





By Michael Slenske

Can Enrique Martínez Celaya be that guy?

The Prophet

Seated in an antique lime-green brocade slipper chair across from a vintage birdcage filled with spice finches and a rainbow-colored Lady Gouldian, in the corner of what might be considered the lounge of his sprawling new 16,000-square-foot studio—equipped with its own outdoor citrus-and-sculpture garden that backs up to Culver City’s hilly Holy Cross Cemetery—Enrique Martínez Celaya is holding forth on the role of memory in his work.

For the past two decades, the Cuban-born, Los Angeles-based artist, now 50, has been mining the deepwater deposits of the psyche—invoking everything from his days growing up in the beach town of Caimito, Cuba, to his studies in physics to transfigurations of his father folded into a portrait of a shore-strolling, Pinocchio-nosed Robinson Jeffers. Each work is layered with its own set of vagaries and incongruities beneath a bedrock of literary, psychological, philosophical, musical, and scientific theory. So it comes as a bit of a shock when he says, “Nobody has ever asked me about my first memory, and I don’t think I have ever said anything about it.”

It was December of 1967, Martínez Celaya’s family was still living in Castro’s Cuba, and he noticed a bruise on his right leg. Confused by the mark, he asked his mother what had happened; at the same moment, she noticed he had opened a closet in her bedroom and discovered his present for the Christian feast day of Three Kings. This discovery, however slight, presented the opportunity for an alternate reality.

“After the revolution, there were not too many chances to buy toys, so the Three Kings was a big deal,” says Martínez Celaya, who is dressed in his studio uniform of black T-shirt, black jeans, black paint-spattered work boots, and a light salt-and-pepper scruff on his face. In a hushed and measured tone, he explains how the dearth of toys on the island led to lines rivaling those for food, and his parents would take turns waiting on these queues for up to six days. One year, his mother was first and secured a little horse sled, but on this holiday the present was a rolling plastic rabbit, which Martínez Celaya spied as he opened the closet.

“As I’m looking at it, it’s coming to me that I had this bruise,” he recalls of the discoloration, the result of a spanking he’d received from his father two days prior. “I said, ‘Mom, what is this?’ And my mom, realizing the opportunity, says, ‘You were hit there by the Three Kings for looking at your toy.’ Crazy logic to a kid in that moment kind of makes sense. The closet closes, everything goes back to normal again, but in a part of your brain something doesn’t add up. It’s such a weird memory, and I’m sure there are others before it, but that one wiped everything else out.”

The punishment-reward slipstream of childhood can be a tricky navigation, especially through four decades of hindsight. But Martínez Celaya’s deft handling of these enlightening failures of memory and those in his own fraught, wanderlusting personal journey—from Cuba to Spain to Puerto Rico to America—has led to some of the more enigmatic paintings, sculptures, installations, and writings by any artist of the past quarter century.

“There’s an extraordinary sweep of intellectual curiosity lying at the base of the work,” says Peter Goulds, founder of L.A. Louver gallery, where

on April 9 Martínez Celaya will open his first solo show since returning to the city. For Goulds, Martínez Celaya's decision to establish this new base around his nuclear and studio family—after spending a decade traveling the globe and working in and around Miami—will no doubt refresh and broaden the practice on many levels.

“Each new place helped me confront something, but there is also a return, an ending that is also a beginning,” says Martínez Celaya, who lived in the city on and off between the early '90s and the early aughts. “It is an important time for my work and for L.A., so it seems right.”

If it's anything like his Florida sojourn, this second Angeleno chapter for Martínez Celaya will be exciting to watch. Over the past decade, he executed a series of provocative solo shows at, among other venues, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia; Site Santa Fe; and the Miami Art Museum. He's also earned spots in the collections of high-level trustees the world over, as well as the permanent collections of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Stockholm's Moderna Museet.

Littered with a cast of now-familiar characters, often portrayed in a hazy glow, the artist's quasi-mystical oil-and-wax paintings (all of which start with poetic, rigorous, and oftentimes academic writings) feature lost and crippled boys (crying, carousing, and collapsing), blustery seascapes, stark winter forests, sun-blached beaches, angels (embracing both darkness and light), docks, portals, boats (beached, tarred and feathered, and storm-beaten), birds (humming and caged), gemstones, bridges, suitcases (painted with starry night scenes in the middle of still lifes, or as sculptural fountains modeled after his mother's refugee luggage). There are deer, dogs, beds (of death

and slumber), storms (rendered in blood, tar, and oil), reflections, light and water (in every imaginable form, from painted waves to literal pools), that are inspired by everything from Paul Celan's poetry and the paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder to Heidegger's philosophies on art and the final days of Beethoven. This last inspiration Martínez Celaya examined in his first video, *The Master*, 2010, starring himself as the composer, and earlier in an orchestral presentation and a haunting refrigerated deathbed that grew frost—and drew lines of visitors—at the Berliner Philharmonie in 2004.

Despite Martínez Celaya's long list of professorships, his practice doesn't hinge on references to some narrow iconographic tradition, however overt or subtle they may be. He doesn't abide knowing winks at art historical in-jokes, peacocking intellectualism, or philosophical tells; he paints them out, even if that means editing jaw-dropping vistas or beatific figures (for him, some paintings can be “too beautiful”) under multiple layers of oil. And even after years of work, he might eventually resign a piece, never to be shown, to his two-story archive, which previously functioned as a series of bedrooms for a webcam porn operation that inhabited the building before the artist got his hands on it. In the past eight months, Martínez Celaya and his team transformed this cavernous sex workers' space into a gleaming white mini-museum with two 22-foot-high studios (each with its own neighboring gallery space) on the main floor. Upstairs, there are conference rooms, a gallery devoted to works on paper (think loose portraits of heroes like the poet Marina Tsvetaeva and a hatless Joseph Beuys), as well as a drawing room. He even built out an inviting entryway library stocked with books and gifts from other artists and writers, not to mention the catalogue of works published by his own imprint, Whale & Star.

“His books are amazing,” says Jack Shainman, who will

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Enrique Martínez
Celaya, 2015.

BELOW:
Martínez Celaya
at work on
“The Portrait
Series” in his Miami
studio in 2013.



turn both of his New York spaces over to Martínez Celaya for his first solo show with the gallery, in September. “The writing is extraordinary. He expresses himself so well.” In addition to the artist’s own collected writings (including those from his old blog, *Bad Time for Poetry*), Whale & Star has published an illustrated edition of Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* along with monographs for Colorado-based painter Mary Conover and one of his favorite bands, Cowboy Junkies, who played to a crowd of 700 for the late-January inauguration of the studio space.

Born in Havana to a schoolteacher mother and a jack-of-all-trades father, Martínez Celaya grew up in the Mayabeque town of Nueva Paz while spending lots of time in Los Palos, where his grandparents had a palatial home. “It was kind of what you’d imagine from a García Márquez description, these grand places that are decaying and peeling paint because nobody will fix them,” says Martínez Celaya. “I was alone a lot with my grandparents, and there was a little desk I had where I did all these little watercolors.”

After the family moved to Puerto Rico, Martínez Celaya’s parents sent him to apprentice with this “very severe, old-school” painter in the town of Hato Rey. His parents had a small business near the man’s messy studio, where Martínez Celaya copied Old Masters and did commissioned portraiture for a local clientele. “I would get a piece of charcoal and paper and just do the same thing over again and again.”

A revelation came to the 12-year-old apprentice after he drew the same bottle of Chianti 100 times. “I realized there was something profound revealed by the experience of putting charcoal on paper and in the effort of understanding what was in front of me,” says Martínez Celaya. “Drawing, and by extension, art, became less of a vessel in which I put stuff and more of an experience to be unveiled.” Furthermore, the studio, he says, “wasn’t separated from life in any way. I remember drawing clouds in pastel and we walked outside and my teacher hits me in the back of the head and says, ‘Those are clouds!’ It was this crazy old Spanish way of teaching you things.”

Though he never stopped painting and drawing, he designed and built a laser in high school. “Science was more realistic, and it was a fascinating endeavor,” he says. “Art was more internal, more private.” He left Puerto Rico to study applied and engineering physics at Cornell and quantum electronics as a grad student at the University of California, Berkeley. This scientific baptism by fire may have helped demystify the natural world, but it couldn’t answer the bigger philosophical questions that haunted Martínez Celaya after he left the lab at night.

These questions still haunt him three decades on. In his rear studio, he shows me two works in progress; he’ll exhibit 8 to 10 at the upcoming Louver show. Pointing to a large painting of a bird inside a cage surrounded by a wintry landscape, he translates some Spanish writing painted into the bottom foreground: “In some place is left the word, building possibilities and revising, always revising.”

“Texts have always been a part of the work, but not on the paintings,” says Martínez Celaya, who also made a black landscape, *The Maker’s Fountain*, 2014, with a brown leather suitcase watering ghostly thistles above the words “Your Kingdom Around You.” Though he’s been crafting dense texts (including a reimagining of the Grimm fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*) that deal with notions of identity and place—and the poems of Robert Frost, Tomas Tranströmer, and Harry Martinson that examine these same concepts—for the Louver show, Martínez Celaya insists that a clarity of purpose and seamlessness in the new studio have allowed him to “get out into the paintings before I even clarify what I’m doing on paper,” he says. Turning around, he walks toward another

He doesn’t abide in-jokes or philosophical tells.



painting of a bird that features one of his gemlike voids. They also appear in a painting of a candle in the adjoining room.

He demands I view these works, all of which are still untitled, in a certain order. There is a dark landscape with a foreboding bridge over a murky river, another piece with a whimsical pastel carousel seen through the end of a dark tunnel that shifts perspective in a hallucinatory fashion, a three-year-old painting of an apparitional boy holding a serpent against a pink background, and another of a large alpine mountain with a befeater toy that has been crammed into its craggy folds.

If anything, Martínez Celaya’s art—especially this new work—is an attempt to visually capture those charged interstitial spaces found in poetry, where two seemingly opposed images are rammed up against one another in a fashion that might first appear surprising but upon further inspection opens up a new dialogue and worldview. The befeater, for example, was modeled after a present he’d bought for his son in London, but considering the toy-deprived years of his Cuban childhood, the mountain seems to tease out metaphors of longing and desire. Though it’s not apparent that this juxtaposition is working just yet, if he collapses the depth in the right way, the painting will focus on what the artist calls a “third point.”

“It’s really like the two images are inseparable even though they’re incongruous because there’s a truth they’re both pointing to. But you never would have put them together,” explains Martínez Celaya. At Louver he might also install his bronze of a boy crying into a pool surrounded by mirrors, which he previously showed at Miami’s Fredric Snitzer Gallery with a painting, *The Remembered*, 2013, featuring a dark angel fallen into an icy surf in the mirror’s reflection. While the visual connections between these new works may appear loose, and perhaps tenuous, they seem to be working toward a unified vision that would crumble were he to pull any work from the archives to “disrupt” the visual flow in the studio.

This tense middle zone, he claims, has been the real space in which his exhibitions achieve success. Such was the case for his epic breakthrough installation, *The Pearl*, which engulfed Site Santa Fe during the summer and fall of 2013. This sprawling 12,000-square-foot piece was a response to the loneliness of hotel rooms, the dynamics of judging kitsch, the writings of Frost and Jeffers, and Beuys’s seven-room *Block Beuys* installation at Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany. Ultimately, though, it was most successful through

The Education, 2014. Oil and wax on canvas, 7 x 8 ft.



its deep exploration of the artist's own biography.

"I think he really wanted to connect with audiences on a personal level because he hadn't so much in the past. He was revealing more than he ever had," says Site Santa Fe director Irene Hofmann. "It had this very surprising theatrical quality to it. I love that so much of what he does isn't in fashion. It's a different kind of work, not easily understandable."

The piece unfolded over the entirety of the institution with numerous paintings, including two of a boy on a dock in Caimito opposite a boy in a field feeding a hummingbird; a wooden home with stars cut into the roof (surrounded by sheets with stars cut into them); a crude ceramic sculpture of a German shepherd (next to a painting of the dog); a tarred-and-feathered rowboat (and a black oil painting of a boy navigating dark squalls in said boat); a soft musical composition by the artist playing from a shortwave radio covered with porcelain birds (with paintings of said birds in a neighboring room); and running water pumping like a lifeline between every room via plastic tubes draped over burnt pine trees; a bronze statue of a boy festooned with gems crying into a series of pine-needle-covered beds (a nod to his childhood home); and a lit pond guarded by a fox sculpture

overlooking a set of plastic lungs breathing—on a respirator—that floated atop the man-made pool.

There were no wall texts, no labels, and visitors were meant to follow the water flow "through this journey into his mind," says Hofmann, adding, "What draws me to his work is what's uncomfortable about it. It can be emotional, psychological, and that's not where I tend to gravitate, and yet I want to find out more about what is going on. What is it?"

For Martínez Celaya, the answers can be found in how his work addresses the very real concerns of heart, ethics, and moral certitude. They're the same concepts and character traits that compelled him to publish his 2003 earth-scorching resignation letter from his associate professorship at Pomona College ("I think it would be better not to have art in universities if all we can encourage is dilettantism"), not to mention diatribes on the unprecedented mushrooming of museums in the United States ("At the moment, [museums] seem to want it all: the fantastic buildings, generous gifts, authority, populism, peer consensus, fame, importance, and legacy. Greatness, however, does not seem to be in their list of desires"); and the notion that artists should aspire to be prophets instead of profiteers ("To be a prophet, an



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
Burning As If Were A Lamp, 2014.
Bronze sculpture,
cement block,
mirrors, and painting.

Cowboy Junkies
performing at the
inauguration of the
artist's Los Angeles
studio, January 2015.

The Cascade, 2013.
Bronze sculpture, five
steel beds, fiberglass,
pine needles,
metal washbasin,
and dishes.



artist doesn't need God but clarity of purpose, character, and attention...there is no better time than now to respond to the call").

"It's not morality. Moral certitude is a very specific kind of clarity where you have a compass that is so accurate that wherever you're thrown, that compass will immediately rectify you," says Martínez Celaya. In his estimate, Lucian Freud, the early work of Anselm Kiefer, and the entirety of Leonard Cohen's oeuvre provide such compasses.

Cohen, however, may offer the most illuminating example of the type of artist—or should we say prophet—Martínez Celaya hopes to be. For years the two had been corresponding and trading books, and Cohen's daughter actually attended the new studio's inauguration party. Cohen couldn't make it, but the two had met once by chance in 2006 after Martínez Celaya sent a proposal to the songwriter about publishing a book of his drawings to accompany Cohen's poems. He'd sent the proposal on a Friday and that Saturday spotted the songwriter walking in Pacific Palisades. Like a crazed "teenage Beatles fan" he jumped out of his car, followed Cohen into a bookstore, and approached him from behind. "I'm thinking this guy is going to think I'm a stalker because I'd just sent him this proposal yesterday," says

Martínez Celaya, continuing, "He turns around and the fucking aura off this guy, the glow, and he gives me a compliment, that he liked my work. I got totally derailed and started acting stupid, and I walked out of there and was like, 'Fuck, I didn't say any of the things I wish I had said.' But the point is that the guy was what you'd hope the guy who made that work was. And I will make the argument that it's very hard to make that work and not be that guy. The question in this studio is: Am I that guy?"

He admits that he may not be that guy just yet, or ever, and that it will probably take him another 20 years to be a "great painter." Then again, true prophets are typically the most unassuming, self-effacing characters, not those hiding behind a false mystique carefully cultivated via social media or a slick network of blue-chip dealers.

"To me, it comes back to heart," he says. "The reason a guy like Leonard Cohen offers himself and doesn't talk about himself is because at the heart of this, at the center of this guy, there is such largeness, he doesn't have to try and convince me."

After observing Martínez Celaya work through a very vulnerable, transitional period, one might easily draw those same conclusions about him. **MP**