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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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## The Rustic, Intricate Fantasy of Enrique Martínez Celaya

by [Jonathan Blaustein](#) on August 12, 2013



Various installation views of Enrique Martínez Celaya's *The Pearl* at SITE Santa Fe (July-October 2013) (all photographs by Eric Swanson)

SANTA FE, New Mexico — When conjuring visions of the Santa Fe art scene, it's the cliché of cowboys and cacti that comes closest to capturing reality. If you're looking for a two-ton, life-size bronze statue of a bison, though, you might just be in luck. Yes, Southwest Impressionism is alive and well, so if you need a soft-focus mountain-scape above your sofa, you now know where to look. Santa Fe, after all, is the third largest art market in the US.

Fortunately, there are a couple of institutions in town that are committed to showing the kind of work you might see in the world's contemporary art capitals. The cultural institution and [erstwhile](#) biennial [SITE Santa Fe](#) usually tops this list. I visited SITE recently for the opening of "The Pearl," a new exhibition by Miami-based artist Enrique Martínez Celaya, and had to go back again to take it in properly.



Step through an inky black curtain, and you find yourself in a dark corridor. Ahead, on another curtain, you see a projection of a German Shepherd eating dog food. Just as he takes a slobbery bite, the sound of a small child giggling is piped into the space. Cute at first, the twisted shriek morphs to menacing in less time than it takes for the dog to inhale his grub.

On through the second curtain, into an atrium of sorts, with the walls painted black. De-branched, dead trees lean up against the walls. Above, next to the Reznor heater, you see clear plastic tubing about an inch thick hung from the ceiling. The sound of waves crashing wafts in from up ahead.

Following along, I stepped into a very large room, also painted black. There were little mini-installations spread about, in such a manner as to encourage walking in an orderly fashion. First, another German Shepherd, rendered as a wooden end-table. Looking up, we see another of the same canine species, this time embedded in a painting on the wall.

In the back corner, I spied a wooden pedestal emerging from the wall. It featured an old, beautiful wooden radio, which was quietly playing music. The shelf and radio were covered with kitschy ceramic birds, the kind you'd see at someone's grandma's house. (The couches in said home would be covered with plastic, and the year would always be 1978.)

And it cut right through the intellect and touched my emotional core. I stared at those birds, and the ceramic red cardinal and blue jay took me right back to my childhood home in suburban New Jersey. My dad had a bird feeder, right outside the kitchen window, and I remember those birds flitting this way and that. Filling the feeders with sunflower seeds was one of my only real "chores," and yet still I complained. (That's about as good a definition of "spoiled middle class American child" as I can give you.)



Moving along, I saw a ratty, black canoe in the center of the floor. I was a little perplexed, until I looked up to see a painting on the wall. A boy sits in a canoe, much like the real one before me, and he's out at sea at night. It's a beautiful piece, though it looks more than a bit like something rescued at an estate sale in Santa Monica on a Sunday afternoon.

After the canoe comes the ocean. A video of cascading waves awaits in the next room, projected behind a dinner table topped with an elephant wrapped in Mardi Gras beads. On the wall above, a clock is covered with birds, in place of numbers. The video is not particularly original, but the light dancing on the floor, a castoff of the reflected projection, is rather lovely.



The plastic tubing still snakes above, and leads further into the space. (Which reminds me of the advice I was given upon leaving the front desk: follow the water.) The tube ducks into a side room, painted gray, so I do too. The serene space is lined with lovely paintings of birds, the same East Coast types seen before. (Is that an Oriole? Does it matter?) The gray paintings, with the slight changes on a recurring theme, remind me a bit of Gerhard Richter. The sparrow, shivering on a snowy tree, looks cold.

I notice the shadows of the tubing on the wall, undulating like waves. Then it's out the way we came in, into the biggest gallery yet. On the first wall, an oversized painting shows two boys at the end of a rickety pier, jutting into the ocean. One holds his arms around him, as if he's cold. The light, warm and yellowish, makes me think of the end of summer. (Again, I'm taken to a nostalgic place.)

Wheel around, and things begin to make sense. In the middle of the room, we see a ceramic man, leaning over a succession of descending stairs made out of pine needles, or something like that. Get close, and you can see the clear tubing is hooked up to his foot. His eyes are leaking tears, which spill into a little groove in the middle of the wicker-like apparatus.

The best part: the sculpture guy is bedazzled. (Of course.) He's totally decked out in fake crystals. Celaya has created "that" kind of Baroque experience, and I loved it. You go, bedazzled dude.



The tears, now a slight stream of water, are conducted down an aqueduct of sorts, which is held up by tree stumps. Across the 80' room it flows, bisecting the gallery as it goes. (At the opening, a guard asked me, retroactively, not to step over the aqueduct.)

The water feature passes another large painting on its way out the door. A boy, in a landscape that looks like New Mexico, stands by a group of rainbowbrite flowers while a bird descends to join him. It's the first, and only time, that I'm reminded of where I'm standing. Up to that point, Mr. Celaya transported me out of the state entirely.





The next room is the only real miss, because Celaya overdoes it a bit. There is a closed, plywood house, in the middle of a dark room, with star holes cut out of the ceiling. Light is projected through, which makes a beautiful faux-night-sky above. Totally great. But there are also some bed-sheet/bath-robe-type-white-fabric hoods affixed to the wall, along with pinned paper butterflies. The fabric sculptures don't really fit, and distract from what is otherwise a seamless experience.



Finally, the last room beckons, and then the installation really does all come together. In the middle of the space, we see a

taxidermied fox, standing beside a fake pond encircled with fake Christmas trees. In the pond sits a pump shaped like a pair of lungs. The aqueduct deposits the last few trickles of water into the pond, while the pump sucks out fresh liquid to send out into the tubing, which begins right there. A closed loop. Brilliant.

This massive, intricate fantasy of high art and kitsch, hand-made things and found objects, all snaps together tighter than an Ikea bookshelf.

Just as I'm ready to leave, I look up one last time. As the tubing cascades away, through the generic double-pane window cut into the wall, I notice a sign in the distance: SITE Santa Fe. Yes, the exhibition closes with one slick bit of branding. How 21st century is that?

[Enrique Martínez Celaya's The Pearl](#) continues at SITE (1606 Paseo de Peralta, Santa Fe) through October 13.

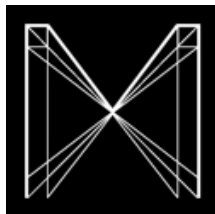
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