

RIOT MATERIAL

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Enrique Martínez Celaya's *The Tears of Things*

By Lita Barrie

Enrique Martínez Celaya's haunting exhibition at Kohn Gallery is conceived as visual poetry predicated upon Virgil's phrase "the tears of things," from *Aeneid* (Book I, line 462), about an encounter with a mural of the battle of Troy which made the Trojan hero weep as he remembered those he had loved and lost. This famous poetic passage about the power of painting continues to fascinate scholars because it is open to multiple subjective and objective interpretations.

As a physicist, Martínez Celaya is trained to ask questions that uncover contradictions that do admit the closure of an answer in the realm of quantum mechanics. Martínez Celaya uses the poetic implications of Virgil's phrase to make a quantum leap into the lofty realm of scientific query regarding the way everything is interconnected in a larger continuum where nothing actually exists in-and-of-itself. His paintings also raise aesthetic questions about the nature of painting itself, as a both a construction and a locus for transformative emotional experiences. I left this exhibition with more questions than when I arrived and returned only to leave with further questions about the wondrous connection between the act of seeing and what I had seen.

A key justification for looking at art — like reading poetry, philosophy and physics — is that the more deeply we study these disciplines the more questions we have about human existence and the world around us. Rarely have I seen this basic existential function of art realized as authentically as Martínez Celaya realizes it in this thoughtful exhibition.

It bears emphasizing that as a physicist, a poet, a philosopher and a painter, Martínez Celaya draws on a wealth of wisdom which gives his artwork greater gravitas. Interestingly, Martínez Celaya was finishing his PHD in



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Faithful*, 2019

physics (having already patented four laser inventions) when he had an epiphany in a lighthouse off the coast south of San Francisco where he was staying for a few days, and this led to his decision to change his career direction to art and study for his MFA at UC Santa Barbara. It was a fortuitous trajectory in that it catapulted Martínez Celaya to international critical acclaim and today his artworks are held in major museum collections worldwide. Martínez Celaya likewise holds a unique academic position as Provost Professor of Humanities and Arts at USC where he teaches graduate courses in different departments, ranging from studio art, to physics, and to literature.

As anyone who has read his prolific learned writings or listened to his brilliant lectures on art, physics and literature will appreciate, Martínez Celaya shares his reflections with an intellectual sensitivity and quiet humility that comes from fully understanding the fact that we can never comprehend the mysteries of existence. Self-satisfaction is a conceit only possible for those less evolved artists who, as Einstein said of scientists he had no patience for, they “drill a great number of holes where drilling is easy.”

Martínez Celaya also practices mindful meditation, which informs his approach to art and life. He continuously re-paints his paintings, like revising a text, understanding that a painting, like a manuscript, can never be finished. He calls his paintings “approximations” because they can never quite grasp the ungraspable. Martínez Celaya’s paintings are distillations from his ongoing quest to understand questions about Being. Like poems that do not really exist on paper, Martínez Celaya’s paintings do not really exist on canvas either, since their presence, along with their significance exists in more private domains, where reading/viewing and remembering become their own vast inner landscapes, rich in their regenerative terrains. Just as the experience of absorbing Sixteenth Century masters like Velazquez, Goya and Titian at the Prado Museum, where he lived in Madrid as a teenager apprenticing to a painter, have become a part of Martínez Celaya’s expressive palette which he draws from sub-consciously.

For this reason, Martínez Celaya pre-plans his exhibitions as environments by making models of the gallery with miniatures of the artworks “arranged to create an experience of a world in itself.” He considers the viewers’ movements as they walk through the space as an integral part of experiencing the relationship between all the artworks as a totality. Needless to say, these paintings make for slow progressions through the gallery space and a more prolonged experience even after that space, much as one finds in quietly reading poetry. Martínez Celaya uses large scale as a kind-of whaler’s gaff to pull the viewer by the gut into a visceral experience of painting, a tack that no less recalls Mark Rothko’s modern masterpieces. Martínez Celaya says, “A small painting becomes too much of a window, and the engagement becomes very mental and intellectual. There is an intimacy to large-scale work because you are involved by it.”

The first thing the viewer sees in the gallery courtyard is a monumental bronze sculpture, *The Well*, of a large torso stained with the traces of tears that have gathered debris and moss that runs down into a pool of water, leaving a human imprint on the landscape. When I met Martínez Celaya to discuss the exhibition he explained that the “impulse” for this work “is the almost ungraspable aspect of the traces of the tears.” This melancholic piece sets the emotional and philosophic tone of the exhibition, which explores “the relation between self and other.” Interestingly “the other” is not understood semiotically as a cultural construction but, instead, “takes the form of the landscape as we participate in the tensions between the promise of something: a better place, a tomorrow. When we negotiate this promise the environment as a whole is imbued with all those marks of promises and regrets.”

Inside the gallery, his large scale paintings use elusive reflections that only seem to be there, building on the opening metaphor of tears. In *The Virtue*, an ice skater glides on frozen waters through a deserted landscape which resonates with him as he passes through it. The entire painting functions as a large setting for the simple breath — just as the monumental sculpture was a setting for simple tears. The painting is inscribed with the phrase “here are your waters and your watering place,” from Robert Frost’s poem, “Directive” (1946). Like Frost’s poetry, Martínez Celaya uses spare imagery (a breath, tears) in which we can discover ourselves through a sense of the common paradoxical experience of finding-in-losing. This painting is also an analogy for painting itself, or at least Martínez Celaya’s, because it is there in the viewing yet one feels it is nevertheless not, for in the act of seeing what is seen is continually in change, continually — if only seemingly — moving.

Martínez Celaya’s paintings are often uninhabited or have but one lone inhabitant to convey a sense of existential disconnect. The displaced feeling of living in exile might be more accentuated for those of us like Cuban-born Martínez Celaya, who live in a foreign land, but he insists that “spiritual or psychic exile is a fundamental condition of our modern time.” Many of these paintings have meandering paths which disappear into vanishing points in the background. Throughout the movement of this exhibition the viewer feels a lonely sense of searching, questing and wandering to find some thing, but what that *thing* might be is never clearly in the fore.

In *The Reign*, Martínez Celaya inscribes the words “your kingdom around you” in an uninhabited landscape with only an apple tree to reference banishment in the story of Adam and Eve. A golden fleece is removed from the center of the painting and displaced alongside in a further reference to the Greek myth about power and authority. Martínez Celaya undermines the elegance of his imagery by leaving drips and crudely painted “messy” areas that create a push-and-pull tension between rawness and refinement. The distinctive edges of his paintings are left jagged and fractured as a reminder that a painting is a construction.

The apple tree is a recurring leitmotif in many of these paintings. It appears transformed into gold, like a fairy tale image, in *The Promise of the Most Whole*. But the allusion is then denied because the rough strokes of Martínez Celaya’s brush remind us that appearance of gold is really paint. So it is neither this nor that but both at the same time — just as light is both a wave and a particle in quantum physics.

In *The Prophet*, the burned apple tree is only partially transformed in a vision of the future. Like many of these paintings, it is elusive because it has no knowable source of light, which leaves one asking where indeed this light does shine. And the one good answer is: perhaps only for our imagination. Martínez Celaya uses what can only be described as an imagined light source from on-high in an effort to undermine perspectival depth in *The Found (or the Lost)* and *The Forgetful*.

However, in *The Faithful*, the reflected light of a full moon is here seen as an internal source of light that illuminates a dark painting which is a constructed world in itself. This melancholic painting, filled with the romance of flowers and the crisp, sharply delineated flight of white butterflies, is undercut by the uncertainty of conflicted feelings of loss, conveyed in the painting’s lower registers, amidst stated rise of hope in the upper thirds.

Martínez Celaya creates an aesthetic for ambiguities that can never be resolved to remind us that ambiguity is an inherent quality of the dualities in all things. Nothing is ever just one thing in Martínez Celaya’s equivocal work, and we are left questioning what we see and how we are seeing it. Martínez Celaya compares these “impenetrable questions about being and the nature of things” to “rotating a crystal to understand it.” The experience of moving around this exhibition feels like a similar rotation, examining the same unanswerable questions from variant angles. This movement is punctuated with a surprising displacement of things: the ice skates, rocks, cement and metal we see in the paintings piled together as a sculpture, of sorts, titled *The Art of Losing (for E. Bishop)*.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Art of Losing (for E. Bishop)*, 2019

In our mind-numbing, mass-mediated culture in which we are constantly told what to think, what to like and what to do by corporate entities trying to sell us the lot, it is rare to be given a secular spiritual space for wandering in our own thoughts that allows for a more heightened awareness of being and place. As I left the exhibition I recalled Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphorism, “If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee” (*Beyond Good and Evil*). Perhaps the antidote to our existential phobias in the era of alienation is to remember that the people, places and things we have lost are really always present as memories imprinted on the larger continuum on which we exist — as seen in Martínez Celaya’s sculpture of Aeneid’s tears transformed by moss and debris.