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Layers of Devotion (and the Scars to Prove It)

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IMAGINE you're an artist finishing work for a big gallery show. You're standing on a ladder trying to reach the top of a wooden sculpture with a chain saw; the next thing you know, you've sliced open your left hand. You've severed the tips of two fingers and nearly cut your thumb to the bone. You've hit an artery. Blood is spurting everywhere. This is the scene that played out in June for the artist Enrique Martínez Celaya, when he was preparing for his first exhibition at the L.A. Louver gallery in Venice, Calif., which opened on Thursday and runs through Jan. 3.

To make matters worse, he had attached the chain-saw blade to a grinder for speed.

He credits his studio manager, Catherine Wallack, with thinking quickly, pressing his paper-towel-wrapped hand in hers, almost tourniquet-style, to staunch the bleeding and letting emergency paramedics know he was an artist. (Pity the studio intern, three days on the job, who had the unglamorous task of finding the fingertips.)

He also credits his reconstructive surgeon, Jerry Haviv, with skillfully repairing his ligaments and tendons. (Mr. Martínez Celaya says he now has 80 percent function in his left hand — which is not his dominant hand — and expects a full recovery within a year.)

As for his own reaction that day, he described it as strangely calm. "I said to Catherine as the paramedics were taking me away: 'Don't throw away the paper towels. I might want to use them in an artwork.' "

It was the reaction of an artist who has often used unorthodox materials like tar, blood, hair and feathers in his paintings. It was also the response of a highly rational, self-disciplined scientist who once worked on the femtosecond laser as a physicist at the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island.

Mr. Martínez Celaya is one of the rare contemporary artists who trained as a physicist. He studied quantum electronics as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, until he found himself more and more often sneaking away to paint, something he had considered a hobby.

"I found that the kinds of questions I wanted to tackle were not the questions of physics," he said. "Art is usually described as a luxury, but I felt the opposite. I just couldn't go the lab anymore and ignore everything going on emotionally with me." The questions he explores in painting (and in his related writings) belong to religion and philosophy: the meaning of life and death, the purpose of consciousness, and what it means to be good or do good. He is as likely to talk about Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, or Herman Melville and Paul Celan, as Joseph Beuys and Lucian Freud.

Although he shows regularly with John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco and Sara Meltzer in New York (and has a retrospective that will open next year at the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg), he recognizes that he is not exactly of the moment. "So many contemporary paintings have this wink to say we're both in on the joke," he said. "Any time I find myself being witty or clever, I paint over it."

For instance, the wooden sculpture that cost him so much blood — carved from a single, 4,000-pound log of Paulownia tomentosa, also known as the Empress tree — has the gravitas of a medieval Pietà. Only there is no body of Jesus, just a stiff girl sitting alone on a big rock in a penitent pose.

“The robe that she wears is too big for her,” he said. “I wanted her to have this awkward, vulnerable feeling.”

The other works in his Santa Monica studio that day, another sculpture and a dozen good-size paintings now at L.A. Louver, are also lessons in isolation ? sparse landscapes and astringent snowscapes, boyish figures that seem lost against the wide horizon, and animals holding their own, sometimes with no humans in sight.

The idea of exile and, more broadly, the existential condition of being separated from home haunts Mr. Martínez Celaya‘s work. Born in Cuba, he emigrated with his family to Madrid in childhood and to Puerto Rico as a teenager before moving to the United States for college.

Even today at 44, with a wife and three young children, he remains mobile. He has been shuttling for the past five years between Los Angeles and Delray Beach, Fla., a town, he said, that he and his wife picked out on a map. (The current plan is to live in Delray Beach year-round, and he has just sold his Santa Monica studio.) An exhibition of his work last year at the Miami Art Museum was aptly named “Nomad.”

“Someone asked me a while back why I paint all of these images of coldness and snow,” he said. “I think that’s the temperature I feel inside. Isolation, solitude and loneliness, I’m always feeling the condition of things — or what you could call the illusion of things — being separate.”

He walked over to a painting that shows a thin sliver of a naked boy trapped inside a tall block of ice, an image he worked on for more than two years. Part of what took so long, he said, was the inherent melodrama of the image, more surreal than most of his scenes.

“It seemed like a remarkably stupid painting to me,” he said. “I even painted pine cones trying to get him out of the ice. I created cracks in the ice, but I couldn‘t get him out.”

For all of the paintings in his studio that day, he relied on the same basic technique. He mixed wax into oil paint (about a 1-to-3 ratio), building up one thin layer after another to achieve a matte finish and translucency of color. (“Shiny paint makes me feel like I can’t breathe,” he said.) Some paintings have as many as 20 layers.

In the process he often painted over shapes or even human figures so that the finished canvas could contain less by way of content than it once did. One muddy, mountainous painting originally showed a boy sitting off to one corner holding the head of a deer. Now both the boy and head are gone.

In another canvas a boy stands in a deep field of dandelions, his face popping out like an overgrown flower. But the more you look, the less the image yields. There is no expressive or virtuosic brush stroke, and little realistic detail, to flesh out the figure or reveal the boy’s age or size. Mr. Martínez Celaya said it was intentional. “There’s not enough there to hold you emotionally. You begin to sink into a black hole.”

“It’s strange to love painting and be so much anti-painting,” he added. “I’m not interested in luscious, sexy, virtuosic painting, but the destruction of the image, undermining the certainty of the image.”

Near that work hung a darker painting of a horse in front of a forest, tethered to something out of sight. Here too there are signs of a painter making himself less painterly, as well as an empathy for animals. “It‘s clunky, like I like,” he said. “It was hard to paint a horse as aggressively as I wanted. It wanted to be treated better than that.”

This painting originally featured a white deer, but he ended up instead making a bronze sculpture of a deer, which stood near the large western stretch of windows in his studio. From a distance it looked as though the deer was pulling a sled, in a possible reindeer reference.

Only this is no garden ornament. The sled turns out to be a small bronze model of a Rocky Mountain-style landscape, complete with peaks and lakes. And the deer has moments of realism, not to mention testicles.

Still, the creature, now installed in the roof garden at L.A. Louver, remains elusive in many ways. Its bronze surface is highly reflective (waxed, not patinated), and the artist imagines that it will shimmer like a mirage for visitors.

“It’s a little like a magic trick,” he said, “trying to make something as solid as metal vanish a bit.”

Then there are the seams on the deer‘s legs and torso, where the welding process has etched faint rainbows into the metal. Mr. Martínez Celaya decided not to smooth these seams so he could “expose the sculpture’s constructed nature.”And now, after his accident, the ridges have new meaning for him.

He glanced down at the deer’s legs, then held up his left hand.

“The seams on the deer look like scars to me,” he said. “I feel even more of a connection to him now.”