

# SITE Santa Fe evolves to display ‘The Pearl’

Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer

Pearls gleam with an incandescent mystery, their lustrous surface disguising the irritant within.

Like memory, a pearl retrieves and hollows what was, burnishing it with its lustre.

Enrique Martínez Celaya’s “The Pearl” spans eight rooms and 15,000 square feet at SITE Santa Fe. Opening Friday, it’s filled with familiar relics like birds, dogs and pieces of furniture. A surface glance might distill the installation into the rooms of a home. But the artist says it was created with the dust of the rooms of long ago, ladled with the ache of loss.

Celaya’s immersive environment gathers painting, sculpture, video, photography, waterworks and sound, turning the SITE building into a work of art. The artist uses the idea of home as a springboard imbued with equal parts philosophical, emotional and psychological resonance. The objects become markers of time, moving from despair to fantasy and finally, redemption. Great loss surrenders to the image of a survivor navigating an enchanted and dangerous arc.

## **If you go**

**WHAT:** “The Pearl”

**WHEN:** 5-7 p.m. Friday. Through Oct. 13.

**WHERE:** SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta

**COST:** \$10/adults; \$5/students, teachers and seniors. Members free; free admission on Fridays.

**CONTACT:** 989-1199, ext. 22 or sitesantafe.org

SITE Phillips director and chief curator Irene Hofmann, who commissioned the work, has been following the artist’s career for 10 years. The pair met when she installed a traveling exhibit by Celaya at the Orange County Museum of Art.

Celaya inspected the SITE space about a year ago. Unlike a museum, SITE is flexible enough to allow artists to create their own space by digging holes, breaking up concrete, moving walls and adding water and living plants, Hofmann said. Celaya comes to Santa Fe after completing a commission at St. Petersburg’s Hermitage Museum in Russia.

“He created more than an exhibition,” Hofmann said. “He created an environment.

“Coming to this exhibition will have a transporting effect from the reality of the world outside to one of memory and fantasy and surprise,” she continued. “You will see a total environment that triggers memories. For him, they’re linked at different moments to his own childhood. Images of a house, child-sized furniture, of dogs and magical, idyllic landscapes all stem from his own memories and have a way of being universal.”

Both epic and miniscule, joyous and shameful, “The Pearl” lurked within the artist “like a dull ache” for years before he lifted its layered veil. For Celaya, home is layers of memory unfolding in concentric circles.

Visitors will enter this darkened maze of rooms by first encountering a film of a German Shepherd devouring its dog food. A closer look reveals the food has been sculpted into the shape of a house. We see home as food, as something needing guardianship, Celaya said.

“Most things in life always have two sides,” he said. “With guardianship comes cloistering and isolation. You cannot be cloistered without isolation.” Water trickles through transparent tubing flowing from a partially opened window. It threads throughout the exhibition, its shadows rippling across the walls like waves, leading visitors to its final repository.

“You follow the hose and the cycle of water,” Celaya said.

A more tranquil-looking sculpture of another German Shepherd guards a side table in the next space.

“Now it has a childish quality to it,” he added.

A radio tops a mantel in this haunted living room. It plays Celaya’s own composition surrounded by 12 ceramic songbirds in a palette of magic and loss. A black rowboat sculpted from tar and feathers reigns over a rectangular gallery, encasing a downed lighthouse.

"In medieval times, and even during the Civil Rights movement, people were tarred and feathered," Celaya said. "It was a way to humiliate them."

"This vessel has a skin of shame and humiliation," he continued. "The lighthouse has been brought into the vessel; it can't guide" anymore.

"Perhaps you have arrived too late," he added. "There's a sense of finding yourself lost in that storm."

A charred table and chairs stand before black-and-white footage of rolling ocean waves. An elephant constructed of cheap costume jewelry stands as the table's centerpiece.

The scene poses a direct link to the artist's past, Celaya acknowledged. The furniture is made from cauarina wood, a tree common in Cuba, where he was born.

"It echoes the magic and stories and delusion of childhood," he said. "We were very poor. We used to sit at night like this and make jewelry." A series of five pine needle beds stairsteps the next space. The bronze figure of a boy weeps over them, his tears flowing into his hands. They burrow a rivulet flowing down from the layers of beds and into a channel connected to the transparent tubing.

"This is a hose of tears," Celaya said. "Your memories have become your possibility for redemption."

Hofmann sees echoes of the artist's previous work in "The Pearl."

It has "all these qualities of being very evocative of memory, of another era," she said. "He's often nodding to sources of inspiration in grand painters of the past. It's a very purposeful, naive kind of painting he employs to suggest the fading of memory. The painting is loose and fades on the edges like memory does."

"The past is irretrievable," Celaya said. "There's no way to go back and correct, and there's the sense of what could have been and wasn't."

"The Pearl" isn't meant to be a specific portrait of the artist's childhood, Celaya insisted.

"It could be (Danish philosopher) Kierkegaard's story; it could be many people's stories. That little boy is still calling you from the past."

Trained as both an artist and physicist at Cornell University and the University of California, Berkeley and Santa Barbara, Celaya has produced solo exhibitions at the Miami Art Museum, the Berliner Philharmonie and the Orange County Museum of Art. His works are included in collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

There will be a concurrent exhibition, "Concepts and Studies for The Pearl," at James Kelly Contemporary, 550 S. Guadalupe St. in the Railyard through Aug. 17, 2014. Call 989-1601.

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## Suggested Reading:

- [SITE Santa Fe revamps biennial with 6-year series](#)
- [Bakos, Friends On Display](#)
- [Santa Fe Gallery Openings](#)
- [Pearl Harbor Remembered on 71st Anniversary](#)
- [N.M. Student Art on Display in D.C.](#)

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-- Email the reporter at [kroberts@abqjournal.com](mailto:kroberts@abqjournal.com). Call the reporter at 505-992-6266