



Exhibitions

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Painting for Käthe Kollwitz

Galerie Judin in Berlin exhibits paintings by the Cuban exile Enrique Martínez Celaya

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The Berlin exhibition comes in the middle of the disruptive time of the coronavirus pandemic, and it begins with a confession: On the gallery wall, the Cuban-born Enrique Martínez Celaya tells us in large letters, why he relates so intensely to Käthe Kollwitz: He feels at home with her work, “Less alone.” And: “She knew what it meant to be human.”

Fleeing Cuba as a teenager, in exile in Spain and Puerto Rico, and finally ending up in the USA where he is to this day, a Latino and a foreigner, Martínez Celaya discovered the German poets for himself: Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Brecht. And the philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche. Sometime in the 1980s he came across the work of Käthe Kollwitz: her hard, powerful etching cycle on the “Peasants’ War.” He, too, wanted to become a painter and draftsman. The expression of pain and compassion in Kollwitz, and her existential and humanistic messages against war and violence, reverberated within him. And, as he says, he was also fascinated by the mysterious, inexplicable, modern and concise urgency of her no-nonsense, even radical, drawing style.

A Compass on the Wall

In 1995 he bought a Kollwitz lithograph from 1922—a self-portrait—from a gallery. Since then it has hung in Martínez Celaya’s studio like a compass, and a daily reminder. Almost inevitably, one can detect an adaptation of the realistic-expressive drawings of the German artist in Martínez Celaya’s work. He spent weeks in Berlin with the works of the exquisite Kollwitz collection held by Gudrun and Martin Fritsch, who were long-time directors of the Kollwitz Museum in Berlin. The images of Kollwitz’s work and the conversations with the collector couple (who are also



Enrique Martínez Celaya, “The Puppet,” 2020, based on the study by Kollwitz, “From many wounds you bleed, O People,” c. 1990. Courtesy Galerie Judin.

important Kollwitz researchers), strengthened his elective affinity and his attitude towards “being an artist in this world”. He, too, he says, works in a time when people are confused and so much in need of clarity, as Käthe Kollwitz did in the darkest years after the First World War (during which she lost her son, Peter) and later during the Nazi regime.

Martínez Celaya, born in 1964, chose the title “Von den

ersten und den letzten Dingen (Of First and Last Things)” for his exhibition at the gallery owned by the Grosz collector Juerg Judin, who is also very keen on Kollwitz’s work. The Cuban exile installed his paintings tellingly opposite the Kollwitz loans, including two sculptures from the Fritsch Collection. Her work hangs on a wine-red wall, his on a white wall, and they are adaptations as bold as they are empathetic. The

large, heart-wrenching drawing, “Woman with a dead child,” from 1903, becomes a requiem for Martínez Celaya, with a huge red flower as if filled with the child’s blood. In ways like this, the painter heightens the drama and emotional impact of the scene in his own way.

With Black Oil Paint

A tiny drawing in a corner of the exhibition hall shows a biblical motif from Kollwitz. It is the study of a nude for the etching “From many wounds you bleed, O People”, circa 1900. It is a torture scene, a woman in pain, a female *Ecce-Homo* figure, a parable to Jesus’ crucifixion.

Martínez Celaya describes Kollwitz’s imagery as ahistorical in the sense that we can see and interpret it without the need for a historical framework. His painting, “The Puppet” (oil and wax on canvas), uses Kollwitz’s work as a point of departure and was completed during the first lockdown period of the pandemic. A naked, vulnerable female figure hangs by invisible ropes as if dead, and she is covered with flowers from above. It is not a funeral, but a sign of life and hope. In the painting called “The Lesson,” Martínez Celaya paints Death, which lets children starve to death, a gripping counterpart to Kollwitz’s famous graphic series, “Hunger,” from 1925.

The drawings and large-format paintings are a suitable, rousing and admonishing warning, a reminder of all the desperately needed “Feed the World” campaigns that had to be canceled because of the coronavirus lockdowns impacting churches, social institutions and charity events. The television and internet images of starving children in Syria, however, literally cry out for our help.

Galerie Judin, Potsdamer Str. 83, until April 10, Tues.-Sat. 11am-6pm. info@galeriejudin.de