

Seductive fictions: Enrique Martínez Celaya

PRUE GIBSON

Miami artist Enrique Martínez Celaya is unwilling to satisfy our human desire for classifications and definitions. His intellectual aesthetic is elusive. He avoids the constraints of narration and yet his paintings hold powerful narrative sway. He avoids discussing the philosophy that so informs his life and yet his paintings are illustrations of the ethical, moral and religious dialectics of the philosophers whose writings he enjoys. It is the curious confoundedness of his work that is most appealing.

Martínez Celaya's studio, Whale and Star, is a hub of diverse activity. The studio incorporates art lectures and a publishing house. It hosts workshops and artists' residencies. And then, there is the space where the artist draws, paints and makes sculpture. Martínez Celaya is a scientist, an artist, a poet, an author, a philosopher, a publisher and a family man. These multiple preoccupations inform one another, enriching each discipline, but I find them to be distractions from any attempt to quantify or qualify his overall artistic talent.

From an early age, Martínez Celaya showed promise in various areas. He studied academic art as an apprentice and displayed precocious talent in science. By adulthood, and having fled his homeland of Cuba, he had majored in Applied Physics at Cornell and pursued a Ph.D.



El Que Llega (The One Who Arrives), 2003

in Quantum Electronics at the University of California, Berkeley. Just before achieving his doctorate, he transferred his energies to painting and received a Masters from the University of California in Santa Barbara in 1994. That year, he also attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

As if science and art weren't complex enough topics with which to engage, he has also developed a tangential passion for literature and philosophy over the years. These corresponding pursuits have been examined and developed through Whale and Star, which has published literature: poetry and books on music, art and philosophy. For ten years the artist has been working on a novel which incorporates a character, Thomas Hoveling. In Martínez Celaya's 2008 exhibition *The Lovely Season* at Sydney's Liverpool Street Gallery, the catalogue essay took an unexpected and innovative form: Martínez Celaya was interviewed about his imminent exhibition by a character, Thomas Hoveling, who turned out to be an imaginary figure.

Thomas Hoveling enjoyed Rachmaninov's music and understood the artist's interest in Osip Mandelstam, the great literary figure of Russian 20th century poetry who spent time in the gulags and eventually died while in long-term custody. Hoveling also apparently appreciated

the artist's interest in Harry Martinson, a good-looking Swedish poet with a tragic past, who attempted suicide with a pair of scissors. It's not often an artist has such simpatico with his or her interviewer. But, here, the two protagonists had the good fortune to drink apple juice together and discuss art and philosophy, in a subdued but safe atmosphere.

While the catalogue interview is a fabrication, its sentiments, or that of the artist, are authentic: 'The new paintings sometimes show a scene of sorts, which maybe makes them more theatrical. But those scenes are fabricated and compromised by the materials, the elimination of many particulars, and the self-conscious framing of the mind as device.'

This comment on the theatrics of his landscapes is of particular interest. In fact, I recently asked the artist a question regarding this point; whether the characters and settings in his paintings maintained a sense of 'mise-en-scene' and whether the space within the painting was a way of presenting the theatre of life? Martínez Celaya replied:

The theatre of life is not particularly interesting to me except for those moments in which reality congeals in an inhuman (can't be processed) way or when life, internal or external, seem to present a discontinuity. Deep emotion or radical lack of



The Shire, from *The Shire and The Storm Suite*, 2009, colour woodcut on archival Thai mulberry paper, 99.1 x 86.4cm.



The Crossing, 2010, oil and wax on canvas, 457.2 x 335.3cm. Painting for the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York.



The Builder, 2009, oil and wax on canvas, 182.9 x 167.6cm.



The Storm, from The Shine and The Storm Suite, 2009, colour woodcut on archival Thai mulberry paper, 99.1 x 86.4cm.

emotion accompanies these moments, and although they engage elements that would otherwise construct a narrative, they are not, in themselves, narratives. What's more, they stand in opposition to narration, in no small part because they lack a narrator's voice.

I would argue that narrative elements do exist in his paintings and that no painting, ever created, lacked a narrator's voice. From the moment the artist touches the canvas with his brush or the writer types her first sentence, there is a narrative voice. I, much like the poor patsy Thomas Hoveling, felt I was trapped in the fiction of an unreal interview. Martínez Celaya was able to manipulate the established structure of the catalogue essay to suit his means. Rather than place himself at the mercy of a real interviewer, he created Thomas Hoveling, a fictional character. All writers manipulate their interviewees. It's true. We ask leading questions. We extract answers and imbed them in our text, to suit our essay points. We paraphrase the artists' comments, even though the intention sometimes becomes a little distorted. These are the tools and talents of the craft of writing.

Likewise, artists duck and weave. They paint landscapes in which characters sigh their painful tales and then the artists cry out a lack of narration. They create theatres of human experience and then protest: 'The theatre of life is not particularly interesting to me.' These are the games creative people engage in, a maze of intent, distraction, trickery and deceit. However, these antics expose the curious obsessions we all have in common – with storytelling – through art, philosophy, poetry and fiction. These are all genres of human endeavour, of individuals seeking to describe or account for our existence.

And so, to push aside the distractions, the multiple talents and any obscuring nihilisms, what is the degree of Martínez Celaya's artistic merit? Eschewing the seductive coupling of fiction and art criticism, which the artist also explored in his 2002 *Whale and Star* book, *Guide* which expounded a conversation of art and authenticity between a Franciscan and the artist, why are the artist's paintings worthy of our interest?

The simple answer is that they are lonely. The paintings



Olorfo, 2007, oil and wax on canvas, 294.64 x 381 cm

groan with the pain of sadness. The figures are lost, forlorn and hopeless. These paintings do not describe the disconnections of contemporary culture. They do not account for the tragedy of lost wildernesses. They are not a reaction against the tokenistic and self-serving preoccupations of other contemporary painters. Martínez Celaya's paintings create a bond with our collective, uncanny suspicion that all humans are connected, not only with one another but with animals, with nature and with otherworldliness. And they are also a reminder that, even if we are surrounded by loved ones, we are alone.

Martínez Celaya's artwork is represented in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In 2010 he was commissioned by New York's Cathedral Church of St John the Divine to install four large paintings. From 2007 to 2010 he was named Visiting Presidential Professor at the University of Nebraska. The artist's new body of work will be at Sydney's Liverpool Street Gallery from 23 April to 19 May 2011.

All images of work by Enrique Martínez Celaya; images courtesy the artist and Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney.