Layers of Devotion (and the Scars to Prove It)

By JORI FINKEL

SANTA MONICA—Imagine you're an artist finishing work for a big gallery show. You’re standing on a ladder trying to reach the top top of a wooden sculpture with a chain saw; the next thing you know, you’ve sliced open your left hand. You’ve served the tips of two fingers and nearly cut your thumb to the bone. You’ve hit an artery. Blood is spurting everywhere.

This is the scene that played out in June for the artist Enrique Martinez Celaya, when he was preparing for his first exhibition at the L.A. Louver gallery in Venice, Calif., which opened on Thursday and runs through January 3.

To make matters worse, he had attached the chain saw blade to a grinder for speed.

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as a physicist at the Brookhaven
National Laboratory on Long Island.
Mr. Martínez Celaya is one of the
rare contemporary artists who
trained as a physicist. He studied
quantum electronics as a graduate
student at the University of
California, Berkeley, until he found
himself more and more often
sneaking away to paint, something
he had considered a hobby.
“I found that the kinds of
questions I wanted to tackle were
not the questions of physics,” he
said. “Art is usually described as a
luxury, but I felt the opposite. I just
couldn’t go to the lab anymore
and ignore everything going on
emotionally with me.”
The questions he explores in
painting (and in his related writings)
belong to religion and philosophy:
the meaning of life and death,
the purpose of consciousness, and
what it means to be good or do
good. He is as likely to talk about
Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, or
Herman Melville and Paul Celan, as
Joseph Beuys and Lucian Freud.
Although he shows regularly with
John Berggruen Gallery in San
Francisco and Sara Meltzer in New
York (and has a retrospective that
will open next year at the State
Russian Museum in St. Petersburg),
he recognizes that he is not exactly
of the moment.
“So many contemporary paintings
have this winky to say we’re both in
on the joke,” he said. “Any time I
find myself being witty or clever, I
paint over it.”
For instance, the wooden
sculpture that cost him so much
blood — carved from a single,
4,000-pound log of Paulownia
Tomentosa, also known as the
Empress tree — has the gravitas of a
medieval Pietà. Only there is no
body of Jesus, just a stiff girl
sitting alone on a big rock in a
penitent pose.
“The robe that she wears is too
big for her,” he said. “I wanted
her to have this awkward,
vulnerable feeling.”

The other works in his Santa
Monica studio that day, another
sculpture and a dozen good-size
paintings now at L.A. Louver, are
also lessons in isolation —
sparse landscapes and astringent
snowscapes, boyish figures that
seem lost against the wide horizon,
and animals holding their own,
sometimes with no humans in sight.
The idea of exile and, more
broadly, the existential condition of
being separated from home haunts
Mr. Martínez Celaya’s work. Born in
Cuba, he emigrated with his family
to Madrid in childhood and to Puerto
Rico as a teenager before moving to
the United States for college.
Even today at 44, with a wife and
three young children, he remains
mobile. He has been shuttling for
the past five years between Los
Angeles and Delray Beach, Fla., a town,
said, that he and his wife picked out
on a map. (The current plan is to live
in Delray Beach year-round, and he
has just sold his Santa Monica
studio.) An exhibition of his work
last year at the Miami Art Museum
was aptly named “Nomad.”
The artist on his style: ‘It’s
strange to love painting
and be so much
anti-painting.’

“Someone asked me a while back
why I paint all of these images of
coldness and snow,” he said. “I think
that’s the temperature I feel inside.
Isolation, solitude and loneliness,
I’m always feeling the condition of
things — or what you could call the
illusion of things — being separate.”
He walked over to a painting that
shows a thin sliver of a naked boy
trapped inside a tall block of ice, an
image he worked on for more than
two years. Part of what took so long,
said, was the inherent melodrama
of the image, more surreal than most
of his scenes.
“It seemed like a remarkably
stupid painting to me,” he said. “I
quickly, pressing his paper-towel-
wrapped hand in hers, almost
tourniquet-style, to staunch the
bleeding and letting emergency
paramedics know he was an artist.
(Pity the studio intern, three days on
the job, who had the unglamorous
task of finding the fingertips.)

He also credits his reconstructive
surgeon, Jerry Haviv, with skillfully
repairing his ligaments and tendons.
(Mr. Martínez Celaya says he
now has 80 percent function in
his left hand — which is not
his dominant hand — and expects a
full recovery within a year.)

As for his own reaction that day,
he described it as strangely calm. “I
said to Catherine as the paramedics
were taking me away: ‘Don’t throw
away the paper towels. I might want
to use them in an artwork.’ ”

It was the reaction of an artist who
has often used unorthodox materials
like tar, blood, hair and feathers in
his paintings. It was also the
response of a highly rational,
self-disciplined scientist who once
worked on the femtosecond laser

The painter, sculptor and sometime scientist
Enrique Martínez Celaya beside one of his
works in his studio in Santa Monica, Calif.

Stephanie Diani for The New York Times
even painted pine cones trying to get him out of the ice. I created cracks in the ice, but I couldn’t get him out.”

For all of the paintings in his studio that day, he relied on the same basic technique. He mixed wax into oil paint (about a 1-to-3 ratio), building up one thin layer after another to achieve a matte finish and translucency of color. (“Shiny paint makes me feel like I can’t breathe,” he said.) Some paintings have as many as 20 layers.

In the process he often painted over shapes or even human figures so that the finished canvas could contain less by way of content than it once did. One muddy, mountainous painting originally showed a boy sitting off to one corner holding the head of a deer. Now both the boy and head are gone.

In another canvas a boy stands in a deep field of dandelions, his face popping out like an overgrown flower. But the more you look, the less the image yields. There is no expressive or virtuosic brush stroke, and little realistic detail, to flesh out the figure or reveal the boy’s age or size. Mr. Martínez Celaya said it was intentional. “There’s not enough there to hold you emotionally. You begin to sink into a black hole.”

“It’s strange to love painting and be so much anti-painting,” he added. “I’m not interested in luscious, sexy, virtuosic painting, but the destruction of the image, undermining the certainty of the image.”

Near that work hung a darker painting of a horse in front of a forest, tethered to something out of sight. Here too there are signs of a painter making himself less painterly, as well as an empathy for animals. “It’s clunky, like I like,” he said. “It was hard to paint a horse as aggressively as I wanted. It wanted to be treated better than that.”

This painting originally featured a white deer, but he ended up instead making a bronze sculpture of a deer, which stood near the large western stretch of windows in his studio. From a distance it looked as though the deer was pulling a sled, in a possible reindeer reference.

Only this is no garden ornament. The sled turns out to be a small bronze model of a Rocky Mountain-style landscape, complete with peaks and lakes. And the deer has moments of realism, not to mention testicles.

Still, the creature, now installed in the roof garden at L.A. Louver, remains elusive in many ways. Its bronze surface is highly reflective (waxed, not patinated), and the artist imagines that it will shimmer like a mirage for visitors.

“It’s a little like a magic trick,” he said, “trying to make something as solid as metal vanish a bit.”

Then there are the seams on the deer’s legs and torso, where the welding process has etched faint rainbows into the metal. Mr. Martínez Celaya decided not to smooth these seams so he could “expose the sculpture’s constructed nature.”

And now, after his accident, the ridges have new meaning for him. He glanced down at the deer’s legs, then held up his left hand.

“The seams on the deer look like scars to me,” he said. “I feel even more of a connection to him now.”

"The Unwilled" (2008), a work that features a boy in a block of ice.