

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Enrique Martínez Celaya: *The Foreigner's Song*

By Irene Lyla Lee

October 2022

An expanse of dark is splattered with white. A figure walks beneath, turning back, as if momentarily, to wave. His reflection is held in a puddle at his feet; above him are large flowers and a vague map. The white spots are not stars, yet they guide us toward the concept of a night sky. C.G. Jung inferred that archetypes exist within each one of us. Our starry nights glimmer with ancient cosmic formations that can be understood, and as they are, we begin to discover our place among them. This painting is titled *The Traveler's Dream* (2022).

Enrique Martínez Celaya's show *The Foreigner's Song*, features paintings and drawings that consider the position of the foreigner as they attempt to bridge the dislocation between the past and the present, while moving into the abyss of the future. Celaya's approach to painting is based on his work as a writer, philosopher, and physicist. References are drawn from mythology, folklore, science, and the artist's own autobiography. While the entire show tells Celaya's story, no names, locations, or specifics are disclosed.

If one were to compare the visual aspects of Celaya's work to other artists, one might conjure Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, or Anselm Kiefer. The paintings are large and replete with swaths of stars, flowers, and mythical creatures. Like Kiefer, Celaya incorporates found objects into his paintings. But his imagery is steeped in the folkloric and fairytale archetypes of childhood in the form of magical lions made of stars, and stairs in the sky. The scenes, however, are suggestions, painted with loose and immediate strokes, as if they are in the middle of an action. The quality of this energetic work lends to the feeling that the subjects are about to move on, move out, the flowers are about to die. Everything is moving. The works struggle between the archetypal and simultaneously real struggles, and the profound strength and hope this life journey entails. Many of the paintings stand on bricks, so close to the ground, they could almost be portals.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Traveler's Dream*, 2022. Oil and wax on canvas, 120 x 63 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Ice-Bound Carriage*, 2022. Oil and wax on canvas, 132 x 82 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *El principio y el final (the Beginning and the End)*, 2018-2022. Oil, wax, tar and silk flowers on canvas, 82 x 75 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY.

*The Ice-Bound Carriage* (2022) is perhaps the most haunting image of the show. It has a direct political connotation, placing the painting in time and place. Laika, the Russian dog who was sent on a one way trip to space, is centered in the top of the frame with wreaths of flowers around her neck. These references draw the viewer into global narratives about communism and the implications of the need to make consistent and fast progress. This painting, with its distinct cultural image, has been made into a shrine with flowers above the map of a medieval city, with crystalline shaped streets. Images get stuck in our heads, small stories play like impossible loops: a dog on a one way trip into space. The supreme tragedy of the incident shrouded by the ecstatic progression from which it came is heartbreaking. Yet, this creature goes, impossibly, into the unknown.

*El principio y el final (The Beginning and The End)* (2022) presents a heaviness. On a canvas adhered with roses, which are painted the color of the background, a long-necked bird, a swan perhaps, with a red castle fastened to its neck, flies across turbulent waters. The sky burns, perhaps the sun is rising, perhaps it is some disaster. I can't help but consider the constant redemption of the swan in fairy tales, from the *The Ugly Duckling* to the changed bodies in *Children of Lir*. The swan is famously mute, but persistent and intensely beautiful. Yet in their curse, the swan carries fairy tale characters across the expanse, through extreme discomfort, back home. This time the flowers do not disrupt the scene, but hold the color of the image, like lenses, they imbue the painting with a deeper feeling: ethereal gifts in the sky.

There is a quote about the artist's hand, how you can feel it. Celaya shows his process within these paintings. The outcome can be haunting, a ghostly presence on the canvas. This process is part of the work. So the paintings live. "Like dry stream beds whose shape determines the characteristics of a river" (Jung). Like a song in the air, waiting to be sung.