

Art in America



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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