

Enrique Martínez Celaya *The Boy: Witness and Marker 2003 - 2018*

By Lilly Wei



Enrique Martínez Celaya, detail of *The Relic and the Pure*, 2015. Oil and wax on canvas, 60 x 78 inches. Courtesy Robischon Gallery.

Boyhood is the theme of this elegantly installed show although whether or not it is that of the artist Enrique Martínez Celaya is unclear—purposefully so. I can't help but think it is, at least partially (and perhaps more than that) since all invention is necessarily filtered through the inventor's experience. He is, to my mind, both the character within the narrative and the artist outside it.

The work (21 in all) spans 15 years and strides the line between representation and abstraction, starting with the photographic realism of a boy standing on a beach, the ocean behind him, then changes tack by becoming more painterly, expressive. The majority of the pieces shown are two-dimensional: oil and wax paintings and mixed media on paper.

Interspersed at different locations, however, are three terrific sculptures. Two are cast bronze, one a head of a boy that's a hand span in height and almost classical in form except for its poignant contemporary interiority, eyes downcast, deeply shadowed, his thoughts almost audible. The other is a surrealistic honey-gold head lying on its side out of which a smaller head springs. Is it a hostile takeover, a gilded éminence grise, or an image of regeneration? Then there is *The Traveler* (2016), a blackened, tar-coated head and torso that conjures a version of Christ as the existential Man of Sorrows, rolled in straw as if just emerging from a stable, birds nesting on him, haloed in solitude, aware of his destiny. This is one of the most compelling images in the show.

Some of the other highlights include *The Unwilled* (2008), the boy in it near life-size, embedded in a beautifully brushed translucent block of ice, revealed and concealed, his sex indiscernible as if still a chrysalis of sorts, waiting for spring, rebirth and release, the spell broken—or not, frozen in a state of perpetual abeyance. There seems to be much in abeyance in these narratives, as well as an uneasiness that emphasizes the fragility and vulnerability of childhood, and its transiency. beautifully brushed translucent block of ice, revealed and concealed, his sex indiscernible as if still a chrysalis of sorts, waiting for spring, rebirth and release, the spell broken—or not, frozen in a state of perpetual abeyance. There seems to be much in abeyance in these narratives, as well as an uneasiness

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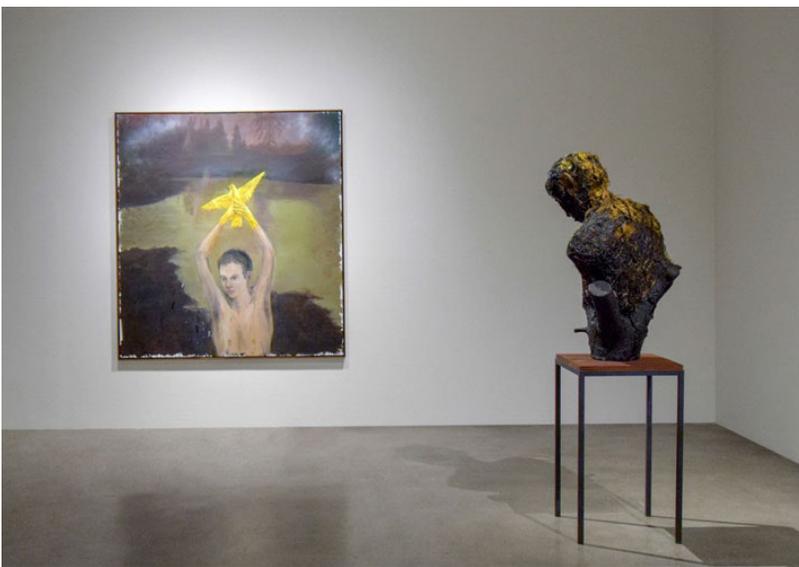
Another, *The Holy* (2009), is somber in palette, dramatically tense, the boy at the bottom right corner cut-off so that only his head, neck, and raised arms (a frequent pose, as is the partial view) is visible. He is holding an ax, conjuring stories of Freudian intimations from folk and biblical tales, although the implement is made of glass and it's uncertain if the strike will be offensive or defensive. Yet another, *The Sword* (2012), is even darker in tone and mood, the boy almost obscured, head bent, ribboned in a thin strip of light and wielding a bright red sword that he has just forged, perhaps, as if contemplating what he will do with it, or what he has done with it, with nod, perhaps, to Excalibur, the magical sword of King Arthur. Martínez Celaya leaves it open. And a boy grasping a tree branch, his arms stretched overhead is shown in a painting called *The Prince* (2015). Weren't we all royalty in our childhood? His chest is bared—Martínez Celaya often strips his protagonists, showing them in their natural state—steeped in the colors of the sunset/sunrise behind him, the brilliant red-orange of the sky spreading out like wings to keep him aloft, all marks of beatitudes that signal the potentialities of our early years.

Another curious painting, a beauty, is that of a skate with a boy resting his head on it, his body tucked into fetal position, a rather strange pillow cum security blanket. Depicted in transparent, tremulous pink, white, and blue—like flesh or the skirt of a ballerina—Martínez Celaya contrasts the enchanting with the mundane, the lush with the bleak.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Prince*, 2015. Oil and wax on canvas, 66 x 50 inches. Courtesy Robischon Gallery.

Martínez Celaya allows us many possible readings, leaving clues like breadcrumbs, which is one of the great pleasures of the exhibition. The other great pleasure these works offer is formal. He does here what he always does, playing the fiction of the narrative against the fact of the paint; stray drips are not smoothed away, the edges of the canvas are permitted to show through, the surface re-affirmed, and the deft brushwork does double-duty, not solely intent on realistic ends. And there are several images of triumph, or so they might be interpreted, such as the *Wager (or the Dreamer)* (2018), the character's arms upstretched, grasping a golden bird like a beacon, a harbinger of things to come. A different construction of triumph is a little painting called *The Trance* (2018) in which a naked boy pulls back a curtain to reveal the miracle of star-studded heavens. Almost an aside, it is also a key to the exhibition, the boy with all before him, still open to wonder. He is a witness, a marker, and not least, a maker, an artist.



Installation view: Enrique Martínez Celaya: *The Boy: The Witness and Marker*, 2003 - 2018, Robischon Gallery, 2019. Courtesy Robischon Gallery.

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