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News that Inspires

Interview: Enrique Martinez Celaya: Self and Beyond Self
by Richard Whittaker

It was several years ago when I first heard of the artist Enrique Martínez Celaya. John Evans, founder of Diesel Books and a poet as well, suggested I'd find him worth looking up. Two years were to pass before we met. I'd learned that Martínez Celaya was teaching at Pomona College and, one afternoon, on a visit to Claremont, I decided to look for him. I got lucky and arrived at his classroom just as his students were leaving; the timing was perfect.

To my surprise, Martínez Celaya was already familiar with works & conversations. We talked for perhaps thirty minutes. Remembered most clearly was his quiet directness and a quality of dignity and depth. At that time, I had not yet seen his work and knew little about him otherwise. We agreed our conversation should continue.

Not long after I returned to the Bay Area, I received two books in the mail, an impressive hardback in German and English published by the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu, Enrique Martínez Celaya 1992 to 2000, and a small paperback entitled Guide, the artist's fictitious account of a drive up the coast to Santa Cruz with a trusted friend—a framework in which the artist articulates his thinking and the questions which form the background for his work. It made a singular impression on me. I couldn't remember encountering another book that spoke so directly to my own experience and interests. I could hardly contain my excitement, and emailed a response. The conversation that had begun, continued.

Martínez Celaya's credentials are unusual. On the very brink of taking his doctorate in quantum electronics at the University of California at Berkeley, he turned instead toward a career in art.

As a boy of eleven, he'd apprenticed to an academic painter in Puerto Rico and up through his high school years, his interest in art and science developed side by side. Science promised to set the world in order. Art provided a place to wrestle with all that resisted order.

In Guide, he writes, "as a student, I was never interested in finding a style. I was looking for art that revealed something about the structure and meaning
of things."

His fictitious friend asks, "What do you want?".

"To clarify, to find a path," Martínez Celaya responds.

"To you or to the world?" asks his companion.

One could say it's the distinction that divides art and science, and Martínez Celaya values both: "To make an artwork requires measurable things like discipline, ideas and some skill, but also requires other things that come from the inside as well as from mid-air."

About this search, he says, "Biographical facts are neither a guarantee nor a requirement for authenticity. Whatever I have to offer can't be collected in the word, 'Cuban,' or even 'Hispanic' or 'Westerner.'" He adds further, "to find oneself in a collective

set of traits is a delusion, [moreover] some things are not signs to be decoded by a specific culture. Take the heart-wrenching image of a mother with a dead child in a Kollwitz drawing. This suffering will always be true. If art is centered in these types of fundamental experiences then it will always have meaning. If it is about fashion or culture then it's unlikely it will survive. But basic human emotions and desires, and things like trees, animals, landscapes, the sun, the moon, and so on, will still matter and will still define human experience."

The effort to authentically draw upon this fundamental realm is a time-honored possibility for artmaking, and it's a way of thinking about the work of Martínez Celaya. Essential in this work, and an aspect he places in the foreground is the matter of ethics. What can serve as a guide for my actions in life?

This search for clarification is not abstract. One might say, the real is that which must be inhabited.

The place of the artist today is far from clear it seems to me. Martínez Celaya's work could signal a new direction, or perhaps the return to an understanding familiar in other traditions and in earlier eras.

Last year one day in May, as I threaded my way up La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles toward the artist's studio, such thoughts preoccupied me. I found the address next to an inconspicuous door that opened to an ascending stairway. His studio occupied the top floor of a two-story building. Enrique showed me around, showed me a number of books he's published under his imprint, "Whale and Star" and described some publishing ideas. By the time we sat down to talk, I knew there would be a lot of material we wouldn't get to…

Richard Whittaker: I can't help feeling you've come an amazingly long way having left science only a few years ago, but I don't really know your history. I know you were living in Spain as a child.

Enrique Martínez Celaya: Yes, my family emigrated from Cuba to Madrid in 1972, and then to Puerto Rico a few years later. Spain, back then, was not an easy place for foreigners, but the difficulties and the lack of distractions helped strengthen my relationship to drawing, so when we moved to Puerto Rico I became apprentice for a painter and took courses at the academy there.

RW: What academy was that?

EMC: La Liga del Arte de San Juan. Most artists from the island, at one point or another, have been associated with it.

RW: So when you were apprenticing to a painter, how old were you?

EMC: I was around ten or eleven.

RW: Would you talk a little about your apprenticeship?

EMC: At first I did many still-life drawings, pastel portraits and copies of Leonardo's paintings—not very well. As I got older that interest in academic drawing continued, but it took the form of narrative paintings—allegories of what was happening around me. I still have a few of those paintings, and I really like some of them. By my mid-teens expressing my feelings didn't seem good enough anymore, so I devoted more time to physics, which was appealing, partly because it gave me access to an emotionally simpler world. Physics held the promise of an orderly life.

The summer I turned sixteen, I worked for the U.S. Department of Energy and built a laser in my spare time. But I continued to paint and read and was fortunate that at my high school everyone was encouraged to explore all disciplines.

RW: What was this school you're describing now?

EMC: It was a school founded in the nineteen-twenties by the University of Puerto Rico as an extension of the College of Pedagogy. By the time I was there it had evolved into one of the best schools on the island.

RW: What a great stroke of luck!

EMC: Yes. It was. My life would not be the same had it not been for that school, especially its bully and its principal. Back when I enrolled, it was a custom for the upperclassmen to grab new students by the arms and legs, like pigs, and humiliate them by forcing their butts onto a pipe located in the middle of the courtyard. I got the treatment three times, so I modified a kitchen knife to stab the ring leader, a bully named Chelo, next time he tried to bother me.

Luckily, I laid the knife on the desk of my high school principal before I could use it. And that exchange, which could have gone many ways, started a relationship that lasted the whole time I was there.

RW: With such gifts, sometimes one feels the wish to give something back.

EMC: Yes. When I started teaching, one of my motivations was to give back some of what I'd benefited from; to put myself out there, to be honest -- and to be interested.

RW: You're teaching art at Pomona College right now, although you've tendered your resignation, something I'd like to ask you about later; but a basic question arises; you must have thought about this: what is of value—potential value—in the pursuit of art and art making? I don't see our culture as particularly supportive of the fine arts, and yet you're teaching that, and you're deeply involved as an artist yourself.

EMC: Many people want to change the world in a big way, but that's difficult to do in art, or in teaching.

Broad political work is better done in the streets.

In the classroom, or with an artwork, the transformations are one at a time. And if in ten years you touch twenty students, that's great. Maybe some of them will push forward and make something out of it.

RW: Driving out, I was thinking about this thing we call "art." We say "art" and have an idea, vague, but an idea of what that means. Art is something, right? But the concept of it we have today is not old, historically. Four or five hundred years old?

EMC: About that, maybe less.

RW: So whatever we now look at and call "art" was integrated with some societal, institutional form in the past. Then, at some point, the phrase appears, "art for art's sake" which, in a way, defines this separation; that there's something we call "art" that stands alone. Can art really have some kind of meaning without an integration in some other structure?

EMC: I think this separation you are referring to began with the Enlightenment. When

Kant proposed that art must be disinterested, he erected a barrier that we should now tear down. Only art for life's sake makes sense to me. And by that I mean art as ethics—a guide clarifying one's choices and life.

RW: I've never heard it put that way before. Ethics and coming to a clearer understanding of oneself. Can you say more about that connection?

EMC: I don't see any useful distinction between understanding of oneself and understanding of one's duty. I think that much of what we are shows up in how we view what's right and wrong, and how consistently we live by that view.

RW: "What is the Good?" In a way, that's the foundational question, as I hear you. And it's not an abstract question, right? When people speak of "the good" and there's no connection with a real person, it becomes dangerous, it seems to me.

EMC: Being ethical away from the world is easier than when we are involved ourselves. I think some people see the path of abstraction as pure, uncompromised, but it's a purity of avoidance instead of distillation of what's essential. And that goes for art too; artists who insist on removing their work from human struggles take an easier path, an easier path that seems particularly wasteful when we know that many live themselves in turmoil and confusion.

RW: Intuitively, it seems to me that among artists there's some form of the wish—if not always consciously—to find what truly comes from one's self. The need to find my own thought, my own step, my own perception. It's a profoundly difficult thing to do, but when one has that experience does that not, in itself, give meaning to one's life?

EMC: To find one's self in a gesture or in an artwork, even if vaguely, becomes a hint of our possibilities, which invigorates life with the sense of purpose. Of course, these discoveries don't happen everyday, but struggling against one's limitations is often good enough to give meaning to one's life.

RW: There's always our egoism—I don't mean that pejoratively, it's just a fact; but intuitively, one knows that's not the whole story of "who I am." So isn't it confusing to say, "What the artist can discover is him or herself?" Maybe that's not so clear. Would you agree?

EMC: Much confusion comes with the "am" in "who I am." There's much in oneself that has little to do with individuality, per se, but which instead is part of a much larger continuum. To discover one's self is also to discover one's connection to the world. As one recognizes these connections, a prison sometimes becomes apparent; the prison of what we've established or imagined ourselves to be. For instance, wouldn't it be nice if something were to come out of my mouth that I don't expect? Of course. But it's unlikely.

RW: Oh, yes. Now the students at Pomona College are a pretty high-level group; I don't know if this applies to them, but I get the impression that among young people today, deep questions are thought to be kind of uncool. Do you know what I'm getting at?

EMC: Yes. Big questions can be exposing and ungraceful, and many students stay away from risks like that. And if a student is not willing or capable of taking risks, there's not much one can do as a teacher. Nothing that matters can be solved with "put more paint on the canvas" or "let's talk semiotics."

But it’s not just them. I think we're evolving into a society afraid to pose certain questions because we’re too embarrassed about the implications.

RW: I was reading a post on an email listserv. In a philosophical exchange, one fellow wrote, “Courageously—grin, grin, face burning with shame—I’ll admit that I’m interested in meaning.” It’s a curious thing, this cultural milieu where one would feel this sort of apology is necessary.

EMC: The average person still says, “I’m interested in meaning.” It’s only among the intellectual elite that the need for meaning has become a sign of weakness. I think many contemporary intellectuals consider “claims of meaning” to be in inverse proportion to mental refinement.

RW: Sometimes it seems there’s almost an attitude of pride among the most rigorous reductionists—“I’m strong enough and smart enough to take it.”

EMC: In my experience many of these people are enamored with science’s authority and want to make themselves into scientists of the arts and humanities, which leads to nothing but fancy terminology, detachment and those attitudes you mentioned. Of course, there are works, or thoughts, that are too soft because they have no emotional tautness or intelligence. But there are also works and attitudes that are “hard” in a very facile, predictable way. The look of objectivity—the arcane language, the pseudo-science journals, the hard expression in the eyes—only points to what science is not.

RW: Yes. Clearly, one sees this. That’s well put.

EMC: I remember the first time I saw works & conversations. I was curious, but not very hopeful. As I began reading I was surprised by your courage, surprised that somebody intelligent was willing to take risks. I think you’re going exactly where people need to go if they want to change things. But doing that requires a certain willingness to not wear the badge of the “cutting-edge” intellectual.

RW: That makes me think a little about the avant garde. For quite a while the whole concept has come under question. But there’s still this tendency to aim for shock value, an old avant garde strategy. Look at Damian Hirst, for instance, just to take one example, and maybe over-simplifying it a bit. This has all long since become a convention of the academy. I think what you’re saying has some relationship to this.

EMC: The idea of the avant garde has become a fanciful convention of the ruling class it once disrupted. Now, the bourgeois collectors, institutions and galleries are out there looking for the new, the different and the shocking. Hirst is not challenging the bourgeoisie or its values, but rather catering to its expectations of hyper-fluff, amusing theatrics and restaurants, without ever annoying them where it hurts. I think the reactionary work of Thomas Kinkade poses more of a threat to the art elite than the work of Damian Hirst.

RW: Interesting point. I’ve said before that what would be radical and shocking nowadays would be something that’s quiet, and that doesn’t call attention to itself, something that requires your time and attention. That’d be shocking. Do you know what I’m saying?

EMC: Yes, I think you’re right. Anything that demands serious and sustained engagement is revolutionary today. We are in the age of entertainment. I don’t think the last century will be remembered as the age of computing or nuclear power, but the age when

entertainment finally took over our consciousness. Now, most other fields—art, politics, war—are defined through, and in relationship to, their entertainment appeal.

Not even Orwell could have imagined that in our time, control and uniformity would be accomplished without the built-in cameras and microphones, but with family programming and by cultivating interest in all superficial things. And unlike 1984, it's hard to see a way to rebel, because dissent is now part of the rules.

RW: Dissent—I wonder if there are other words which would also be worth thinking about? That's a word that points one in a certain direction just like the word "subversive" does. But to become more present, to find something more real. The system doesn't care, one way or the other, I'd say. Language is problematic.

EMC: I understand what you're saying. It's uncomfortable to speak this way, but it's a battle against loneliness, against the dissolution of the idea—and problematic as it is—of quality.

But I do agree with you that language gets us in trouble. Every time I give a talk there's someone in the crowd who says, "Yes, I know exactly what you're saying." And as they continue to speak, I realize that they misunderstand me.

RW: Well, yes. I struggle with this myself in pretty much the exact way you describe it; this problem with language. In so many areas the available words are essentially dead. One searches for alternatives, mostly without much success. "The middle ground" for instance; it's not as dead as a lot of phrases, but still, it's burdened with dismissive associations…

EMC: … and it's always heard as some sort of compromise between the two sides.

RW: And you know, there should be some pretty good associations with "the middle." The center. Balance. If you're off-center, eccentric, which in the art world, I suppose is thought to be a virtue, it means you'll fly off in some direction. A high level of energy combined with a lack of balance isn't so good.

EMC: "The middle" is difficult. It usually rubs against the edge of language which leads to confusion and misunderstandings.

RW: It comes to me that there is a word that bears a deep relationship with some of the things we're talking about. Being. Now that's a term we don't hear. Heidegger comes up here. It occurs to me that when one is connecting ethics with the pursuit of art, as you described earlier, as a search for clarity - clarity of one's self first - would you not also be willing to say that it's also a search for being, for one's own being?

EMC: Yes, I think you're right; many of Heidegger's ideas are helpful in thinking about the connections between self and world.

RW: And anyone who loves Heidegger's thinking, as I do, is dismayed by the Nazi connections. Do you ever feel hamstrung about that?

EMC: Not really. Our lives, unlike fairy tales, have contradictions that resist resolution, and to insist that these shouldn't exist is to invite falseness. Heidegger's mistakes and weaknesses don't cancel his contributions, even if some people try to argue that his Nazism was already brewing in his philosophy. I hope that the value of my own work is not measured by my human frailties.

Even more challenging than Heidegger, in this regard, is Wittgenstein. He wasn't a

Nazi, but he was both saintly and cruel. And I don't think that the similarities between them are just lives with contradictions; their philosophies have a great deal of connection, even if not always apparent.

RW: Well, Wittgenstein pretty much reduced what we can say to language games, right? No deep questions need apply, I guess. But with Wittgenstein, there's this category of "that of which we cannot speak." But he also said, "that which cannot be said, sometimes can be shown." This is pretty interesting, don't you think?

EMC: Yes. And life, like art, is one way "to show." Wittgenstein wrote about logic, mathematics, language, color, but the concerns that seemed most important to him—ethics, belief, spirit—he lived. And as a moral man facing the contradictions that I spoke about, he struggled with himself and judged his actions by standards that he often failed.

Maybe this goes back to the beginning of our conversation. To talk about ethics, to talk about what is good or bad is interesting, but somewhat useless and academic. To live life with integrity is the thing. And the purpose of art is to support and clarify that endeavor.

RW: I'm reminded that you've tendered your resignation, of a tenured position, too, at one of the best colleges on the West Coast. I wonder if you want to say anything about that?

EMC: It was a hard thing to do. I thought about it for three years before I did it. My approach ultimately failed and that is, partly, why I quit. I couldn't teach in the environment of the institution as it existed and be happy about it.

To give up a tenured position in the fickleness of the art world is a huge decision and, possibly, a stupid one. But I felt I was moving in the wrong direction by staying there.

RW: This is not the first time you've made a big change like that. You were just on the verge of taking your doctorate in physics and you made a dramatic turn there.

EMC: Yes. And that decision was especially difficult, because I knew I was going to hurt my parents. Despite my fellowships, they had made many sacrifices to put me through school and dreamed of me being a great scientist. When I told them "I want to be an artist," I couldn't offer any assurances of success. I definitely felt foolish, careless, leaving the promises of my research at Berkeley. But I still did it.

RW: Maybe it's the only way. It brings me back to your concern with ethics; a life in which one embodies what one represents. Wouldn't you say that we face these questions, and that we don't know the answers? It's necessary to take a step sometimes in order to find out.

EMC: Yes. And also it's an added motivation when the one direction has shown it has no answers. I might not know where the answer is, but I know where it isn't. To realize that there's no answer in something is an important breakthrough. Then, it's just a matter of coming to terms with the personal sacrifices one has to make. There's nothing unclear in that. There may be pain. But that's different.