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the escape artist

To Enrique Martínez Celaya, leaving the big-city buzz of Los Angeles for the peace and quiet of Delray Beach is anything but a disappearing act.



IN HIS ELEMENT
Martínez Celaya in his
Delray Beach studio



A detail from "Schneebett" ("Snowbed"), part of "The Beethoven Cycle;" Opposite page: Martínez Celaya utilizes various media in his work

On one wall of Enrique Martínez Celaya's Delray Beach studio are two neat rows of framed letters and drawings he mailed to his father in the early 1970s, when the artist was only 8 years old. His father had left the family's native Cuba for Madrid, where he was making preparations for his wife and three sons to join him. (The family would be reunited in Spain in 1972.) To his eldest son, the separation seemed interminable, which is why, perhaps, so many of the drawings feature ships, planes, helicopters and figures parachuting from the air—a child's dream of escape.

Since then, movement has been a defining characteristic of Martínez Celaya's life. Growing up, he says, he can't remember ever living in the same house for two consecutive years. At age 18, he relocated from Puerto Rico, where his family had gone in 1975, to upstate New York to pursue a degree in applied physics and electrical engineering from Cornell University. A perpetual sense of displacement followed him from stop to stop. "We were strangers in Spain, Puerto Rico, when I came [to the United States] for school," he says.

After college, Martínez Celaya journeyed across the country to enroll in the Ph.D. program in quantum electronics at the University of California-Berkeley. Looking back, he believes science, with its sterile settings and emphasis on precision and quantifiable outcomes, was his refuge from the chaos of exile. But it was not his passion. At age 11, he had been apprenticed to a painter. By the time he reached grad school, art and science were competing for his attention. When he wasn't in the lab, he was painting and selling his art in Bay Area parks. So, this close to his doctorate, he made the biggest move of all—he abandoned the program in quantum electronics (earning instead an MFA from the University of California-Santa Barbara) and devoted himself exclusively to his art.

At least, it was his biggest move until October 2004. That's when Martínez Celaya decided to pick up his life once again, making the jump from Los Angeles to Delray. "People in L.A.

thought it was an unusual move for me," he says, unveiling a gift for understatement no less impressive than one of his oversized paintings. "Nobody leaves L.A., especially if they're doing well."

Martínez Celaya was and is doing very well, indeed. Still relatively young (he turned 41 this past June), his work already resides in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan and Whitney museums in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Sammlung Rosenkranz in Berlin. He has produced a commission for the Berlin Philharmonic ("The Beethoven Cycle") and has been the subject of a 10-year retrospective ("Enrique Martínez Celaya's Works on Paper") at the Oakland Museum of California. As for what his work brings on the market, pieces range between \$50,000 and \$250,000, depending on whether it's an individual work or an environment (Interested? Get in line now—there's a worldwide waiting list of buyers). Not to put too fine a point on it, Martínez Celaya is as hot as any young artist could hope to be.

And that, he maintains, is precisely what brought him to Delray: "My old studio was at the intersection of La Brea and Beverly [in L.A.]. I knew too many people; it was crazy. I wanted to get away from the buzz." It wasn't that he was out of place in Tinseltown—with his dark, natural good looks, Martínez Celaya would probably be tapped to play himself in the movie version of his life—it's just that, well, enough is enough. So he and wife Alexandra started shopping for a new location. "It took three years of research to find this place," he explains, sounding a lot like the scientist he used to be. "We looked in Connecticut. I'm Cuban originally, but Miami was too much. I was looking for a village."

What he found was Rosella's, an old, abandoned bakery just off Federal Highway in Delray, far enough from the madding crowds on Atlantic Avenue to guarantee some privacy but close enough to restaurants and shops that he doesn't miss city life too much. He made it his studio. "It's nice to be able to

travel to the big cities and retreat here,” he muses.

He only had one reservation about his new home, but that was dispelled quickly. “When I came [to Delray], I expected to travel; I didn’t expect people to travel here. But look at the guest book—there are people from all over.”

The locale has had an impact on his work “This is the closest I’ve been to my childhood [since leaving Cuba]. I live near the ocean, and you can see the ocean [in some of his more recent paintings].” Indeed, the artist who on at least one occasion has been called “The Prince of Darkness”—after his penchant for incorporating tar, soot, dirt and even his own blood into minimal, often murky, compositions—is broadening his palette.

Perhaps because his new setting recalls the island home of his youth, Martínez Celaya is also delving more deeply into what has always been, for him, an area of particular interest: “This theme of a young boy coming of age—it was in my work before, but now it’s come to fruition.”

All around Martínez Celaya’s studios are images—paintings, photographs and sculpture of boys on the edge of the sad and magical discoveries that come with adulthood. None is more arresting than a statue primitively fashioned from dirt, tar and straw. He stands in the middle of the studio, head slightly bowed, arms at his side, his mouth, posterior and genitals covered with daisies. The artist initially exhibited the work sans flowers. “I saw him standing in the gallery, surrounded by all these people,” Martínez Celaya says, “and he looked so vulnerable. I requested they send him back. [The flowers] are both a covering and a point of attraction.” To further magnify that dual effect, the statue will now be placed inside of a large glass case.

This new work is titled “Boy in a Vitrine” and is emblematic of Martínez Celaya’s deeply personal relationship to his creations and of his willingness to keep experimenting with and through his art. “That painting,” he says, pointing to a canvas that, from across the room, appears to be a solid black, “was of a boy pointing to the sea. The gallery in Berlin really loved it, but it’s different now.”

Which is just fine, he says; he’s not playing to the art crowd. “Today, I have a waiting list; tomorrow nobody might want my work.” He only does two commercial shows a year, choosing instead to concentrate on commissions and museum shows. (Though he will, of course, be represented at this month’s massive Art Basel Miami Beach art fair.) “When you walk into a church,” he says, “everything there is for the purpose of [promoting] a spiritual experience. I like to create that environment with painting, sculpture, photographs. I read what [critics] write about my work, and I’m repulsed. My dad doesn’t know anything about art, but I really like to see how he reacts to my work. I’m not interested in the aesthetic experience. I’m interested in the ethical experience. These works have nothing to do with the art world—they’re about life.”

Coming from most other artists, such a declaration might well trigger the bullshit meter. But in Martínez Celaya’s case, it’s true. The guy is so grounded it’s scary. The evidence is everywhere. On the wall of his sketch room, prominently displayed, is a homemade birthday card from his wife and kids, featuring a coloring-book cutout of a pony with a hot pink mane and tail. In another corner is a painting by one of the children (Martínez Celaya and his

wife have three: Gabriela, Sebastián and Adrián). Family pictures dot the walls.

Friends are also ubiquitous in the photos pressed under the glass of the coffee table in the studio’s reception area, and even on the walls. Dominating one of the two main rooms is a huge—maybe 12’x15’—portrait of one of Martínez Celaya’s former mentors, the American painter Leon Golub, who died in 2004. The painting, which depicts Golub’s face seemingly floating above a black background, his intense stare stopping the viewer in his tracks, is inscribed simply, “Leon/Whom I Miss So.”

That’s when you get it. Martínez Celaya, whose own quiet intensity is matched only by an ever-present sweetness of spirit (so much for the stereotype of the angry young artist), isn’t at all out of place in a small community like Delray. He’s exactly where he needs to be—close to the people who most matter in his life, close to the ocean and close to his art. But, after years of moving around, sometimes by necessity, sometimes by choice, can he help himself? Could this really be Martínez Celaya’s last stop? “I have a family now,” he says. “My move to Delray is an attempt to make my stand.” He’s making it. Big-time.

