

HYPERALLERGIC

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One-on-One: Enrique Martínez Celaya / Albert Pinkham Ryder, at the Phillips Collection

By Carl Little



Enrique Martínez Celaya, "The First Kierkegaard" (2006), oil, wax, and tar on canvas, 100 x 78 inches, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Courtesy of The Phillips Collection.

In the opening of his first book, the two-volume *Either/Or* (1843), Søren Kierkegaard asked "What is a poet?" and promptly answered his own question: "An unhappy man who in his heart harbors a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music."

Kierkegaard has been a constant source of inspiration for the Cuban-born painter Enrique Martínez Celaya, one of a number of philosophers and writers whose work he has studied, absorbed, and responded to (the roster includes Robert Frost, Joseph Brodsky, Mandelstam, Rilke, and Maeterlinck). Martínez Celaya has produced a series of paintings related to the Danish existentialist, starting with "The First Kierkegaard," 2006, which is on view at the Phillips Collection through April 2.

Martínez Celaya's painting portrays the spectral figure of a thin, naked adolescent boy standing both against and within a dark background, the surface of the painting resembling a blackboard that has been scratched and erased over and over. The boy's body, painted in a soft brown tone, is lightly outlined, with his anatomy minimally delineated: facial features, collar bone, nipples, genitals, feet. His left arm rests by his side while the right is held straight and slightly away from his body. He wears a thoughtful expression on his face — something like resignation — while turning slightly to the left.

The figure stands just off center, with a circular scattering of small colored dots above and to the right of his head. In the middle of this circle the name "Kierkegaard" is inscribed in simple script. Is this an imaginary portrait of the Dane in his youth, beginning his quest to understand the world?

Dr. Klaus Ottmann, art historian and the Phillips Collection's deputy director for curatorial and academic affairs, ties the figure in Martínez Celaya's painting to Abraham in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), which revolves around the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Asked to sacrifice his son, Abraham finds himself, in Ottmann's words, "in the in-between of nothingness and anxiety, between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the 'disquieting supervision of responsibility'" — a kind of limbo such as Martínez Celaya depicts in his painting.

In 2015, Martínez Celaya gave "The First Kierkegaard" to the Phillips Collection in honor of Ottmann. He was subsequently invited to be part of the *One-on-One* series, for the third exhibition since Ottmann launched the series in the spring of 2011, shortly after his arrival at the museum. Learning that Peter Doig would be giving the Duncan Phillips lecture at the museum in April of that year, Ottmann invited the Scottish painter to select a work from the collection to hang alongside his own. Doig chose Georges Braque's 1956 "Bird"; it was exhibited with three paintings of ravens he had made in Trinidad for the first *One-on-One*. The second *One-on-One*, in August 2015, featured Washington, DC-based artist Carol Brown Goldberg, who juxtaposed one of her paintings with Matisse's 1948 "Interior with Egyptian Curtain."

When Martínez Celaya visited the museum in 2015, Ottmann took him into the Phillips's art storage and showed him a number of works, including several Albert Pinkham Ryder paintings. Martínez Celaya connected to the American painter on several fronts, including their shared use of tar (bitumen) in place of black paint. In addition, recounts Ottmann, the dark, mystical quality of Ryder's works, with their religious underpinning, seemed "a fitting match for Martínez Celaya's painting."

Three of Ryder's greatest works hang across the hallway from Martínez Celaya's: "Macbeth and the Witches," from the mid-1890s and later, "Desdemona," 1896, and "Dead Bird," 1890s. Without forcing a dialogue between Ryder and Martínez Celaya, you can make those aforementioned connections: the shared love of a richly worked surface and the ethereal quality of the imagery. (In 1926, Duncan Phillips, who was a champion of Ryder's work, wrote that the painter was "always superbly plastic with simplification which contains powerful suggestions and persuades us to believe in the reality of his visions" — a commentary that could apply to Martínez Celaya.)

At the same time, Ryder turned to Shakespeare much as Martínez Celaya turned to Kierkegaard: as a source for models of worldly doubt. Macbeth and Desdemona confront their own existential situations; Ryder heightens their angst through the dark settings in which he situates them. Likewise, Martínez Celaya's vulnerable youth seems caught in a moment of transition: in the transom of some invisible doorway between innocence and knowing.

Art historian Elizabeth Broun wrote of Ryder's "Dead Bird" that it was "perhaps his single most affecting image" and noted how the image distills "pathos to a monosyllable." She further remarked, "The extreme isolation of the image demands the most intense concentration from the viewer." Pathos, too, is provoked by Martínez Celaya's isolated individual, a distant relative of Giacometti's "Walking Man" and other icons of modern dread.

One-on-One: Enrique Martínez Celaya / Albert Pinkham Ryder is hung in a hallway portion of the second-floor gallery space in the Phillips's central building. Just behind it is the museum's Rothko room, a fitting neighbor — the color field painter also found wisdom in Kierkegaard. As Ottmann has noted, the abstract expressionist "had Kierkegaard in his veins." He points to Rothko's biographer, James E. B. Breslin, who reported that the painter kept a copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* next to his bed.

In a conversation with Ottmann at the museum back in October, Martínez Celaya offered thoughts on what the act of art means to him. "Art is, for me (but I think not just for me), it's not really a cathartic experience, but rather ... you have a sense of clarity. What happens is, it reveals the luminosity of the secrets sitting underneath all things. And in some way that luminosity is some sort of guidance or clarity, but it is not an answer in the conventional sense. But there is a promise in there, that if you continue on, somewhere around some corner, when I am 175, I will actually have some insights into what's really happening."

Martínez Celaya is Kierkegaard's poet, able to transform anguish into visual beauty: the tender boy on the brink of experience. The Ryder accompaniment only underscores that perception.