



Enrique Martinez Celaya in his Culver City Studio

Courtesy Studio Enrique Martinez Celaya

Enrique Martinez Celaya Captures a Familiar Feeling in His First L.A. Show in 4 Years

Ever feel like an outsider looking in on your own life? Cuban-born artist and USC professor Martinez Celaya gets it

By **Liz Ohanesian** - September 17, 2019

You probably know the feeling. You head out of the house only to realize that you left something behind. Maybe it's your cell phone or your wallet. You rush back home, walk inside, and everything is exactly as it was when you were last there. Something else, though, seems different.

Enrique Martinez Celaya had forgotten a book. When the L.A.-based artist returned to retrieve it, he noticed a sense of disconnect that happens when you enter your own home for the sole purpose of grabbing something left behind. "It's an opportunity to see your life as if it wasn't yours from a distance that we almost never get, accidentally," he says inside Hollywood's [Kohn Gallery](#) the day before the opening of his current solo show.

The Tears of Things, which opened at Kohn Gallery on September 13, is inspired in part by this sensation. The first L.A. solo show from Martinez Celaya in four years, began as "reflections on journey and risk and displacement." Its title is derived from Virgil's *Aeneid*, specifically, a scene where Aeneas sees artwork depicting the Trojan War. Through paintings and sculptures, most of which were made this year, Martinez Celaya brings together nature, light, and narrative to explore intertwining themes.

Born in Cuba, Martinez Celaya was 7 when his family left the country. While he was an apprentice to a painter as a child, and art has always been a part of his life, his first academic path was in science. "I never thought that art would be a real career," he says. "I always thought it would be a hobby."

He painted and wrote while studying physics. "It seemed totally natural to me," he says. "What's not natural is trying to find the time and the kind of lifestyle that would allow me to do physics, art and literature. It just became harder and harder the more advanced my career got as a scientist."



'The Tears of Things' installation view

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KOHN GALLERY

Art and literature became Martinez Celaya's calling. He's also an author and a professor at USC, teaching primarily in the English department. Science, though, has stayed with him, although it may not be obvious in his work. "I have such respect for science that I never want to dabble with it within art galleries," he says. "Science exists in my head as a way of moving through the world, rather than something else."

And science does come into play with his work, less as a theme and more as a background for engineering pieces like *The Well*. Dating back to 2014, *The Well* is the oldest piece in this exhibition. It's also the show's starting point. Standing just outside of the gallery's entrance, it is a large, bronze bust of a girl with lips puckered as if to give a kiss and tears streaming down her face, pooling in the well that surrounds her.



Martinez Celaya at his studio in Culver City

COURTESY STUDIO ENRIQUE MARTINEZ CELAYA

Inside the gallery are a series of paintings depicting real and imagined landscapes, as well as two more sculptures, including a wood boy on a marble platform called *The Token of Exile*, and a small pile of materials like cement and wood, paired with gold ice skates, titled “The Art of Losing.”

Literature is a crucial part of Martinez Celaya’s process. The preparation for this show began with writings, sometimes “philosophical reflections” and other times poetic fragments. The writings will lend themselves to the titles of the works. Sometimes, too, Martinez Celaya incorporates the writings as text in the pieces.

There are literary references within the show as well, like his repeated use of apple trees in landscapes, stemming from its appearance in everything from the Adam and Eve story to the work of Robert Frost. (“They’re a quintessential tree of possibility,” he says.) He plays with a quote from Frost in *The Virtue*, in which the line “here are your waters and your watering place” appears at the top of the painting. His piece *The Reign* makes use of the mythological golden fleece.

Earlier this year, Martinez Celaya returned to Cuba to participate in the Havana Biennial. It was his first trip back to his country of birth as an adult, and an experience that was captured in the documentary *Nieve en el portal: El niño que se fue regresa* (*Snow on the Porch: The boy who left returns and artist*).

“I’m glad it’s documented because it went by so quickly in some ways,” he says. “I think that if there had not been documentation of it, it would just be a blur for me right now, but there was something odd also about being in the moment and being filmed about being in the moment.”

It was a bit like that time he left the book in the house. He says, “I think a lot of us find ourselves to be in our lives and sometimes outside of our lives looking in.”

RELATED: [At 80, Judy Chicago Is Claiming Her Rightful Place in L.A. Art History](#)

Stay on top of the latest in L.A. food and culture. [Sign up for our newsletters today.](#)