

# Bpd

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# Art Matters

Enrique Martínez Celaya's work addresses the essential questions of life.

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"It's the single piece of visual work that has been most challenging for me," says Enrique Martínez Celaya, taking a break in between brushstrokes at his Delray Beach studio on a late September afternoon. He's not talking about the painting in front of him. In fact, he's not even talking about his own work. Rather, the daunting object is a coloring-book page prominently displayed on the far wall of the room, next to his workstation. The picture is of a large rabbit wearing pants and a coat, sitting on a stool and playing a huge brass horn. It was colored by Martínez Celaya's five-year-old daughter, Gabriela, in an expressionistic flurry

of pinks, browns, and blues. "I couldn't figure out how I would *make* it," says Martínez Celaya, recalling his reaction when she first brought the page to him. "I could reproduce it, but I couldn't make it. What she had done was outside my range."

Martínez Celaya was being more than just the proud papa (though he is that as well). He realized that, despite his accomplishments—his work hangs in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan and Whitney museums in New York and the Sammlung Rosenkranz in Berlin; he's represented by prestigious galleries in New York and California and is assiduously courted by

collectors—he was an artist at a crossroads. "The completion of my last book [a collection of his early works, published this past spring], something about deciding that everything I had done was my 'early work,' made everything questionable again," he explains. In other words, it was time to trade the known for the unknown, to reinvent himself. Again.

It's been a recurring theme in the artist's life. Born in Palos, Cuba, in 1964, Martínez Celaya was a child when his family fled to Spain. Growing up, he says, he can't remember ever living in the same house for two consecutive years. The family moved to Puerto Rico

BY GASPAR GONZÁLEZ | PHOTOS BY ANDREW KAUFMAN

# FOR ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA, ART IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE LARGER QUESTIONS OF LIFE

## TRUE COLORS

FOR ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA, ART IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE LARGER QUESTIONS OF LIFE.





in 1975. At age 18, Martínez Celaya left Puerto Rico for upstate New York, to pursue a degree in applied physics and electrical engineering at Cornell University. After college, he enrolled in the Ph.D. program in quantum electronics at the University of California-Berkeley. Science, with its sterile settings and measurable outcomes, was his refuge from the chaos of exile.

Science may have been Martínez Celaya's security blanket, but it was not his passion. Art was. At 11, he had been apprenticed to a painter. By the time he reached Berkeley, art and science were competing for his attention. When he wasn't in the lab, Martínez Celaya was painting

and selling his work in Bay Area parks. Eventually he traded the Ph.D. program at Berkeley for an MFA degree from the University of California-Santa Barbara and devoted himself exclusively to his art. A professorship at Pomona College and the Claremont Graduate School helped him pay the bills.

Throughout the '90s and into the new century, his star rose. He developed a reputation as an innovative artist, incorporating tar, dirt, and even his own blood into minimal, often murky compositions. He received fellowships, scored his first solo museum show, and opened a studio in the hip heart of Los Angeles. By 2004, he had acquired

an international profile: That year, *Schneebett (The Bed of Snow)*, a large-scale installation inspired by Beethoven's deathbed, premiered at the Berlin Philharmonic, while *Boy (Part III)*, an environment of paintings, sculptures, and works on paper, opened at Liverpool Street Gallery in Sydney.

Then, in the spring of 2005, Martínez Celaya did the unthinkable (at least, it seemed like that to most of his peers): He moved to Delray Beach. "People in L.A. thought it was an unusual move," he once explained to me, demonstrating, among his many talents, a gift for understatement. "Nobody leaves L.A., especially if they're doing well. But I knew too many people. It was crazy. I

wanted to get away from the buzz."

Martínez Celaya and his wife, Alexandra—a charming, lovely woman he met in Los Angeles, and the mother of his three children—had considered moving to Connecticut or even Miami, but the artist was looking for a more intimate setting. He found that in Delray, where skyrocketing property values and development have yet to diminish the town's laid-back, beach-bungalow charm. He bought an abandoned bakery just off Federal Highway and transformed it into his present studio, a large, well-lighted space where he works, maintains an office staff, and entertains the occasional collector.

Today Martínez Celaya is

Above: *No Title*, blood, charcoal, and varnish on canvas and mirror, 100 x 156 inches, 2006. Previously shown as part of *The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama*.

Opposite: *December 2003*, oil and tar on canvas, 100 x 78 in., 2004.





alone, working on the paintings that have been inspired partly by Gabriela's coloring, partly by the realization that he has entered a new phase of his career. A CD of Joan Manuel Serrat singing the poetry of Miguel Hernandez plays over the studio's speakers as sunlight streams in through a specially designed, pyramid-shaped skylight, raising the temperature in the room just enough to make a visitor uncomfortable (though it suits the artist just fine). Martínez Celaya, dressed in a uniform of paint-splattered black t-shirt (bearing the logo of Whale and Star, a small publishing house he operates), black pants, and work boots, contemplates the large landscape before him.

He reveals that he wrote for almost a year before he started painting these particular works. (Writing is an integral part of Martínez Celaya's process.) And, as he always does, he read. "I

studied Søren Kierkegaard's work, but from the perspective of Kierkegaard's failings," he says. "There's a certain sadness to Kierkegaard's ethical choices." He cites a crucial episode in the philosopher's life: "Kierkegaard had this woman he loved. He wanted to marry her, but he realized that would bring him [only] worldly happiness, so he said to himself, 'This will prevent me from reaching a higher level,' and he gave her up. It's a beautiful gesture—and a grotesque one."

That Kierkegaard's biography—as much as his ideas—would inspire Martínez Celaya is no surprise. On the subject of the relationship of art to life, he sides with another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who posited that "art equals ethics"—a belief that Martínez Celaya believes too few artists share: "Once art has no purpose, it gravitates toward entertainment.

There are too many gatherings [in the art world] where the point is to be clever or savvy, to 'wink' at the people around you a lot. Irony passes for sophistication." It isn't a harangue, but, rather, an observation—one that makes Martínez Celaya a little sad.

His work, he says, is tied to a more personal project: "I always felt that I was somehow not present for the important things in my life, so I try to account for more things [through my art]. I'm trying to use the work to live better. It's not about the aesthetic experience for me; it's about the *ethical* experience."

Hence, the interest in exploring Kierkegaard's lonely choices—or, rather, in uncovering the possibilities Kierkegaard could never bring himself to embrace. The current work will consist of 12 paintings, each representing a month of the year; the cycle will begin in July and end in June, so that the month of Kierkegaard's

death, November, falls roughly in the middle. (The philosopher died in 1855, at age 42, the same age Martínez Celaya is now.) In the most representational of the works, a figure lies on the ground, under a massive black sky, with only a few books to cover him—a meditation, perhaps, on the cold comfort of philosophy at the moment of mortal reckoning. In another, a nude girl stands by a shore, bathed in moonlight and a bright blue hue. With both hands, she has brought a dove to her lips and bitten down on it, producing a hypnotic burst of red.

"I can't stop looking at her," says the artist, adding that he's not really sure where the inspiration for the painting came from. "Working on these paintings, I get this feeling—and I always used to laugh when other people said it—of something working through me. I feel like stuff is happening and I'm just trying to catch up to it."

Martínez Celaya's arresting portrait of the American painter Leon Golub (1922-2004), who was a friend and a mentor.

Painting, for Martínez Celaya, has always been less about making definitive statements than about asking the right questions. As a result, he will continue experimenting with a canvas, painting over (and over) seemingly finished works. (It's a practice not everyone appreciates; on at least one occasion, a buyer was dismayed to learn that the painting he had purchased had been radically altered by the artist.)

The evolution of one particular work in this series is illustrative. The large-scale painting initially was of a boy, curled up in the center of the frame. Five weeks later, the boy remained, but the foreground had become a snowy bank with truncated trees rising from it; the background, a green field. A rainbow was suspended in the muddy-blue sky above, and scripted across the middle of the painting was a legend: "Kierkegaard is nobody's wife." By the next day, the boy, like the field, had virtually disappeared into the snow, while the trees, with their jagged, broken trunks, had become much more pronounced. The legend had begun to fade.

Two weeks later, the trees have sprouted brown and orange leaves, and the boy has returned, this time wearing translucent pajamas. Situated in the foreground, he blows a large, colorful bubble. It is a fanciful, affecting image, and quite unlike anything else in the artist's body of work.

When asked about the changes, Martínez Celaya nods his head. "Many of the paintings began with figural elements that receded or were obliterated," he says. "Now they've returned, and I really don't know what to make of it." He pauses to consider the cycle as a whole. "They're ambitious paintings," he says. "They possess a purpose—an unnamable purpose, perhaps, but a purpose nonetheless."

One of the things Martínez Celaya most likes about his studio is that it's in a walking neighborhood, with a nearby 7-Eleven (where he can get his daily Diet Coke fix) and a low-slung Mexican restaurant just across the street. Sitting in one of the restaurant's booths a little while later, dipping chips into a thick, fire-red salsa, he turns the conversation



*Schneebett*,  
courtesy Museum  
der bildenden  
Künste Leipzig,  
Leipzig, Germany.

from artwork to the work of being an artist—specifically, the demands of the market. Commercially speaking, Martínez Celaya is a very hot commodity at the moment. His paintings go for \$60,000 to \$90,000, his installations for around \$250,000. He can't produce enough work to satisfy all the collectors who want a piece. It's an enviable position for anyone to be in, but for a man who believes every action brings an equal (if not necessarily opposite) reaction—a belief born of both the philosopher and the physicist in him—it raises larger issues, not all of them of a strictly theoretical nature.

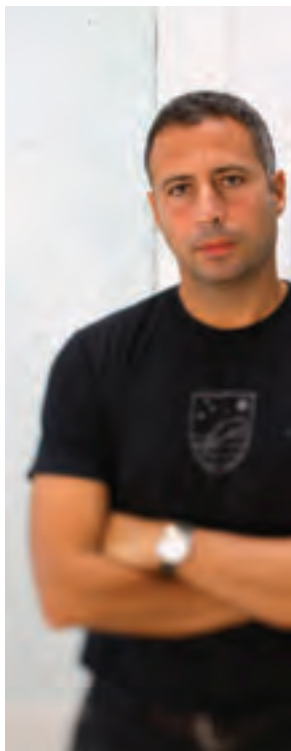
The Kierkegaard cycle, when completed, was supposed to hang in a prominent Miami gallery during this year's Art Basel Miami Beach. Just before the official announcement was made, however, Martínez Celaya called it off. "The way the work was going to be shown was not appropriate," he says. "That was at the heart of the matter." [The gallery owner declined to comment.]

Other artists might have capitulated (after all, this was for *Baaaaase!*), but Martínez Celaya feels strongly that exhibitions are not simply about showing individual works, but about creating an environment. (He has likened the desired effect to the feeling one gets when stepping inside a church.) Instead, he will now place one painting with his New York dealer, Sara Meltzer Gallery, and another with John Berggruen Gallery of San Francisco, both of whom will be at the fair proper. (The complete Kierkegaard cycle will most likely be shown at Sara Meltzer in the spring;

meanwhile, Martínez Celaya himself will be a presence during Basel week, delivering a lecture at Miami Art Museum as part of Photo Miami.)

The artist, who participates in very few commercial shows, knows that, in the art world, sticking to your principles can sometimes seem like a strange, even hostile, act. "There's this notion that you're being 'difficult' if you're up-front with people about how you want to do things," says Martínez Celaya.

Fortunately for him (and us), Martínez Celaya doesn't create with the art world in mind, doesn't much care what the critics think, and steadfastly refuses to buy into the hype that surrounds him. In that sense, art remains what it has always been for him: an extension of who he is, and, along with the people in his life, his greatest source of joy. "I love being an artist," he says. "Some projects, like the Berlin Philharmonic and working



with the Cowboy Junkies [a recent collaboration which produced a retrospective volume on the band's 20-year career], have really been life-changing."

No longer a "young" artist—not after his "early work" has been published—and confronted by the runaway train of his own success, Martínez Celaya works harder than ever to stay on track. "Alex and the kids [Gabriela, three-year-old Sebastian, and one-year-old Adrian] really keep me present," he says. "You come home and the kids ask you for juice or they want to play and you have to be there for them." He is sitting in the living room of his waterfront home, less than a three-minute drive from his studio. Gabriela and Sebastian sit at a small table just a few feet away, drinking soup from colorful plastic bowls equipped with built-in straws. Their father hears what sounds like gurgling. "Are you blowing bubbles in your soup?" he asks Sebastian, a blonde cherub who has no trouble affecting a look of complete innocence. "Don't blow bubbles in your soup."

The question of whether Martínez Celaya is an "important artist" seems strangely distant at such moments. But it would anyway. (No doubt he would dismiss the subject with a laugh.) He's on an important *journey*. "Keep your actions faithful," reads a note the artist has written to himself on the wall of his studio. He will. ☉

A still-evolving work from the current project.



Kerrigan

