

"BIRD", 1996. Enrique Martinez Celaya
Spotlight Presentation by Maureen Boren, April 2018



Artist's Background:

Born in Palos, Cuba in 1964. After the Cuban Revolution Celaya's family moved to Madrid, Spain, and then in 1975 to Puerto Rico. He moved to upstate New York in 1982.

Education:

Celaya became an artist's apprentice to Bart Mayol in Puerto Rico at the age of 11.

Cornell University, studied applied physics and electrical engineering, graduating Magna Cum Laude with a B.S. in 1986.

University of California, Berkeley, studied quantum electronics and gained a B.S. in 1989.(Regent Fellow)
He conducted research at Brookhaven National Laboratory and patented four laser inventions.

University of California, Santa Barbara, earned a M.F.A. in 1994 with highest honors.

Studied at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture

Academic Appointments:

Tenured faculty position at Pomona College 1994

Founded Whale and Star- publishing House focusing on art, literature and philosophy, 1998

Professor at Claremont Graduate University 1998 -2003

Current faculty member of Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Colorado.

Fellow of the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities

Frequent lecturer at various universities-exhibitions in America, Spain, England, Ireland, Russia, Australia, Germany, Puerto Rico, Mexico.

Scope of work:

Enrique Celaya works in paint, sculpture, poetry, photography, and prose. His art encompasses sculptures of giant proportions as well as life sized works. His paintings span small intimate pieces as well as very large wall- covering works. From his studio in Los Angeles, Enrique sponsors programs for children, provided scholarships for artists, and assisted schools in curricular development. He is often the catalyst for interdisciplinary discussions and publications (Whale & Star)on poetry, art practice and critical theory./

Influences:

Enrique Martinez Celaya's study of existential philosophy (Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer) has been cited as a major influence in his orientation to life and art. He responds to other philosophers of humanity and nature as well-Robert Frost, Joseph Brodsky, Mandelstam, Rilke, and Maeterlinck. Celaya relates that a show at the Phillips Collection drew him to the paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder in several ways .(6.Little) Ryder and Celaya used tar in place of black paint and to convey a mystical quality with religious underpinnings to the work. The softness of Ryder's style can be seen in a number of Celaya's representational images as well. Celaya's artistic work examines the complexities of individual experience especially in relation to nature and time. In his own words he cites his central preoccupation as 'What is life and how do I make sense of it?'(5.wikipedia) Often his works pair an unknown anxiety- ridden situation with a hopeful image, often from nature. An overview of his body of work shows a series of "cycles"or"environments" that define the content of the pieces. Many times these projects result in examinations of memory, attachment, love, death, longing, and familiarity.

Art Movement:

Enrique Martinez Celaya's work has been described as "Contemporary Realism and Symbolic Representational.

Artist's Impact on the art world:

Celaya has been grouped with artists who portray single isolated images of people and images of nature, such as Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, and Nathan Oliveira. His impact goes beyond the actual art work he produces. He is an acknowledged teacher, lecturer, writer, founder of a studio which offers opportunities for discourse and artist scholarships. He has shown in over 49 exhibits from 1990 to the present and is included in collections of many American museums as well as European institutions.

Impressions and Analysis:

Celaya's work defies simple interpretation. He reports that he takes his objects, images and processes from everything around him, from art and from life. His subjects range from simplified landscapes and embellished portraits to single figures both painted and sculpted- birds, hands and heads.

Philosophically, he speaks of the need to close the vacuum between our present society of technology and globalization with what it means to be human.

"It seems more sad than ironic that in the process of mastering our destiny through technology and global reach, we have lost our respect for nature and our sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves.."(1.Celaya p.12)

A work such as "Bird", presents simplicity. For Celaya, "simple is not a reduction to absurdity.....but where the mystery emerges from a few means and without bombastic décor."(1.Celaya p. 19)

Celaya's surfaces are complex products of layered painting often coupled with fabric, erasures and at some times, tar. He indicates that the surfaces are a nod to the tension between abstraction and the natural world. He says he likes to "churn things up a little".

"It's easy to drip and it's easy to scribble something out, but it's really hard to do it in a way that means something."(1. Celaya,p.40)

His birds appear over and over, sometimes as a singular image, other times in multiples surrounding a portrait or larger image. He particularly likes the hummingbird. He speaks of it as being a manifestation of the spirit – so fragile, yet so full of life.

"Bird" expresses all of Celaya's processes and themes. It presents a single focal object that invites you to contemplate and then enjoy the moment. The painting is free of any distracting colors and additional elements, yet upon closer inspection it poses many questions as you view the texturing of the background, the delicate unfinished penciling of a branch, a mysterious arrow to the right of the delicately painted bird and the penciled word "BIRD" at the bottom. The edges are boundless and allows the bird freedom. Each corner is embellished with overpainted tassels reminiscent of classic décor. It's as though elevating the importance of the bird or perhaps reminiscing about past beauty.

Compare & Contrast:

In the same gallery, the work by Axel Geis, "Hand", 2009, presents a seemingly unfinished image of a hand and part of an arm. The painting is done in a painterly style and is without context. Its surrounding background is heavily worked and textured. The singularity of the hand forces the viewer to focus only on that central image. Because of its isolation, "Hand" evokes a sense of mystery similar to "Bird". Geis' philosophical base is different from Celaya's, however, to the viewer the sense of mystery pulls them both together.

Touring Possibilities:

In order to help visitors make a connection with this work, it may not be necessary to delve deeply into existential philosophy. Celaya's work evolves away from narrow definition with each series he produces. This piece requires time and attention and therefore is easily dismissed due to its simplicity.

Steps toward helping visitors unlock its significance might be the following:

- Observe "Bird" from a distance first. What is your impression?
- Move very close and direct the viewers to observe all parts of the piece – background, bird, penciling, corners.
- Ask if they can tell where the bird is or what time of day it is? (actually points out the irrelevance of these details)
- Ask what they think is the most important thing about the painting?
- What has the artist done to the corners? (embellished with something classical and ornate)
- What questions does the painting pose?
- Ask if their impression changed upon closer observation?

For children, you may use many of the same questions to illicit close looking but you can end by asking what they think the artist might add if he were going to "finish" the painting? More birds, more branches, a whole tree? How would that change the way you look and think about this bird?

Bibliography/Sources:

Books:

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Websites:

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3. *Axel Geis.*(n.d.) retrieved from Biography <https://www.widewalls.ch/artist/axel-geis/>
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5. *Enrique Martinez Celaya.* Wikipedia (edited March 15, 2018).Retrieved from https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EnriqueMartinez_Celaya.
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