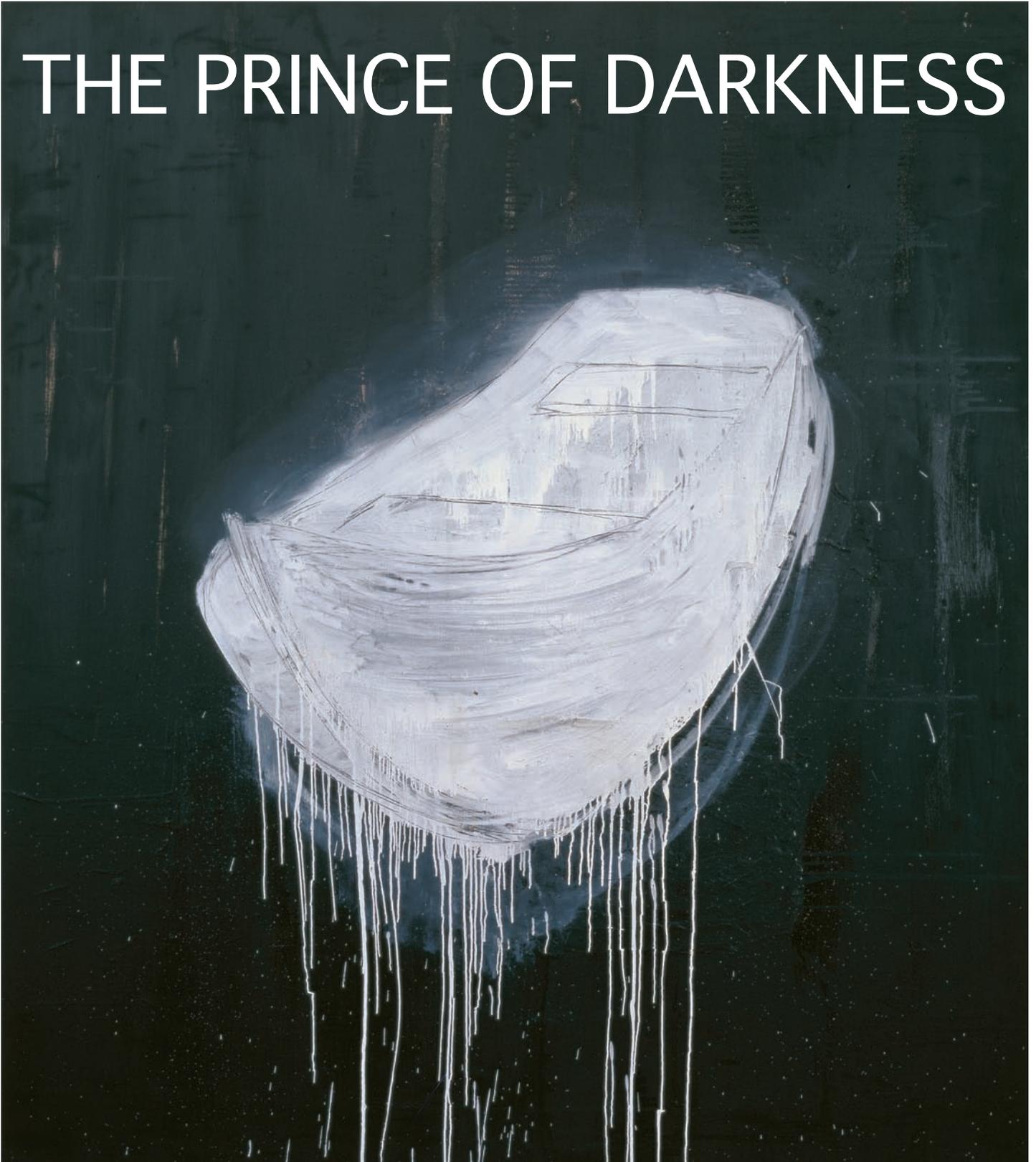


ARTS

THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS



BLACK HOLES: Enrique Martínez Celaya favors stark and simple statements that evoke loss, like the empty boat in *The Helper (Abruptness)*.

ART REVIEW

BY ELISA TURNER
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His paintings come from places where most of the lights have flickered and died. Looking at them, you feel as if you've stumbled in from a leafy outdoors noisy with sunlight bouncing off cars and kids, having just pushed the door open onto a house boarded up for years. Other paintings can make you feel as if you've left a familiar kitchen, bright and busy with pots simmering and knives chopping, and then stepped into a living room just as the power fails, when arm chairs and family photos vanish into a chilly black hole.

The heavy darkness in the paintings of Enrique Martínez Celaya can make you blink and squint. You want to peer into their light-devouring voids, trying to make out the telltale surroundings for his chalky white outlines of men, women, and children, trying to figure out where these hollowed-out families, who are really more phantom than flesh, belong.

The tantalizing pleasures and secrets gingerly offered by this dark art, part of the artist's *October Cycle* now at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, are dense with layers of oil paint and emulsified tar. They usually outweigh the annoying way their murky, mucky surfaces can trigger eye-strain. As your eyes become accustomed to Martínez Celaya's moody nighttime palette, the artist lures you into the delicate task of refocusing, of starting to see absence as well as presence, to recognize how even a contrasting, glowering black abyss of loss, of black near-nothingness, can pump rare strength into the faint glow of what has survived.

In a talk last week at the Museum of Art, the artist tried to illuminate his aesthetic of absence and loss in a body of work that includes photography and sculpture as well as painting. Based in Los Angeles, Martínez Celaya has seen his career take off in the past decade, with his art entering museum collections in Germany and the United States, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art. One of his paintings also hangs in the striking corporate collection at Miami's Four Seasons Hotel.

"I was fascinated by the way he changes from one exhibition to another," said Jorge Santis, a curator at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, who invited the artist to create a large-scale mural near the entrance to the exhibit. "There are so many facets to his work. It's realistic, it is minimalist, but it is also romantic, passionate. I think there's an inner suffering in many of his pieces that comes from his Cuban roots."

During his time in Fort Lauderdale, Martínez Celaya wanted to eat only Cuban food, explaining that it was hard to come by where he lives now, Santis said. In talking about his own varied work, Martínez Celaya doesn't express such visceral desires. He can wax into a passionate but windy philosophizer, even a killjoy when it comes to understanding why some visual artists get their kicks from



The faint white outlines of father and son in *Distance*.

tweaking the excesses of pop culture, a subject his severe, almost monastic paintings avoid.

MISERY IN MADRID

The absence of another subject dramatically shadowed his talk. He barely grazed over his memories of leaving his boyhood home in Palos, Cuba, a small town surrounded by sugar-cane fields and located on a road leading to Varadero Beach. In 1972, when Martínez Celaya was 8, he and his family moved from Cuba to Madrid. It was a miserable life of severe poverty, played out against seasons of cold and early dusk, beginning with the month of October. That's the telling namesake for his series of 22 paintings now at the museum, in a show organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Nebraska.

I have fought so hard to make the paintings not just be about exile," he explained, with an expression that combined frown, sigh, and a quick, rueful smile. "Exile implies loss but there are other ways of loss. In each talk I add something and I take something out of the story."

But his is a story, like *The October Cycle*, about etching thin rays of light in dark times and places. Sometimes those rays of light are as weak as the winter sun, like those outlining a father and son in his painting *The Distance*.

"Spain was such a shock. We were beyond poor. My father couldn't find a job. We lived in a storage place without a place to take a bath. It was not just exile, it was the sense of

Artist forces your eyes to adjust to the darkness



ON EXHIBIT: *Constellation (Permanence)* at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale.

being completely dispossessed," he recalled, as he walked around his show at the museum. "Creditors were coming to the house banging on the door."

Their digs in Madrid had no windows. Tensions flared. It was such a contrast to life at his grandfather's home in Palos, where Martínez Celaya spent much of his time, while his father worked on a cane plantation and his mother taught school. Comfortable despite its layers of peeling paint, the house opened onto a sunny courtyard shaded lightly by a fir tree.

In Madrid, Martínez Celaya looked to art as an escape, though he didn't care to paint the courtyards of his past. Somehow he laid his hands on a book about Leonardo da Vinci and spent hours trying to mimic the secret of Mona Lisa's smile in his own drawings. In a talk he showed a skillful drawing he made after arriving in Spain. It was the face of someone sleeping, but the slumber seemed so airless and final. Its disembodied clarity resembled a death mask. "Definitely our life there [in Spain] was a death," he said. "There was a hopeless kind of life. Every day was the same as the day before. I was just waiting for something to change."

SCIENTIFIC TRAINING

Change came in 1975, when the family moved to Puerto Rico. Martínez Celaya studied art but developed another passion: science. Bright and creative, he built a laser for a

10th grade science project, and won an award from the National Congress of Science. He graduated from high school as valedictorian and headed off to Cornell to study applied physics. Next came graduate school in quantum electronics at the University of California, Berkeley, and a job at a laser company, where he patented four inventions. But much of this time he was still painting, selling art in San Francisco parks.

In the late 1980s he left scientific academe and returned to art, and later earned an MFA from the University of California at Santa Barbara. "I did it because I simply couldn't afford to leave my life outside once I entered the door of the lab, which is something you have to do as a physicist," he said. "I did it because I want to bring my life into my work."

In *The October Cycle*, Martínez Celaya paints the mysteries, sorrows, and longings of life as both parent and child. At 37, he is a stocky man with short dark hair and a penchant for soft-spoken but intense conversation, voicing surprise at how much life as a father has seeped into his life as an artist. He and his wife of five years, Alexandra Williams, have two small children, Sebastián and Gabriela. *Gabriela (First)* is one of the most memorable paintings here. It shows a mother tossing a baby in the air, or perhaps catching her as she falls. It is not sentimental. The figures gleam as the barest suggestions, their reaching-but-not-touching-hands more vivid than their faces. Six small dashes of light float across the black void cloaking these figures.



Enrique Martínez Celaya paints a mural mixed with his blood at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale.

As an aside, the artist explains that the points of light represent his daughter's six birthmarks, the possible symptom of a congenital disease. When he painted this work, he and his wife were in the midst of determining whether she had the disease — learning eventually that she did not.

But whether you know this or not, the painting is a hauntingly spare scene of life's fragile bonds, of gifts that come and go, and of the capacity of art to say much with a few threads of light that are deceptively simple. Like the pinpoint beams of a laser, Martínez Celaya's pale brushstrokes pierce their target, life, at its core.

Elisa Turner is The Herald's art critic.

SMART BOX

IF YOU GO

Enrique Martínez Celaya: *The October Cycle, 2000-2002* is at the Museum of Art, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, through April 19. Hours are 11 a.m.-7 p.m. daily; closed on Tuesdays and selected national holidays. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors, \$3 for students and \$20 for a family of two adults plus children. Free on the first Sunday of the month. For details, call 954-925-5500 or visit www.MUSEUMofART.org