



Snows of exile: Enrique Martínez Celaya's Schneebett at the Miami Art Museum

At Miami Art Museum, Enrique Martínez Celaya's 'Schneebett' acts as meditation on death and its parallels with exile.

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The entry into this room at the Miami Art Museum, built specifically for this exhibit and seemingly recessed from the main gallery, is startlingly dark.

A dim light ahead suggests the way forward, but meanwhile a loud humming, or more like a chugging sound, fills the space, emanating from an almost old-fashioned looking machine. Turn the corner, and a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling reveals a solitary chair, a somber antechamber. The view from the chair is of a bed, also lit by a single light bulb, which in turn has its own view out into a winter forest with trees covered in snow, bereft of leaves. Although the doorway to this third room is blocked by a low fence built of branches, look closely and the bed is covered, literally, in a frozen blanket with pillow.

The effect is stunning — both subtly gorgeous and deeply melancholy at the same time, in this installation called *Schneebett* (German for “snow bed”) from Enrique Martínez Celaya, an acclaimed Cuban-born artist who has recently made Miami his home. As of next week, a video of the Miami Symphony Orchestra playing Beethoven's Late String Quartets will play on a screen outside the installation room, adding another element of dark beauty and unease.

The meaning and craft to all this reflects the man behind it. Martínez Celaya started his career as a scientist studying superconductivity and pursuing a PhD in quantum electronics before leaving physics behind for a master's in fine arts and an intense interest in German philosophy.

Fast forward to 2004, when the artist created *Schneebett* for the Berliner Philharmonie building (an early 1960s architectural prototype for later music halls), meant as a meditation on the dying days of Beethoven. Although known primarily for his pensive paintings, Martínez Celaya's remarkable installation struck a chord: here was a Cuban artist memorializing

not the heyday of Germany's — and arguably the world's — greatest classical composer, but his painful last moments. Germans could understand the zeitgeist, and the installation moved on to Leipzig and was acquired by the German collector Dieter Rosenkranz.

Perhaps in a nod to the new MAM museum under construction, Rosenkranz has now donated the piece to the museum.

As the artist walks by that chugging machine days before the opening, he explains that he wants the visitor to hear it — partly to appreciate the mechanism hard at work freezing up the *schneebett* in the other room, and also to relate to the composer himself, who while technically deaf, apparently mostly heard loud humming. The electrical contraption-water-cooler also emits heat, but when entering the next part of the exhibit, an incredible blast of cold hits the intruder. In this chilled room stand the chair and frozen bed. There are no figures, but on the bed is an imprint of one: the pillow is indented, the blanket is wrinkled.

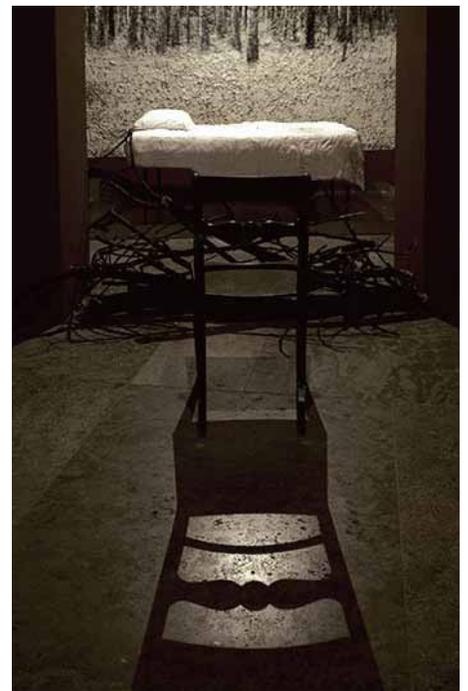
“With the empty chair, there is an absence of somebody,” explains Martínez Celaya, but someone who “is witness to a bed of death.”

This death bed is what most intrigues the artist, as it represented the time when an incredible talent in the end lay almost alone, estranged from his father and his country — Beethoven had left Germany and died in Vienna — with little comfort, hence the ice covering. His view is of an unforgiving, empty winter landscape.

It is the ultimate fear of exile, something Martínez Celaya relates to. “Much of the regret and longing,” says the artist, “is my own.”

Even the “painting” of that empty forest has several layers. It is in fact made from tar and feathers, which, claims the artist, made it harder to craft; it was a hardship he physically wanted to feel as he made this complicated work.

The painting itself reflects Beethoven's hardship, Martínez Celaya explains. Bedridden



in the final months of his life with terrible bloating of his stomach, the composer was nonetheless visited by members of the German cultural elite, who wanted a piece of him. So they cut off parts of the musician's famous mane. He was left with just patches on his head, and people still claim to have bits of Beethoven's hair. “What humiliation,” says Martínez Celaya, calling it the “ultimate tar-and-feathering.”

On a broader level, the time of Beethoven's death in 1827 was also a transitional time, when Europe was moving into the Industrial Age. “The spiritual and emotional desolation” of the composer's deathbed reflected that of the time, similar to the “cynicism, the numbness of ours,” says Martínez Celaya. “It's a period when it's difficult to believe in anything....”

but the counterpoint is the great music of Beethoven.”

Yet here another unexpected meaning of the deathbed arose during the original installation, remembers Martinez Celaya. In a horrifically cynical deception, the Nazis arranged for quartets to play classical music, including that by Beethoven, in concentration camps to convince foreigners that all was good. When the artist realized the added symbolism to Schneebett, he included poetry lines from Holocaust survivor Paul Celan to the work. This is why the piece is a welcome addition to MAM. As it moves into its Herzog & de Meuron home, and with luck onto a national and international stage, the museum needs smart works that speak locally but also globally. Here is an homage to the death of the Beethoven, centered around a bed made of ice and bronze first commissioned in northern Europe, created by a Cuban exile, with references to Jewish suffering— but which in the end serves as a testament to the triumph of human creativity.

In a continental role reversal, Martinez Celaya takes Beethoven out of the snow and down to the blue Caribbean shore — his constant backdrop, he says, to exile — in a video that will be screened at the Sagamore Hotel on Miami Beach during the opening night of Art Basel Miami Beach, on Nov. 30. “I am wearing a white wig, dressed in my impersonation of Beethoven,” he says.

Martinez Celaya replaces the frozen setting with a rising sun over a South Florida beach, as he dons and takes off his fake hair. Again accompanied by a Beethoven score, the sunrise breaks up and dissipates, along with the music, and this landscape too becomes unforgiving for the exile looking for home.

IF YOU GO

- “Schneebett” by Enrique Martinez Celaya, Miami Art Museum, through Jan. 1; 101 W. Flagler St.; 305-375-3000; miamiartmuseum.org.
- Screenings of Martinez Celaya’s Beethoven at the beach video, evening of Nov. 30, Sagamore Hotel, 1671 Collins Ave., Miami Beach.