

## Martínez Celaya: nomad visions

By Adriana Herrera

Translation by Melanie Breitman

Nomad, the solo exhibition of Cuban-American artist Enrique Martínez Celaya, organized by the Miami Art Museum and curated by Peter Boswell, is a poetic exploration of the artist's vision of the nomad. "Modernism"—as he wrote in one of the sketchbook pages in the catalog—is the result of nomads bringing their experience into a new land and generating new "crops". The same notion is reflected in a drawing from his sketchbook published in the catalog that depicts growing seedlings with the words "nomad" and "look-back" linked above the horizon line, alluding to the balance between "regret" and "losses" with survival. This is a concept that all the ones who have left their land can understand. In the roots of the plants, Martínez Celaya wrote the names of poets like the influential Mandelstam, exiled to Siberia, who spoke of an nameless sadness in a land where beasts reigned, and Brodsky, locked up in an institution for the mentally ill after his poetry challenged the Soviet regime—"And who listed you among poets?" they asked. He responded: "Nobody. Who listed me as a member on human race?" Martínez Celaya also wrote the name of the Swedish writer [Harry] Martinson, who grew up in an orphanage and after escaping, when he was an adolescent, embarked and sailed around the world. This narrator and poet, pioneer of Modernism in Sweden, who was arrested for vagrancy in a distant city, appears in Martínez Celaya's sketchbook numerous times. Martinson shares with the artist a contemplation in nature, and a deeply emotional way to inquire for humanism. "Martinson"—the artist notes, alluding to his writing—"is an idea. An idea of beauty and strength compressed in an iceberg." Then he goes further and says that if it were possible to compress an iceberg to the size of a crystal, the light it would radiate would resemble the writings of Martinson, who killed himself some years after winning the Nobel Prize. A painting of the sun in a yellowish sky and the figure of a bird in ascent go side by side in the catalog with other notes inspired by Martinson, who gave life to *Aniara*, a spaceship that loses its course in space and drifts without destiny, eternally lost: "Everything that seems to matter—writes Martínez Celaya—matters against a landscape of change or of either insignificant or huge significance. The scale of what matters is always off."

All the notes—and drawings—that precede the five paintings exhibited at MAM are essential. Each one of those poets was an exile, someone that wandered without finding a home throughout the years of their lives. The prehistoric nomad remerged in the 20th century, which Mandelstam called "the beast", and the masses that displaced themselves in herds, waves, or in furtive migrations grew bigger with time. Moreover, those who are not displaced by external violence experience—as Lévinas or Baudrillard noted—a nomadism associated with interior uprooting. For Martínez Celaya it is troubling to see a human being wandering along his or her own time, and his artwork is, above all, a poetic shout in the middle of vast, desolated zones. What other things does the visual sequence of the figure of an adolescent girl show at the instant in which she takes a leopard in her hands, and then appears naked, looking forward and alone in the immense space of four canvases?

What the viewer undergoes in the exhibition is a moving experience of being in the center of a room surrounded by the repeated image of a barefoot girl, now dressed in red, who carries a dead leopard on her shoulders on a journey so long that it spans through Spring and Summer, Autumn and Winter. She is always in the same coat, always with a gaze contemplating the horizon in the distance, which could well be that of *Nunca y Siempre* (Never and Always), where the dark silhouette of the leopard reflects on the brilliant surface of the ice of a foreign Nordic landscape. In that strange environment, the fragile figure of this girl is absent, with her rare mixture of an unbreakable will to walk with the leopard through difficult terrain, day after day, and the vulnerability of her thin silhouette and of the soles of her feet, exposed to the hardness of the vast roads.

Martínez Celaya combines fragments in the horizon, as seen in *Nunca y Siempre* (Never and Always), in which the abstracted grays and blacks are drained by the white of winter with an Expressionistic force; patches of color and light take the form of flowers and trees in spots that seem vaguely Impressionistic. But the universe this reveals is not real, and the Surrealist atmosphere that Martínez Celaya creates tries to communicate homelessness bearing resemblance to that of Martinson's *Aniara*. Standing in the center of the room, the viewer that looks at the passing of time, and the unflappable face of the nomad girl dressed in a red coat, is overwhelmed with a sense of abandonment. In an instant, it seems that the world is uninhabited or that there are no more deserted beings walking alone in the world, with something precious and dead, without anything that can change their steps. The marvelous thing in Martínez Celaya's work is its power to transmit, with a series that is simple in its structure (the repetition of the same figure in different sequential settings and its absence in another strange place), something intended to be said with words or be associated with an infinity of narratives, but that is finally unspeakable. As Foucault well knew, one of the conditions of the contemporary nomad—the one excluded from all utopias—is the need to find another person with whom to fable. That is the call of the painting of Enrique Martínez Celaya.

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