Today, to claim any significance or meaning, even if only to ourselves, is to flirt with ridicule.
—Enrique Martinez Celaya, 1998

In the last analysis man has no more knowledge of himself than mastery over himself. Again and again he must let himself be shown who he is.
—Karl Barth, 1961

We are all literalists most or all of our lives.
Presentness is grace.
—Michael Fried, 1967

THE OCTOBER CYCLE, 2000–2002

The preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes writes that there is a time for everything, "a time to be silent and a time to speak," and later warns, "[D]raw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools" (Eccles. 3.7, 5.1). It will be useful to consider this ancient wisdom as we explore Enrique Martinez Celaya's October Cycle. The contemporary art world seems to demand that we "give the sacrifice of fools," which produces a constant chatter that often drowns out the still, small voice of aesthetic presence. The literary critic George Steiner has gone so far as to argue that the prevalence of such interpretive discourse is intended to insulate us from the radical effects of encountering the Other manifest in aesthetic form and the scary proposition that it might change our lives, "convert" us in unforeseen ways.1 Talk, interpretation, and criticism have often served to domesticate, tame, and even mute the power and impact of art, reducing it to just another text that engenders yet more discourse.

Enrique Martinez Celaya's October Cycle, 2000–2002, offers an explicit, if unconscious, challenge to the monotonous discourse that textualizes the experience of visual art and converts it into an aesthetic illustration of critical theory or philosophy. The October Cycle also marks a shift in the artist's own aesthetic development.
Martínez Celaya’s Honolulu retrospective exhibition of 2001 challenged him in important ways. Perhaps the scope of the task of “defining” nine years of his artistic life (1992–2000) as “significant” and “important” had the reverse effect of producing a sense of incompleteness. The October Cycle’s exclusive focus on twenty-two large-scale paintings from 2000–2002 is an attempt to drill to the core of Martínez Celaya’s art and life.

The medium of painting occupies a tenuous position in the contemporary art world. Unless it is used to reveal its own artifice, painting seems unable to keep up with sculpture and photography as a suitable form for the expression of postmodern critical discourse. It is apropos, then, that an artist who holds on to such currently unfashionable concepts as morality, ethics, and truth would use a similarly uncommon and unfashionable medium to reveal the relationship between his aesthetic and life projects. The critic Donald B. Kuspit has observed that painting has the “power to evoke and convey what is subjectively fundamental in human experience” and that at its best it “can become an expression of personhood and individuality.” It is not irrelevant, then, that Martínez Celaya views himself first and foremost as a painter.

Martínez Celaya has used a modernist strategy for preserving his aesthetic integrity by guiding the critical reception to his work, whether through installing his own exhibitions, granting interviews, giving lectures, or writing poetry and prose. But the October Cycle suggests a shift in this practice. And Martínez Celaya’s publication of Guide, which accompanied the first public exhibition of the paintings in the October Cycle, might be an attempt to force himself outside the deep grooves of the current interpretive frameworks within which his work resides, frameworks he is largely responsible for establishing. Although it does not seek to “explain” his current work, Guide makes undeniably explicit the artist’s often overlooked concern with ethics, morality, and the spiritual.

The October Cycle represents Martínez Celaya’s desire to find spiritual presence by exploring the immanent and the transcendent through the materials of painting. Whatever else it does, the October Cycle evokes a sacramental quality that contrasts sharply with the secularism of much contemporary art world discourse, following, in the end, Wittgenstein’s assertion that the existence of ethics and morality cannot be logically proved but only observed. The paintings in the October Cycle are aesthetic sacraments that bring forth Martínez Celaya’s emerging worldview.
Who Is Enrique Martínez Celaya?

Two essential components are crucial to understanding Enrique Martínez Celaya: his identity as an exile and his interest in physics (fig. 1). Martínez Celaya has always defined himself as an exile. He was born in Cuba in 1964 and raised in Cuba, Spain, and Puerto Rico. His family’s move to Spain from Cuba was a catastrophic event in his life: in Guide, the artist confesses to his conversation partner Thomas, “I think I leaped from a cliff when we left Cuba and the fall, which took twenty years, shrunk my capacity to focus on the present” (18). As the Palestinian literary and cultural critic Edward Said has observed, an exile is simultaneously at home and homeless in the world. This has affected every aspect of Martínez Celaya’s art and life. He observes, “My exile makes me a stranger to myself, a suspicious foreigner” (Guide, 24). Art is the means by which he has attempted to reconcile himself to himself and find a home, a dwelling. It is within this context that his much commented-on interest in exploring memory and nostalgia must be interpreted. His interest in the past is in the service of recovering it, even if that recovery is partial or distorted.

The aesthetician Paul Crowther has argued that memory, both “voluntary” and “involuntary,” plays a fundamental role in aesthetic form. For Crowther involuntary memory, although more ephemeral, is also more powerful because “it does not deal with schematic facts subject to immediate recall, but involves, rather, more indirect and profound sense of times, places, feelings, and situations, which are involuntarily triggered in response to items or events associated with those times, places, feelings, etc.” Martínez Celaya’s early work plumbs the depths of voluntary and involuntary memory in an attempt to give meaning to his past by constructing a narrative of his life.

An important theme that reoccurs in Martínez Celaya’s aesthetic exploration of his past is spiritual presence, whether in the unique Caribbean manifestation of his family’s Roman Catholicism and their forays into the occult and Santeria, or through the artist’s own interest in German idealist and romantic philosophers, composers, poets, and painters. A key theme for Martínez Celaya is recovering the vitality of presence, the spiritual, mystical, magical, and divine made manifest through the artifacts and rituals (religious and intellectual) that were ubiquitous throughout his childhood and imbued his life with meaning, order, and substance.
Martínez Celaya’s intellectual precocity was discovered at a very early age, particularly as it related to his aptitude for physics. He recalls that as a young child he would often avoid stressful family encounters by spending the afternoon in his room designing experiments. He served as valedictorian of his high school and received a scholarship to study physics at Cornell University. After receiving his undergraduate degree at Cornell, Martínez Celaya matriculated at the University of California–Berkeley, in one of the world’s foremost physics graduate programs. Throughout his studies at Cornell and Berkeley, however, Martínez Celaya remained interested in art and pursued it as time permitted.

Science appealed to Martínez Celaya because of its clarity and its institutionalized belief in—and search for—truth. But his love for art gradually surpassed his love for physics. In response to Thomas’s question about why the artist did not pursue physics, Martínez Celaya responds, “I loved physics but the questions that started to pre-occupy me then didn’t have scientific answers” (Guide, 38). Comparing art to science, the artist observes, “[I]n art, I confronted my life and tried to process it, and in physics, I tried to detach myself from my life and find a purer place, a place that was less complicated and less compromised” (Guide, 24). But, “as I got older, it became more difficult to leave my life at the door of the lab. In art, everything could be brought in” (Guide, 37). A turn to art was consequently a turn toward his personal difficulties, toward confronting his identity as an exile and his complex and confusing childhood, all as part of the process of discovering who he was and who he might be. For Martínez Celaya art was the only means to order how he was experiencing the world—to apply the cosmic order and meaning he discovered in physics to his own life. But bringing everything to art and using it to confront his life has proved just as difficult and arduous as leaving his life at the door of his lab in Berkeley or Brookhaven.

Although he ultimately chose to pursue art rather than physics, Martínez Celaya did not choose the “personal” or “subjective” over the “universal” or “objective.” He carried the scientific quest for objectivity, universality, and truth into his art-making. For Martínez Celaya art is not about emoting or celebrating the “artifice” of representation but rather about using aesthetic form to reveal truth. And truth for Martínez Celaya is not merely linguistic or mathematical, but existential, incorporating both the objective and subjective.
Before he could engage in the artistic quest for truth via aesthetic form, Martínez Celaya had to struggle through his past: he did this by darting back and forth frenetically between painting, watercolor, photography, sculpture, and installation, all the while critiquing, exploring, and questioning. The turning point in this process might be found in the installation Coming Home (2000), in which a tarred-and-feathered boy and elk confront each other (fig. 2). In the installation, the boy faces the elk: between its antlers is perched a mirror, the classic visual trope alluding to self-reflection. Coming Home lays the groundwork on which the October Cycle is built. It objectifies the relationship between self and Other in the most materially direct manner possible through showing two beings—a human and a beast—confronting one another. The use of materials of “shame” (tar and feathers) adds to the awkward and tension-filled confrontation. And it is in this confrontation, where the presence of the Other is engaged face-to-face, that Martínez Celaya seems to be shifting away from his previous work, from using art to recover and work through the past to using it as a quest to engage the present and the future. This seems to be the reason for the palpable sense of the sacred or the liturgical in Coming Home.
The sacred and the liturgical are omnipresent, if understated or deemphasized, themes throughout Martínez Celaya’s early work. Indeed, much of his early work, particularly his paintings, serves an iconic function, emphasizing the spiritual and sacred component of his role as an artist and the presence in the works of art he creates. For example, Pena (Sorrow) suggests a sacramental act of blessing or forgiveness (fig. 3), while St. Catherine (Spirit) functions as a sacred relic (fig. 4) and Frankness (Work of Mercy) depicts the artist engaged in a ceremonial ritual (fig. 5). Before acquiring Thing and Deception (fig. 6) for the Sheldon’s permanent collection, I put to Martínez Celaya a series of questions about the condition of the painting. He responded: “Over the years it has developed cracks that I find wonderful—the fragility and aging of the object directly interact with the image and the suggestions of memory and mortality that are invoked by the covered rabbit.” The work itself, then, is an icon, created for devotional use.
Martínez Celaya’s studio on North La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles is nothing if not a sacred space set apart for the serious labor of spiritual work. Written in marker on the wall of this space is the same inscription that has sanctified all his studios: “Keep your actions faithful.” This invests even the most simple and banal of “art-related” actions with sacred meaning (figs. 7, 8). The artist’s use of music while he works, particularly Beethoven and Mozart’s haunting Requiem Mass, further sanctifies his space. He has even sanctified public exhibition spaces: at the first showing of paintings from the October Cycle, at Griffin Contemporary Art, in Venice, California, Margo Timmins of the Cowboy Junkies “consecrated” the gallery space with an a cappella performance of the haunting spiritual “Mining for Gold,” which the band recorded on their 1988 album, entitled Trinity Session.
What Is the October Cycle?

The new direction represented in the October Cycle is dramatically illustrated by the following anecdote: For some time, several collectors had been considering purchasing a large white painting of Martínez Celaya's that explored the artist's childhood experiences growing up in the Caribbean. The artist received a call from his dealer requesting that he display the painting so a collector could come by the studio to view it, but before the collector even had a chance to see the painting, the artist had repainted it, focusing on a new interest, his baby daughter, Gabriela. Gabriela (First) features a figure either throwing or catching a baby who seems to hover suspended in the air.

If the origins of this painting can be taken as emblematic of the October Cycle, then we may conclude that the past now seems to have less of a hold on Martínez Celaya. Indeed, in response to Thomas's question about whether he has “stopped falling” after leaving Cuba, he says, “[I]t feels different now” (Guide, 18).

Martínez Celaya is drawn to the work of the remarkable but largely unknown Swedish mystic Hilma Af Klint, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, painted stunning abstract paintings but was reluctant to show them to the public because she intended them to be exhibited as a complete body, an aesthetic universe, as it were. Although he says that he does not understand the specific iconographical meaning of Af Klint's paintings, Martínez Celaya has observed that when he views them, he feels as if he were in the presence of a cosmic order, a system of thought and expression that is “right.” The October Cycle is likely to produce a similar feeling in viewers. Although the origin of the October Cycle lay in a poem, the paintings are not literary; nor do they narrate, although lay in a poem, the paintings are not literary; nor do they narrate, although their imagery is fundamentally figurative. Instead, they function as icons, an aesthetic form that invites contemplation of the transcendent through the immanent. For Martínez Celaya the October Cycle is not merely a reflection on “spirituality” in general but on how and in what ways his life is sacramental.

The paintings in the October Cycle, then, do not speak their influence or articulate their aesthetic and philosophical debts in the same manner as had such previous works of Martínez Celaya's as La Otra Prisión (The Other Prison) 1992, which recalls the influence of Germans Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer.
in its conceptualism and alchemical approach to materials (fig. 9). Beuys and Kiefer figure prominently in Martínez Celaya’s early interest in his own history and with memory and nostalgia, but Kiefer’s “undecidability” and Beuys’s “ambiguity,” echoes of which are evident in his Thing and Deception, seem conspicuously absent in his recent paintings. But what, then, is the October Cycle’s lexicon?

The first and most obvious is black. Martínez Celaya has observed that he thought that he had moved beyond black after his own “Black Paintings” of the early 1990s, but, as he says, it continues to come back (fig. 10). The blackness in the October Cycle recalls the backdrops of Goya’s tragic Black Paintings and perhaps even Ad Reinhardt’s use of black as an absolute negation of all that gets in the way of the aesthetic. The black in Martínez Celaya’s paintings does indeed signal that something of terrible importance is manifest. In the October Cycle black serves to alter the environment, to signal a change in context: this is particularly evident when the paintings are shown together. Black serves also to signal formality, perhaps separating the exhibition space from the world. It suggests silence, not that which terrified Pascal and Kierkegaard and which is communicated in Goya’s Black Paintings, but one of focused contemplative dwelling in the presence of the sacred.

This black is not atmospheric but thick and viscous, as is emphasized in the sticky and murky tactility of the tar and impasto oil paint on canvas or velvet (fig. 11). It does not function simply as a formal device—a compositional backdrop—but calls attention to the physicality of paint, to the unique capacity of matter to evoke the immaterial. In all sacred liturgical rituals, objects—usually the most banal and absurd—take on significant meaning. The October Cycle is rife with such objects, such as the rainbow that suggests hope, the giant conch shell that evokes soul and depth, and the bubble that reflects playfulness. For Martínez Celaya, then, black serves to underscore two elements that Kuspit has described as fundamental to authentically spiritual art: silence, or the capacity to distinguish the experience of art as separate from the banality and noise of the world; and alchemy, the artist’s ability to transform common materials into valuable means for transcendence.10

In contrast to the murky and materialistic blackness of these paintings, the figures in them are luminous. A subtle glow appears to backlight the figures, lending to them an intensified aura of dramatic charge.
German culture has provided Martínez Celaya with a dynamic repository of “departing metaphors” for his art and poetry. The artist was exposed to German art and literature as part of his childhood education, and Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Hegel, Paul Celan, Mozart, and Beethoven figure prominently, although indirectly, in his work. He seems interested in these figures for two reasons. First, he is attracted to the seriousness with which German artists, poets, and thinkers take Being, becoming, and the impact of time as a constituent component of the unfolding of meaning. Second, he is drawn to these artist-thinkers as people, interested in the relationship between their art and their lives. He has thus been drawn to the Holocaust survivor and exile Celan’s quest to wrest the German language from the abyss of Nazism; to the peculiar ethics and asceticism of Wittgenstein; and finally, and most recently, to Beethoven’s deathbed, where the composer reflected on his life, his art, and his spiritual destiny, while at the same time serving as a “living” relic for his admirers. Martínez Celaya’s trip to Germany in 1998 culminated in the artist book Berlin, which features photographs taken in Berlin and fragments from his sketchbooks written between March and August 1998 that serve as “moments of belief” (p. 12; see fig. 12).

In Guide, Thomas asks the artist why he is interested in Beethoven. He responds:

I: People like Beethoven bring me closer to the moments that you’re speaking about. I think there’s something to understand there—some insight—in a great man dying with bedsores on his back.

He: Why Beethoven?

I: Beethoven and his music span something of a universe of options between the sublime, the abject, the nostalgic and the moral. Somewhere in there is the mystery of life, and not just his life. For me, Beethoven’s last moments is the means to something, not the end. (112)

But it is the October Cycle paintings themselves, not the artist’s statements about them, that will suggest the ends. And it appears from my vantage point that the ends might be even more ambitious and consequential than even Martínez Celaya is willing to acknowledge. Is it possible that his art suggests a
confrontation with presence that he unconsciously deflects through his fluency in philosophical and poetic language? From this perspective, Guide cannot be made to “explain” Martínez Celaya’s paintings. In fact, it is probable that the artist’s identity is constructed through both characters, “He” and “I,” thus echoing the pattern of Jorge Luis Borges’s famous story “Borges and I.”

The October Cycle begs to be experienced, not interpreted; its horizons of meaning and significance are expanded, not restricted, not even by the artist’s own eloquent and insightful statements. I am convinced that Martínez Celaya recognizes this. The critic’s responsibility, following Kuspit, is to keep the artist from limiting the scope of his or her art, to wrest it from the grasp of even the well-intentioned artist, in order to demonstrate how it might have universal meaning. The October Cycle embodies this critical sensibility of universality.

The iconography of the October Cycle is, like that of Klint’s work, intensely personal and highly idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, because of the deep cultural meaning of such elements as the forest, birches, rainbows, and light, the October Cycle seems to invite the kind of deep “etymological” archaeology that Martin Heidegger performed on the German language in order to tease out echoes of Being. Despite the importance of this endeavor, this essay is not the place to unpack his fascinating iconography. Rather, I suggest a framework for experiencing these works that is rooted not in philosophy and aesthetics, but in spirituality.

The Sheldon’s installation of October Cycle corresponds to three manifestations of the spiritual as articulated by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow in his revealing study of postwar spirituality in the U.S. Wuthnow’s categories are: dwelling, seeking, and practice.

For Wuthnow a “spirituality of dwelling” or “habitation” consists in seeking to experience the sacred in special places, such as churches or temples. As I have mentioned, Martínez Celaya views his studio as a sacred place that sanctifies or blesses his hard work; it reflects the artist’s interest in sacred places, or contexts, where actions, objects, and images achieve transcendent meaning and spiritual significance. The most pregnant symbol of such dwellings in the paintings is the forest, a “place” that evokes communion or connection with the meaning that lies beneath the surface of appearances. Rain, October, Snowfall, and Birch (Wood-Milk) all refer to special places—cut off from the mundane world—where the sacred can be experienced.
The “spirituality of seeking” or “negotiation” consists of the personal—even lonely—search for spiritual presence. Martínez Celaya’s decision to avoid using institutional religions to define his spiritual life, and his early interest in Zen (a privatized form of spirituality that has even interested such mystical Christians as Thomas Merton), reaffirm this concern to view spirituality as not simply resident in a set of doctrinal beliefs or even a sacred locality, but as a continual process toward discovery. But, for Martínez Celaya, and in contrast to much Zen and Buddhist thought, self-discovery or self-dissolution is not an ultimate concern. His rational, realist view of the world does not allow him to remain content with the belief that meaning is merely personal. Personal meaning must, in some way, result in a relationship with the world’s truth. Paintings such as The Helper and Boatboy, with their sailing imagery, cast the adventure of the quest or discovery of meaning in one’s life as a voyage. His use of a sharp, direct light as exemplified in Light and Light and Figures (Almonds) signifies a momentary revelation of truth or perhaps even a divine “in-breaking” that illumines, ever so briefly, the world: one sees in a lightning strike—if only briefly—the world as it really is and not as the distorted shadows that reflect off the walls of our darkened earthly caves (fig. 13).

The third and final category is the “practice of spirituality,” which Wuthnow views as a spirituality rooted not simply in sacred places or in the lonely search for beliefs, but in actual practice, that is, in acting in such a way as to allow beliefs to affect and shape behavior, developing practices that actually shape and discipline one’s own life. This concept is the source of Martínez Celaya’s concern for art as an ethical activity; it is manifest through those paintings that show figures acting or performing simple gestures that imbue mundane, ordinary activities with sacredness (Seated Figure, Gabriela I, and Logbook).

For Martínez Celaya art—symbolized most clearly in the medium of painting—embodies all three manifestations of contemporary spirituality. The studio (and the gallery space) offers the dwelling for an experience of the sacred; the process of making art, the very process articulated and pointed to through the artist’s means of composing art, suggests seeking, embarking on the journey or the “walk” of life; and ultimately, the very act of art-making, the discipline required to make art, is found in the solemn actions of his figures.

Echoing a common concern among western philosophers about the specter of Being and Nothingness, Liebniz asks, “Why is there not nothing?”
Martínez Celaya answers this question in his very practice as an artist. The *October Cycle* offers aesthetic testimony to creation, to the sacred, to the transcendent, and to the immanent. This seems to be sufficient evidence for Martínez Celaya that the world has meaning and coherence with which he must develop a personal relationship. The immanent, the immediate, and the banal have significance, then, only because of the existence of transcendent meaning. Without transcendence, the banal remains brute existence. For Martínez Celaya art, particularly painting, is Eucharistic. It is the transubstantiation of matter—smelly oils and sticky tar—into a vessel for spiritual presence. These paintings don’t merely “represent” or “memorialize” spiritual presence, or “signify” transcendence; they simply are presence and transcendence. Artistic practice, then, for Martínez Celaya, is inherently spiritual, and, perhaps, a wager on the very existence of God. The spiritual, the transcendent, and the sacred are real to Martínez Celaya. And this is not simply of importance to him as an artist, but as a human being. These paintings are the tools through which he explores and discovers the cosmic order and develops a personal relationship with it.
Conclusion

George Steiner begins his study of the “real presence” of the transcendent by imagining an anti-Platonic Republic in which there is no “secondary” discourse, commentary, or criticism, only primary aesthetic production. Likewise, the October Cycle is Martínez Celaya’s endeavor to explore meaning—aesthetic, moral, ethical, and spiritual—through the material particularity and specificity of painting. In contrasting art to philosophy, Kuspit argues that philosophy ignores art’s “practice,” that it “exaggerates the artwork into an epistemological problem, into the problem of epistemology itself.” It thus ignores the “concreteness that is the source of the artwork’s intense particularity.” Thus art is not ultimately about ideas, it is a “knot of consciousness, an intransigent texture not easily shaped to intellectual order.” Art is to be experienced, and the October Cycle offers a stunning celebration of silence, the silence of an aesthetic experience that cannot be separated from the experience of transcendence. In the last analysis, the October Cycle is not about ideas, philosophy, or systems: it is an aesthetic demonstration of transcendent presence, a presence that saturates our language and actions, even though we often build elaborate intellectual edifices in a systematic attempt to forget or deny it. Naming that presence is not Martínez Celaya’s task. Living in its light is his aesthetic and ethical project.

Presentness is indeed grace.
Notes


