

Art in America

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Enrique Martinez Celaya: *The Return*, 2008
Oil and wax on canvas, 100 by 78 inches; at L.A. Louver

Enrique Martinez Celaya has long treated landscape as a site of soulful reckoning. His starkly beautiful new paintings (all 2008) follow suit. In them, fields of poppies, glistening snow and clusters of birch trees chronicle shifting subjective conditions: yearning, loss, solitude and, more rarely, a longing for communion.

Memory seems an active force in these large (up to nearly 10-foot-wide) canvases. Several feature a young, androgynous figure, a lone journeyer emblematic of the artist's own itinerant path from his native Cuba to Spain, Puerto Rico and ultimately the U.S. (He now divides his time between studios in Los Angeles and Delray Beach, Fla.) In his paintings, Martinez Celaya combines oil and wax in

thin layers, building surfaces of variable density and translucency that evoke the simultaneously impenetrable and inescapable nature of the past.

In *The Return*, the youth's raw red knees are exposed beneath the hem of a fur-lined coat that seems only a small step removed from its origin as a pelt. The figure stands facing us, holding the coiled rein of a russet horse. Dusty rose streaks the slate gray sky, which, in turn, evidences a suppressed layer of brighter blue. The picture, like several others featuring the pensive figure, read as an installment in an ongoing parable of exile, endurance and survival. In another painting, the figure (more boyish here) clutches a block of ice to his chest, as if for comfort, while the pelt-like coat slips from his shoulders.

A sense of displacement and vague brooding permeates the paintings. Color plays a more prominent role than in previous works (which often incorporated tar and were largely monochrome), but Martinez Celaya's emotional spectrum retains tinged with sorrow, persisting in even the brightest of dawn landscapes.

The deeply affecting mood extends as well to the two sculptures (both 2008) in the show. In *The Savior*, a bronze, a 5 ½-foot-tall stag pulls behind him (via ropes pulled over his antlers) a miniature mountainous landscape—a portable refuge. *The Rail*, carved from a thick tree trunk and some 9 ½ feet tall, is a seated figure, this time feminine, wrapped in that same primal coat. Her head is lowered slightly and her hands are tucked between her knees in a pose of introspection and self-containment. The form, blocked out with a raw, angular simplicity and thoroughly charred, has the power of a monumental relic, belonging at once to the present and past.

[Works by Martinez Celaya are on view at Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York, through Mar. 28.]
—Leah Ollman