

# FIRST DEGREE

## Enrique Martínez Celaya: Coming Home Before and After Schneebett

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I DO NOT THINK ABOUT WHAT I HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN; I THINK ABOUT WHAT I AM GOING TO WRITE—WHICH IS USUALLY WHAT I HAVE ALREADY WRITTEN, LIGHTLY DISGUISED.  
 JORGE LUIS BORGES'

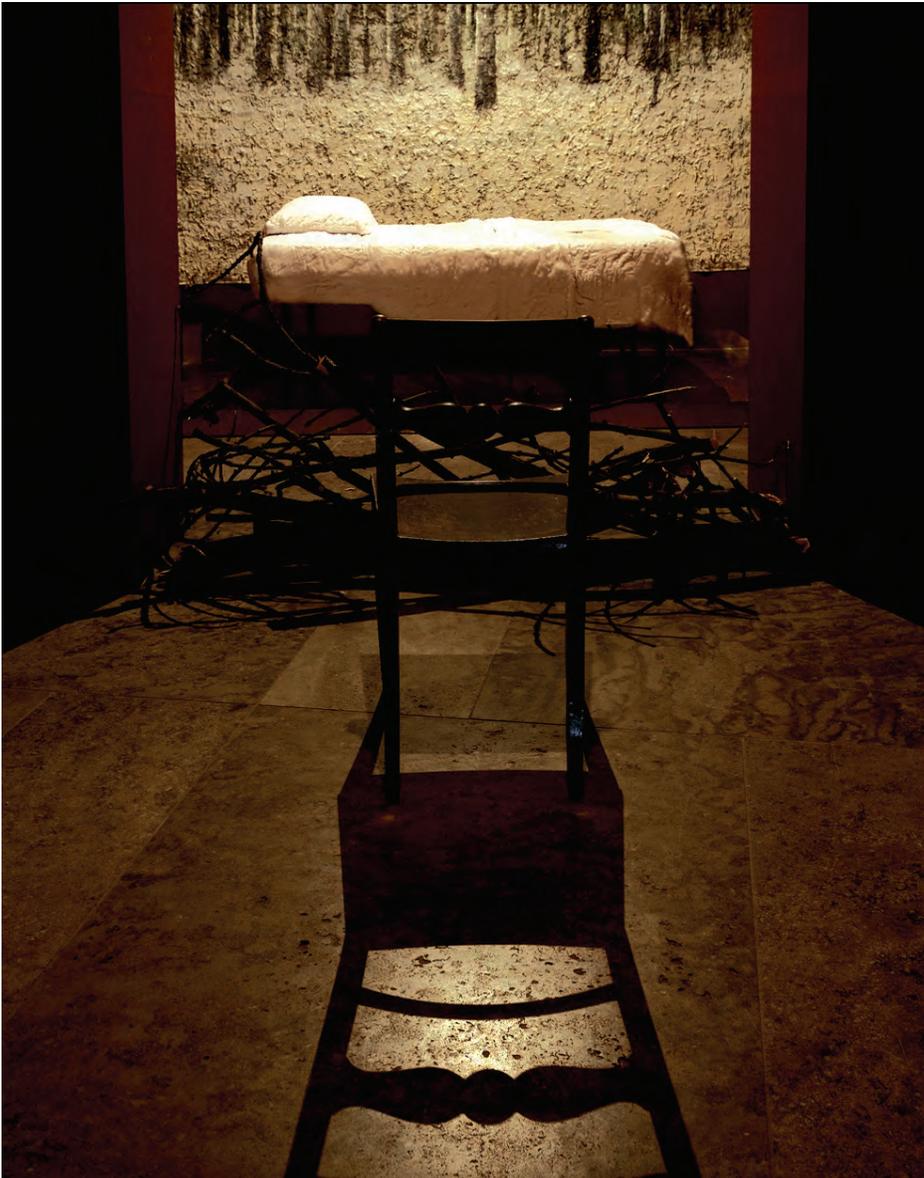
A work of art acquires meaning over time. This is true for the artist as it is for the viewer. The production of new work sheds light on previous work, either by extension, differentiation, or as auto-critique. This is perhaps truer of Cuban-born Enrique Martínez Celaya than of a lot of artists working today. Although trained as a painter, Martínez Celaya also produces sculpture, photography, drawings, installations, as well as prose and poetry. Moreover, he works in and through the art cycle, series, or project, all of which provides the overarching idea behind the overwhelming diversity of his artistic means.

Martínez Celaya does not always determine beforehand a particular cycle or series. These will often emerge in the course of his practice. Perhaps starting work on a series of photographs feeds into his paintings while also prompting some written response that gradually brings forth the faint contours of a project, unified thought, or feeling. Or



occasional writings might lead to chance representations that end up giving shape to a former memory or experience. However, there may be other serial implications that emerge only retroactively, years after the work has been completed. This is due not only to his predisposition toward making ever finer adjustments or finishing touches, but also his conviction that past actions or deeds cannot be reclaimed without somehow inviting revision, which by necessity excludes them from ever being “finished” in any material

or existential sense. His work is almost Wittgensteinian at times, with his elaborate system of sets and subsets to be inevitably abandoned in favor of new ones, which in turn must also be replaced or at least rebuilt. Attributing critical significance to a Martínez Celaya series is thus almost always a *retroactive* as well as forward-looking procedure. In this way his work is deeply rooted in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, which argues that knowledge—the so-called “stomach of the mind”—is a theatre or rumen of memory.



Nowhere is this digestive process more evident than in the sandwich of two of Martínez Celaya's more ambitious sculptural projects (he prefers to call them "environments"), *Coming Home* (1999-2001) and *Schneebett* (2003-04). Although both are canonically discrete works, they relate closely to one another. In fact, they relate so closely as to be in direct correspondence. First exhibited at Griffin Contemporary in Venice, California in 2001, *Coming Home* was reinstalled this fall in Lincoln, Nebraska. Initially shown in Berlin in 2004, *Schneebett* was reprised in Leipzig this summer, only a few months before the repetition of *Coming Home*. The two shows should thus be understood first as a diptych, a

transitive or ramified elaboration, achieved over a six-year period (and still counting). However their close relationship is not, as these reprises suggest, merely chronological, with the earlier of them merely "suggesting" the latter. Their independent histories and meanings are far more inextricably entangled.

#### COMING HOME

*Coming Home* features a boy, molded from tar, feathers, and wire, bowing to a gigantic, dissolutive elk made of the same materials and with a mirror set between its antlers, which the boy's downcast gaze seems to avoid. The installation also included a series of

photographs and works on paper painted with emulsified tar and feathers, which extended and elaborate on the pivotal boy/elk confrontation.

The tar and feathers used by Martínez Celaya lend the scene a rancid atmosphere or debasement and abjection, implying that the encounter between self-here a self-in-formation or even under-self-and other is fraught with personal or philosophical uncertainty. Furthermore, these base materials allude to the artistic process itself, being nearly impossible to work with, and, given their putrid odor, offering a great challenge to Martínez Celaya's physical and mental endurance. This is why his figures possess a somewhat tentative or barely described form, appearing almost on the brink of collapse. But it is not quite accurate to say that what remains lack "finish," for they do not look as if they could ever be pulled together, resolved, or made whole.

It is easy to imagine the sculptural duo standing in for the youth's anticipated or distantly recalled encounter with a brute force of nature—in this case, a forest deity of "Erl-King" (which is the artist playing the role of ambivalent father). There is a narrow gap between boy and beast, not only heightening the impression of the latter's sudden and miraculous appearance, but also inviting the viewer to pass through it himself, thus confronting his reflection in the mirror perched precariously between the elk's antlers. Although Martínez Celaya claims he didn't make the connection at the time, this primal scene recalls the legend of St. Eustace, who before his Baptist was a Roman general under Trajan named Placidus. One day he went out hunting and saw a stag coming toward him with a crucifix between his antlers, crying out: "Placidus, Placidus, why persecutes thou me. I am Jesus Christ." The general believed and was baptized, along with all his family. But the Emperor was so furious he had Eustace, his wife and children placed inside a brazen bull and burnt to death. The long religious and artistic pedigree of this encounter (St. Eustace kneeling before the miraculous stag was a favorite subject with Medieval painters) has always emphasized the fuliginous moment of recognition, of instantaneous *Aufklärung* or metamorphosis.

On the other hand, *Coming Home* could be thought to materialize from the unusually redolent imagery of Martínez Celaya's 1999 poem "October," which invokes autumnal reflections on the ephemeral, transition, and, as Thomas McEvilley has suggested,



purification, supposedly initiated by some encounter with death.<sup>2</sup> (It is important to note that the poem also spawned another project, the *October Cycle* [2000-04], a series of 23 paintings presented at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in 2003 and the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale in 2004.) Yet the Griffin “environment,” acquired *in toto* by businessman Dieter Rosenkranz, was only part of the *Coming Home* project, which also included photographs, drawings, and other related documents, material that would all come to play a central role in the formative, yet to be realized diptych.

### SCHNEEBETT

Perhaps Martínez Celaya’s most ambitious project to date, *Schneebett* (Snow Bed) owes its title to a 1959 poem by Paul Celan, whose stark yet powerful language remains an important catalyst for the artist’s visual as well as literary work. This complex split-room environment, created for the Berliner Philharmonie, offers an aesthetic reflection on Beethoven’s long and painful convalescence in Vienna, culminating in his death in 1835.

Like *Coming Home*, *Schneebett* challenged Martínez Celaya’s fortitude, obliging him to start, as he says, “from a

disadvantage,” that is, from the very real possibility of failure, whether technical or conceptual. The focal part is a partially divided room in which lies a life-size bed cast in bronze, which, through the complex workings of an elaborate (and even incongruous) refrigeration system, is frozen, festooned with ice—just like the room’s window, is a painting of a birch grove in tar and feathers, not unlike what Beethoven must have looked out at while reflecting on his dwindling life. At the threshold of the room are a stack of birch branches, a poem called “Poisonwood” written in German on the wall, and finally a chair. This chair is meant for us. It is here that, while contemplating the cold and empty bed of snow and ice, we contemplate our own “bed of death,” as Heidegger called it. Yet despite this melodramatic aspect, Martínez Celaya says the installation is not intended as “a diorama (...) recreation of [Beethoven’s] room, but an exorcism of the spirit of the room as it was.” *Schneebett* would thus be a place of silence, of banished or resurgent thoughts, deep in the recesses of a performance hall where the faint echo of Beethoven’s music can still be heard. According to the artist, the work represents “one embodiment of a possible final moment. It’s the memory of a room as the room remembers the demand of being.”<sup>3</sup>

“To the pensive wood I am driven,” Beethoven yearns in his deeply introspective song cycle, *An die Ferne Geliebte* (1816). It is this precise yearning that is recalled by the birch

grove painting and branches straddling the transition between both sides of *Schneebett*’s divided room, translated here as a “pensive wood” for Beethoven’s (and our own) dying moments, inviting remembrance and retrospection. “When *Schneebett* opened at the Philharmonie,” Martínez Celaya recalls, “I saw the public waiting in a line to see it and the orchestra playing Beethoven’s late concertos in the lobby. I was humbled by the futility of *Schneebett*, and I love it more for it. That day my mind was filled with thoughts of Beethoven as a boy.”<sup>4</sup> It would, however, be two years later, after *Schneebett*’s reprise at the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig, when the boy resurfaced in Martínez Celaya’s thoughts.

In fact, this image of Beethoven’s youth reappears via *Coming Home*. Dieter Rosenkranz donated the work’s sculptural components—the boy and the elk—to the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska Lincoln in 2005, which also recently exhibited them. Coming four years before *Schneebett*, *Coming Home* already anticipates the latter’s major themes. Now, *Schneebett* can be seen to have even prefigured *Coming Home*.

### COMING HOME AT THE SHELDON

The Sheldon’s reprise of *Coming Home* is very different from its pre-*Schneebett* incarnation. Martínez Celaya chose to omit the drawings and works on paper that first accompanied the sculptures in 2000. This time there are nine



photographs, which variously depict the elk, the boy, and an enigmatic nude female standing in a birch grove, her body painted a birch color with two arrows on it, one pointing to the name "Celan." We even see the boy lurking on a Californian beach. But the most significant new addition here is undoubtedly the wallpaper compose of nine-foot fragments of an as yet unrealized photograph of the same female nude. Titled *Woods*, the wallpaper wraps around the entire gallery and generally acts as a support for the photographs, which are directly applied this wraparound backdrop.

The environment of *Coming Home* is dark and gloomy, depriving the viewer of a firm footing or sense of distance. Unlike *Schneebett's* chair, which sits just this side of the threshold overlooking Beethoven's deathbed and the woods beyond, here the viewer is thrust directly into the spectacle of a birch grove, itself mimicking the matted branches one has to cross when "passing over" or through the aforesaid portal. In return, *Woods* confounds the sense of visual integrity normally afforded by the presence of white spaces or gaps between individual works in an art museum. Martínez Celaya enfolds or papers over this modernist, Neo-Kantian separation. But *Schneebett* is not just about space or living-and-dying room, it also gives places to or *takes time*, repeats itself in and because of the passage of time.

In reprise or in time, *Coming Home* is recast through the lens of the death or mortuary bed. Can it be that this

encounter with the other, which elicits such an ambivalent response from the boy, is precisely what we in turn fall prey to, from which we gain such a bittersweet morsel of spiritual comfort? It has been said that life is one long preparation for dying well, that our entire life's work is brought to bear in that moment such that we do not merely confront death, but look beyond it, see it from behind or beneath (like Orpheus), from across the divide of the "complete" or finished self. Can dying somehow *complete* the encounter as an open invitation, as something as tentative or incomplete as the whole of life itself?

*Coming Home* repeats the beginning of life (art) from the vantage point of impending death (finitude). At the end of life, one reflects back across a distance from a position of maturity, as an imaginative, strictly Augustinian "recollection" of the past's presence. From the perspective of the art process, the work retraces an original founding gesture, which is also the point of departure from its suddenly remembered death or closure.

Neither *Coming Home* nor *Schneebett* portrays a particularly flattering or comforting image of human nature. The Erl-King suddenly appearing out of nowhere at the height or glint of noontime, reemerges at the twilight of life, when once again the fate of dissolution looms before us. In an early sketch by Martínez Celaya, which sheds light on *Coming Home's* bipolar deportment, he observes: "I have been interested in the spaces covered or

created or made apparent by thought (rational) but not explained by it—the possibility." *Coming Home* BEFORE *Schneebett* projects hope in or at least deferral to the future, *Coming Home* AFTER *Schneebett* implies a terminal memory that does not so much forgive or forget, but *makes possible*. As Borges said, "what is left at the end of our memory."<sup>5</sup> And perhaps, in this context, before and after *Schneebett*, it bears remembering.

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**Notes:** 1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Conversations*, ed. Richard Burgin (University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 242. 2. Thomas McEvilly, "Martínez Celaya: No Horizon Line," in *All the Field Is Ours*, exh. cat. (Griffin Contemporary, 2003), 5-10. 3. Enrique Martínez Celaya, lecture at the American Academy in Berlin, October 10, 2004. 4. Quoted in "Schneebett," Martínez Celaya: *Early Work* (Whale & Star, 2006). 5. Borges, 4.

