

## BRUSH FIRE

Enrique Martínez Celaya promises to make a statement with his new show at the Baldwin Gallery. By Gaspar González



Enrique Martínez Celaya is being consumed by flames. Or so it would appear. The artist, still youthfully handsome at 45, is on his knees in his studio, adding a touch of red paint to a large-scale canvas depicting a field of poppies enveloped by fire. He works meticulously and yet freely.

The imagery of the work fits the space, where Martínez Celaya—dressed in black T-shirt, shorts, and work boots—keeps the thermostat high. The fire is also symbolic of his avowed goal for his art in general. “The only way to keep painting alive is to destroy it,” he explains between brushstrokes, “so that the only thing remaining is the heart of it.”

Martínez Celaya will unveil his new series of “anti-painting” paintings at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen on December 26. It will be his latest visit to a community that, over the past decade, has become a favored destination. “I did my first show at the Baldwin in 1997, alongside [fellow Baldwin artist] Donald Sultan,” he remembers. “At the time, it put my work in a different context, it was very successful, and it began my relationship with Aspen.”

Martínez Celaya has led a peripatetic existence. Born in Cuba, he grew up in Spain and Puerto Rico, attended schools in New York and California, and today is based in Florida, splitting his time between Delray Beach—where he lives with his wife, Alex, and their three children—and a new studio an hour away in Miami. The constant moving has made him philosophical. “Like all the world is mine and also like none of it is mine,” he says.



Still, Aspen holds a unique appeal. “There’s pressure in the art world to only exhibit in very large cities,” he notes, “but working with the Baldwin has been great for me personally, and for my career. Local patrons like Melva Bucksbaum, Vicki and Kent Logan, Susan and Larry Marx, Peggy and Marne Obernauer, and June and Paul Schorr. Over time, Martínez Celaya has also become involved with the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, where he is both a member of the board and an annual guest lecturer.

He’d love to have a place to work in town. For now, though, he’s content to bring to Aspen what may be his most ambitious project to date. “It’s the first body of work I’m making that is conscious of this idea of ‘the artist as prophet,’” he says, adding that he is not using the term in its religious sense, but to refer to someone whose character—whose *clarity of purpose*—transcends the mean imperatives of a particular historical moment.

He cites Tolstoy and Kierkegaard as influences which comes as no surprise to his followers. “Enrique is one of the most brilliant artists I’ve ever met in my life,” says Carol Damian, director of the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum in Miami. “He imbues everything he does with serious intellectual content. This is not ‘art for art’s sake.’ This is art that forces the viewer to think.

The work exhibited in Aspen marks the beginning of what Martínez Celaya terms “a new cycle,” something he initiates every two to three years. “This new group of works seems to deepen my interest in the relationship between the landscape and its human interpretation,” he says, contemplating its ultimate meaning in a way that suggests that, for him, art is less about making pronouncements than asking the right questions.

Emblematic of this approach, Martínez Celaya is known for often painting over his images in pursuit of the work’s final form. In this collection, there is one

painting in particular that he refers to as “my battleground,” the place where he is most actively working out the themes that will eventually inform the series as a whole. It is of a girl in a red dress, walking with a giant seahorse through a pile of detritus. It is odd scene from the artist, whose work is typically austere. He is not troubled by the stylistic departure. “The ridiculous may make an appearance in this body of work,” Martínez Celaya acknowledges. “More than usual.”

The show at the Baldwin will surely defy the expectations of some observers, challenging notions not only of what painting can be, but what it can do. “I feel a certain amount of urgency to push aside the conventions of the art world,” says Martínez Celaya. He is confident that Aspen will respond positively; it’s a place, he says, where “people are sophisticated enough not to be surprised by anything.”

