

# Painter Enrique Martínez Celaya and the Hero's Journey

*The Hispanic Society's current show taps art history, architecture,  
and the power of a good origin story.*



Installation details of “The Word-Shimmering Sea: Diego Velázquez / Enrique Martínez Celaya” at the Hispanic Society.

**By Shana Nys Dambrot**

To draw a child well you have to do it with love — even, or especially, when the child is wise beyond their years, or has witnessed trauma, or has an attitude problem, or is your gentle but inscrutable granddaughter sitting still so you can practice your technique. Even, or especially, when that child is yourself.

Like the plot of a novel about where art comes from, when Enrique Martínez Celaya was six and half years old, still living in Cuba where he was born and which his family would soon leave to join the father who had traveled ahead to Spain, his mother gave him a notebook. The picture on the cover was Spanish master Diego Velázquez’s Portrait of a Little Girl (ca. 1638–42). On its pages, the young Cuban boy with a proclivity for art drew pictures and wrote letters to his absent father, and visualized the circumstances of their reunion. Airplanes, rainbows, ships; small misadventures

and triumphs; the various presents he desired from abroad. Decades later, on the other side of all those oceans, dreams, separations, schools, and an acclaimed international art career, that old notebook was rediscovered by the artist's mother in a box filled with other artifacts from his childhood, which she had miraculously preserved. An eccentric and profoundly, foundationally personal series of monumental paintings was born in that moment. And better still — Martínez Celaya knew which museum had the Velázquez.

Martínez Celaya's work is characterized by a certain dream-logic sensibility, and often features adolescent protagonists in symbol-rich settings — surrounded by fruit trees, frozen lakes, muddy roads, abandoned homes, caged birds, dramatic botanicals, wild horses, and, in particular, the wide, moody sea. He speaks eloquently about how his family's history of migrations, losses, and returns has affected him. And his style has a certain flickering, poetic dissonance about it — equal parts classical and folkloric, narrative and mysterious, urgent and elusive, beautiful and difficult. But the suite of seven large-scale (118 x 92 inch) paintings that emerged from this rediscovery of the notebook reserve that impassioned impasto for the artist's treatment of the ocean. "The sea that separated us was both the way and the obstacle," says Martínez Celaya about that time in his life; it was and remains both a promise and a barrier. That complexity is in full force at the Hispanic Society, where each canvas features encroaching, cresting ocean waters intervening in the mostly black and white, meticulously faithful renditions of the original materials from the sketchbook.

Calling it a "substrate" for the paintings — whose subject, per the series and exhibition title, *The Word-Shimmering-Sea*, is both the water and the writing — Martínez Celaya devotes most of the pictorial space to these enlarged but rather sparse armatures of first-grade drawings and scholastic penmanship. Their emergence from raw canvas grounds makes an aggressively schematic counterpoint to the hefty, dynamic, almost metonymic waters. When I saw them in the artist's Los Angeles studio earlier this year, the paintings made me uneasy. Despite the almost somatic impact of the oceans, they felt unresolved; despite their pride of place in the hero's journey across migration, separation, reunion, and the attainment of resolution, they seemed unfinished to me — and I said as much. "But wait," he said, "I have to tell you the rest of the story!"

So it turns out that the original Velázquez painting is one treasure among many in the world-class permanent collection of the Hispanic Society of America, located in a stunning building in Washington Heights. Long story short, the venerable institution's director, Guillaume Kientz, has co-curated this exhibition with Martínez Celaya, thereby launching a new initiative that will engage contemporary artists with the museum's holdings — and crucially, unavoidably, its architecture. Months later, I hardly recognized the paintings I'd seen in Los Angeles. The artist had done nothing further to them, they were as they had been. But in this space, with its particulars of setting and aura of a particular history, they felt finished — balanced, connected, clear-voiced, poignant, and complete. In a very real sense, the room is a protagonist in this story, as surely as are the Velázquez portrait, the little girl, the little boy, and the man.

It was a little bit like magic.

Other elements of the installation: at the far end of the room, a careworn, mournful wooden sculpture of a boy holds the notebook, its 50-year-old cover image staring across the expanse of painted ocean and the passage of time at the original, with whom it too has been reunited; four small paintings by Martínez Celaya based on *Little Girl*, augmented with young Enrique's objects of desire, such as a balloon, new socks, and the plane that took his father away and could take Enrique to meet him; a canopy of light projections of items from the notebook illuminating the ceiling; and garlands of paper boats made by students in his childhood town of Nueva Paz. As well, a thoughtful selection of early-20th-century works from the permanent collection — by Goya, Miguel Viladrich Vilá, Eugenio Hermoso Martínez, and others — line the vestibule, delivering on the promised engagement and offering a charming art historical potpourri that reinforces the enduring themes of children, families, and migration in art history.

But back to the building, because I can't stop thinking about how much the architectural setting and context amplify Martínez Celaya's paintings. The idea that the canvases I saw in his L.A. studio seemed to remain unfinished until the moment of reunion between 17th-century canvas and 20th-century cahier is appealing, in that novelistic way. But the animation they elicit from this stately old manse is equally remarkable. The decorative motifs of its terra cotta walls, the interior cloister-like colonnades, the cathedralesque archways to which the canvases are measured within a centimeter, the fact that a tall ship graces its seal and its lozenge is central to the mosaic floor — all of this contributes to a dream-like sensation of its own, conjuring the salty mist of memory from which the whole project arose. The power of the exhibition ultimately lies in the sense that we are witnessing the moment when the hero finally completes his quest.