
***BOMB* – Artists in Conversation**

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Enrique Martínez Celaya by Saul Ostrow

The Miami-based artist discusses exile, violence, philosophy, and literature.



Burning As It Were A Lamp, 2014. Bronze sculpture, cement block, mirrors and painting, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami. Photo by: Frank Casale.

Enrique Martinez and I met for lunch in New York—he was in town, from Miami, on business. Our conversation covered such topics as literature, travel, theory, and so forth, and by the end of the afternoon had come to constitute a type of audition, or a form speed date. When I got home I looked at a book of his work; at first there seemed to be something off. Given our conversation the work was not what I had expected—it appeared to be sincere, somewhat naive and sentimental in both subject matter and style. Consequently, I decided I wanted to talk to him more, I wanted to know how his interest in literature and theory connected to his works. Given I was going to be in Miami for the art fairs, I arranged to do an interview with him. The day before we were to speak, I went to his newly built studio to see the work, which in person revealed itself to be much more complex both aesthetically and psychologically. When we sat down to talk, the subject was his concern for sentiment, nostalgia, and melancholia as devious means for posing existential questions.

Saul Ostrow I thought we could talk about two things: first, the themes your works address. Despite difference in style and imagery, they seem to be primarily focused on pain, loss, implied violence, and death. Let's talk about these subjects. The other thing I'm curious about is, given our initial conversation over lunch in New York, how you think your interest in theory and criticism is manifested in your work?

Enrique Martínez Celaya When I was younger I always felt that I was missing what was most important about things. I didn't understand the world very well. So I turned to philosophy and literature to make sense of things. My interest in philosophy and theory came partly out of deficiency, of not knowing enough. And partly the result of being raised as an exile. We were migrants in Spain, so philosophy and literature were useful anchors, ways to make sense of what was happening.

Over the years, literature and philosophy have remained a presence in my work, and my interest in theory rises from them, but my goal is not to make the work appear intellectual or to be part of a sophisticated joke. I am trying to use this stuff, but whether it is an ontological preoccupation or some other philosophical concern, they must somehow be internalized into the narrative. In my lectures and writings, I try to make sure the language I use is accessible even though the ideas might not be. I come to this situation from my experience with physics and philosophy, so many of the questions that people take to be very difficult do not seem very difficult to me. On the other hand, some of the questions that are deemed trivial to many, seem difficult to me. For instance: How do we make choices and how do we live with the consequences?

SO How do you make choices? In your work you make stylistic shifts—do you see style as a philosophical issue, or is it more practical, simply the notion that one chooses the appropriate style for a given subject? And then how does the question of aesthetics weigh on this?

EMC That's a very good and fair question. Marsden Hartley insisted on remaining an amateur, never a professional, and I like that. Whenever I'm starting a new body of work, I like to pretend it's my first. Although it is ultimately impossible, I try not to build on whatever knowledge or expertise I had from before. I'm trying to be an anti-expert. That's why you see these stylistic and conceptual shifts. I want to resist the tendency in contemporary art to become a product-maker. So given that I know more about painting than about video, I might take on video, or I might take on a way to work in sculpture I've never tried before so that the lack of familiarity could be revealed in the work as inarticulateness, directness, and maybe also secrecy.

SO I'm curious about this: Do you start by saying I'd like to explore this aesthetic and then figure a subject for it, or does the narrative come first? I know it's a very formalist question, but I'm always interested in how the artist comes to decide what something is going to look like?

EMC The work always begins with writing. I write not to find content but to sort out

where I am standing, so that by the time I get to draw or paint, I have an understanding of the conceptual and emotional relation I have, or I am seeking, with the work. If I've just done a show of paintings, I start thinking what else is there. I look to see if those previous paintings reveal certain problems, then I might start to think of a sculpture or a video. It's not a prescription, but I am often somehow reacting to what I've done before.

SO It sounds like the work is always incomplete, no one work seems to stand alone, and then you work in series, so no one series becomes extendable, but it becomes something to react to. Can you ever forget—begin afresh?

EMC We are all trapped by what we have done and the more we do, the more trapped we are. Our history is in no small way a prison, so I try to forget myself to the extent it is possible. My projects usually span two or three exhibitions, and after I am finished with one of them, I want to explore what else is there, what new paths seem worthwhile. I prefer to let go of something when it has become familiar, even if not completely understood and even when I know I will probably return to it at some point.



The Hours, 2012. Bronze, dimensions variable. Courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, California.

SO Do you see that as an analogy for the artist or as a condition of the artwork?

EMC As an artist and as a thinker, one can't avoid being oneself. You don't need to try to keep yourself *in* the work as a line of connection because it's always there. There is always a line—however obscure—connecting the activities and thoughts one has. We don't need to make much of an effort to create a continuous body of work because the continuity is already there.

SO Well I guess the subjectivity of the artist is always the subjectivity of the artist. But that's the studio perspective. Yet, when you put things into the world it appears like separate bodies of work, all stylistically different, so the continuity in the work is that sense of loss I mentioned before. Is that emotional source the consistency in your work? Is that the signature of you, the trace of your subjectivity?

EMC Maybe that's the way to understand it. Believing that continuity is a given, I try to discover new things with each work without worrying about style or intellectual allegiances. So it might be that what binds my work together is not a look or even a body of knowledge but rather the insistence the work must shine a light on the choices I'm making. In that sense, the central preoccupation of my work is the same that animated my first drawings as a kid: What is this life and how do I make sense of it?

SO Is that where the violence in the work comes from?

EMC Maybe.

SO Despite the sometimes banal style, the unicorn and the dog painting, for example, is incredibly violent, with the severed unicorn heads. It doesn't immediately strike one as violent—you stand there and look at it and you go, "This is a fairly, cool, dispassionate image!"—

EMC Violence is everywhere, and it often spurs fairytales and reinventions. People invent fairytales to escape the life they're in or to try to make sense of it. When life is unbearable in some manner, you invent another life, a better life. Or maybe, a clearer life.

So what does the unicorn signify? Does it point to the dreams of a teenage girl? Is it a wink to popular romantic culture? Or is it the cynical gesture of a bitter man? Maybe it's all of them, but maybe also a stand-in for hope in the face of overwhelming odds, or an ice cream gesture from someone used to digging up dirt. For me, what the unicorn points to is not really what one might think it points to.

SO Is it a type of double negative?

EMC What seems to be going on in my work is not usually what is going on.

SO I figured that out! [laughter]. The other day while looking at your book it came to me. I "got it." Part of it was with the book there's the lack of scale. I realized that these are large paintings not for the sake of being large paintings, and—I'm not using this as a negative term—they have a sort of vacuity, an emptiness.

EMC I don't think many people have picked up on the current of violence that runs under some of my work. When you see these paintings in reproduction, they seem very rendered, but when you get close, you notice there are translucent layers of wax and the image has been treated rather roughly. This roughness dismembers the conviction the image initially seems to possess. After looking at these paintings for a while they are not credible as scenes. The struggle between the dissolution of representational conviction and our desire to hold on to it is, in some ways, a violent as well as disconcerting aspect of the work. But this struggle never reproduces well, so you have to experience the paintings in real life.

SO You know, as a critic I'm interested in the other content of work, not the narrative content but the actual content of the structure. Your compositional tendency is always this incredible frontal move, as if everything is being exposed. It's there for you and the longer you stand in front of it the more it withholds.

The only place where that seemingly doesn't happen is in the black paintings where you end up building it up to such a degree—where it just becomes a surface, where the narrative gets obliterated or tentative, as if it is going to disappear or you're going to end up with something that's almost just marks. That type of content, I find the equivalent of that fugitiveness in the sculpture, *The Well*, and there's something really scary about it. Those little holes, she's not crying from her eyes, it's the little holes.



The Well, 2013. Bronze, 152 x 65 x 59 in.

EMC Right, and the dismembered arms—

SO Similarly in the photographic works, the appropriated imagery, the still lives, the arrangements of objects like the German shepherd on the stand with the bowl of fruit—these works seem intent on undermining your seriousness!

EMC The fruit bowl that might belong to a lower middle class dining table and the ceramic German shepherd, or a jeweled elephant on a burnt table, are not approaching kitsch as Koons might approach it. What I find remarkable about some of these kitschy elements is that, although their “story” seems to be a given, you are left with a hole when you try to read it. Where the apparent given used to be, we find a pointer to nowhere in particular, but maybe it is only then, when the signified is not much more—or much less—than a cloudy hole, that this pointer becomes meaningful, and it is meaningful, in part, because it shows things as they are.

We live in a cynical age, a time of hollowness often pretending it is otherwise. So any hope of real emotional connection, of authenticity, now has to acknowledge that we are starting from a deficit, from a constructed emotional making that has been built by television, propaganda, politics, entertainment, etcetera. Part of that acknowledgement

means working with some crumbling signifiers of emotion and then trying to actually build something genuine from these ruins. So when I take, for example, the elephant made of jewels, I start with a real reference. When I was growing up, my family and I used to sit around the table to make custom jewelry necklaces to be sold. But then I try to distance that reference from me because I am less interested in telling what happened to me than in understanding what was going on there. The attempt to make this little elephant out of jewels is a futile, and maybe ridiculous, art gesture. Unlike, say, Richard Serra for whom the heroic and the epic seems to be in solid footing, I come to the heroic and the epic with yearning as well as doubt. I like to work from holes, from deficits, so that something seems failed from the beginning, then seeing what happens with that.

SO Let's go back to the notion of the double negative, you work out of this reference and understand the loss and then the audience comes along and wants to see it as true sentiment.

EMC Usually.

SO Since you said you don't do any of this with a wink, how do you feel about that?

EMC Even though people tend to read these references at face value and think they know what they are looking at, the apparent sentiment of these elements is really a hole, an absence. The problems brought on by this misreading are necessary if we want to contend with things as they are. Maybe a Romantic artist could have fully trusted the epic narrative of the man in the landscape, but now I must acknowledge the futility of those dreams, the doubts, the problematic, the cynicism, while at the same time upholding the possibility of the epic itself. Doubts have to be in the forefront. It might be impossible to aim for the authentic gesture without accepting we are also aiming for its negation. Of course, we cannot wink while doing this, otherwise nothing of value can be created. We have to fully believe and fully not believe at the same time without collapsing the options to one or the other. Many are used to looking for that wink. That wink makes them feel comfortable. Part of the club. If a work does not wink and does not give people a hint of the intellectual allegiances of the artist, then it is likely to be dismissed as naive or lacking sentiment.

I am not suggesting that artists should be coy. What I'm saying is that the work has to exist with its inherent contradictions without the benefit of interpretations or disclaimers.

SO You know, it's funny talking about the modern condition or the contemporary condition, the question here seemingly is that there's an increasing desire for both nostalgia and sentiment. How do you understand that? On the theory side do you understand your work as symptom of or a response to this or is it really the notion that it's yours?

EMC Maybe working with those dualities is the only way out of the disease of cynicism. The only path out of cynicism is right through the middle of it. When you immunize for a disease, you're sort of getting a gentler version of the disease so that your body can prepare to fight the more severe version. To say, "I don't have the disease," is not an answer, and to get the disease is really the end. So you have to get the disease a little bit, to find your way out of it.

SO If I understand what you're saying, your work functions as a form of defense?

EMC For me it is, partly, a defense.

SO Both for you and your audience.

EMC Well, certainly for me. I'm not sure it is that for the audience as well. Maybe I'm only accidentally an artist. I turn to this work out of my own needs, needs that come from a sense of my own deficiencies, deficiencies that have to do with numbness and carelessness. For most of us, life loses its radiance as we grow up. Then, we learn a few things and we begin to think we have seen it all before. This attitude makes everything seem opaque or dull. So how does one go about restoring the radiance of the world? I think the only way to do it is to acknowledge the opacity.

SO It's most indirect!

EMC Sometimes the indirect way is the best way, and indirectness often requires hiding the traces of how one got somewhere. Although I might talk with you about the critical framework of the work or offer a lecture that includes some philosophical ideas, in the work I try to bury all intellectual allegiances by making sure they are cooked into the work rather than sprinkled on top of it. I also try to consider how I talk about the work, and whether it is true or not, I prefer to deny any biographical references. Although this approach resists the type of thematic analyses that are popular among some curators, and it creates confusion and, at times, disdain, avoidance of the tidy story is important to fight the over-simplification of ideas and to keep the work unstable. It also helps in the effort to remain a moving target to others as well as to myself.

SO Is that strategic? In terms of you being able to continue to make work? Does this go back to becoming the amateur?

EMC I think in some ways it's both. The effort to remove or hide the natural connections that people want to make with the work is a strategy. But it is also a necessity if we are to avoid the deceitful comfort that comes from thinking we know the story, that we understand the sources. Everything that matters is secret. The best we can do is to create approximations. The kind of analytical confidence we sometimes see in the art world is dangerous. If you think you know, then you are likely to miss something important. If you think you don't know, you keep at it, you keep searching. I like to remain an anti-

expert in myself to avoid the familiarity that comes with knowing what one is about. I try to digest whatever I read and if I find myself speaking in jargon, I feel I've failed. Any serious inquiry requires some semantic tools, but these can always be broken down into simple terms. If you can't do that, then it is likely you don't understand what you are talking about.

SO So there is a resistance to allowing the work to be “about” anything?

EMC In the way we usually mean “about anything,” I guess that's true. But the work is something. Take, for instance, the suggestion brought about by the fact all my works have the article *the* in their title. That specificity points to locations, and so one way to look at the work is as mappings. When I was a physicist, we often used the idea of conformal mapping, which is a coordinate transformation that allows a complicated or inconvenient problem in one space to be transposed to another space where it is easier to solve. In some ways, this use of mapping is similar to how I approach my work. The questions about life and identity that matter to me are difficult to approach and even to formulate. So I try to map them in a space where the forces at play are more apparent. The clarity gained by this mapping might then be applied to life itself.

SO Even though that world is mythic?

EMC Yes. In many ways myth is a way of making things clearer.

SO I guess I'm using myth here the way Claude Lévi-Strauss talks about living in a sort of “mythosphere”—we construct and then inhabit as if it is not of our own construction.

EMC Much of what we are is constructed—emotions, identity, context, relationships—but that construction is usually invisible. So you have to map it somewhere else to reveal the structure, and it is that structure that shows aspects of our, as well as the social, fabrication of reality.

SO A conversation that I recently had was all about that notion of “habit” and overdeterminacy in that the law already announces the response to it. Is that what you're trying to avoid?

EMC It's part of what I'm trying to avoid. I'm especially trying to avoid confusing the reflection of the self-referential sign with truth. We often set out to discover something new, but what we find is the reflection of our own assumptions and prejudices, and, of course, they will always seem right. Recursive investigations are a dead end, and sometimes the only way out of their circularity is a rupture, and it almost doesn't matter how this rupture comes about. The urgency is not about getting it right but about getting out of the loop.

SO Is that the reason for the use of literature?

EMC Absolutely.

SO That's very anti-modernist, this notion of rejoining painting to literature.

EMC I tend to look at literature for its abstractions—its structures and moral stances—rather than as narrative sources. I read a poet like Harry Martinson to understand how one structures silence in relation to some epic tensions as well as how he navigates, or fails to navigate, work and life. I am currently studying Tolstoy's relationship between morals, life, and art. While this might sound abstract or detached, I am sure this study will surface in my work soon. So when I say literature influences my work, that's what I usually mean. It's rarely its narrative content.

SO If we're talking about the subject of a novel it's not the storyline. It's the slippage, it's the ordering of it. In regards to that, why *Moby Dick*?

EMC I like the ambition of this novel. Melville decides to write a book about a whale and right away this is a crazy gesture, and that's fascinating to me. Who makes the choice and why? What are the consequences of that choice? Then the novel itself, which is superficially a fishing story, below the surface is a moral story, and below that it is an existential struggle that reminds us Melville is writing at the same time as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. I am also very interested the American mystical tradition Melville taps into, which springs from the collision of puritanical mysticism and pragmatism with the monumentality of, and challenge presented by, the American landscape. This mysticism is under pressure or compression. It is repressed awe in an ambivalent relation to the human scale and its needs. This distillation of mysticism is quite different than what happened in Europe. When I open *Moby Dick* I always find myself in a strange place, which is partly *The Pequod*, partly the whale, and partly that desk that took Melville down a crazy journey from which he never recovered.

SO You can't see yourself as Ishmael? Then we have Starbuck, who is the artist in the novel?

EMC Ishmael is too distant. It might be nice to be Starbuck, the conscience, but being an artist makes you closer to Ahab than to anyone else in the book.

Saul Ostrow is an independent critic, curator, and contributing editor for BOMB Magazine. In 2011, he founded Critical Practices Inc., an organization established to promote discourse and collaborative practices. Ostrow has also served as co-editor of Lusitania Press (1996–2004) and is the editor of the book series Critical Voices in Art, Theory, and Culture (1996–2006) published by Routledge, London. As a curator he has organized over 70 exhibition in the US and abroad. His critical writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the US and Europe.