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Critics Choice: Enrique Martínez Celaya art of displacement and longing

By Leah Ollman

Billy Collins, among the most accessible of contemporary poets and an eloquent advocate of poetry's place in public life, spoke recently about why people tend to resist the genre. Too much emphasis, he feels, is put on interpretation, to the detriment of poetry's "less teachable, more bodily pleasures."

Collins' words came to mind when hearing Enrique Martínez Celaya talk about his new paintings and sculpture at L.A. Louver and how efforts to decipher the meaning of a work of art too often hijacks the experience of it.

In the case of visual art, and especially art like his that makes use of familiar, recognizable imagery, "we're so attached to what's given," he said, "rather than what's underneath what's given."

In one of his most stunning new paintings, Martínez Celaya presents the view from inside a dark cave whose floor is rocky and wet, its threshold rimmed with pendulous icicles. Beyond lies a field of grasses and brightly-hued flowers beneath a frosty, vaporous sky.

Symbolic readings of the painting are inevitable -- the tunnel of death with its famed bright light at the end, despair giving way to hope -- but what matters is the potency of the encounter. Like so many of Martínez Celaya's works over nearly two decades, this one seems to enter

through the bloodstream and lodge in the heart, the soul, the gut.

Martínez Celaya's working procedure begins with notes rather than sketches, and the philosophical probing that courses through his prolific writings also infuses his imagery.

His childhood displacements were formative (he left his native Cuba at 7, living in Spain and Puerto Rico before settling in the U.S.), and both the concept of home and a tone of longing are constants in his work.

In the bronze sculpture, "The Enchantment," a small, archetypal house is lodged in the branches of a leafless, thorny bush, itself uprooted. The piece evokes destabilization, but even more strongly a comforting sense of protective shelter -- as of something live, nested.

Martínez Celaya's internal negotiations with place, belonging, rupture and fragmentation are enacted on every canvas, in the waxy pigment's provisional drips, the layers that visibly track a history of making and remaking, and the images' raw, unfinished edges, precluding any seamless illusions.

These tableaux of the mind and memory take place in a realm of temporal and spatial ambiguity. They are anchored by an emotional authenticity that holds fast even though some of the imagery is saddled with kitschy, sentimental associations. Unicorns appear



Photo: Enrique Martínez Celaya, "The Tunnel and the Light (For the Ones Who Hope to Come Out)," from L.A. Louver

repeatedly here, for instance. They are most affecting when rendered (as in another of the bronze sculptures) abject rather than cloying: their black, disembodied heads in a heap like so many chunks of spent fuel.

The lives and works of numerous poets -- among them Celan, Mandelstam, Martinson, Frost -- inform Martínez Celaya's sensibility. For all of his work's profound visual presence, he remains a sculptor and painter of an interior world, radiant with the innocence of childhood, steeped in the darkness of loss, ever unsettled.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Jan. 5. www.lalouver.com
