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## Domestic disturbance: Enrique Martínez Celaya's "The Pearl"

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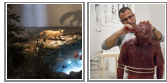
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Enrique Martínez Celaya's *The Pearl*, installation view at SITE Santa Fe; photo Peter Kirby



To walk through Enrique Martínez Celaya's *The Pearl* — a large-scale site-specific installation that meanders from room to room throughout SITE Santa Fe — is to walk through a dark passage of fragmented memory. Details relating to a specific memory or series of memories are arranged through the space not chronologically, however, but in layers. One must reconstruct events, fictional or real, as one goes along. That makes for a

challenging, cerebral experience. For Martínez Celaya, the work is personal, touching on autobiographical content, and from within that content he has attempted to cull more universal experience of how childhood trauma can shape one's later life. "I'm interested in the friction between the epic and the domestic," he told *Pasatiempo*. "This particular body of work has a lot of my own history in it. More than usual. I'm not so interested in a confession. The point is not a rumination of what happened, of what my experience was, but certain cracks open up those events. I want to explore what they mean, the larger questions. What I'm interested in is our condition. What is memory, and how do we find our place?"

Entering the installation, visitors are confronted with an unsettling image, a projection of a snarling German shepherd devouring a house made of dog food. Visitors hear the laughter of a baby girl. "It's very disorienting," Martínez Celaya said. "You're in the dark, and the laughter of the girl is so off from the images you're looking at, it's a dislocation similar to the dislocation of going back to an image you cannot quite place." Moving on, you come to a window looking out on a bucolic scene, installed in another room, of a fox approaching a small pond surrounded by trees. The pond is lit from inside by a mysterious light, and a hose extends from it through the window. The hose is suspended from the ceiling and courses through room after room. The next room brings you to a forest of Casuarina pine, and one can glimpse the sea through the pine trees, five of which are burned. These images — the German shepherd, the fox, pine, the number five — are repeated in various ways

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throughout the exhibit. One room, for instance, contains a sculpture of a German shepherd. "The German shepherd, for me, invokes immediately the idea of home and guardianship and protection and domesticity, but also there's a certain threatening quality to it. Anything you guard you also hold." There are other recurring motifs: songbirds, a lighthouse, a boat, the number 12. These may hold certain meanings for Martínez Celaya, and others must make an intellectual leap and begin constructing a narrative to account for them. *The Pearl* is like a story puzzle whose pieces need to be fitted together.

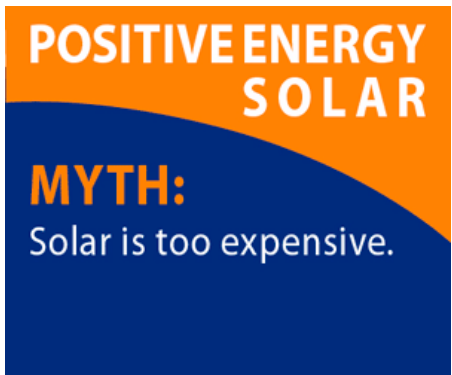
Early in the installation, as you are guided through, always following the hose, there is a boat enveloped in tar and feathers, something suggesting humility and shame. Think about that when you come to a room with urine-stained sheets and, for some visitors, painful memories may surface. How, then, is this rather dark exhibit like a pearl? "We think of a pearl as a jewel that we like to wear, but it's really an irritant that comes into the oyster. What the pearl is is just the effort of the oyster to wrap itself away from this irritant. I like this dual meaning. In many of our lives we have some sort of irritant, part of our childhood, and we're somehow trying to do something to that memory to convert it."

Touches of domesticity run throughout the installation as well. There is a table, burned like the pines, surrounded by four chairs and a missing fifth (which shows up again further on). A gaudy jewel-encrusted elephant rests on the table. Moving through *The Pearl* is a bit like moving through a dream. Martínez Celaya likens it to a musical composition or story told in several acts. "You have a first movement, and then by the time you get to the end, you reconsider that first movement and say, 'What I saw was not what I thought I saw.'"

The strange repeated patterns continue into a room where a painting on the wall shows three boys playing on a pier. In this room the hose drops down and the water coursing through it flows as tears from the eyes of a bronze statue of a boy. It flows through a channel cut into five beds of pine needles, each set lower to the ground than the one before. It continues to flow along a narrow trough into another room where there is a house of undressed pine, its roof riddled with star-shaped cutouts. Illuminated from within, the roof casts a dreamy nighttime sky full of stars onto the ceiling. The house is surrounded by the stained sheets, which have butterfly shapes cut from them. Follow the water into the next room, and the cloth butterflies from the sheets line the walls. This is the room glimpsed at the start, through the window. Come to the pond with its otherworldly glow, where the river of tears finally empties out. Look inside the pond, and you see a pair of human lungs, inflating and deflating to the rush of air from a machine that gives them, like an oxygen tank hooked up to a patient in a hospital bed, the air they need to breathe.

Martínez Celaya was born in Cuba in the 1960s, one of three brothers. He immigrated first to Spain when he was 8 years old and then to Puerto Rico before coming to the United States. As a child, he suffered from respiratory trouble. "I had these terrible asthma attacks. And then I had a domestic life that was full of unrest, violence, difficulty, sadness, and isolation, and then the move from one country to another, which is not so much a question of exile as it is a question of displacement within yourself — the sense of being dislocated and the loneliness that comes with that." The five trees arranged around the pond, two big and three small, suggest the units of a nuclear family: a mother, a father, and three children. The jewel-encrusted elephant references Martínez Celaya's long nights spent working with his brothers, often until the early morning hours, making costume jewelry to support their family. But these tangible expressions of memory hold meaning for us all. "As a child there's a certain density to reality at times that you cannot pass through, so you project around it, instead. You project fantasies and fairy tales that allow you to bear the reality as is." ◀

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