

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in May

The Word-Shimmering Sea: Diego Velázquez / Enrique Martínez Celaya



An installation view of “The Word-Shimmering Sea: Diego Velázquez / Enrique Martínez Celaya” at the Hispanic Society. Credit Alfonso Lozano/The Hispanic Society of America

By Martha Schwendener, Will Heinrich, and Blake Gopnik

There are places you can’t easily return to, like childhood or, for many migrants and refugees, the country where they were born. This was true for Enrique Martínez Celaya, who was born in Cuba and relocated with his family to Madrid when he was a young boy. Martínez Celaya, now almost 60, returned to Cuba only in 2019, but he has found a way of retrieving both childhood and homeland in this impressive exhibition at the Hispanic Society.

Large canvases by Martínez Celaya include blown-up snippets from his childhood notebook, surrounded by interpretations of waves and seascapes. In a stroke of kismet, the notebook from which these early drawings were copied was given to him by his mother and featured a reproduction of a painting on its cover: Diego Velázquez’s “Portrait of a Little Girl” circa 1638-42, which is in the collection of the Hispanic Society. That painting is displayed at one end of the room.

Objects and their historical hierarchies are irreverently jumbled in the show: Velázquez, the great Spanish painter, sits alongside Martínez Celaya’s childish doodles. In another series of paintings by Martínez Celaya, the “Little Girl” holds objects that he coveted as a boy. The exhibition also includes work by other artists, like the 1971 notebook of Emilio Sánchez, an artist born in Cuba in 1921 who never went back to his homeland after 1960. In the end, the subject of the exhibition is really an immaterial poetic thread in which memory is fleeting but art, in its various forms, connects people, places and history.

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Through July 14. The Hispanic Society Museum & Library, 613 West 155th Street, Manhattan; 212-926-2234, hispanicsociety.org.