

ELLE DECOR

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ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA

This Los Angeles-based painter and sculptor creates brooding works that are as enigmatic as they are compelling and beautiful.

By Liz Brown



The image is simple- a bird in flight and a burst of black and orange flames- but it lingers in complicated ways. There's an electric jolt from the ball of fire, and then, as the eye takes in the desolate black field behind it, a haunting emptiness sets in. At once voluptuous and bleak, Enrique Martínez Celaya's wall-size *The Burning* (Mandelstam) could technically be called a landscape painting – but it feels more like a premonition. You don't know whether to be excited or scared.

Martínez Celaya's work – in addition to painting, he also creates sculptures and installations -draws on easily recognizable images and scenes, which the artist renders in ways that make them appear strange and uncanny: In *The Guest*, a colorfully dressed matador stands incongruously alone on a tree stump against a stark mountain range. In *The Treasure of the Patient*, a life-size bronze sculpture of a young boy inhabits a giant birdcage; the holes cut out of his torso house the nests of five Australian doves. "I am interested in creating certain experiences, certain scenes, and then undermining them," Martínez Celaya says in his spacious studio in Los Angeles's Culver City, "so that the notion of representation – how trustworthy this image is – becomes unstable."

In recent years, he has created a series of paintings inspired by the singers Adele and Freddie Mercury, the artist Edvard Munch, and his own children. Although the faces are recognizable, Martínez Celaya

doesn't consider himself a portraitist or even a figurative painter. "Mostly, I create the figures, objects, and landscapes in my work from memory. The work is really not about the figures," he says. "They are the references, points of entry more connected to issues of memory and representation and metaphor." Indeed, each face is partially a

reflection of himself.

He works with what he calls environments, or cycles, creating multiple pieces simultaneously. He's currently developing around the idea of "another shore", an investigation of arrivals and departures, for an upcoming show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. He has other exhibitions lined up in Berlin, Stockholm, and Porto Cervo, Italy.

It's tempting to draw a link between the artist's biography and the atmosphere of dislocation in his work. Born in Cuba in 1964, Martínez Celaya emigrated with his family to Spain when he was seven, and then again to Puerto Rico when he was 13.

But he is quick to cite influences beyond his transient childhood, such as his grandfather's austere Catholicism, distinct from the flamboyant ritual so often associated with the religion, as well as the mystical tradition of

American authors like Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

His background in math and science, including doctoral training in quantum electronics, also contributes to the rigorous level of technical experimentation in his practice. For a room-size 2004 installation titled *Schneebett*, he constructed a refrigeration system within an unmade bronze bed, creating a thick layer of white frost that seemed to take the place of sheets and blankets.



While the two artists evoke a similar moodiness, it turns out there are other resonances as well: Martínez Celaya often paints with tar, accounting for the viscous density of his blacks, and Ryder favored bitumen, a tar-like substance.

Ottmann also likens the spiritual dimension in Martínez Celaya's art to the way that Catholicism informed Yves Klein's work and how Mark Rothko drew from Jewish mysticism in his paintings. In terms of formal references, Miami collector and philanthropist Jorge Pérez sees Martínez Celaya in the mold of Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, but notes that it's simply not possible to pin this artist down. "He is not static", Pérez says. "He is always growing."

TOP: detail of *The Bloom, for the Wilderness*, 2015, oil and wax on canvas

LEFT, from top: *The Savior*, 2008, bronze; and *The Empire*, 2015, oil and wax on canvas