


Art OF CONVERSATION

Acclaimed artist
Enrique Martinez Celaya,
re-establishing roots in Delray Beach,
lets his thought-provoking work do
the talking on the eve of a museum
opening in Boca.

BY **CHELSEA GREENWOOD**



he walls seem to talk at Enrique Martinez Celaya's Delray Beach home. The Cuban-born artist's 1930s-era residence along the Intracoastal is equal parts gallery, sanctuary and time capsule, a space where works of art and personal artifacts come together in an ongoing conversation.

Like in the foyer, where Martinez Celaya's 2007 bronze statue, "Boy Raising His Arm," stands with a portrait of the artist's son Sebastian ("in Chinese dress") gazing over its shoulder. Or in the master bedroom, where a painting that social realist Ben Shahn created for his wife hangs just feet from a portrait of Martinez Celaya's own spouse, Alexandra, which he gave her on their wedding day.

It's as if Martinez Celaya can hear these unspoken dialogues among the works, as he walks from room to room. However, he isn't the only one to whom the art speaks.

Pieces by the contemporary artist—who incorporates painting, sculpture and photography into his compositions—reside in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum in New York, and in museums and galleries around the world. Martinez Celaya's work is in such demand that there's a wait list for his pieces, which typically sell for between \$10,000 and \$250,000 each.

After moving back to Delray Beach from Los Angeles last year—he lived in Delray from 2004 to 2007 (see page 122)—Martinez Celaya is keen to reintroduce himself to South Florida audiences. This month, he will unveil his first area exhibition since 2007, "An Unfinished Conversation: Collecting Enrique Martinez Celaya." On display at the Boca Raton Museum of Art from Nov. 17 to Jan. 10, the show comprises 19 works purchased by avid collector Martin Brest (director of films such as "Beverly Hills Cop," "Scent of a Woman" and "Meet Joe Black).

"Enrique is a renaissance man," Brest says. "He's been both university-educated and self-educated in a spectrum of disciplines. He's a uniquely brilliant individual. I find my conversations with him part of my ongoing education, and he



The artist in his Delray Beach studio

Clockwise from top: Martinez Celaya works "Breath," "The Immigrant" and "Figure"; the artist firing a sculpture



offers a wisdom and a point of view that I've yet to encounter. I find that my friendship with him is elevating."

Brest remembers first seeing Martinez Celaya's work at a gallery in 2001 and being transfixed. "I came back and saw it again and saw it again and finally purchased it," he says of "The Helper (Abruptness)," a composition of oil, wax and tar on canvas. "It really moved me very deeply, and I couldn't put my finger on it."

When the two met in the artist's L.A. studio in 2002, Martinez Celaya recalls how they felt an instant kinship and stood talking late into the evening, oblivious of the time.

"We have become very close friends," Martinez Celaya says of Brest. "He's a very interesting person because he brings to my work, and he bring to his collection, a sensibility that is extremely attentive to details, to connections. It's not an exaggeration to say that over the past six years or so, Marty's commentary on my work has been one of the reasons that making art has been fun—not fun but meaningful. He makes me feel significantly less alone."

As Brest continued collecting Martinez Celaya's work, the artist was struck by Brest's seriousness and scholarship as a collector: "At the gallery in L.A., we used to give him a bench because he would sit there, come back and look at a work for six hours. And I'm not exaggerating—six hours. I don't even do that.

"So I felt that what he had done [with his collection] was not just about me and my work, it's about him picking the work and putting the time and the care and ultimately the love for it."

Brest says that one of the most striking aspects of Martinez

Celaya's work is how a seemingly simple work has much more to offer than meets the eye. Say, for example, you're looking at Martinez Celaya's painting of a boy—that much is "apparently readable," Brest says.

"However, one feels that something's off, something's wrong. You're looking at something you think you can identify readily, but yet something inside you tells you something's askew. ... And as you try to figure out what is it about this image that makes [you] feel uncomfortable or makes [you] engaged or sad or elated, you start this thought process in your head that leads you to all these different things inside your imagination. ... For me, that journey keeps going forever; the work keeps provoking you in that way."

Whatever the critical or public reaction to the show, it's clear that Brest and Martinez Celaya's "unfinished conversation" will continue unfazed—a dialogue about art, life and, ultimately, companionship.

"It's easy to imagine all kinds of delusions [about the meaning of one's work]," Martinez Celaya says. "The nice thing about the conversation between Marty and I is that he has shared that delusion. He has given it range and made it more colorful."

Next, Martinez Celaya has an exhibit opening in late December in Aspen, where he goes every summer and is a trustee at the nearby Anderson Ranch Arts Center. He says that the paintings of this upcoming show represent a new "cycle," or phase in his art. "I felt like I just finished, in the spring, a cycle of three or four years," he says. "I felt rumblings of other ideas, other preoccupations. In Aspen, that will be the first time it will be shown."

This winter also will see another major unveiling for Martinez Celaya, a project five years in the making: Whale & Star, an 18,000-square-foot building that he recently



Inside the Artist's Studio

MARTINEZ CELAYA SHEDS LIGHT ON HIS WORK AND HIS CREATIVE PROCESS.

On technique: "I use very big brushes. My paint is completely liquid. I do very large paintings. And I purposely pick the big brushes just to not let me get stuck on details. I use my paint transparent, which also disrupts the image somewhat. I'm very interested in undermining facility."

On inspiration: "I used to be a scientist [he was in the Ph.D. program in quantum electronics at the University of California, Berkeley, but left to focus on his art], so I'm interested in inquiry. I'm interested in people who would really give me a run for my money. [For example,] it's difficult not to read Tolstoy and be challenged on many, many levels, particularly in terms of quality of delivery. So I process ideas by reading, by using these [authors] as foils to reflect what I think is interesting from them to set up a bar for me. And then I write and begin to work."

On photography in his work: "I don't know a lot about photography in a mechanical way. All my interest in photography comes from a theory or a philosophical exploration about the nature of photography and how that intersects with painting. I've been using photography to push against the boundaries of representation in my painting and see where truth moves between photography and paintings."

On knowing if a piece is finished: "It's always very hard. It's really a feeling. That's why I have to paint over paintings many, many times. ... Sometimes when something is painted, something is lost and sacrificed, but usually it's because there's a good reason."

On his prerogative: "I don't want to make artwork to impress anybody. I don't want to make artwork to decorate anybody's house. The work has to have a meaning, a utility for me in my life. It has to help me understand something, of how to live life better."





DAVID DURBAK



Artist in Residence

THE DELRAY BEACH HOME OF MARTINEZ CELAYA IS A STORY UNTO ITSELF.

Art isn't the only thing that Enrique Martinez Celaya takes seriously.

His thoughtful and personal approach to design extends to all aspects of his Delray Beach house, which was built in 1939.

Martinez Celaya purchased the property in 2006 and has spent the last three years renovating. (A process that he has down to a near-science, after renovating more than a dozen properties over the years.)

"I don't love new houses," he says. "We love this house. We had to figure out what it needed to become."

In an effort to "restore the dignity" of the original home, Martinez Celaya, overseeing every aspect of the overhaul, implemented a classic style, including marble flooring in the kitchen, coquina blocks for the patio (his favorite space in the home) and coffered ceilings with cypress beams in the living room. The five-bedroom, six-bathroom home even has traditional spaces like a cozy library and a charming music room, with cypress-paneled walls. Even the light fixtures are mini works of art, like the 1930s-style period pieces from Seattle.

"I wanted to be attentive to details but still have it be a lived-in house," Martinez Celaya says. "Nothing too precious."

Martinez Celaya, wife Alexandra and their kids—Gabriella, 8; Sebastian, 6; and



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Adrian, 4—really love this home, so much so that it called them back after moving cross-country. In 2004, Martinez Celaya, already well known in the contemporary art world, moved his family from Los Angeles to Delray Beach, looking for a quieter existence.

But, after Martinez Celaya and the city had several disputes regarding the exterior of his studio (the city didn't like his minimalist aesthetic), the family picked up and moved back to L.A. in 2007. Enrique and Alex realized that living in L.A. with three children wasn't the same life they

Clockwise from top left: the living room features coffered ceilings with cypress beams; a view from the foyer, looking into the music room; the Martinez Celaya family includes (from left) Alexandra, Gabriella, Enrique, Adrian and Sebastian

remembered there. The family returned to Delray in 2008.

"The things that pulled us back were the house and the school," he says. "Which is strange to say, you come 3,500 miles back, retracing your steps, for those two things? But they were big things to us."

From top: "The Imitator" and "Boy," both part of Brest's collection

"There is a moment that you begin to make a stand for something, which goes beyond just simply doing a show."



purchased in the Wynwood Arts District in Miami. Taking the name from his 11-year-old publishing house, this new institute will serve as Martinez Celaya's main studio and headquarters; house his complete collection, archives and library; and continue as the publishing arm of his operation.

Most importantly, it will be a gathering place where people from all walks of life can feel what Martinez Celaya calls "the transformative power of art" through internships and residencies; symposia, lectures and workshops; and the Kappus Prize, which he will award every five years.

"This institute will be involved with the world in a different way, using my work as a context in which to explore other ideas and interact with the local community, from having scholars come and do residencies to free classes for the urban poor," he says. "As my life, my career, has moved on, gone up, whatever, I've become rarefied sort of, and I'm trying to not lose the ground."

He is committed to becoming a part of the surrounding community, including the impoverished Overtown neighborhood nearby. "A lot of the things that happen in the art world in Miami, like everywhere, are kind of ivory towers: just build your place, separate it from the world," he says. "And my idea is: Can we go there and be part of the community? The building is next to the Miami Rescue Mission. So instead of just building a huge

wall, can I figure out a way to work with them?"

In the meantime, Martinez Celaya is thrilled to see his idea come to fruition, and he's celebrating the December opening with a concert by Cowboy Junkies, the alternative-rock band with whom he has become good friends.

Now, with his Delray home finally complete, Whale & Star well underway and a new artistic cycle in the works, it's not surprising that Martinez Celaya feels "like something's aligned," he says.

"There is a moment that I've heard people talk about—and I feel like it is for me now—that you begin to really make a stand for something, which goes beyond just simply doing a show. Somehow, taking that stand—it feels that there is a lot at stake. And it's exciting." 🗨️

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