

ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA: CONCEPTS AND STUDIES FOR THE PEARL

JAMES KELLY CONTEMPORARY
550 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

The work is fundamentally impenetrable to me. Why shouldn't it be to someone else?

—Enrique Martínez Celaya

THE IMMEDIACY OF ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA'S

exhibition of preparatory drawings and maquettes at James Kelly Contemporary is stunning—markedly so when compared to the finished product, the installation *The Pearl*, showing concurrently at SITE Santa Fe. In fact, the exhibition at Kelly's gallery is meant to serve as a studio visit, sans artist, complete with drawings, sketchbooks, and maquettes; books, articles, and an intelligent staff are also there for your edification. If you didn't quite get *The Pearl*, a visit to James Kelly could turn your experience around. From it, I came to believe that Martínez Celaya's work, albeit figurative, is not nearly as narrative as it would seem on first glance: It is the stuff of memory articulated in the strangely familiar language of the unconscious. His vocabulary consists of, but is not limited to, an achinglly lonesome little boy; birds, dogs, and other animals; water and the vehicles that traverse it; and the devices—both mechanical and metaphoric—that make a place a home.

Martínez Celaya's work is largely about what it cannot say. It is post-structuralist and poetic, built upon a foundation of science and literature. The result is an odd mixture of the ineffable and the mundane, comprehensible during that brief moment of awakening from a dream in which the impossible has just matter-of-factly occurred. Under the reign of full consciousness,

deep understanding recedes. As slippery as nirvana during a meditation session, once we think we've got it, realization steals away. In an essay about the artist, Daniel A. Siedell proposes that Martínez Celaya's works on paper "act as the 'still, small voice' compared to the thunder and lightning of his paintings and sculpture." Upon entering the Railyard gallery, it is readily apparent that the show here is more delicate, vulnerable, and fragile than what is on display across the street at SITE.

The Dove, a smallish drawing of a boy crying colored tears, carries its own solemn presence in a way that the painting of the boy and the bronze sculpture across the street don't. On the other hand, while the large tarred-and-feathered boat piece at SITE is strikingly evocative, its counterpart, *Untitled (Boat and Lighthouse)*, a charcoal drawing at James Kelly, is rather more academic. Still, it is an absolutely luscious drawing (but then I've always loved works on paper for their tactility and directness) and I suspect that, in terms of longevity, the drawing will hold its own via the very hesitancy with which it is rendered. Martínez Celaya makes ghosts, not objects, and this drawing is effectively haunted. In his own writings about his work, the artist has hinted that his media is the *mater* of grief itself. A house-shaped maquette in the gallery is labeled *The Grief Box*; across the street, the plywood-

house installation in *The Pearl* conceals anguish under a ceiling of projected stars. Unlike the maquette, with its self-containment, drawings of the house with stars radiating from it are quite exuberant, even childlike, a quality that did not translate to the three-dimensional installation piece at SITE.

Every boy, and every home, must have its dog. For Martínez Celaya, that dog is a German shepherd, the eternal guardian, a heartbreakingly faithful friend. The artist's studies convey the endearing, profound love we experience with our beloved pet. For a lonely boy, that dog can be more lifesaver than companion, keeping savage predators (like love and loss) at bay. In the gallery exhibition, dogness is delivered more directly by the clay *Study for the Treasure Keeper* than by the drawing on the wall next to it. The excellent watercolor-and-ink paper piece *The Gate* presents the dog swimming in water; in or on his head is a small house—his crown, his obsession, his everything. The treasure keeper will gladly lay down his life for the boy, and we, the viewers, are relieved that the abandoned child has such a brave sentinel at his side. At SITE, Martínez Celaya created an elaborate fountain with a bronze sculpture of the boy-hero weeping into a trough that carries his copious tears into the next gallery. It is an arresting piece, but one that either hits or completely misses its audience. If it doesn't score an instant strike with the viewer, that is probably because it comes across as too self-aware, too precious, to be an effective work of art. In his *Studies for the Fountain* at Kelly's gallery, an ink, graphite, and conté crayon work on paper, Martínez Celaya manages in a few exquisite strokes to conflate sculpture, painting, and drawing on the toothy paper. "It's strange," he told critic Jori Finkel of *The Los Angeles Times*, "to love painting and to be so much anti-painting." *Studies for the Fountain* is breathtakingly beautiful in its delivery, far beyond the object it was meant to be a prep drawing for.

As to the above quote by the artist: Impenetrability is one thing. Don't allow it to fool you into thinking Martínez Celaya doesn't work on a seductively intimate level. *Concepts and Studies* is must-see viewing for any fans—and the not-so-convinced—of his work, and is indispensable to eradicating much of the preciousness of *The Pearl* at SITE Santa Fe, replacing it with the personal and the profound.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Untitled (Boat and Lighthouse)*, watercolor and charcoal on paper, 38½" x 61", 2013