

The Wanderer

Cuban artist Enrique Martínez Celaya has found a wider audience in Los Angeles and, just maybe, a city to call home

By Michael Slenske

For the better part of his life, the Cuban-born artist Enrique Martínez Celaya has been in transit. At the age of seven, he moved with his parents from Cuba to Madrid only to arrive in Puerto Rico when he was 12. At 17, he was off to Cornell University in Ithaca, and then to UC Berkeley. After that, New York, Venice Beach, South Florida. Ten years ago, he landed in L.A., maybe for good.

“Leaving Cuba at seven and moving within all those places, there’s a sense of restlessness and always imagining the reinvention of a home;” says Martínez Celaya, now 57, sipping a diet Coke in the library of a 16,000-square-foot brick building just north of Leimart Park, where he’s been working only since February. “Rather than restlessness, I’m so interested in the present. When something ceases to provide answers or is no longer productive then I feel it’s time to go. Even if I don’t know where I’m going I know I have to leave.”

On the wall above the library sofa is a painting of the artist as a boy wearing a life raft, bathed in yellow sun beside a haunting beachscape. Another wall holds a massive canvas of a house floating in a sea of darkness.



Though it’s peaceful, the building, once a mail-flier warehouse, has been under construction since the summer, workers carving out skylit cathedral like spaces under the buttressed ceilings. There’s a warren of exhibition spaces that are regularly toured by museum groups, curators, and collectors.

As a result of living in this age when we’re all “distracted from distraction by distraction;” to quote T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*—the epic-poem cycle that informed Martínez Celaya’s most recent body of work, on view at UTA Artist Space—solitude is what he’s been craving.

“At the time he wrote the *Four Quartets*, Eliot was dealing with the dissolution of his marriage, Europe was falling apart between the wars, England was being bombed, and there was a sense of unrest about the whole society. And he was at the height of his powers but he cannot find the words to write with—something that I feel in many ways at this moment,” he says.

Martínez Celaya has been living through his own existential crisis since the end of the Obama years. His marriage of nearly two decades came to an end, he got engaged to Aussie pop singer/model Erica Packer only to have that called off a year later.

Despite all that, Martínez Celaya has emerged in this moment with several new exhibitions in Los Angeles: At the Huntington Library, where he’s been a Fellow in the Visual Arts for the past two years, he painted migratory birds on the glass façade of the Scott Galleries to connect with the gardens to which he’s loaned a pair of sculptures; during Frieze, he opened his Eliot-inspired UTA show; and the week after, an 18 year survey called *Sea Sky Land: Towards A Map of Everything* bowed at USC’s Fisher Museum of Art. The latter brings together paintings and sculptures to investigate the artist’s long-term exploration of memory as it relates to time and space.

Though all his work—which has made its way into the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney—is about exile, loss, and redemption, you’ll find no virtue signals or social justice tropes.

“If you want to do that you can go into politics;’ says Martínez Celaya, who grounded the Huntington show with a life-size, semi-nude photographic selfie awash in flames and a vitrine with sloppily painted, oversized silk roses, with fragments of Eliot’s verse scrawled on the glass. One refrain seemed to sum up his new moment of transition: “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. ■



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