

ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA

Hispanic Society Museum and Library

By Barry Schwabsky

Museums with historically oriented collections have long recognized the value of inviting contemporary artists to intervene in their spaces. The idea is a win-win: Contact with historical pieces can recharge an artist's practice just as much as juxtapositions with new art can refresh our perceptions of more familiar objects. But rarely have I seen an artist's work interact as beautifully and poetically with an institution's holdings as I have with Enrique Martínez Celaya's exhibition "The Word-Shimmering Sea."

Among the treasures housed at the Hispanic Society Museum and Library is the tender yet forceful *Portrait of a Little Girl*, ca. 1638–42, by Diego Velázquez. Whoever this child might have been—some believe she was the painter's granddaughter—her fierce gaze, once encountered, is unlikely to be forgotten. One person who remembered this picture was Martínez Celaya, who first came across it not in person in New York but in the form of a color reproduction used to cover his first-grade notebook in Nueva Paz, Cuba, where he grew up. That notebook happens to be one of the few things from the artist's childhood that survived his family's emigration, first to Spain, in 1972, then to Puerto Rico, in 1975. So, in a very immediate way, the installation transformed the dialogue with art history into one with personal history and the experiences of exodus and displacement that have become only more common for so many in the decades since.

The most imposing elements of the installation were seven large paintings (roughly ten by seven and a half feet) sitting on blocks on the floor. In them, Martínez Celaya had superimposed images of the sea over



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Los paracaidistas* (The Parachuters), 2024, oil, wax, and charcoal on canvas, 118 × 92 in.

passages copied by hand from letters he'd written as a child to his father, who had left Cuba for Spain ahead of the rest of his family. Even for the viewer with little understanding of Spanish, the plaintive undertone of the young artist's missives, made of pictures as much as of words, was patent, and seemed somehow amplified by his efforts in adulthood to transcribe them faithfully. Of course, the gestures that come naturally to an experienced painter are quite incommensurable with



Enrique Martínez Celaya, “The Word-Shimmering Sea,” installed at the Hispanic Society Museum and Library, New York.

those of a kid just learning to write. Yet the two distinct forms of effortfulness matched each other here, both formally and affectively. By contrast, the water imagery with which Martínez Celaya has overlaid the letters allows him to express himself with ferocious energy and freedom: Since water has no inherent form, he can do as he pleases with it. For example, the two facing tsunami-like walls of water in *Los paracaidistas* (The Parachuters) (all works 2024) could never occur in reality, but we accept them as representations of a powerful sea notwithstanding. Paper boats hanging in the room’s archways emphasized the impossibility of any attempt to conquer the ocean.

Facing the seven large paintings were four much smaller ones, each featuring a drawing of Velázquez’s little girl, a bit larger than the tiny original, but with something else added—a pair of blue socks, for

instance, or a gingerbread house—calling to mind the sacred objects held by saints in Renaissance paintings. The girl’s eyes were shown differently in each version—as if she was gazing back at the boy who would grow up to be a man, who would have disparate feelings of hope or pity. Finally, a carved-wood figure with a dark, ashen surface, *El transfigurado* (The Transfigured), cradled in its arms a frame holding the original first-grade notebook saved by Martínez Celaya’s grandmother.

Needless to say, it’s dangerous for any painter to show his work in the same room as a piece by Velázquez, or to present variants on the Spanish master’s imagery. The competition is just too stiff. But Martínez Celaya wasn’t trying to compete: He opened his installation to the presence of his great precursor as to the seed of a constant memory that keeps blooming in his own art.