

**“THE SEA, CHILDHOOD, EXILE”:
IN CONVERSATION WITH ENRIQUE MARTÍNEZ CELAYA AND BARRY SCHWABSKY**

Barry Schwabsky: Let's start with a very broad question. Something that strikes me very forcefully as being unusual in today's context is that I think you actually believe in the idea of great painting.

Enrique Martínez Celaya: You're right. Being in academia and interested in philosophy and criticism, I'm familiar with the counter-arguments, but I believe great painting is still possible. I don't see very much of it. The impoverished intellectual and emotional ambitions of most of the work I encounter are not enough for me. That doesn't mean my work is great. It just means I have seen great work and know what that looks like. For instance, I recently spent hours looking at Fra Angelico's frescoes in Florence that six hundred years after their making still pose profound questions about what painting is, how it functions, and its possibilities.

Barry: Do you feel that modernism led to similar levels of achievement as in the Italian Renaissance? Or are your main inspirations really from before modernism?

Enrique: Modernism has brought about outstanding achievements in arts and sciences, as well as problems and misunderstandings that have undermined it, especially in the last sixty years. This decline is less severe in literature, probably because of the grounding language provides, and because the extravagance of literary markets is more subdued, so I often look in books and at writers for models to guide me.

Barry: Yet, you haven't decided the way some other painters have to cultivate an anachronistic style, to try and recreate the styles of the masters of the past. Your style of painting clearly comes from this modernism.

Enrique: It may seem like a contradiction, but if there's the possibility of authenticity in painting, it is probably going to be found in the ruins of modernism and accounting for the problematic condition of painting today. Sometimes by seeming to step around it. For example, I often think about the work of the mostly untrained Black artists in the Caribbean and Florida who sold their paintings along the roadside. There's something immediate about those landscape paintings. If you look at them and then at some German paintings of the sixties and seventies, you can see some similarities that point towards ways around the challenges faced by contemporary painting.

Barry: I was kind of amazed when I went to the gallery the other day to see your new paintings. I thought there was a profound change going on. It has to do with space. Before, the space tended to dominate and the figure would be sort of nestled within it. Whereas these new flower paintings are almost the first works of yours I've seen in which there's a distinct kind of figure ground duality with a dominant figure, which in this case is the flower. Your last show in New York had some flower imagery in it but it was never the main image.

Enrique: I see what you mean about the figure-ground relationship, but this is a very particular cycle of work. As a kid, I was asthmatic, and since the sea was supposed to be good for my asthma, I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house in a small beach town in the south of Cuba. In the summer, when the late-afternoon wind changed direction, a scent of flowers sometimes permeated the air. Some people considered it a good sign, but others felt something bad was coming—maybe a death. Like it often happened in the Caribbean, nature was a messenger of things to come, and it was unsettling to watch adults fret nervously because a smell had taken over the town.

I found that experience to be a good point of entry into my own history and aspects of the Caribbean, which, like my grandfather's house that was taken by the sea, are now gone. When I returned to Cuba in 2019, I realized that not just our family but almost everything we knew there was gone. This transience is inherent in most of what we treasure, and it contrasts with the permanence of the sea.

At first, I was afraid to make these paintings because I didn't want them to be decorative, and this concern as well as my hopes are visible in the way they're painted. I am trying to make these paintings exist in the world despite everything that is against them.

Barry: When I looked at the paintings, I certainly didn't think of anything decorative, even though of course we associate flower paintings with that. There seems to be such a strong engagement with, let's say, the struggle of depicting them that decoration doesn't come to mind at all.

Enrique: I'm glad you feel that way. But, yes, there was a struggle. I began with the seas. Then I sat with them until I was ready to bring in the flowers. The flowers directly or indirectly have some relationship with the seas with which they interact.

Barry: So, you are saying that you actually, for each painting, painted the whole ground first and then sat and looked at them and then placed the flower in that already existing ground?

Enrique: Yes! And I don't usually work like that. I wrote for a while surrounded by the completed seas. Then, flowers from my history—for example, my grandmother and lilies, gardenias, or roses—emerged. As I painted them, I had the scale of traditional portraiture and the division of the canvas in mind, but there were very few alterations to the seas to merge them with the flowers. I wanted a sense of immediacy, of placing something there and accepting the consequences.

Barry: For some reason, that idea of this seascape onto which you sort of projected the flower image reminds me of a lot of things that psychoanalytic theorists, Freudian theorists, have discussed. I remember this idea of what they call the dream screen, a sort of background, the mental substance upon which the dream is presented. And the fact that you figure this as the sea—Freud himself talked about an “oceanic feeling” that goes back to before we differentiated ourselves as individuals, in infancy or even in the fluid environment of the womb. Something we long to recapture. It must have been a very hypnotic experience to sit looking at the rolling waves of these seas you painted and wait for them to tell you what flowers belonged there.

Enrique: It was a hypnotic experience, and your references to dream and recapture are also insightful. In these paintings, there is an offering to and marking of what is no more—migration and exile, for example, among other losses that one cannot hope to recapture. The sea separated the island not as much from the actual United States as from the fantasy that El Norte was for all of us. The dream of El Norte was in that sea. One of the things that was most surprising to me while working was how each flower reacted differently to the act of being painted against the water—or maybe I reacted differently to painting them.

Barry: Can you give me some examples of what you mean? Can you explain to me some of the differences?

Enrique: For instance, the lily, which I think you've seen at the gallery, it's almost not there—it's so loose and sketchy. Compare it to the pink hollyhock, which is more rendered. And the difference between them is not only about two ways of rendering the flowers but two ways of thinking about what painting does and how the image can be embodied in the material. Those differences are not the result of decisions about how the flower would be handled but the

consequences of the effort of creating a painting from the existing sea—from the pressures the existing sea put onto what could exist there. And the flowers made their own demands because of their form and my associations with them. The lily, for example, has a long history in my family, so I'm not surprised it behaved differently than the hollyhocks, which I only saw for the first time after I came to America.

Barry: That pink hollyhock painting is also unusual because behind the pink hollyhocks, there are some white flowers. I don't know if they're also hollyhocks or something else. But then the white of those background flowers connects with the white of the whitecaps of the ocean. So there's more of a blending between the flower image and the ocean image in that painting than in most of the others. At the top of that painting, you have the inscription of the name of Antonio Machado, the poet. Why his name in particular there?

Enrique: When I started these paintings, I hoped—as I do with most of my paintings—they all would have writings on them. Unfortunately, most of the time, it doesn't happen. But someday, I hope to create a body of work that will be only writings.

Barry: All writing, no imagery, just painted writing?

Enrique: Yes. Maybe. Writing, especially poetry, has been important to me since my teens, and since then, I have been trying to include words and short and long passages in my paintings. From time to time, a word or a phrase resonates or collides just right with the experience of the rest of the painting, as was the case with that inscription. Antonio Machado was a poet exiled from Spain and, ultimately, buried in France. I was reflecting on the distance of that grave from his native land, and those reflections and the spirit of Machado's poetry bounced against that horizon and echoed through the painting.

Barry: Should we think of the hollyhock as a sort of substitute portrait of Machado? Or is it better to think of it as a kind of offering to him? Or simply a dedication?

Enrique: It's more abstract for me. The emotional circumstance the painting provides has something of the spirit of Machado's poetry, his tragedy, and the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War. But it also has much of my life in it. Whenever I come across a poem by Machado, Hernández, or Lorca, it brings up the emotional texture of my childhood, a time that is profoundly connected to my first readings of these poets. I remember the rooms and even the lighting in which I first read them, and also what was happening in my life then, so these emotional nuances are involved in my experience of Machado.

Barry: Is it that you see a parallel between the experience of exile of that generation of Spanish poets and the exile of so many people from Cuba? Is that part of why you have this feeling or is it not a relevant connection?

Enrique: There is some of that, but there's also a connection to my father and mother, to my native language, and to an emotional texture I associate with a Latin heart. Machado is a nostalgic poet who made an effort to be austere at a moment in history when dislocation and loss were commonplace but still heartbreaking, so his poetry has a unique quality. So, for me, the paintings invoke the feeling of Machado, the sea, childhood, and exile all at once in a way that makes them inseparable.