

Dartmouth Hosts a Painter in Pursuit of Discoveries

By Nicola Smith

Thursday, May 04, 2017



Artist Enrique Martínez Celaya is the Roth Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College, and was also a Montgomery Fellow at Dartmouth. Martínez Celaya was born in Cuba, grew up in Spain and Puerto Rico and before dedicating himself to art studied physics and quantum electronics. "I like to think of (a painting) as a discovery, the way a scientist discovers something," he said in Hanover, N.H., Monday, May 1, 2017.

Enrique Martínez Celaya, who has been a Roth Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College since September, works in a studio in the basement of the Hopkins Center. The walls are lined with paintings in progress, some of which he's been working on for years.

Martínez Celaya has placed around the studio images of the people important to him: a photograph of his mother, Edilia, when she was a young woman, photos of his four children, and high up on a wall, a portrait of an aging, bearded, ascetic Leo Tolstoy, who sits with hands clasped, eyes boring into the camera. Tolstoy's

gaze seems an implacable rejection of the camera's scrutiny, but as you look more closely another expression emerges: somber and searching, with a hint of sorrow. That grave ceaseless spirit of inquiry and idealism also seems to have animated Martínez Celaya throughout his life.

He began painting and drawing as a child, but studied applied physics and electrical engineering as an undergraduate at Cornell University, before earning an M.S. in quantum electronics at Berkeley. In 1990, Martínez Celaya, who lives in Los Angeles, decided to leave the field of science and made a

180-degree turn toward the life of an artist, earning an M.F.A. from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1994. On Monday,



A portrait of Leo Tolstoy hangs on the wall of artist Enrique Martínez Celaya's Hopkins Center studio in Hanover, N.H., Monday, May 1, 2017. "I'm interested in how a guy like that confronts the big questions," he said of the Russian writer. "What does it mean to be a good person? I think Tolstoy struggled with that."

Martínez Celaya will give a talk on the role of the artist in the world at 4:30 p.m. in Carpenter Hall at Dartmouth.

Martínez Celaya may have left the sciences, but that doesn't mean that the scientist's methods and habits have left Martínez Celaya.

"When people think of a work of art, they see a painting, sculpture or photograph as a conclusion, an end point," he said. "But, that overlooks the ongoing role of process and discovery, and the search for an elusive truth that pushes an artist onward."

Martínez Celaya grapples with these knotty questions, both in his art and in his writing about art, literature and life. "I come here every day and I make these paintings to make sense of life," he said. "If I'm not writing or painting I begin to float, I have no idea of what I'm doing."

The night before an interview he had painted for nine hours. When he is in his studio, he said, "the time disappears." Martínez Celaya, who was born in Cuba in 1964, grew up in Spain and Puerto Rico. The sense of dislocation

or impermanence that can come from moving relatively frequently as a child shaped how he viewed life.

"Exile just confirmed for me a certain separation and distance. It made me more observant than I already was," he said. Trying to sort out the questions that often preoccupy an adolescent — what are truth, compassion and justice? — pointed Martínez Celaya toward artists, poets, philosophers and writers from beyond his largely southern and Latin upbringing. The Russians: novelists Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Lermontov, Bulgakov and Pasternak; and poets Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva and Osip Mandelstam. The philosophers: the Danish Soren Kierkegaard and the German Arthur Schopenhauer.

"It was with them I felt the most comfort," he said. "Even though my own internal making had a domestic Latin component, parts of my personality were already rather North-like."

Three of the landscapes on which he's been working distill the northern winter to its essence: the darkness, the sense of being swallowed by the cold and damp, a line of trees in a forest, deep tire tracks in the snow, the way winter reveals but also conceals.

"I've always been interested in Nordic imagery, maybe as a counterpoint to where I grew up," said Martínez Celaya. "Mud and snow imagery is seeping its way through me. That oppressiveness and darkness of winter are metaphors I'm interested in." They're not the only paintings in the studio, by any means. The painting that first confronts a visitor is of a blackened tree, looking as if it's been consumed by fire, against a backdrop of febrile color. There are paintings of boys and men, who have a quality of absolute stillness as they take the measure of the landscapes around them. There is a painting of mountains outlined against a flaming sky, a metaphysical landscape, Martínez Celaya said, that shows

a “waterfall of milk on a black landscape.” He has deliberately left the edges of some of his paintings blank so that you see the white grain of the canvas, or has let paint dribble down in an unexpected way to remind the viewer that this is, after all, an illusion.

“What is this, really? What’s really at stake here?” he said.

Martínez Celaya might work for years on a single painting. He will redo a painting, though, if he thinks he’s over-worked it, technically and thematically. If the mystery at its heart is diluted to the point of nothingness, if painting is simply a question of mechanics, where is the challenge, and the pleasure?

“I’m trying to discover something new in each work,” he said. His paintings in the Hopkins Center studio are large in scale but by comparison to some of his other paintings, which can reach 8 by 10 feet, they are relatively modest. But they’re still big enough that you could walk into them, if you think of paintings as environments that you could enter. “I’m interested in being intimate: going into them as opposed to looking through them,” Martínez Celaya said. Despite New York’s role as an epicenter of the art world, and his appreciation of the city’s dynamism, Martínez Celaya shied away from moving there to pursue his career. “New York seems overtly defined by power, by everything human, and by Culture with a capital ‘C.’ Los Angeles is more confusing and less “a thing” than New York, but exciting for that reason. Also, L.A. is a sliver of people living by the coast in a mostly desolated and magnificent landscape, and I like that,”

Martínez Celaya later wrote in an email. Over the years Martínez Celaya’s work has been exhibited at and collected by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los

Angeles, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the Hood Museum, among others. He has lectured widely in this country at colleges, universities and museums as well



Enrique Martínez Celaya paints and repaints the head and shoulder of a man and his reflection in the artist’s Hopkins Center studio in Hanover, N.H., Monday, May 1, 2017. His paintings begin as a point of departure which may bear no resemblance to the final piece, and he said he may work on a painting for several years painting and re-painting a particular detail.

as at the American Academy in Berlin. Most recently he has exhibited at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., as well as at galleries in London and Stockholm.

His work, said Hood Museum Director John Stomberg, shows Martínez Celaya’s capacity for bringing to life philosophical questions about the nature of the world in a way that is thoughtful, but not arcane.

“In his paintings he engages images the way poets approach words. He presents subjects,

such as a horse, a boy, or a jewel, to which we all bring our personal interpretations, but combines them in ways that allow ambiguity and allusion to draw us into a world of expanded meaning,” Stomberg wrote.

This month, Martínez Celaya will return to Cuba to look at sites where he will be installing work, along the Malecon, or esplanade, in Havana, and for the Havana Biennial in November. (It is his first trip back since he was 15.) Martínez



Artist and Roth Distinguished Scholar Enrique Martínez Celaya mixes shades of black, brown and gray while painting in his Hopkins Center studio in Hanover, N.H.

Celaya was also at Dartmouth in 2014 as a Montgomery Fellow, when he created an installation for the Hood Museum. He likes Dartmouth’s size and spirit. “The combination of those things have made me really attached to the community. It feels like something of a second home,” he said.

Martínez Celaya is “very generous with his time and very articulate. With some artists there is a concentration on the visual and he has given equal balance to the word and the vision,” said Jane Carroll, assistant dean of faculty at the college who also teaches art history and directs the Roth Visiting Scholar program.

“He is the opposite of the hermit who doesn’t want to work with people, he wants to share ideas as much as possible,” Carroll added. (Martínez Celaya’s Hopkins Center studio is open to Dartmouth students and staff, and to the wider community, he said.)

In his last talk at the college, Martínez Celaya will discuss the idea of “the artist as a prophet offering a counterpoint to a very cynical view of the world.” Part and parcel of that is considering the definition of an artist.

“No one is sure what an artist is,” Martínez Celaya said. “So there is no sense of how to teach an artist. What does it mean to train an artist in academia?”

While the intellect clearly plays a primary role in how he approaches his work, it is not the driving factor. “I think the role of intelligence and the intellect is to reveal and then move out of the way. So, I want my work (to) not be or to seem intellectual, even if many intellectual questions were considered along the way.” Critics and academics often place so much emphasis on the meaning, and the intellectual principles and social and cultural context in which an art work exists, that they can overlook the physicality of painting or sculpting, its transformative power, and how an artist actually executes his or her conception of a work, Martínez Celaya said.

“It’s easier to talk about ideas rather than how paint lays on the surface,” he said.