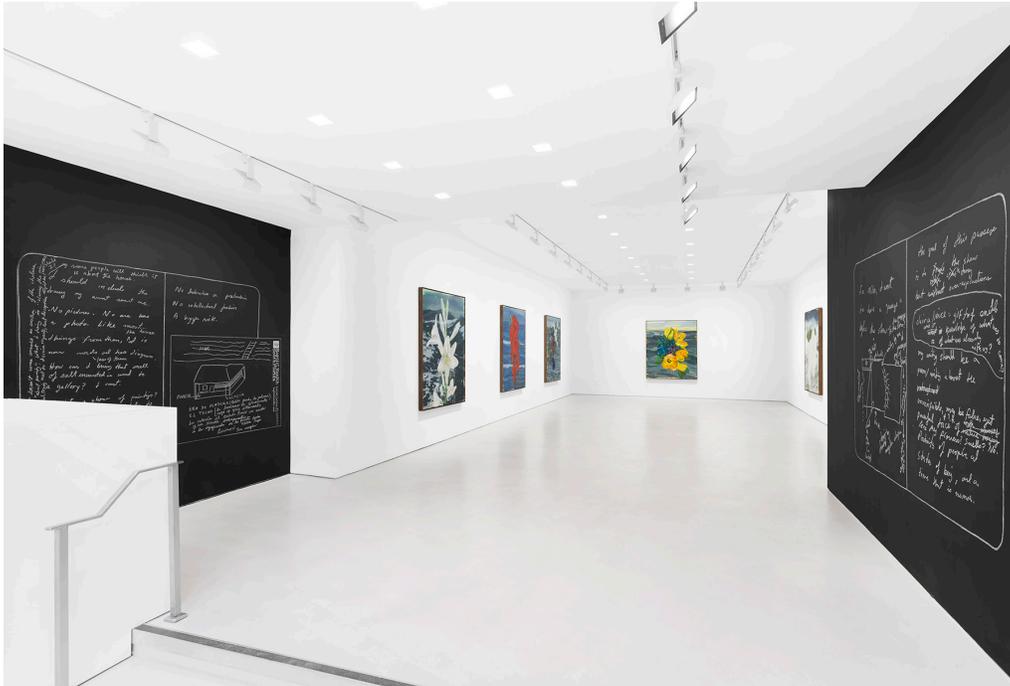


# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Enrique Martínez Celaya: The Sea Memory (Found)

By Alex Grimley | October 2023



Installation view: Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery.

“I should make sure it doesn’t come across as another of the Chelsea show of paintings or ‘about painting,’” [sic] reads a note from the journal of Enrique Martínez Celaya. Pages from this journal, painted in reproduction on the wall of Miles McEnery Gallery on West 21st St., flank the threshold of the exhibition. “The goal of this passage is to deny the show but without over-explanation,” we read. “The writing should help to clarify it is not a ‘show.’” The artist’s musings in this liminal space prime the viewer to experience the six large and identically sized oil and wax paintings that hang just beyond it.

In his brief and poetic catalogue essay, art historian Alexander Nemerov, following the lead of Martínez Celaya (who describes the paintings as portraits), further characterizes them: “I think of the flowers as saints, each painting the portrait of a saint.” The running metaphor of Nemerov’s essay hits upon a curious quality of these paintings, that they feel like ciphers or surrogates, symbols for meaning that the works on their own do not concretely evoke; but this very opacity seems to be part of Martínez Celaya’s purpose. It is built into the execution of the works, where Martínez Celaya first rendered each painting’s seascape, then the flowers separately, without trying to integrate them. This contrast is most evident in *The Omen (Gladiola)* (2023), where the sharp contours and rich shading of the titular flower gives it a near sculptural presence compared to the sketchily rendered sea. The disjunction between the two elements recalls Courbet’s late landscapes, where he’d paint figures and animals after the fact, to make the works appear more conventional.



Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Omen (Gladiola)*, 2023.  
Oil and wax on canvas, 72 x 60 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

Martínez Celaya employs this method as an analogue for what he describes in the catalogue's afterword as "the interaction between permanence and transience." The themes of dislocation and loss permeate the paintings. Inscribed at the top of *The Omen (Pink Hollyhock)* (2023), is the name of Spanish poet Antonio Machado, who fled his home country during the Spanish Civil War then died and was buried in France. In his interview with the critic Barry Schwabsky, Martínez Celaya speaks of "the distance of that grave from his native land," an idea that resonates with the loss of his grandfather's house in Cuba, which, when he returned to his native Cuba in 2019, he realized was gone, like his "family [and] almost everything we knew there." The titles of the paintings, each one called *The Omen* with the name of the depicted flower in parenthesis, stand in for another fleeting, intangible quality: the scent of those flowers blown through the coastal Cuban winds, taken by locals either as a hopeful harbinger or a fateful portent. With its turbulent waves and rising mists, *The Omen (Gardenia)* (2023) captures something of that aromatic sensation.

Shifting, then, to what is visible and palpable in the paintings, each work presents a complex color chord or harmony, marked equally by subtleties like the pale green leaves echoed faintly in the sky of *The Omen (Second White Lily)* (2023), or by stark contrast as in the dramatic red blossoms set against the placid sea in *The Omen (Gladiola)*. Martínez Celaya captures an elegiac mood most effectively in the former picture, where paint drips down the surface and trickles from the petals as if they were weeping. A sense of isolation pervades *The Omen (Blue Poppy)* (2023), as the flowers loom unmoored, suspended above the vastness of the ocean.

There is a kind of poetry that resides in the painterly details of these works. But their meaning—that is, the themes the paintings seek to convey and the metaphorical significance of their imagery—arise from Martínez Celaya's memory and biography. To access the depth of that meaning, one must read, not into the paintings but around them: read the ponderous passage text, his statement, the catalogue interview. Without that context, the more readily available qualities of the pictures—the repetition of size, format, and imagery—make them somewhat inscrutable. This isn't necessarily a criticism, but rather an acknowledgment of the difficulties, if not the impossibilities, burdened upon these works. "Is it a show of paintings? No." reads Martínez Celaya's text in the threshold passage. "And are they paintings?"