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A photograph of a person's legs from the waist down, wearing heavily paint-splattered blue denim jeans and blue and white sneakers. The person is standing in an art studio, with a wall covered in graffiti and yellow tape in the background. The floor is cluttered with art supplies like a blue cup and brushes.

THE ART ISSUE





AN EVER WIDER WORLD ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA

Christian Williams watches with fascination and sadness as the life of his son-in-law gets too big for California

THE LAST SYMPHONY

Martínez Celaya's "Schneebett," a vision of the deathbed of Ludwig van Beethoven on exhibit at the Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig in Germany through July.

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Enrique Martínez Celaya was born in Palos, Cuba, on June 9, 1964. For most of us, however, the real biography of an artist begins at the time and place of our first encounter. For me it was seven years ago in Los Angeles, when he appeared in my doorway on Thanksgiving Day on the arm of my daughter Alex. We are free to wonder at such intersections in our lives, how they come to happen, and why.

He was at first glance a robust young man in paint-spattered shoes who knew a lot about laser physics and volleyball, and who, after a period of familiarity sufficient to display a courtly regard for the necessity of light conversation, quoted Wittgenstein in the kitchen.

His work had shed color years before, and was now advancing in textures of tar and feathers and reinterpreted human body parts. Some of the parts I would later recognize as my daughter's, but at this early stage a potential father-in-law is capable of dark projections without cause. Having met Enrique once, however, I needed another meeting right away just to finish the conversation. Alex, too. They were married within a year.

Others have noticed this phenomenon, and commented on it: The universe around Enrique seems to be constantly expanding. Drawn into it, you feel larger. Alex took it literally, expanding in the next five years to produce Gabriela, Sebastián and Adrián Marcos, who in turn did the same to the world of their father.

But at the time Enrique's biography began for me, he was living in his studio on Abbot Kinney in Venice. This structure was itself expanding, throwing walls outward and up, lintels rising to admit the transportation of larger and larger canvases, skylights opening. You went in the door, reached for something familiar and discovered it was 30 feet farther away than before. It was the big bang of a new universe with a soundtrack of contractors hammering.

Bill Griffin's contemporary gallery was then an intimate space near the beach, where the opening of Enrique's show "Coming Home," with its boy and elk gazing at one another across the room, was such a success that I couldn't see both boy and elk at once, the space between them being filled with patrons. So the Griffin Contemporary also expanded, transforming into an elegant, airier structure in Santa Monica.

During this period Enrique's work was being collected by the museums of great cities and bought by collectors who came from afar, sometimes with interpreters. I could feel the

momentum of his career. Even so, his work didn't seem made to hang over a sofa, and I wondered how many sofas required a 100-foot-long mural composed of ashes and the artist's own blood.

It is not something you mention to a son-in-law, but I had grown up in a house where the post office was revered as a job impervious to recession, and I'd had moments in my own career as a journalist and screenwriter when I wished I worked there. So it was a private solace that Enrique was all this time a tenured professor of art at Pomona College. They can't fire you from that, as Grandma used to say.

When teaching cut into his time to paint, he quit.

At about this time Enrique and Alex moved to Hancock Park, that old enclave of stately homes. The new house virtually flew apart, growing new rooms on the second floor for Gabriela. When she was 18 months old, Sebastián was born, and Enrique, invigorated, decided to restore to glory a 6,000-square-foot 1914 neoclassic mansion a mile away. This would be in his spare time, of course, while not traveling to install a show or working day and night on the next one.

It is an axiom of the artist that he should be able to bicycle to work from his home. This required that an 8,000-square-foot commercial building on La Brea be transformed from drab anonymity into his new studio, where the "Schneebett" ("Bed of Snow") was conceived. Inspired by a poem of Paul Celan and surrounded by glossy catalogs of industrial compressors, he constructed the deathbed of Ludwig van Beethoven, a literally frozen yet vaporous object to be installed at the Berlin Philharmonic for the contemplation of German concertgoers.

The ground floor of the building came equipped with tenants, a photo-finishing shop on one side and a venerable kosher pizzeria on the other. Visiting there, where Gabriela at 2 had her own set of watercolors and sometimes worked at her father's side, it was hard not to think of the intersection of Enrique's world with that of the pizzeria patrons below. Did they ever look up at the sound of the triumphant Ninth Symphony, which the artist played loud while refrigerating the memory of its composer, and wonder where it was coming from, or why?

Those of us who climbed the stairs to see the progress of a favorite new work were often disappointed. It wasn't that the course of inspiration had gone wrong but that we couldn't find it. It was gone. Enrique had painted it over, changed it or completely re-imagined his conception. The thing was, we had



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seen where Enrique was going. We had understood, for a moment, the path. We felt, therefore, a part of it. But it turned out that what he was looking for was not what we were looking for. It wasn't what he was looking for either.

So he would start over again, speckled with paint or tar, brushes everywhere, following a process he refused to understand (because that is intention?) toward a goal he refused to define (because that would be decoration?). He did this, it seemed to me, without guilt or reservation, and fearlessly. After all, most of us work toward an end, not a new beginning.

There were many new acquaintances in Enrique's expanding world. Some were athletic and came with volleyball nets, which when set up sent the artist smashing the ball as he had in college. Others were of rarefied connoisseurship or wealthy or famous, or old pals or young apprentices, and some seemed to be there for the intellectual jousting and would come through the door, eyes wild, already in mid-argument. There were collectors and fans and critics, and sometimes sleepless young moms guided by Alex, their baby carriages equally welcome in the moving salon, all making a marvelous accidental connection, as I had, and probably wondering, as I did, how and why?

We all seemed to be going somewhere together, and nobody knew where. Enrique's work didn't chart a course; it was more

like a boat we were in together. By 2003, with the opening of his show "All the Field Is Ours," it became an ark—there was suddenly birth and rebirth and youth and children among the hummingbirds and the tar. I wondered if the others felt it too, the change in their lives, the mysterious convivial expansion.

The father-in-law has the best deal, and I knew it. I could talk to Enrique late into the night about "Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai" or tennis or Velasquez; throw the Frisbee with him, change diapers with him or just ponder Los Angeles, a place stretched tight as canvas on a frame, blank, ambitious, but freighted with indefinable expectation. He was from the Caribbean, where the nights are soft. Sometimes, when the Santa Ana winds howled in the dry palms and the city seemed to swing like a glittering chandelier, he was far away. Or so it seemed to me. He said he liked California. It was just that the ocean was cold.

We lost him frequently to Aspen, San Francisco, New York, Mexico, Germany. It was natural that as his reputation grew he would come to be known in distant places. But I could feel an undertow, as of water receding before a wave. When "Schneebett" went on exhibit in Berlin, there was a line of 6,000 people waiting to get in. Six thousand new intersections with Enrique, 6,000 miles away.

Biography doesn't sit still. Enrique was a child in Cuba, a boy in Spain, a teenager in Puerto Rico, a physics student in upstate

New York, where winter knows what it's doing. Quantum electronics brought him to Berkeley in damp San Francisco, where science and art faced off in his life. When art won he turned south, toward UC Santa Barbara. And then south again, to Venice, where the sun was warmer still. It didn't seem a pattern, at the time.

One day in 2004, with the mansion just restored and the La Brea studio full of art and his shoes still spattered with paint, Enrique and Alex said they were leaving. The expansion of the years had left no space for them in Los Angeles. They had searched from Malibu to Palos Verdes, looking for more land. His plan was a family compound of sorts, where he could live and work. He had computed the perfect number of footsteps between house and studio, between life and art. I think it was 200. Alternatively, the bicycle.

I knew the tension between home and work was important. I had been along on Sunday marathons that probed one available plot of land after another, some on the edge of the ocean and some on the sides of the mountains above it. But the coast is crowded now, and California could no longer fulfill its promises.

In Delray Beach, Florida, however, there was an abandoned bakery.

A bakery? Yes, on a quiet street, close to the beach. All Enrique had to do was gut it, push out the walls, fabricate a massive pyramid skylight for which he already had sketches. It was a big space under a mountain of cumulus clouds, and with the windows open a wind blew through that was almost Caribbean.

They had found a house, too, a sprawling limestone-roofed Bermudian a bicycle ride away, and, don't worry, it has separate luxury guest quarters. I watched Alex, holding year-old Sebastián, while Gabriela leaned against her knee. She was pregnant again. It was the pattern.

It's been six months now since Adrián Marcos Martínez Celaya was born, in Florida. On this new coast the Gulf Stream lies just offshore, and the air storms and steams. In

Enrique's recent work the sky seems different and the sea is aquamarine. The climate of Los Angeles, in contrast, remains a figment of local imagination, where the weather report is about careers and the role of lightning is to be captured in a bottle.

Enrique moved, he said, "because my work began to teach me that in the pursuit of my ideas I had to be away from the buzz. For both my family and my work, I needed to isolate myself."

Trajectories are hindsight, and the artist can't see his own. It doesn't point to Cuba, because he has no intention of ever living there. It may someday point back to California, which he discovered in the novels of John Steinbeck long before he first saw it. His universe continues to grow, and he has his eye lately on a 28,000-square-foot former trucking warehouse to accommodate the scale of his newest ideas. He has been mapping the bicycle ride.

Writing this in my own house in Pacific Palisades, I'm aware of the signature hummingbirds on the walls. One of his small acrylic heads lies on its side, vaguely Enrique-like, absorbing the sun off the Pacific. An early work, "Inventario de Recuerdos," is a diptych with holes cut away on one canvas, and the missing pieces transposed to the other and stitched securely there. Not lost, but remembered in another place.

These familiar works seem elements of a biography. But is it his, or mine? And there are so many works now, spread from Berlin to Honolulu, paintings and photographs, drawings, prints and sculptures, books and poems, thoughts, memories. So many intersections on a single road.

Maybe it is that artists shed pieces of themselves, leaving a trail we follow together.

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Enrique Martínez Celaya is among 88 artists who have contributed works to "The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama," opening today at the UCLA Fowler Museum.

