

BROOKLYN RAIL

MARCH 2021

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INDEPENDENT AND FREE



Art | In Conversation

Enrique Martínez Celaya with Eleanor Heartney

“Art allows the possibility of everything being in.”

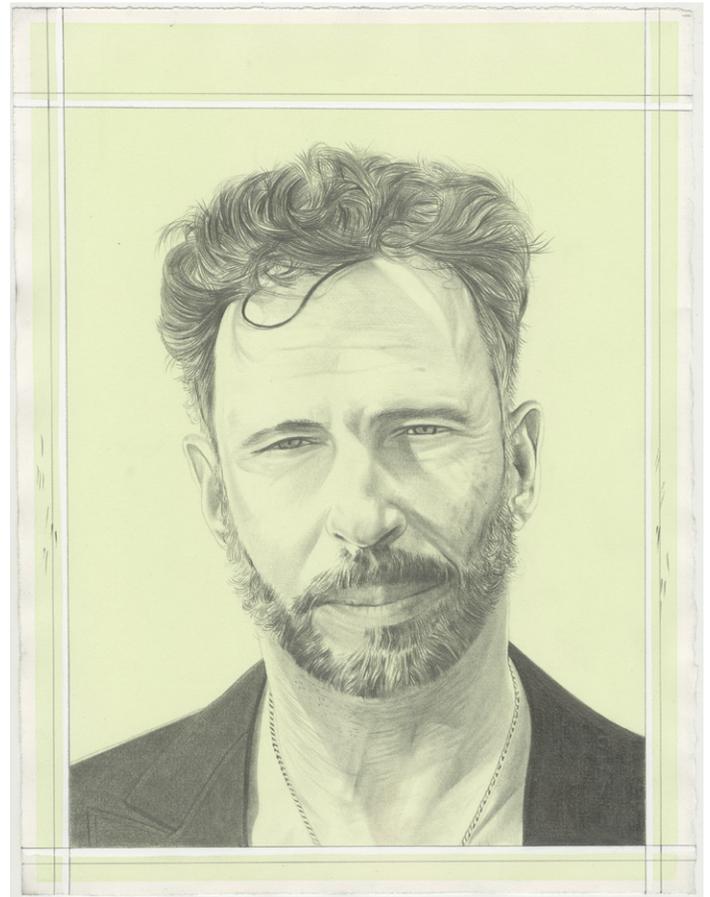
Enrique Martínez Celaya is that rare artist who is also a polymath. Born in Cuba, raised in Spain and Puerto Rico, he now lives in California. Originally, he studied science, receiving a bachelor of science degree in applied physics and a minor in electrical engineering from Cornell University. He followed this up with a master of science degree from the University of California, Berkeley, specializing in quantum electronics. But then, after this, on his way to a PhD, he did an abrupt turn, and changed to art, earning an MFA from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is currently the Provost Professor of Humanities and Arts at the University of Southern California. Enrique is a highly respected artist and an author of numerous books and articles on art, poetry, and philosophy. He is also the founder of the publishing company Whale & Star Press.

Enrique is as conversant in literature, philosophy, and physics as he is with art. These are all incorporated into his paintings and sculptures, which employ an artistic vocabulary of imagery drawn from nature and imagination. A quote from a lecture he gave in 2008 at the University of Nebraska in Omaha sums up a lot of his ideas as an artist,

“As I see it, the aspiration of the artist’s work is to dissolve the distance between self and the cosmos, thereby uniting being and language, memory and nothingness, life and death. These are perhaps lofty claims on behalf of pigments, metal, and wood. But the disparity between the aims and means of art is its essence.”

Eleanor Heartney (Rail): Enrique, there are so many topics we can address today, but I would like to begin with a discussion of a pair of upcoming exhibitions. One appears at Galerie Judin in Berlin and presents works that were made in dialogue with the works of the early 20th century German Expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz. The other, titled *A Third of the Night*, appears at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen and comprises works that are more dreamlike and personal, with a recurring motif of the starry night sky. On the surface, the two shows appear to be quite different, but both were done during the COVID pandemic. I’d love to know in what ways they are responses to our current situation and how you see them as relating to each other.

Enrique Martínez Celaya: The collaboration with Käthe Kollwitz, *Of First and Last Things*, was proposed to me about a year and a half ago. That was before COVID. So, it’s coincidental that the loss brought on by the pandemic and the social unrest we have seen over the past year echoes Kollwitz’s work, which made working on this project particularly poignant.



Portrait of Enrique Martínez Celaya, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

The other exhibition, *A Third of the Night*, moved in a similar way, and, in my mind, they both respond to the fragility and vulnerability of this moment. They reflect the challenges, the isolation, and the sense of loneliness that we have felt, which is why they conceptually merge into each other, even if visually they appear different.

Rail: I was especially struck by the way the works in *A Third of the Night* have a sense of being suspended in time, which is very much how we all feel right now. We're in this weird in-between place, and the images in these works feel like they're coming from that place as well.

Martínez Celaya: I think that's right. That suspension you speak of is something many of us felt. There are many ways to be suspended. One of them is when time seems to stand still, and our relationship to what's outside of ourselves becomes a question. "What is this relationship?" we wonder while sensing the impassiveness of the universe to our human concerns. Our problems and we seem fragile, transient, in comparison to, say, stars, which is one of the elements in *A Third of the Night*.

Rail: In both bodies of work there are images of the stars, but the Kollwitz work seems much more anguished, and there is a sense of being in a world full of sort of turbulent political upheaval.

Martínez Celaya: Kollwitz is an artist who I have admired since my teenage years, and I keep her prints in my studio. So, it was a gift to work on these paintings using her drawings as source material. But I couldn't anticipate our concerns were going to become as significant as they did on account of what we have been going through as a society in the last 12 months. Typically, my work is not political like Kollwitz's. So, it was an opportunity to learn from her humanity and see how issues that seemed to belong to Germany from, say, the 1920s to 1945, resonated with the sense of poverty, loneliness, disenfranchisement, and oppression that many of us were feeling during this time.

Rail: One of the bodies of work sort of looks in, while the other looks out. One of the things that I've always loved about your work, and something I think we share, is a willingness to embrace unfashionable ideas like the ideas of truth or spirituality or sincerity. And I'd like to dig into that a little bit. You are also, as well as being a wonderful painter and

sculptor, a very gifted writer. You've written quite a bit about this question of truth. What do you mean by that and how, in a world of fake news, alternative facts, and postmodern irony, do you manage to hold on to a notion of truth?

Martínez Celaya: That is a great question. Truth is an essential source of energy for me. I am as aware as anyone else of the problems of making claims for authenticity or truth. I know the arguments, and despite these arguments, I still see the importance and validity of truth. Partly, this comes from having been a scientist. It's very difficult to be a scientist for whom truth is not part of what is accounted for. At the end of the day, science is ultimately an inquiry searching for truth. While problematic and requiring modifications and adjustments, truth is what gives meaning to life. We live in a meaningless universe, and we create meaning through work, how we live, and the creative choices we make. Some order needs to exist to make those choices. In my case, that order is related to the question "what is true?" and to how we respond to it, not just in words but in day-to-day actions.

Rail: I'd like to maybe push a little further about the truth of science and the truth of art. How are they the same and how are they different?

Martínez Celaya: I think truth is truth. In art, we have different kinds of questions. Some people think of art primarily as cultural production. But in my understanding, art is an inquiry towards truth—a search for the foundations of truth. The truths of science are the truths of the order of



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Sparrow*, 2020. Oil and wax on canvas, 63 x 70 inches. Courtesy the artist and Baldwin Gallery, Aspen.

things—how the universe is built. The truth we seek in art is clarity—a moment in which there's a clearing in the forest of confusion. We live in tremendous confusion, in darkness. Our lives are mostly an assembly of poorly understood ideas and feelings. So I go to art to find clarity, which is when the world opens, and truth reveals itself as brightness.

One challenge in answering your question, which is so important, is that words often fail. We have to describe things as brightness, as clearings, but these are metaphors, and they're sloppy and blurry. But if we put words aside, clarity becomes easy to recognize as it is easy to recognize when somebody you meet is present and not wearing masks or pretensions. It's difficult to explain what you're recognizing, but it is undeniable. So, truth, in some ways, has a similar quality. It's easy to point to it—or maybe not easy, but easier—than to try to articulate what you're pointing to.

Rail: Another aspect of your work that relates to this is your engagement with spirituality. That can be a problematic word, but it indicates a reality that's larger or beyond what we immediately see and experience. And, in fact, you have said that you work in a religious manner. And yet, science and spirituality are generally seen as being on opposite poles. Science is seen as being about materialistic objective truth while spirituality is about a different kind of reality or truth. In fact, however, that opposition is a modern assumption. In the 19th century one didn't find this hard and fast distinction between science and spirituality. A lot of scientists, people like William James for instance, were looking for scientific proof of life beyond death. And there was so much interest in invisible forces like the telegraph or electricity, and other new technologies. At that time scientists didn't necessarily see a separation between spirit and matter. I'm wondering if, in your switch from science to art, you were able to tap into that sense, or did you feel that you were leaving behind a world that was more skeptical of spirituality?

Martínez Celaya: When I was young, my internal tendencies, as well as exile and the dislocation that comes with that, gave me a sense that I understood very little of what was going on and that there were many things I needed to figure out. That's why I became interested in science, philosophy, and art. As a kid, I painted to sort the world out. So, anybody who then goes to science with these concerns has to marvel at the incredible beauty of the physics equations that describe the world. The immensity one is confronted with through the discoveries of physics and the limitation of the words one has to explain that experience create a gap of articulation similar to the one we find in trying to describe spiritual experience.

As you correctly said, I don't have a religious practice, but questions usually taken on by theology are the most urgent ones to me—for instance, our place in the universe, mortality, choices, and ethics. The types of concerns that have been the territory of religion, spirituality, and theology are more pressing to me than social dynamics or power structures, which I feel are more transitory.

I don't really see a significant separation between science, philosophy, and art in the big picture. In fact, until the 18th century, physics was called natural philosophy. People were trying to figure out how nature works, which includes everything, doesn't it? So, these disciplines are much closer than we assume they are.

Rail: And have you in the course of your career, have you faced pushback against that aspect of your work?

Martínez Celaya: The triumph of the sciences over the last 150 years has led the humanities and arts to grow insecure. Many people in these areas compensate by trying to come across as rigorous and theoretical, so anyone bringing up ideas like authenticity or truth is seen as a simpleton—as if you don't understand what's really going on.

So, of course, you get pushback when you use these words. I try to stay away from words like spirituality because they summarize too much. I prefer to be more specific, to say what I mean, even if it is difficult to articulate. But I still get pushback for voicing concerns that don't quite fit the discourse, especially as a Latin artist. There are rigid expectations in the contemporary art world about Latin artists' proper concerns.

Rail: Relating to this is another aspect of your work. We could call it a sense of sincerity. Or, we could say that it's a reaction against the kind of postmodern irony that is so kind of pervasive in the art world today. To quote you again, you have written, "I have found irony, not to be an exciting destination, but the tiresome quicksand from which I must always depart. Irony and suspicion are embedded in the spiritual foundation of many of us. Therefore, it takes effort to build anything trustworthy, and, particularly, anything resembling ethics and beliefs capable of surviving the erosion of time."

So how do we escape from the irony today? It's hard, in light of recent events, with the whole world getting turned upside down, to avoid irony. Has irony shaped us in difficult ways?

Martínez Celaya: That's a key question. Peter Sloterdijk wrote a book called *Critique of Cynical Reason*, where he makes a good argument of how cynicism is entrenched in our consciousness and social structures. So claims of being outside of its influence are suspicious, including when I make them.

It's a day-by-day effort to recognize that cynical tendency in oneself. It is easy to make arguments on behalf of being cynical and ironic and why there's a lie behind almost everything. But this is not a great accomplishment. You don't have to be that intelligent to see behind the curtain. I'd rather try to find alternatives to emptiness and hypocrisy. This is a much harder task that requires recognizing how small one is. It's always a task we are too incomplete, too small, too inconsequential, to take on. But that's precisely the reason to take it on. The reach gives meaning to one's effort, and it gives meaning to my work and my practice when I arrive at the studio each morning.

Rail: You have said that you feel that all artists should aspire to be prophets. What do you mean by that and how does that relate to this whole discussion of cynicism and sincerity?

Martínez Celaya: The prophet is somebody who works to bring forward the future with a commitment to the idea of truth we've been speaking about. When people hear "prophet," it sounds like I'm making big claims for the artist, and in fact, I am. But it doesn't mean that by recognizing my smallness or how petty my knowledge or understanding is, I am not up to the task. It is precisely because it's a task bigger than me that I want to pursue it. We all know too much of what's easy and reachable, and we have become too familiar with diminished expectations, which is partly why we're in this cynical state.

I left physics because I wanted certain qualities in my life and my efforts. So, I welcome the idea of bringing forward the future and work to accomplish it as sincerely as I can, even though we both know the notion of sincerity is full of holes and quite problematic. Yet, it has to be somewhere in the mix.

The prophet is someone who is committed to life. It's not a mystic who stays in a mountain meditating. The prophet comes back from the mountain and tries to offer something to the world. It's not a selfish act, it's one of sharing.

Rail: This is something that you do not just with your art but with your writing as well. And so maybe you could talk a little bit about that. How does your writing feed your art and how does your art feed your writing?

Martínez Celaya: Writing is important to me as something I do and also as an influence. Writers, especially poets and novelists, have provided me with an emotional and intellectual education. I also find that writers, more than visual artists, have understood the critiques of late modernism and the problems they bring up, and yet managed to remain committed to something other than the idea of cultural production or the kind of conversations that take place in ivory towers.

Take a writer like Czesław Miłosz, a Polish poet. Even though he was at the leading edge of poetry, he was also committed to the conditions in Eastern Europe and Poland. He didn't announce a separation between the two. There doesn't need to be a choice between being "high art" and being involved with the world, and I think many poets and writers—particularly in Latin America and Europe—have been able to do this. They are examples of how you can try to have it all: to be a serious artist aware of the discourse and yet involved with the world.

In my writing, I try to address those areas of concern that cannot directly be addressed by art, and then I weave them back into the visual projects. And often, they are presented together. Writing has an ongoing role in my work.

Rail: And how does your publishing venture fit into all this?

Martínez Celaya: It started in 1998 as an effort to publish poets and other writers that I felt would not be of interest to trade publishers, partly because publishing has continued to shrink and because poets don't do much for the business. If you sell 1,000 books of poetry, which is not easy, nobody makes money. Nonetheless, I felt it was critical to bring these writers forward, including some that perhaps we knew but whose translations could be reconsidered. For example, we did a book on Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet, in which accomplished poets did the translations. This book was done in collaboration with Kevin Platt, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. On the cover, we put Modigliani's drawing of Akhmatova.

We have also done collaborations with musicians, cultural magazines, and artists. We are trying to create exciting publications with writers and thinkers people should know. And we have been lucky the University of Nebraska Press distributes our books. With their help, our books have had a good reception. It's really a labor of love, to use that corny phrase. My studio and I produce and design them here in the studio, usually in small editions, and it has been incredibly satisfying to engage the world in this way.

The publishing house's outreach is part of a larger way in which we try to be involved with the community. We also do some programs for children and public schools at the studio, and we host a lecture series on art and ethics. As artists, we deal with increasingly rarefied spaces, so it's good to have a different kind of conversation with the community than the one that takes place in galleries and museums.

Rail: Your mention of the writers that you've published and that you admire shows that you cast a very wide net. You said that people like to box you in as a Latin artist, but obviously you're a citizen of the world. I'm interested in how you got that way. Does this wider view of the world come from your background in some way?

Martínez Celaya: It does come from my background, and a couple of experiences contributed to it. One is exile. I left Cuba when I was seven and moved to Madrid during Franco. That kind of dislocation sends you into the world seeking answers. There's a deficit one feels as an exile, and, for me, this deficit was filled by literature—without cultural boundaries. I would read a Russian writer, like Tolstoy, whom I first discovered in Cuba, an English writer, or someone like Joseph Conrad, who was also an exile. These writers gave me the world. One of the things you gain as an exile is the discovery of a life outside of your own country.

The other thing that influenced my interest in philosophy and literature was the Puerto Rico of the 1970s. In 1975, I went from Spain to Puerto Rico, which was very active politically back then. The ideas of colonialism and political definition were critical in the island, and students were reading Hegel and Marx to figure out how to make sense of the colonial condition. It might seem odd now, but it was necessary to be politically aware when I was a teenager. It was considered "cool" to read Immanuel Kant, even if you couldn't understand it.

People look at the German influence in my work and often don't understand how it makes sense for someone with a Latin background. But, in the Puerto Rico of the 1970s, every one of my friends read these thinkers. I also had great teachers who pushed me and helped me find ideas and books. The question became, "where are the answers?" So, if they seemed to be in Thomas Mann, Bulgakov, or Hemingway, that's where I was going to look for them, regardless of tradition or country. The whole world was accessible to me. I think that's one benefit you get from dislocation—in reorganizing your sense of identity, everything can be at play.

Rail: I'm curious about whether your thinking changed as you've gotten older? Do you see a trajectory in your work, starting from that place?

Martínez Celaya: In some ways, no. When I look back at the paintings I did when I was 11 or 12, even though there were many things I didn't know then that I know now, I see the continuity of concerns. I think perhaps this is true of most of us. We have two or three things that define our preoccupations, which, in turn, define our lives. What we do, quite often, is find support and a way to amplify those early concerns in an effort to clarify them. So, I have had a very limited evolution in my concerns, but I have been very fortunate to have found ways to expand their reach. Growing up, I didn't know much beyond my city block, so I feel fortunate I have had so many opportunities. Yet, I am not fundamentally a different consciousness than I was then.

Rail: How would you define some of those continuities?

Martínez Celaya: I would define the continuity as a set of questions that has always been with me. First, the questions "who am I?" and "what's my relationship to the world?" These have always been pressing and urgent. I couldn't take it as a given that I was a Cuban or from this family. I felt these were questions that needed better answers than those I had. I have always been concerned about how these questions lead to the choices we make and how we value them. And then, there is the question of truth, which is, if you rotate it a little bit, the question of beauty—not the pretty, but the beautiful.

I tried to find answers to these questions in religion when I was a kid. Then, I tried to find them in physics, literature, philosophy, and art, and if tomorrow you suggest another good way to approach the questions, I will incorporate that too. I am interested in everything because, ultimately, behind all my interests is a concern for clarity and better understanding.

Rail: Having gone through all these disciplines, you ended up with art. What did art have to offer you that those other disciplines didn't?

Martínez Celaya: Nobody has asked me that, and it's an excellent way to get to what's at stake. Art allows the possibility of everything being in. When I was a scientist, many of my concerns had to be left outside of the lab—like the questions I have about memory, or of where we are, or a glance that my father might have given at some moment. They were left outside, and I went into the lab to figure out some scientific problem.

But I felt that life being so short, I didn't have the luxury of postponing concerns that mattered to me. We tend to think of STEM fields as practical instead of luxurious, but I found it very luxurious to pause asking questions urgent to me and assume I will always have time to take them on later on. I needed to be involved in something in which nothing is left out. This conversation we're having can be part of my work. Any preoccupation that comes up can be part of my work. Art allows everything important to be in the work as material and aim.

Rail: I wanted to ask about your working process. In the video you included a wonderful time-lapse sequence of you creating a painting. I found it interesting that you started with a certain composition and then at one point you obliterated half of it and then you came back to it. Finally in the end this very amazing rose appears. Can you describe your working process? What kind of an idea do you start with, where does it go, and what makes it change?

Martínez Celaya: I usually start with a series of questions that are quite abstract and have no imagery associated with them. I often write first, then I make a model of the museum or gallery and try to conceptualize how those questions can be given shape as an environment. At some point, I begin to work on many works at once. The evolution you saw of that painting is actually very conservative. My paintings usually change more dramatically. In that piece, I was anchored by a particular drawing by Kollwitz, which provided continuity.

That is why I could never have an assistant do my work for me. I never know what tomorrow will bring to the artworks, and I cannot be prescriptive about it. Each piece has its own series of concerns. I'm not interested in the reproduction of ideas or the continuity of visual experience that artists, especially painters, often pursue. My process is one of inquiry, where I work on many things at once. Sometimes, I move from painting to sculpture, occasionally to photograph and video, searching for something, and there's a lot of destruction along the way.

Sometimes people visit my studio and like a work, but it's gone when they come back. I depend on that evolution and that destruction to clarify what I'm after. I remember Allen Ginsberg saying that, in art, the first idea is the most important, and the second one in everything else. For me, the seventh idea may be the one that's important. I find that before then, I am working superficially. It takes me a while to realize what I should be after.

Rail: Is the process different when you work in sculpture?

Martínez Celaya: Well, it is different in the sense that with some of the monumental bronzes, once I commit to something of a large scale, I'm mostly following through with it. But I still find myself improvising. I like to do my own carving because—again—I don't really know what I'm after until I see it. Videos and photographs are also different in their own way. But, in general, I am willing to destroy or alter anything I'm doing. For example, the sculpture in the exhibition at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen was changed at the end, even though it meant cutting a part of it off. Everything is always up for grabs. I am fully invested but also detached from what I'm doing. So, I don't mind transforming or destroying something if I don't feel there's truth to it.

Rail: These two recent bodies of work are each a coherent series. Do you always work in series?



Installation view: Enrique Martínez Celaya and Käthe Kollwitz: Von den ersten und den letzten Dingen (Of First and Last Things), Galerie Judin, Berlin, 2021. From left: Käthe Kollwitz, Mother with Her Dead Son (Pietà), 1937/38. Bronze, 15 x 11.25 x 15 3/8 inches; Enrique Martínez Celaya, The Child's Song, 2020. Oil and wax on canvas, 116 x 150 inches. Courtesy of Galerie Judin, Berlin.

Martínez Celaya: I do. Each series revolves around a group of concerns, and it unfolds in a particular exhibition space. It's difficult for me to work on just one painting or one sculpture. I prefer to work on a group of works connected by a continuity of preoccupation. This is partly the case, Eleanor, because, as I mentioned earlier, when I start, I don't really know what is truly at play—"Why am I concerned with this? Why is this hole, this absence, here?" Only after I have worked for a while on something do I begin to understand, "Oh, this is what's going on here." And once a project is done, I cannot do another version. When people ask me, "Do you have another work like that one you did three years ago?" my answer almost always is that I do not, because those concerns were exhausted once I got to the other side.