

## Enrique Martínez Celaya: The Gypsy Camp

Cuban-born and Los Angeles-based artist Enrique Martínez Celaya returns New York for his second solo exhibition with Jack Shainman Gallery. The paintings Martínez Celaya created in the last two years continue his quest for alternative realm through otherworldly and ephemeral depictions of humans and nature. Artspeak editor Osman Can Yerebakan interviewed the artist about *The Gypsy Camp* that will remain on view until April 22nd at the gallery's 20th street location.

**Osman Can Yerebakan:** In a previous interview, you talked about the influence of studio life in your work. You said that your studio needs to be better than yourself, so it can teach you how to be better. Was studio life influential in this body of work here?

**Enrique Martínez Celaya:** My studio life was very influential because I worked in two different studios for this exhibition, one was a studio that I have in Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and the other one is in L.A. where I live. I worked in both studios and the work came together in the L.A. studio. I don't consider studio as a factory as many artists do, but to me it is a mixture between a laboratory and a monastery that has a certain pressure on me to create and make work that I otherwise wouldn't be making. I didn't have an assistant in New Hampshire so there I did everything myself and I had help in my other studio. Having two different ways of working effected my work.

**O.C.Y.:** Some of the paintings give the impression that a human being was just there, but we missed that person This feeling of abandonment is also brought up in the press release. What do these setting without humans mean?



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Hunter*, 2016, Oil and wax on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**E.M.C.:** I never heard anybody say that before, but actually this is a very accurate way of interpreting the work. It always seems to me that there are pointers to that absence in my work. Sometimes we are looking at aftermath of an incident or sometimes things are waiting to happen. That absence also has anthological questions about existence and one's relation to the nature and the surrounding. If you look at *The Folktale* painting, for example, something happened a while ago and now things are calm once again. The feeling of having arrived too late to a circumstance and having missed something is very important to me.

**O.C.Y.:** The paintings' ethereal and ghostly nature presents your figures almost like ghosts, but they don't know they are dead. How much

life do you attribute to your figures? In *The Unloved* painting, the child looks almost dead while standing next to the snowman. Although it is clearly very cold, he is not wearing anything to protect himself as if he didn't feel the cold.

E.M.C.: I think in some ways the work hovers around remembrance and memory. If we are talking about memory, we can accept that all figures are ghosts; nothing is there anymore. It is one's transposition to another circumstance. The landscape itself inhabits me as a ghost, as well. Although the viewer is looking at a scene, I am putting constant reminders like unfinished edges or text to empathize that this is a painting, not a scene. In that sense, I don't think my work is representational. When people say this work is figurative, I am always shocked.

O.C.Y.: You say that your paintings are not windows to another world, but they are all that there is. You want to viewer to focus on the frozen moment in time and not be concerned about the narrative. But on the other hand, some of your paintings imply certain backup stories, like the man holding the fish he potentially just caught. How do you create that balance between narrative fluidity and character depth?

E.M.C.: I spent two and half years to complete *The Little Paradise* painting and it was mostly to create that balance to give an elusive impression. In *The Last Harvest*, in which a man is holding the fish he just caught, I tried to keep the narrative at bay, maneuvering around without fully revealing it. There are pointers to a story through little fragments, but I hope that fragment, rather than being connected to a larger narrative, is in itself a crystallized moment. The same way with our lives and how we remember the past. Sometimes, certain moments are disconnected from a full continuum and that one moment becomes very bright. Similar to how Proust depicted remembrance and years of memory with one bite of a madeleine.

O.C.Y.: Where does the title *Gypsy Camp* come from?

E.M.C.: I have had interest in the idea of being nomadic, not just in terms of moving around the space but also around time. But in recent years I have been interested in all these promises we make to ourselves about how tomorrow will be different or better. This has a certain denial of the present, but also hopefulness about the future. I did an exhibition called *Empires* which was about launching yourself into somewhere new and different.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Folktales*, 2017, Oil and wax on canvas.  
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

*Gypsy Camp* is not about not settling. In a settlement, you decide to live at a place for a certain period of time or at least hope to be able to do so. Here though you know from the onset that your stay is temporary. There exists a transitional nomadic existence to find a place to stop, observe the surrounding, and then move on. O.C.Y.: Writing is an important element in your work as it can be seen in some of the paintings here. Could you talk about that?

E.M.C.: For twenty years or so, I have been highly influenced by writers and

philosophers in my work. I painted some of them as well. I have been particularly interested in poetry, and I consider most paintings as poems in a metaphorical sense. People sometimes find surrealist references in my work, but in reality that is not the case. They are juxtapositions of different fragments similar to poetry to reach another meaning. When I look at all the paintings here, I see different components of a poetry book. I am constantly finding measurements and influences in poems. Czesław Miłosz's soul is everywhere in these works, for example. I don't mean in terms of the content, but a certain aspiration. Additionally, I am writing myself and the writing you see in these paintings come from my own writing. I am however not interested in confessional work; my intention is not to tell my own story. I am not interested in my own memories, either, but instead I try to understand what memories mean in terms of continuity of time, regrets, and what we leave behind. That is why I describe my work as philosophical rather than psychological, because I try to understand the foundations of an experience.