

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

FOR LOS ANGELES ARTIST **ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA**, ART IS NOT ONLY FOR DEPICTING WHAT WAS, BUT WHAT IT CAN BE, OR WHAT MAY HAVE NEVER BEEN AT ALL. BIOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND IDENTITY ARE ALL OPEN FOR INTERPRETATION.

BY JENNIFER PIEJKO

Born in Havana, Cuba, and growing up in Madrid and Puerto Rico, artist Enrique Martínez Celaya came to visual art from a circuitous path. Convergent interests in philosophy, science and art led him to pursue degrees in physics and electrical engineering and, eventually, graduate degrees in quantum electronics before devoting his efforts to art more fully and an MFA. He attended the famed Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in rural Maine, eventually exhibiting at SITE Santa Fe, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Recent and upcoming exhibitions include The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, Calif.;

Miles McEnery Gallery in New York; and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana. Martínez Celaya's work includes intensely personal and intricately philosophical writing and publishing (through his Whale & Star Press).

Drawing on details from the lives of Beethoven, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein and Robert Frost, Martínez Celaya's work can take the form of complex built environments, such as immersive installations and sound works, to the more surreal, such as detached vibrant bouquets and flower stems floating above ocean waves, to the more intimate, painting what appears to be diary pages with sketches of dreams in analysis, with brief personal musings anchored by staircases leading to—or from—nowhere. The enormous, wall-sized, textured paintings, which often illustrate narratives that he explores in three dimensions and writing, feature a single figure wading through turbulent, callous natural landscapes (dense flower fields between mountains, starkly barren wintry clearings, arid maroon plains). Thick stacks of layers in oil paint and waxes are interspersed with less traditional materials: Blood (including his own, after a slip of a chain saw while carving a wooden sculpture resulted in blood gushing from his hand, feathers and hair find their way into his scenes.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Explorer*, 2021, private collection, Seoul, South Korea.



Sculptures are also covered in wax, giving his work something of a veil, making them vulnerable—caught, even—but still not fully perceptible, under a sort of camouflage. His depiction of these characters is withholding in his technique in this way, with each stroke taking away more of, rather than adding to, the image.

In the near decade that Martínez Celaya and his family have spent living and working in the Miami area, he's also deepened ties to the local artist community, having made public sculptures *The Tower of Snow* at Freedom Tower at Miami Dade College and *The Well*, which adorns the top of the MKDA-designed headquarters of Jorge Pérez's Related Group. In 2011, he premiered the installation *Schneebett* in the U.S. at the Miami Art Museum after debuting at the Berliner Philharmonie as the first artist commission since its beginnings in 1882; the monumental piece materialized the poetic final moments of Beethoven's life, first alongside the music of the Berliner Philharmoniker and later the Miami Symphony Orchestra. One chamber of the installation is centered

in a bronze bed covered in a layer of frost manufactured inside the room, with a painting of a forest made from tar and feathers on the wall and a mound of branches blocking the doorway. Like Martínez Celaya's other works, the project wove classical aesthetic practice with melancholy, leaving room for one's own existential fluidity and doubts. The title is a translation of snow-bed, a term from a line by Holocaust survivor and poet Paul Celan. Visitors can only glance into the room from the outside, speculating how things might have played out in the tender scene.

His lone figures leave room for the artist and maybe ourselves, in another realm or another material, too. Holding visual space for a story, or resisting the urge to share the story within it, allows the viewer to fill in with their own, to see some of themselves within the work. For Martínez Celaya, artwork in any form is an oblique style of self-portraiture.



From top left: Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Harvest*, 2017, the Roden Collection, London, United Kingdom. Martínez Celaya working in his Los Angeles studio, 2023; *The Mystic*, 2021, private collection, Pacific Palisades, Calif.