

ARTFORUM

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ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA

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For Enrique Martínez Celaya, as for the Romantics, imagination is a faculty of perception, one that unlocks the mysterious world loosely referred to as spiritual. Apprehended in rare moments, the forms of this world are at once allusive and singular, familiar and private, perceptible and fleeting. "Unreal" in the rationalist sense, they are nonetheless the portents on which the quality of our living seems most deeply to depend.

Celaya's recent exhibition, "Drafts of a Landscape," featured large, primarily white paintings on black velvet, as well as more intimate works on paper. A master of texture, the Cuban artist uses velvet to conjure a sense of translucent depth in which seemingly alien or angelic beings-by turns fierce, staid, menacing, and gentle-inhabit the auras of the solitary, often ghostly human forms that dominate the canvases. Mostly depicting inky, brackish landscapes haunted by hallucinatory creatures, the works are stark yet intensely lyrical and reflect an arresting nature mysticism. The human figures gracefully occupy an imaginary space every bit as phenomenal as the everyday world-a space in which plants, rain, shells, and animals share our very being as participants in a collective experience of life.

It is a tribute to the artist that one cannot distinguish between the features he has subtly yet intentionally articulated and those that our perception cobbles together out of chaos, chance gestures, and inchoate forms. It's this involvement of the abyss-which, as Nietzsche understood, can stare back-that makes the tranquil expressions of the solitary persons in such



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Spoken For (The Merciful)*, 2000, oil, wax, and gesso on velvet, 96 x 108".

paintings as *Man and Dog (Loneliness)* (all works 2000) and *Rain (The Wanderer)* read as urgent, not sentimental. In the watercolor *Dove and the Lightest Wood*, a modeled adolescent figure at the edge of a forest gazes with bashful sincerity past a flurry of blood-red brushwork that could represent the flight traced by the title's dove but could also be a witch (or at least her broom), an attacking medieval Chinese warrior, or a spoked wheel, each above a flaming lotus blossom. It's as though the artist is pointing out the attitude we adopt in this world and how that determines the nature of our experience, individual and collective.

Another feature that mitigates the initially naive-seeming lyricism is the bleakness of many of the paintings. If these works engage fairyland, they are not without quasi-nightmarish intimations of our more common realm. *Rain (The Wanderer)* features a solitary figure amid

streaklike silvery-white raindrops that resemble mercury, introducing a sense of the poisonous concomitant with the alchemical. And the occasional metaphysical nuance tugs the emotions gently back toward thought, as in *Resolution*. Only after approaching this canvas does one notice that a circle has been thinly drawn in the silhouetted head of the work's lone figure, who appears to be standing up to his elbows in water. In the middle of the circle is a smudgy, dark brown mark, caused by the artist ending his brushstroke, that could almost carry some arcane cuneiform inscription. The contrast between the obviously symmetrical, intentionally rendered circle and the more random seeming mark enhances the enigma of each. Neither arbitrary nor pretentious, these are passionate, complex, and deeply moving paintings.

-Tom Breidenbach