Fall 2010

Enrique Martínez Celaya: Collected Writings and Interviews, 1990–2010

Enrique Martínez Celaya

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Enrique Martínez Celaya
Collected Writings and Interviews, 1990–2010

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON
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Buy the Book
Foreword

The University of Nebraska's relationship with Enrique Martínez Celaya began through the university's outstanding Sheldon Museum of Art, which acquired several of Enrique's works. Former Sheldon curator and now University of Nebraska at Omaha professor Dan Siedell has continued to collaborate with Enrique. The University of Nebraska Press, in a wise decision made years ago, agreed to distribute the publications of Enrique's press, Whale & Star, which include beautiful productions of his own writings and catalogs, as well as the work of some of the writers he most admires.

I first met Enrique five years ago in connection with the installation at the Sheldon of his work *Coming Home*. I encountered an engaging, articulate, and disarmingly polite man with an unusual academic background—in physics—and an intriguing personal history. He was comfortable with conversation on any topic, especially—and, it seemed at the time, diplomatically—issues involving higher education and the University of Nebraska. We continued our conversation on art, ideas, and the modern university in many locations, including at his studios in Los Angeles and Florida and on the campuses of the University of Nebraska.

I would be happy to take credit for the decision to deepen the university's relationship with Enrique by naming him to a Visiting Presidential Professorship, but I have come to realize that the idea was at least as much his as mine. He saw special qualities at the university that he found promising, and the plan for his successful visiting professorship, with its many valuable dimensions, almost entirely his. The essential role and responsibility of universities in the exploration of ideas has informed Enrique's interest in and approach to his relationship with the University of Nebraska. At each step, he has looked for ways to challenge himself and us to think more deeply about this role we play with our students, our faculty, and the larger community. In a culture that often expects so little of substance from its artists, Enrique is a bracing breath of fresh air.

*James B. Milliken*, President of University of Nebraska
Whether one agrees with him or not—and I most often do—his is exactly the kind of challenge to comfortable and easy thinking that universities should foster.

Enrique’s visits to the university have included public lectures on art and ideas; conversations with students and faculty, ranging from undergraduate class visits and graduate student critiques to relatively unstructured discussions with philosophy and literature faculty; employing students as interns in his studios in Los Angeles and Florida; and now, joining with the university to sponsor our students at Anderson Ranch in Aspen. My expectations for the professorship were greatly exceeded because of the thoughtfulness and commitment Enrique brings to anything he does. I was a fortunate and grateful junior partner in the development of the plan and its execution.

This book began with a simple idea to publish his six major public lectures, one delivered each semester of his three-year appointment, which I thought made important contributions to the discussion of art and ideas and were of great benefit for students, faculty, and members of the community who attended. Enrique’s response was, of course, an improvement, and the resulting book, with its additional writings and images, is extraordinary. The University of Nebraska Press was enthusiastic about the work and offered to publish it. I hope it will reach the audience it deserves—within the university and the state of Nebraska, where people will always be reminded of the university’s exceptional relationship with Enrique Martínez Celaya—but with a much broader audience as well. On a personal level, it will always remind me of a rewarding professional relationship and an important friendship with a remarkable man.
Introduction  The Subjective Thinker

The subjective thinker . . . has . . . esthetic passion and ethical passion, whereby concretion is gained. All existence-issues are passionate, because existence, if one becomes conscious of it, involves passion. To think about them so as to leave out passion is not to think about them at all . . . Yet the subjective thinker is not a poet even if he is also a poet, not an ethicist even if he is also an ethicist, but is also a dialectician and is himself essentially existing, whereas the poet's existence is inessential to the poem, and likewise the ethicist's in relation to the teaching, and the dialectician's in relation to the thought. The subjective thinker is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist. To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is esthetic enough for his life to have esthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to master it.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments

The Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is never far from Enrique Martínez Celaya's mind; he is a continual presence in his art and in his writings. Martínez Celaya always reminds me of Mark Rothko, another painter who had Kierkegaard in his veins. Rothko once wrote:

Kierkegaard has that passion for the “I,” for that “I” experience, like Abraham in his Fear and Trembling . . . It is the “I” that I myself experience every day.1

According to his biographer, J. E. B. Breslin, Rothko kept a copy of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling next to his bed.

The biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is, of course, the existential parable par excellence. Moralists may be scandalized by the “case” of Abraham who placed himself outside universal law, answering only to God, but Kierkegaard recognized in the story the “paradox of faith,” “that the
According to Kierkegaard, Abraham is the Special Individual who finds himself mired in a *tragic collision* that ends in a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” The Special Individual must be *unconditionally* willing to sacrifice. The sacrifice is situated by Kierkegaard in the in-between of nothingness and anxiety, between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the “disquieting supervision of responsibility.”

The story of Abraham and Isaac seems to haunt Martínez Celaya’s paintings and sculptures, many of which depict only that Special Individual, represented either by the single figure of a man or a boy. Martínez Celaya is a subjective artist, for example, non-abstract, figurative, just as he is a subjective thinker in the definition of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s text on the “subjective thinker” was directed at Hegel, the abstract thinker, and Hegel’s pretension of a “pure logic.” “Pure thinking is a phantom,” wrote Kierkegaard, and so is pure art. All art, figurative or nonfigurative, is subjective, rooted in the concrete, and entangled in the dialectics of the aesthetic and the ethical. As Wittgenstein famously proclaimed: “Ethics and aesthetics are one.”

Thinking about Martínez Celaya, I am also reminded of the Greek historian and biographer Plutarch writing on the political responsibility of the philosopher. Plutarch argued, much in the spirit of Socrates, that philosophy should not stand by idly like the statues of a sculptor but, rather, inspire and exert influence over those in power:

> The teaching of philosophy is not, if I may use the words of Pindar, “a sculptor to carve statues doomed to stand idly on their pedestals and no more”; no . . . it inspires men with impulses which urge to action, with judgments that lead them towards what is useful, with preferences for things that are honorable, with wisdom and greatness of mind joined to gentleness and conservatism and because they possess these qualities, men of public spirit [*hoi politikoi*] are more eager to converse with the prominent and powerful.

To be an idle thinker is as inhuman as to be an idle artist. To be human is to exist and to exist is to live and work in ethos—to be *hoi politikoi*. Ethos describes how human beings exist in the world as a community.

According to the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, philosophy is a discipline that involves creating new concepts. Science, art, and philosophy are all equally creative. According to Deleuze and Guattari, all true concepts require conceptual personalities (*personages conceptuels*): every philosophical idea is linked to its originator in much the same way...
as a work of art is grounded in the personality (or style) of the artist, and thus all artists can be considered conceptual personalities.8

Artists, like philosophers, poets, and scientists, seek to understand life at its deepest level. Focusing on the areas of knowledge, duty, and destiny, Immanuel Kant defined the objective of philosophy as providing answers to three fundamental questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for? These questions, which address knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics, are at the core of all religious, philosophical, scientific, and artistic pursuits. What unites these various disciplines is the quest for meaning, for the answers needed to create an ethical ground for one's life. Some seek these answers in meditation or prayer, others in political or humanist activities, while still others find happiness in material possessions.

As an artist, Martínez Celaya is a “conceptual personality.” When he theorizes about his artistic practice, he does so by speculating out of a general milieu that includes art, literature, philosophy, and science. With his writings and public talks, as with his art, he makes a case for “the artist's ethical responsibility to the world and art's potential to transform lives,” so the title of his most recent lecture included in this volume, with the very Kierkegaardian title, “The Prophet.” Like Kierkegaard's subjective thinker, Martínez Celaya lives his convictions (and his art) “in actuality.” Since he founded a small publishing press in 1998, his studio in Delray Beach has become a creative sanctuary as well as a laboratory (before studying painting and sculpture, Martínez Celaya had pursued a PhD in quantum electronics), “a contemplative research and educational environment concerned with the role art has in life, spirit, and community”:

It compresses two very different models of such work, the scientific laboratory and the monastery. With its concepts of rigorous discipline, intense intellectual scrutiny, and service to the discovery of truth, the scientific laboratory offers a context that is precise and clear. The monastery offers a model that introduces an ethical dimension to work, making it inseparable from the worker and his or her own development as a human being . . . The studio also educates and serves the urban poor of South Florida, especially the children.10

Summoning Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, the Persian poet Allama Iqbal, and, of course, Kierkegaard in support, Martínez Celaya makes a case for artists to be prophets again, citing as examples Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. A prophet, like the subjective thinker, is in the world—he exists: “The prophet, unlike the mystic, returns to the world,” Martínez Celaya says.11 For Kierkegaard, “To exist is the highest interest for an existing person . . . whereas pure thinking, in mystical suspension
and with no relation to an existing person, explains everything within itself but not itself."12

As an aspiring prophet, Martínez Celaya is of this world, yet he does not deny, as did modernism, that in art "the Absolute is present."13 His work is an example of the paradigm shift from modernism to late- and postmodernity, which has brought with it a reevaluation and reconstitution of the concept of the spiritual and transcendence. Martínez Celaya’s figure of the Single Individual depicted in so many of his canvases is meant as a reminder of our ethical imperative. Neither assertive nor submissive, he is rather a contemplative and modest proposition.

Unlike the major monotheistic religions that suppose the answer and construct an ethical system upon a soteriological canon, philosophers, scientists, and artists are engaged in "running against the boundaries"14 of knowledge in an effort to come closer to the ultimate truth, which, by definition, is forever unattainable. As Wittgenstein reminded us, neither salvation nor immortality can solve the ultimate riddle of human existence:

Is the riddle solved by the fact that I survive for ever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one? The solution of the riddle of life in place and time lies outside space and time.15

Schelling, the philosopher of the Absolute, once wrote:

Each of us is compelled by nature to seek an absolute, even those still wrapped up in finite things, but if we want to fix one’s thoughts on it, it eludes us. It hovers around us eternally, but . . . it is only there if one does not have it; as soon as one possesses it, it vanishes. It appears before the soul only at the moment when subjective activity joins the objective in unexpected harmony, which because it is unexpected has an advantage over free, desireless rational cognition to manifest itself as happiness, as illumination, or as revelation. But as soon as this harmony is brought about, reasoning sets in, and the apparition takes flight.16

Willem de Kooning famously remarked that “content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It’s very tiny—very tiny, content.”17

As the sublime, the Absolute (that which will always remain out of bounds, but nonetheless continuously beckons to be represented and lies at the core of the Human Condition) has haunted artists ever since the advent of the aesthetics of the sublime in the eighteenth century (with the publications of Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful and Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment). Some celebrate it as a fait accompli (Barnett Newman, foremost, comes to mind), and others strive to catch hold of it, if only for an instant (Martínez Celaya belongs in this group, together with Rothko,
Anselm Kiefer, Cy Twombly, etc.). As communication without communication, it has pushed art toward an *écriture blanche* (Sartre), colorless writing, or “zero degree” of painting (Barthes)—toward a *style of absence* (e.g., Piero Manzoni’s *achrome*, Robert Ryman’s white canvases, or Yves Klein’s *Le vide*).

According to the postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard, the challenge at the core of all artistic endeavors is “to make visible that there is something that cannot be seen”—the unrepresentable or inexpressible. But as the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas has taught us, transcendence is not a modality of essence—not a question of being or not-being—but rather an ethical imperative; it is not a “safe room” of solipsistic inwardness, but a site of responsibility for others. In the transcendental beyond, we are ordered toward the responsibility for the other. This responsibility, which Levinas calls the “otherwise than being,” substitutes subjectivity (the self of the artist) for another: it becomes the other in the same.

Martínez Celaya is a serious thinker, and a passionate one, as well as a prolific writer. He is, by today’s standards, an artist and thinker of the rarest kind. He possesses one of the most priceless gifts of all, an encyclopedic curiosity and a considerable knowledge about the world—something that was more common among philosophers and some artists before the end of the nineteenth century, before knowledge broke apart into countless specializations. During the Renaissance, painters and sculptors were often equally learned in poetry, architecture, and science. In the same spirit Martínez Celaya has pursued the Kantian questions of the human condition through diverse knowledge systems as well as through literature, poetry, and art. His gift is the *form* of his communication, which defines his *style*. Wittgenstein’s famous dictum that “ethics and aesthetics are one” has to be read in the context of the philosopher’s understanding of philosophy as a *living practice*. Ethics includes an aesthetical component, and vice versa. For Wittgenstein—as for Nietzsche before him—art and morality are closely tied. All aesthetic activity is also ethical, just as philosophy is a practice of life, a *Lebensphilosophie*. It is through style that ethical and aesthetic practices become authentic:

The subjective thinker’s *form*, the form of his communication, is his *style*. His form must be just as manifold as are the two opposites that he holds together . . . To the same degree as the subjective thinker is concrete, to the same degree his form must also be concretely dialectical. But just as he himself is not a poet, not an ethicist, not a dialectician, so also his form is none of theirs directly. His form must first and last be related to existence, and in this regard he must have at his disposal the
poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, the religious. Compared with that of a poet, his form will be abbreviated; compared with that of an abstract dialectician, his form will be broad.20

NOTES

Notes

1990

November 1–5 (Pescadero, CA). Excerpts from *Pigeon Point*. Basic control can be learned by doing your work, whatever it is, and by being humble while working on your own self-assurance. Seek the honor of the house chores. It puts you at peace with yourself by forcing you to spend time with yourself doing something that definitely benefits you and others. Seek the usefulness of your life, even if it is of the simplest kind. Same at work, by doing what needs to be done you get rid of possible ways to cut yourself down or stress yourself without reason.

Passion is strength. Human effort. Passion is not rage or violence; it is control. Avoid consuming feelings that swallow passion and erode your fundamental belief in yourself. Trust passion. Nurture your ability to be

*In early November, EMC went to Pigeon Point, a lighthouse fifty miles south of San Francisco, to decide whether or not to continue the PhD program in quantum electronics at the University of California at Berkeley. For five days he wandered the beach and wrote. Upon his return to Berkeley, convinced he should be an artist, he abandoned the PhD program.*
passionate and, for as long as it lasts, go all out. Go beyond what you think possible. Passion is belief in something. Be passionate about your belief in man and his ability to transcend body limitations.

Is this true for all men? I do not know if for all men. I have sampled but a small section of the world. Yet, only few people strike me as passionate. But I suspect it is like colors. There are many but you prefer only some. I am sure that value is relative to whoever is doing the valuing.

Let us think about painting. I am concerned about the making of art but am I being simplistic by not being mesmerized by the process? I do not think it is the process what means the most but what is “being said.” It is also true that what is being said is also in the process, but by aiming painting at some middle ground something like truth emerges.

How do I go about doing this? Well, I try to obey my instincts, my impulses, and the accidents. This is how far I will go toward process.

How about image? I need image right now. I am basically a narrator. I need to make stories (is this true?).

What I do not want to do:

1. Paintings where all the strength is in the story.
2. Make paintings that only I can understand.