

# The Body of Death, Pictured

By Dr. R. R. Reno

We are not at home in the world, at least not in our current damaged condition. As St. Augustine put it: we long to untangle ourselves from the earthly city and its wounding self-loves so that we can journey toward the heavenly city, but our bondage is self-wrought, and we cannot free ourselves.

The paintings, images, and sculptures in the Museum of Biblical Art's recently opened collection of Enrique Martínez Celaya's work, "The Wanderer," unsettle. They do so because they evoke the fact that we are not at home in the world, that we are damaged and entangled in the earthly city.

In his work, the human forms are always solitary and isolated, often slumping and sometimes seemingly wounded or injured. The subject matter is universal: our troubled humanity. If there is a biblical theme—as one perhaps expects at the Museum of Biblical Art—it comes from St. Paul: "Who will deliver me from this body of death" (Rom 7:24).

One figure, a boy, has been fabricated in a fashion that makes him look mummified. He stands awkwardly in a glass case.

His mouth and genitals are covered with dried flower petals that look busy and aggressive, almost diseased. He is isolated and disfigured. Like so many of Martínez Celaya's human figures, he seems neither dead nor alive. Instead, suspended and forlorn, he waits with an inwardly numbed patience for an unknown relief.

As I walked through the galley, I found myself averting my eyes, wishing to walk past, as I so often do when disfigured and damaged people on the streets of New York ask me for change. As a result, this piece of art, however remote from an explicitly biblical theme, has an effect not unlike



**Boy In Vitrine**, 2004, Paint, dirt, tar, straw, pins, hair, steel, plaster, glass, wire and flowers

many of the parables of Jesus: it exposes the Pharisee in me.

This in contrast to the garish, exhibitionist work of Damien Hirst. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has acquired one of his pieces, an embalmed shark encased in a large glass display. The passerby may feel excited by the aggressive image with its sharp jaws of death. But the effect is short-lived, giving way to giggling whispers like those exchanged among a clutch of young girls I overheard when I last visited.

The giggles reflected sound critical judgment. Hirst is an artistic entertainer. Not so Martínez Celaya. Viewing the young boy in the glass case, one recoils, but also empathizes. He seems almost frighteningly vulnerable—the sort of person who might end up requiring a great deal from us in the way of support, which is why we recoil. And yet we know we should care. I rarely feel a complicated moral response when viewing contemporary art. For the most part the impact is aesthetic, technical, or ideological. Some work achieves an attractive beauty for its own sake. Some involves

creative manipulation of various visual techniques, or virtuoso performances. But the ambitious contemporary efforts to make art "say" something typically involves images of oppression, or of the gross excesses of consumer culture.

These are worthy of artistic treatment, of course, but the result is work that can be analyzed and reflected upon rather than encountered as a direct personal challenge to our moral characters. That Martínez Celaya can achieve this moral challenge sets his work apart.



**The Song of the Thrush**, 2007, Oil and wax on canvas

A number of paintings in this show reinforce our sense of moral need and failure. Some depict snow-covered landscapes, places pure yet uninhabitable. In "The Song of the Thrush" the snow gives way to muddy ruts in backwoods pathways that lead into dark forests. We are on a journey, but we've yet to arrive.



**The Orchard**, 2009, Oil and wax on canvas

In “The Orchard,” the landscape is a place of water-logged rot, dreary and lifeless. Water that should be the source of life chokes and drowns. Creation is out of sorts, groaning, as St. Paul writes, in a bondage to decay that echoes our own inner bondage and moral decay (Rom 8:22-23).

When human figures are present in this collection, they are often painted overtop rather than inside the landscapes, emphasizing our alienation, as in “December 2003.”



**December 2003**, 2004, Oil and tar on canvas

The Museum of Biblical Art’s exhibition of Martínez Celaya’s work has been coordinated with an installation of four huge canvases by him along the sidewalls of the nave of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In these paintings Martínez Celaya’s brooding moods remain predominant. Mud-puddled landscapes, a mountain lake at dusk with an empty, drifting boat, a young figure on crutches who is being strangled by his burden—these monumental canvases provide moments to contemplate our unhappy condition, our sin-soiled lives.

The most striking canvas in this foursome, “Muddy Path,” depicts a winter scene. Snow covers the ground in a forest of denuded trees. The muddy margins of a languid stream—or perhaps a water-filled rutted path—eat away the half-melted snow. Thin layers of melting ice float on the surface of the unmoving water.



**The Muddy Path**, 2010, Oil and wax on canvas

This painting struck me as a visual triumph, capturing a mood of existential exhaustion: the winter-blackened bark of cold traumatized trees, the browned edges of melting snow that is losing its frigid, dominating grip on the winter landscape, stagnant water, half-frozen mud.

I’ve walked through such places on grey and damp winter days that are neither cold enough to give life a crystalline, frozen purity, nor warm enough to encourage hope for new life. No, not walked, but rather trudged with tired, wet feet in a fine winter rain that can’t make up its mind whether or not it wants to be sleet. In those dusky moments I’ve wanted nothing more than to be home.

“From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.” The Christian tradition encourages us to contemplate the futility of our endeavors. Our eager and energetic efforts are for naught, as any serious contemplation of our

own imminent deaths remind us. The art of Martínez Celaya encourages this memento mori. His work is true to the banality, the ordinariness, and the personal reality of sin and death.

The exhibitions at the Museum of Biblical Art and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine are well worth visiting, for Martínez Celaya’s moral realism evokes the most biblical of all questions: Who indeed shall deliver us from this body of death?

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