

ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA

THE UNIVERSAL THEORY OF EVERYTHING IS PROPPED ON A PEDESTAL

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

The Cuban-American artist's first solo exhibition at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles is open, informed by romanticism and impressionism, completed by a documentary showcasing his participation in the 13th Havana Biennial.

Whether in a meandering conversation with the artist in his studio, contemplating his nuanced, psychologically charged, and symbolism-rich paintings and sculptures, perusing his poetry and philosophical prose, or reviewing his holdings of scientific patents, with Enrique Martínez Celaya, you can expect to take the scenic route. Across art history, literature, quantum physics, dream interpretation, psychoanalysis, love, and myth-making, it can seem like a broad range of topics to cover. For Martínez Celaya, however, it's all just part of one big idea—the search for meaning in a meaningless world—and the artist uses every tool at his disposal in the pursuit.

For proof of his omnivorous intellectual humanism, look no further than his own calendar. As USC Provost Professor of Arts and Humanities, he's taught *Moby Dick* and the poetry of exile. In January, three major works were installed at The Huntington Library in Pasadena, which also named him their first Visual Arts Fellow. He created a monumental public sculpture on Cuba's historic Malecón esplanade as part of the 13th Havana Biennial, which led to a documentary of the project and the artist's return to his native Cuba after 47 years. Next month, poet and Nobel Prize-winning chemist Roald Hoffman will come to his studio for their ongoing Lecture Project, and in October at Kohn Gallery, former Metropolitan Museum director Philippe de Montebello will interview him. At year's end, the second volume of his *Collected Writings* (covering 2010-17) will be released by the University of Nebraska Press. He'll be showing a survey of early works at UC Santa Barbara in January, and large-scale portraits at the Fisher Museum in September.



But on the eve of his new exhibition of painting and sculpture at Michael Kohn—his first in Los Angeles in four years—Martínez Celaya is hard at work in the studio. He's been thinking, not only about art, but also about poems and politics, science and the environment, exile and place-making, and whether or not objects have a soul. Opening in September, the exhibition is titled *The Tears of Things*, after words from the Roman poet Virgil, in which the case is made that, yes, they do. In a majestic and witty move, Kohn will install a large-scale sculpture of a crying girl outside the entrance, thus making the evocative notion into quite a literal experiential gesture.

“You know, one of the things about my work,” Martínez Celaya posits, “is that people always want to interpret the meaning of the images. When in fact so much of what I'm constantly working on is about the actual painting or sculpture itself. When I say that I'm working ‘about’ painting, people don't think of that.” Of course, his compelling visual language of lonely boy-kings, long muddy roads, songbirds in cages, and flowering fruit-bearing trees does lend itself to narrative interpretations, even suggesting autobiographical references to the artist's peripatetic upbringing and conception of a remembered self. But in truth, Martínez Celaya's real subject in the work is the mechanism by which an invented object is imbued with meaning beyond its pictorials.

The energy of the work comes from the friction between the many possibilities inherent in an image. “There's always an ambiguity in my work,” he says, “that you can read one way or the other and they're both true. The powerful part of reality, to me, is that two contradictory or paradoxical things can exist at the same time.” To discourage the seduction of autobiography in the new work, he has involved a cast of characters including a matador, an ice skater, and the poet Robinson Jeffers, none of whom could be mistaken for his stand-in. He's also started using quotes from authors and poets he admires rather than his own writing in the text-based elements of the compositions.

The thoughtful, deliberately naive style of his painting functions in this way, as its textures, revelations, and distortions insistently remind viewers that they are experiencing a work of art, with its own soul, and not merely a vehicle for a story. “I built one painting entirely to create the image of the skater's frozen breath,” points out Martínez Celaya. “Whether it's that, being gored by a bull in the throat when you're wearing precious matador garments, covering the bones of a whale in roses, setting a rutted path against the constellations or a strange golden river, it's actually just the same thing again and again and again. All I'm doing is rotating it around to see it in different ways, to see if something is revealed.”

When he speaks this way about art, it's easy to imagine him as a scientist, the same guy that registers patents on some advanced laser technology, setting out to map the unknown territories of existence. “I'm thinking about the interconnectivity of all things,” he shares. He means in both a quantum mechanics way and in a psychological one. “It all seems seamless in my head. I don't see a big difference between them. I think they all point to the same thing, which is the larger field of experience in which we move.”

Martínez Celaya has described one of the central new paintings, *The Faithful*, as being a risky move. A full moon and a pageant of flowers, it's perhaps understood to mean that beauty is suspicious and embarrassing in our academic culture, and often not taken seriously in contemporary art discourse. “Well, it's roses and butterflies as a fifty-year-old, you know,” he laughs. “But what I am asking in the painting is that the energy in the painting comes from the flicker, back and forth, between its possible meanings.” It's a black and white, regal but melancholy work, quite romantic and even a hint gothic. There's no way to know for certain if it is about desire, loss, acceptance, dreaming, dying, magic spells, illusions, or falling in love.

“When you fall in love at 15, you fall in love with a freshness,” Martínez Celaya says, by way of explanation. “But it is a love that is a shallow one, no matter how much you feel it. But when you fall in love later in life, at 40 or 50, when you have already been slapped around by life and you have dealt with shit, the fact that you even want to believe in love again is such an act of heroism. Believing in love with full knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of the flaws in yourself and your beloved. To love a person despite or even because of their scars, that is what this painting means for me. It's risky.” And messy. And beautiful. Like a frozen lake, a matador's cape, or a dark country road that glistens under the stars.