006), 11.
5. Daniel A. Siedell, in Martínez Celaya: *Early Work*, 5.
6. Elisa Turner, "The Prince of Darkness," *Miami Herald*, March 7, 2004, 3M and 5M.
7. Daniel A. Siedell, Enrique Martínez Celaya: *The October Cycle, 2000–2002* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2003), 21. Catalog for exhibition at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden. The exhibition, curated by Daniel A Siedell, traveled to the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, in 2004.
8. Siedell, artist's comments, 82.
9. Schneebett: An Installation in the Green Room at the Berliner Philharmonie, Berlin, 2004–05. Comments by the artist, *New Work*, 104.
10. Shore. "Is Today Yesterday?" has been exhibited as Part I in Berlin and Part II and Santa Monica, California in 2005.
11. Collection of the Sammlung Rosenkranz, Berlin, Germany.

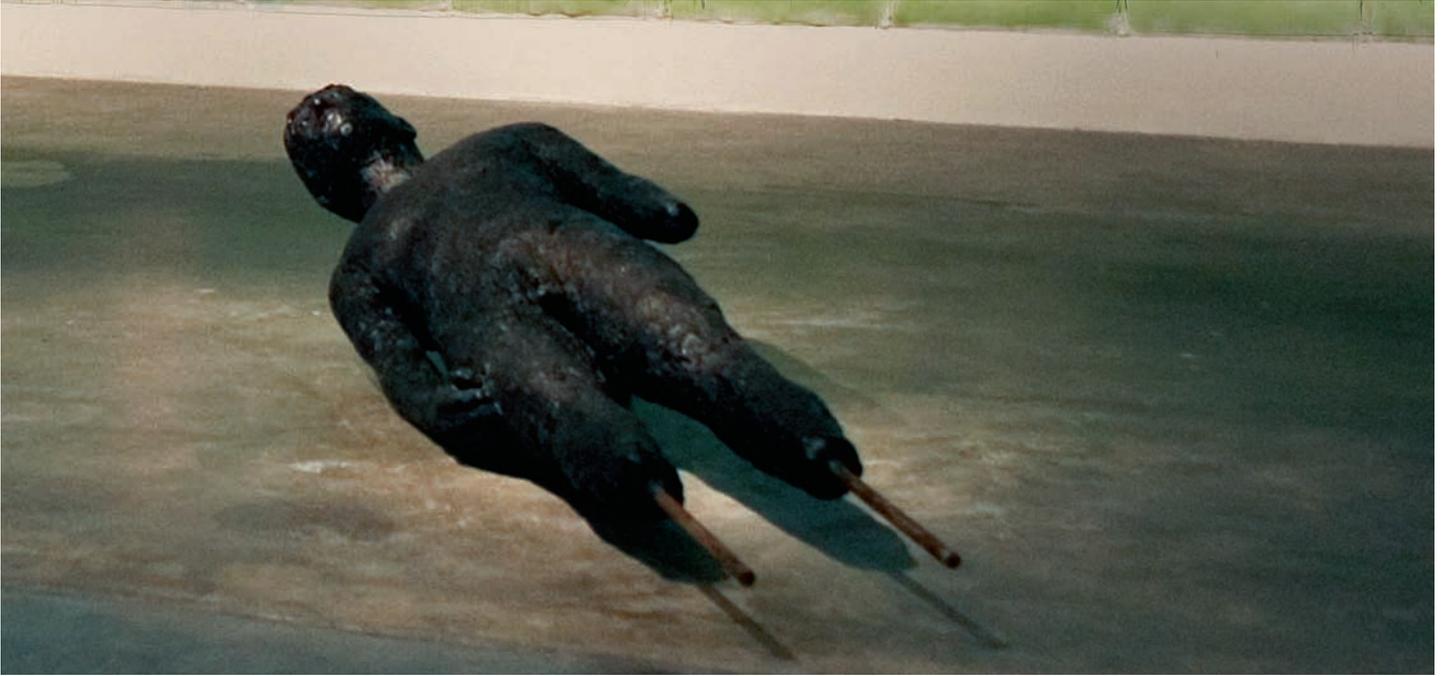
CAROL DAMIAN

Art History Professor School of Art and Art History, FIU.

Los Angeles Times

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2005

Renaissance man looks to the past



The Immigrant 2005. Bronze and steel, 93 x 24 x 17 inches.

Art Review

By LEAH OLLMAN

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Over the last decade, Enrique Martínez Celaya has massaged raw matter from the deepest recesses of the mind and heart into stunning visual form. He has an uncommon wealth of tools at his disposal—versatility in painting, sculpture, photography, installation and the written word, as well as studies in physics, philosophy and poetry. As viscerally powerful as his work can be, no Martínez Celaya show ever feels complete in itself. Each batch of work integrates with what came before the way a fresh journal entry expands upon earlier reflections, or a new melody line weaves its way into a fugue. Images recur; familiar rhythms and moods resurface.

In new painting, photographs and sculpture at Griffin, Martínez Celaya continues his meditations on loss, refuge, innocence, melancholy and hope. The show has weaknesses (particularly the group of photographs printed on canvas, which feel conceptually slight and lack the artist's exquisite sense of touch), but the emotional throughline that unifies his work maintains as strongly as ever.

The intense interiority of the work is independent of scale. A small painting of an iceberg in oil and tar has a stark, brooding presence.

Equally powerful though lighter in spirit is “Refuge,” a huge multi-panel painting on paper of a boy standing on an expanse of green beneath the protective canopy of a rainbow. This radiant figure—pure, complete, innocent—complements a slightly larger than life bronze figure, titled “The Immigrant,” which is missing one hand and both feet. The dark, rigid form is propped up on its side on the floor like a piece of driftwood, compromised and vulnerable.

Works in the show bring to mind painters Albert Pinkham Ryder and Caspar David Friedrich, sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz and poet Paul Celan, but the wistful, painfully beautiful atmosphere throughout is pure Martínez Celaya.

Griffin, 2902 Nebraska Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 586-6886, through Jan. 21. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.griffinla.com

Art in America

May 2003



Enrique Martínez Celaya: Gabriela's Laughter, 2002, oil and tar on canvas, 77 by 60 inches. Collection Herta and Paul Amir.

In a Silent Season

While often working in a multiplicity of mediums concurrently, Cuban-born artist Enrique Martínez Celaya remains acutely aware of the limitations of each. A recent retrospective and a new cycle of paintings highlight the contradictory impulses at the core of his enterprise.

BY LEAH OLLMAN

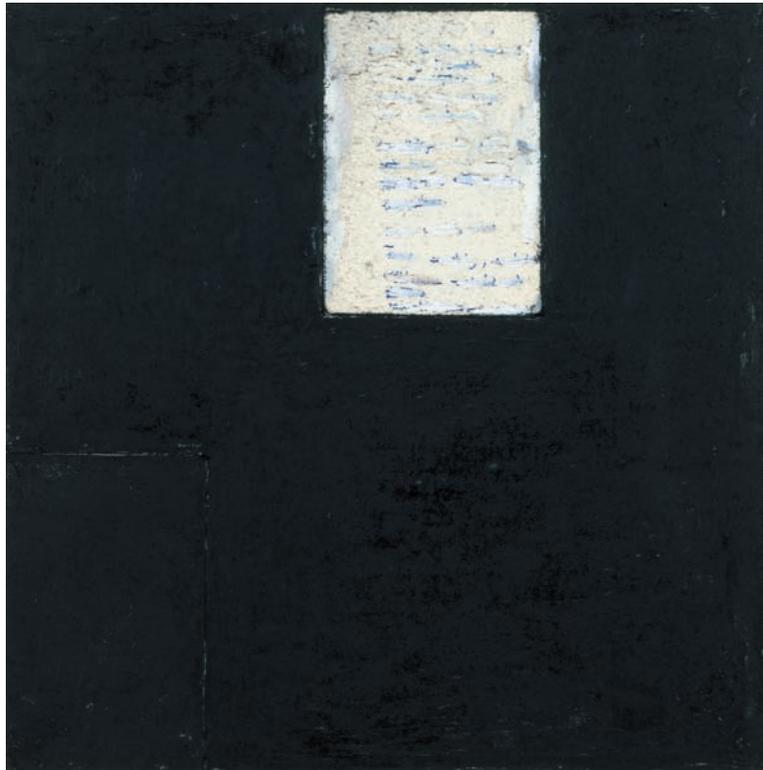
They say each person is an island, but it's not true, each person is a silence, yes, that's it, a silence, each of us with our own silence, each of us with the silence that is us.

- José Saramago, *The Cave*

Enrique Martínez Celaya's recent 10-year survey exhibition, organized by the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, had all of the textural richness of a fugue. His paintings contain strata of concealed imagery and sometimes embedded objects, like feathers, artificial flowers, butterfly wings and hair. Dirt and flower petals float in his resin sculptures of body parts, and poems appear incised upon their surfaces. His photographs are occasionally painted on, after being printed from negatives he has altered and scratched. Such interweaving and layering feeds into the reciprocity of the artist's working process.

His written notes might invoke a sculptural idea, which in turn might generate a poem or give rise to a painting.

Since the conclusion of that show's tour last year, Martínez Celaya has created a spare yet intimate new group of paintings, "The October Cycle." He showed the work-concurrently at Griffin in Venice, Calif., and Danese in New York-in uncharacteristic isolation, without the company of corresponding work in other mediums. Between this purer mode of presentation and the work's own emphasis on fundamental emotions and conditions (tenderness, sadness, grace), "The October Cycle" came across as uncommonly concentrated, less like a fugue than the clear, resonant tone of a single bell.



No Doubt Good Writing, 1995, charcoal and collage on paper, 17 by 16 inches.

Though physically imposing in size (up to 10 feet wide), the paintings feel restrained, purposefully quiet. Painted in oil and varnish on grounds of emulsified tar, their surfaces are dark and rich, fertile as humus and as primal. They oscillate between thick and thin, matte and glossy, dense and translucent. In places, paint drips in thinned streaks down the canvas. In others, the artist furrows into deep, viscous tar. An animate darkness presides. The warm, brownish black evokes neither night nor despair, but a primary condition, a place of beginning, anterior to light and language. Into this rich silence, Martínez Celaya voices his world, one element at a time. A man. A tree. Snowfall. A rainbow. A child.

In the stunning *Gabriela's Laughter* (2002), named after the artist's young

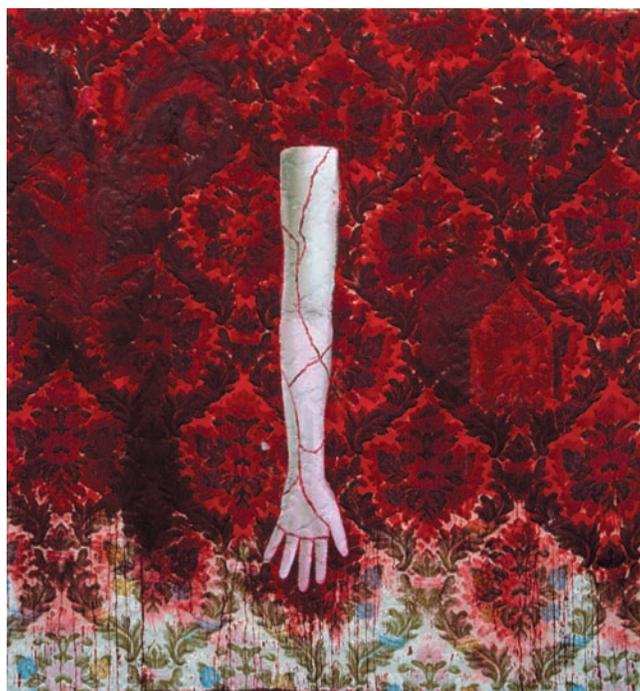
daughter, an adult figure in pale outline half stands, half sits in darkness. Brilliant light cascades from an intensely radiant source above, fanning out and enveloping the figure in its blessing.

Laughter and light, as suggested by the title, have converged into a single affirming force. *Light* (2002) has an urgent, brooding kind of beauty familiar from the landscapes of Albert Pinkham Ryder. The simplest denotation of a tree, a trunk dividing upward into two thick branches, appears against placeless black. As in *Gabriela's Laughter*, light redeems this darkness, too. A muted luminosity emanates from the crotch of the tree, as if it had been nesting there, a dense glow spreading its pale, thinning rays.

Rugged textures and translucent veils in the paintings convey a sense

The fragmented body parts in Martínez Celaya's work conjure larger discontinuities within physical experience and enduring memory.

of shifting space, space-in-process. These are staging grounds for becoming, rather than fixed locales. Martínez Celaya named "The October Cycle" after the startling transition in seasons that he experienced for the first time at the age of eight, when he moved to Spain from his native Cuba. October became, for him, a metaphor for premonition and revelation. A few years later, his family moved again, to



Map, 1998, oil on fabric, 48 inches square.
Collection Stephen Cohen, Los Angeles.

The figures that have recurred in his paintings over the past decade are vaguely male but have no specific identities or detailed features. Their one consistent quality is their inwardness. Their eyes are nearly always closed, and their backs curve in a slight hunch, as if reflexively protecting a fragile interior. These are portraits of the introspective self, reckoning with the circumstances of loss, transcendence, memory and impermanence that have shaped Martínez Celaya's sensibility. The experience of never living two consecutive years in the same house until he was 18 exiled him repeatedly from his past and forced upon him the condition of the stranger with perpetually unfinished business. For him, looking became synonymous with looking back.

Last year he published *Guide*, a fictionalized account of a dialogue



Milk, 2002, oil and emulsified tar on canvas, 100 by 78 inches.
Courtesy John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.

Puerto Rico. He had begun studying art as a child, and he continued developing as an artist but simultaneously proved himself something of a prodigy in philosophy and science, publishing papers by the time he was a teenager.

As a college student, Martínez Celaya relocated to the U.S., earning his B.A. in physics from Cornell University and continuing with graduate study in quantum electronics at the University of California, Berkeley. He switched to the graduate art program at Berkeley but left after a short while to work at a laser company (where he took out several patents in laser technology) and to paint. He later enrolled at U.C. Santa Barbara, where he earned his M.F.A. in 1994, and moved to Los Angeles, where he has remained, teaching at Pomona College.



House of Arms, 1998, wax and titanium dioxide, 27 inches long.
Collection Stephen Cohen.



The Empty Garden, 1997-99, oil, tar, and objects on canvas, 84 by 100 inches. Collection Christopher and Tracy Keys, Laguna Beach.

about art and its meaning that he had with an older mentor while on a road trip up the California coast. In the book, Martínez Celaya allows himself two voices, one in quoted conversation with his companion, and the other silent and italicized, augmenting and second-guessing the first. His process pivots on both faith and doubt, he writes. Faith in a medium's possibilities fuels his efforts; doubt in its capacity to measure up to the intensity of lived experience infuses those efforts with an aching sense of displacement.

Working in numerous mediums concurrently, he remains acutely conscious of the limits of each. He wrestles, through his work, with the prospect of meaning being located just beyond the boundaries of expression. In *No Doubt Good Writing* (1995), he painted in white over a page of his own writing, then adhered the page to a larger sheet blackened by charcoal. "I could not live with what I had written," he has stated in regard to the work, "but I could live with the writing denied." A cycle of searching, defining and undermining plays itself out openly here. It's a process that is also at work in early canvases that the artist cut, then stitched back together, and in the recent paintings, with their images buried under layers of blackness. Clashes between affirmation and denial, repair and violence, redemption and loss all lend their friction to his work.

In the early '90s, Martínez Celaya reduced his vocabulary to a modest set of primary images that he has used ever since: the human figure, birds, trees and flowers. He practices a kind of blunt poetry of essentials, stripped of small talk, using a palette of charged, basic tones—milk, earth, blood and light. The hummingbird appears frequently as a metaphor for consciousness. Its own duality—fragile yet sturdy, delicate yet aggressive, capable of stillness within continuous movement—mirrors the mind's synthesis of opposing impulses.

Heads and hands also recur often in Martínez Celaya's work, usually in isolation. In the 1998 painting *Map*, the image of a pale, truncated arm dangles unanchored upon a ground of florid upholstery fabric soaked blood-red. Thin red lines trail across the arm, more like branching rivers than veins. Martínez Celaya, like Guillermo Kuitca, asserts the validity of a personal, bodily geography, in which demarcation of territory parallels the articulation of experience and meaning. In *The Empty Garden* (1997-99), a large silhouetted head seems to have fallen like a dead weight into a lower corner of the canvas. The neck drips like a fresh wound. Feathers stick into the milky white ground near the chin, and small, rolled scraps of canvas poke through slits in the surface. The mouth hangs open, bereft, as dispossessed of speech as the feathers have been deprived of flight.

In *Rosemilk* the visual overlap of split tree branch and cruciform torso reads as romantic - a confluence of spirit, body and nature.



Rosemilk, 2002, oil and tar on canvas, 78 by 120 inches. Private collection, Corvallis, Ore.

The fragmented body parts in Martínez Celaya's work evoke larger discontinuities within physical experience and memory. A head or bird's wing or flower petal invokes the larger whole from which it is detached. It channels our attention to what's absent. What isn't represented then becomes emblematic of what cannot be represented—an entirety, a full understanding of the workings of consciousness. That polarity between the possibilities and the limitations of representation (again, faith and doubt) drives Martínez Celaya, and links him, soul to soul, to the poet Paul Celan (1920-1970), whose writings have served as his touchstones for the past decade.

Celan, a Romanian-born Jew, lost his parents in the Holocaust: his father died of typhus in a concentration camp, and his mother was shot. After the war, he resettled in Paris and ultimately drowned himself in the Seine. Though he wrote in German, he struggled against its loaded status as the language of his enemy. In part to reinvent the language, and to reclaim it, he conjured a wealth of neologisms, compound words that compress multiple associations into singular, densely emotive form: *breathturn*, *threadsuns*, *smokemouth*, *madnessbread*, *sleepscraps*.

Martínez Celaya conjoins disparate images in much the same way, adhering rose petals onto the silhouette of a head or setting birds across a figure's eyes and mouth. In one of the new paintings, *Rosemilk* (2002), he superimposes images of a split tree branch

and a cruciform torso with outstretched arms. The visual overlap reads as romantic—a confluence of spirit, body and nature.

Martínez Celaya's work shares with Celan's a common texture and attention to essentials—the seasons, hair, breath, stones, sleep, death, love, loss, the darkness of earth and the whiteness of snow. His images, like Celan's, are concentrated to the point of irreducibility. Memory inflects his every gesture, and silence in his work assumes fullness arid palpability. His cast-resin heads and caramel-colored arms have the import of sacred relics, bringing the lost forward into the present.

In *Bed (The Creek)*, a 1997 installation, Martínez Celaya staged a stunning reconciliation of love and pain on par with Celan's call (in the poem "Speak You, Also") to "keep yes and no unsplit." The double bed, neatly made with two sets of pillows and an embroidered spread, exuded domesticity, stability, intimacy. Sourced somewhere between the pillows was a stream that coursed steadily through a resin-lined trough running down the center of the mattress. A kitchen pot atop a stack of plates caught the water at the foot of the bed. The water was nourishment, perhaps, vital arid cleansing. But its path split the bed into two separate banks, unbridged.



Frankness (Work of Mercy), 2000, gelatin silver print, 60 by 43 inches. Neuberger Berman collection.



Bed (The Creek) 1997, water, resin mixed mediums, 22 by 60 by 85 inches.

In his paintings, Martínez Celaya both cuts and mends, buries and excavates. He pairs the extremes of tar black and milk white. Throughout, he reckons with time's duality - its generosity in bestowing beauty and love, its violence in canceling them both out. He trusts the authority of silence and the truth in contradiction. "Is the record of our loneliness the best we leave behind of ourselves?" he asks in *Guide*. It may be so, but it also may be enough. In the record of Martínez Celaya's inner silences, there is profound beauty, and it proves to be a powerful form of communion.

1. Ann Trueblood Brodzky, *Unbroken Poetry: The Work of Enrique Martínez Celaya*, Venice, Calif., Whale and Star Press, 1999, p.16.

2. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 2001.

Paintings from "The October Cycle" were on view at Griffin in Venice, Calif. [Oct. 19-Nov. 30, 2002] and at Danese in New York [Oct. 18 - Nov. 16 2002]. The complete series will be shown at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln [opening Nov. 21, 2003], with additional venues to be announced. The survey exhibition "Enrique Martínez Celaya: 1992-2000," organized by The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu traveled to three US venues in 2001-02. It was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Charles Merewether, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Rosanna Albertini as well as an interview with the artist by Howard N. Fox.

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