

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA SITE Santa Fe

The Pearl takes you on a slow nocturnal journey experienced through the eyes of a child. As in Proust's night visions, time and place are fluid. And as in Proust, the installation maps onto the present a remembered past of conflict, regret, fear and longing. The journey collapses inside and outside, domestic and epic, substance and shadow, sight and sound. The Miami-based Enrique Martínez Celaya, now 49, has an unusually wide range, and his commissions have included projects for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (New York), the Hermitage (Saint Petersburg) and the Berlin Philharmonic. *The Pearl* amounts to a midcareer retrospective, a summa of themes that have preoccupied the artist for years.

Freud called dreams the “condensation and displacement” of waking life, in which daytime experiences coalesce and reappear as mutable vignettes and episodes. This could serve as no mean description of *The Pearl*'s modus operandi. At SITE, you are led through eight sequential rooms, 12,000 square feet altogether, in which you find houses made of dog food, plywood or paint; a 1950s radio playing a musical composition by the artist; 12 Hummel-like songbird statuettes; a 12-foot-long tarred-and-feathered boat containing a lighthouse; a wall-posted poem; waterworks; motion-generated audio; a walk-through diorama with a taxidermied fox and fake Christmas trees ringing a pond; and 600 cutout butterflies pinned to the walls. This catalogue may sound disconcerting, perhaps even distasteful. But the pleasure—and spookiness—of *The Pearl* comes from your registering how these things accrete, and how Martínez Celaya invites you to connect them. Besides being *about* memory, then, the work *creates* memories for the viewer that ricochet and accumulate.

Transparent liquid-filled plastic tubing, suspended from the ceilings, guides you through *The Pearl*, which is both mindscape and bodyscape, as you discover in the last room. There the tube is bundled with electrical wires (the environment's nervous system?) and a respirator, attached to a set of polyurethane lungs floating in the pond. Although your path is linear, it's unclear whether advancing physically carries you forward or backward in time. What you have heard or seen returns in different forms throughout. In the first room a terrifying vision of home assaults you. A video shows a German shepherd devouring the dog-food house (shaped like a classic child's drawing of a house), accompanied by shrieking sounds. The close-up shot is so intimate that you can almost smell the dog's breath. Indeed, breath haunts *The Pearl*, from canine breath, to drowning, to those lungs, to birdsong audio. (In Latin “breath” is *spiritus*, and in Greek “butterfly” is *psyche*, or “soul.”) The German shepherd reappears in the form of a terra-cotta cookie jar, behind which hangs an intentionally awkward painting on velvet of this dog watching over a dead fox. The menacing cohabitates with the comforting; the guardian is also the killer.



View of Enrique Martínez Celaya's installation *The Pearl*, 2013, at SITE Santa Fe.

If *The Pearl* has a center, it's a 64-inch-high bronze cast of a boy. The plastic tubing terminates at the sculpture, and tears seem to fall from the boy's eyes into descending beds of pine needles. These echo the shape of a dock in a 116-by-150-inch painting hung behind the boy. It's as if the child stepped off the canvas and into the gallery. The liquid is then channeled from the pine needles through a winding trough that empties into the pond. The tube we have previously followed reappears, rising out of the water.

The Pearl answers postmodern flatness of affect and layered irony with a heart laid bare, for Martínez Celaya is assured enough to be heartfelt. After traveling through anxiety, violence, nostalgia and song, you're left with a feeling of tenderness. As an oyster creates a pearl in response to an irritating grain of sand, so the artist cradles memories in *The Pearl*. SITE has never seen anything quite like it; nor, save in dreams, have you.

—Arden Reed