

ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA

SEATTLE

Enrique Martínez Celaya's paintings, watercolors, and one small bronze head were recently on view in the exhibition *Splinter.Return* [Greg Kucera Gallery; April 6-May 13, 2006]. These works visualize various states of consciousness – fragility, loneliness, delicacy, haunting, and meditation. Martínez Celaya's roughly surfaced paintings build an unstable physical setting for images of young boys quivering on the edge of visibility, anonymity, and consciousness. Tar is the paintings' dominant medium. Figures emerge from a ground that is at times blank or left unpainted. At other times, an oil line is painted over the

blackened tar surface. The figure almost disappears in a sea of darkened tar in the large painting *Your Will*, 2005.

Martínez Celaya's male figures are all about the same age as the artist was when he moved from his native Cuba. He changed homes every other year, moving to Spain and then to Puerto Rico, until he was eighteen. Such constant relocation requires inner resources. One must detach oneself from one's immediate surroundings and focus on soul-sustaining constants. In Martínez Celaya's paintings, tar and blood are these constants. Tar suggests suffocation and toxicity. Blood, especially dripping blood, references sacrifice and suffering in Catholic contexts. Young, non-sexualized boys float in a dark place filled with thin lines of blood, and only an occasional light, in many of the works on view. They are not quite in our world, nor in other worlds, living inside their heads in places that are invisible.

Blood Landscape, 2006, is drawn with blood on white paper. Here, the pale outline of a boy is juxtaposed to a delicate tree. Theirs is a silent relationship, the coexistence of two discrete entities rather than a conversation. The tree is also the more energized of the two figures. The camphor tree's odor is a major reference in the artist's statement about the exhibition. Here, it exudes life, reaching out to

nourish the child, who may be inhaling its fragrance.

Invoking an aura, an iceberg appears behind the boy's head in *Boy in Icy Landscape*, 2006. Light is cold and solid in this larger canvas also drawn mainly with blood. The boy projects an inner life. He seems to be praying, detached from his surroundings. Across from this painting, *Tu Sonrisa Miguel*, 2006, is paired with an identically sized mirror, which reflects *Boy in Icy Landscape*. These two works become a pair – one cold, the other warm, one somber, the other almost smiling.

In the exhibition's last section, a pair of hand-colored lithographs – a boy and a girl – faces a large photograph. The boy in the lithograph and the boy in the photograph wear identical transparent and diaphanous blue shirts embroidered with vines. Apparently, the artist depicted the shirt, and then had his father make it for the photograph where, looking blankly into the distance, the artist's young cousin inhabits a limbo similar to the spaces in Martínez Celaya's paintings.

The artist has lived his entire life in intensely sunny environments. In his art, however, Martínez Celaya deliberately turns away from the sun's seductive brightness, seeking escape in a darkness that he finds more profound. He refuses society's distracting lures in order to explore the profundity of the soul.

– Susan Platt



ABOVE: Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Boy in Icy Landscape*, 2006, blood, watercolor, and charcoal on paper mounted on linen, 60 x 37 inches (courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery)