

OCEAN DRIVE

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t's not easy to categorize Enrique Martínez Celaya, but considering his family's tumultuous escape from

Cuba and his subsequent travel around the globe and vast array of interests and talents, it makes sense that his artwork defies easy characterization. Because rather than following one influence, culture or history in art, the 41-year-old Martínez Celaya, in truly post-modern fashion, freely incorporates many diverse styles, aesthetic theories and positions into his own. While certain subject matter or symbols may reoccur in his work — note heads, arms, hummingbirds, leopards and children — he is constantly pushing himself, questioning

Enrique Martínez Celaya at work in his Delray Beach studio.

This fall, the artist's works can be found in exhibitions at the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig in Leipzig, Germany, the Akira Ikeda Gallery/Berlin in Berlin, the Oakland Museum of California, and Griffin Contemporary in Santa Monica, California. He will also be represented by John Berggruen Gallery at Art Basel Miami Beach. Pieces range from \$50,000 to \$250,000.



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his ideas and incorporating new materials and techniques into his paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs.

In recent works—to be exhibited this month in concurrent solo shows in Berlin and Los Angeles—the Delray Beach resident uses tar mixed with paint as his medium, providing himself with yet another self-imposed challenge, and emerges with some surprisingly beautiful results. Paired with large mirrors that play with depth and perspective, these dark, moody nightscapes offer a stark contrast to the sun and light of Florida. And yet, as if to prevent any effort to categorize his work, Martínez Celaya juxtaposes those brooding paintings with a more autobiographical creation: A white pajama-clad young boy, who reappears in other Martínez Celaya works, stands expressionless in a neutral environment beneath a large rainbow, seemingly lost

in the giant landscape. There emerges another theme of his work: that of the child in exile.

Indeed, sometimes art does imitate life. Martínez Celaya knows a bit about being a youth with no homeland, having fled from Cuba with his family in the 1970s. After that exodus, Martínez Celaya moved to Spain, and then Puerto Rico, before heading to the U.S. mainland. He first stopped on the East Coast, studying art and science at Cornell University before heading west for more study at the University of California Berkeley. Along the way, he excelled in physics, built a working laser, earned a degree in science and a master's in fine arts, apprenticed with artists, wrote poetry that was published, and even found time to study philosophy on his own.

Consequently, the idea of displacement from the motherland is not only a driving force in his work, but also



Enrique Martínez Celaya, who fled Cuba with his family when he was a youth and lived in Spain, Puerto Rico and around the United States before settling in Delray Beach, often explores the theme of alienation from one's surroundings in his works. Clockwise, from top right: *Where* (2003), watercolor on paper, 10.5" x 10.5"; *Schneebett*, Berliner Philharmonie (2004)

keeps Martínez Celaya in pursuit of the physical and philosophical meaning of home. In addition to having "settled down" in a half-dozen locations, he often travels to London, Berlin, Colorado, New York, Los Angeles and various other places for exhibitions, teaching and public projects. His recent commission for the Berlin Philharmonic drew a crowd of 6,000 guests to its opening, and this month he will cross Europe and the U.S. for solo exhibitions of his work.

Nonetheless, he is not interested in living the life of an artiste—hence his recent move with his family to Delray Beach. Martínez Celaya confides that he sought to get away from the hustle and bustle of the West Coast art crowd, and everything about his new life underscores that it is about the work, not the lifestyle. His new studio is a light-filled renovated former bakery in an industrial building just off Atlantic Avenue, a grand



yet incredibly serene compound replete with blooming hibiscus, a fountain and sitting area typical of Spanish architecture. But amid this calm is the flurry of Martínez Celaya and his assistants at work.

Unlike Andy Warhol's Factory concept, Martínez Celaya has humanized his workspace. He wanted to bring a sense of unity to the studio but didn't want his presence to be the unifying force, so he came up with the idea of a uniform: all black with a T-shirt sporting a white line drawing—family-crest style—of a whale jumping out of the water toward the stars, a nod to his favorite work of literature, *Moby Dick*. In today's frenetic art world, where the cult of personality and the soaring price of works rule, it's a rarity that an artist puts his ego aside for the greater good.

But again, that is a direct result of his past experiences. He says he has had many mentors in his art career, but often

became disheartened by those who were seduced by the whims of the marketplace and the quest for celebrity status. But it's not that Martínez Celaya doesn't have his role models: he freely admits that he has sought to emulate—in style, if not subject matter—New York painter Leon Golub. Upon Golub's death five years ago, Martínez Celaya painted an enormous homage to the political painter, who depicted images of war and unnecessary death and destruction in a highly contrasting dark and light expressionistic style. But while Martínez Celaya's work evokes Golub's in style, it veers away in terms of substance: Where the New York painter was political, the Cuban-born artist leans to the personal and spiritual. The struggle in Martínez Celaya's work is not about humans fighting wars, but rather the fight for the existential soul within.

Martínez Celaya also explores the theme of the single child in exile, detached from the world and without a homeland, a motif inspired at least in part by his family's exodus from Cuba. Examples include, from left to right, *Boy in Sunset (with Mirror)* (2005), oil and tar on canvas and mirror, 66" x 144"; *Destroyed Painting* (2005); *Boy with Fish* (2005), oil on canvas, 100" x 78".

His studio is a light-filled renovated former bakery off Atlantic Avenue, a grand yet incredibly serene compound replete with blooming hibiscus, a fountain and sitting area.

It's clear that his work carries a certain Latin-American sensibility in concept and form. A painting of a dismembered arm with a red vein spilling blood painted over what appears to be the pattern of some grand European decorative wall treatment recalls the disturbing yet powerful graphic

images of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Meanwhile, a series of black-and-white photographs of nude figures in various landscapes recalls the performance images of 1960s conceptual artist Ana Mendieta. There are also strong influences from contemporary European traditions, too, as seen in a group of dark

and brooding paintings and sculptures with haunting images of animals that recall the shamanistic expressionism of German artist Joseph Beuys. But ultimately this very mix has become the Martínez Celaya style, and art lovers can expect it to continue to evolve in the years to come.

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Boy at the Shore (2005), ink on canvas,
77" x 52".



Enrique Martínez Celaya in his studio, in front of *Portrait of Leon Golub* (2004), oil and tar on canvas, 138" x 172".

