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Arts & Entertainment

From the Heart

John McDonald

Enrique Martínez Celaya is an over-achiever by any standard. An American artist of Cuban extraction, he has been feted and praised as only the US can fete and praise. He studied to be a scientist, specialising in lasers and quantum theory, before turning to the visual arts. Since the late 1980s, he has pursued an artistic career with such energy and determination that he is now an established star of the American scene, with the mega studio and voluminous CV that goes with the job.

What sets Martínez Celaya apart from the stereotypical big-time artist is that he makes paintings and sculptures with his own hands. The more common procedure is to enlist a small army of helpers to execute museum-scale works on your behalf. Many of today's leading contemporary artists could best be described as factory managers, but Martínez Celaya's works have the Martínez touch.

Another distinguishing feature is Martínez Celaya's intellectual ambitions, which go far beyond the level at which most artists opt out. While the expression "stupid as a painter" has only ever applied to bad painters, it has to be admitted that an artist's intelligence is generally of a different order to that of a scientist, a lawyer or even a writer. Artists tend to take only what they need from a book or a visit to a museum. They are less



The Giant Cliff, 2010

interested in complex arguments than in memorable images.

Martínez Celaya has this fascination with images but also a formidable interest in literature and philosophy. His writings and interviews, collected in a book of last year, are peppered with

references to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and many other serious cogitators. My first thought was, "Is this for real?" A whole page devoted to a black-and-white photograph of Hegel's tombstone is enough to ignite anyone's scepticism.



The Last Reason, 2011

But in some cases reading is believing, or at least accepting. Martínez Celaya writes well and with lucidity (which is more than I can say for Hegel). There is none of the jargon that many artists fall back on when they want to appear to be great intellectuals. It's rather like those people who think that snobbery makes them seem like gentlemen and ladies. Martínez Celaya is no snob and he has a genuine element of the philosopher in his make-up.

This raises the question as to whether a taste for philosophy makes him a better painter. If we leave aside the proposition - which I thoroughly endorse - that a taste for philosophy makes one a better person, then it is interesting to note that all Martínez Celaya's works are problem pictures. He never sets out to demonstrate an idea or theory but creates ambiguous, poetic images that give the viewer much to ponder.

In *The Cliff*, his third solo exhibition for Liverpool Street Gallery, he concentrates on the motif of a bare-chested child. In *The Giant Cliff* this boy wanders by the seashore, lamp in hand; in *The Music* and *The*

Sunrise, he carries a small house on his back. In *The Brother*, the child pulls a younger child behind him in a cart enclosed in a pink bubble. It is not necessarily the same figure each time, but the motifs feel closely related.

We read these figures as meaningful but puzzling, like the figures in a dream. In the same manner as dream images they have a persistent sense of *deja vu*. There is a hint of the child motifs of the German romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge. There are also nods to Edvard Munch, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Rene Magritte, Anselm Kiefer and Francesco Clemente. None of this may be intentional, but a portrait of the artist emerges as a man with a highly absorbent mind.

To give but one example, Martínez Celaya's watercolour *The Last Reason* shows a girl eating a bird. It's impossible not to think of Magritte's painting with the uncharacteristically descriptive title *Girl Eating A Bird* (1927) in the Dusseldorf Kunstsammlung. But where Magritte's image gains its potency from its stylistic crispness and the girl's neat dress with its lacy cuffs and collar, Martínez Celaya's carnivore is a dark, murky figure with bare breasts standing beside a bare tree.

The child in these paintings is probably an oblique self-portrait but it has resonances with the motif that Robert Rosenblum called "the romantic child" - the child in mystical commune with nature, found in the works of Runge and his peers. Martínez Celaya's child belongs to an age of disenchantment in which nature has been ravaged and despoiled. His child is no allegory of nature's innocence and abundance but a survivor of its wrath. He portrays nature in the guise of a rocky seashore, snow-covered fields and a barren, muddy track.

Another picture, *The Way Things Are*, is even more apocalyptic, showing a crystalline sarcophagus under a dark sky lightly dusted with stars.

These images possess a bleak but powerful poetry. They are all the more affecting because of the loose, unfussy manner in which Martínez Celaya has wielded the brush. He is not concerned with the technical aspects of a painting, only with the rapid transcription of an image that haunts his imagination. One assumes he can paint and draw a lot more correctly if he chooses, but the roughness of these works is fundamental to their identity. As a painter, Martínez Celaya aspires to the emotional impact of Munch rather than the cerebral precision of Magritte. It's a lesson for artists that it takes self-discipline and self-knowledge to paint expressively. The emotions need to be cultivated and channelled no less than the union of eye and hand.

The conundrum of how to express one's thoughts and feelings in a way that doesn't become illustrative or didactic lies at the heart of abstract art. Many artists consider abstraction to be a logical progression, believing that once they have crossed the line that separates them from strictly representational art there is no turning back.

ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA: THE CLIFF

Liverpool Street Gallery, until May 19
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