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Broken Angel

A new exhibition rescues artist Martin Ramirez from his "Outsider" status

by **Jerry Saltz**

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Martin Ramírez (1895–1963) is the 20th-century Fra Angelico. Like the 15th-century sainted Italian who combined elements of Medieval art with nascent renaissance styles, thereby transforming them into something ravishingly new and forceful, Ramírez extended a mosaic of visual traditions, among them, Mexican folk painting, Spanish liturgical woodblocks, movie magazines, travel posters, vernacular Mexican church architecture, and carved Madonnas from his home parish. In the process Ramírez created something transcendently powerful, beautiful, and new. Not only is Ramírez the best of the so-called "Self-Taught" or "Outsider" artists—baldly limiting, not to mention bogus categories considering that on some level all artists are self-taught—but he ranks as among the greatest artists of the 20th century, along with three other so-called "outsiders," Adolf Wölfli, Henry Darger, and Bill Traylor.

For a glimpse of an angelic visual energy and earthy intensity, treat yourself to the *Martin Ramirez* retrospective at the American Folk Art Museum. Impeccably organized and installed in this sadly-broken-up, narrow building by the museum's messianically dedicated director and curator, Brooke Davis Anderson, this survey rescues Ramírez from the "Outsider" category, presenting nearly 90 works grouped thematically and stylistically. The show establishes that rather than being some easy-to-feel-sorry-for illiterate, insane, mute, Mexican holy-man, Ramírez was literate, sane, and a brilliant draftsman who skillfully melded biography, history, hope, religion, and tragedy.

The tragedy began on August 24, 1925, when Ramírez, then 30, left his wife and four children in central Mexico to find work in the United States. For six years he labored on the railroads and mines of northern California. Then, in January 1931 Ramírez's world collapsed. Not speaking any English and suffering in the throes of the Great Depression, Ramírez was picked up by police as a vagrant. He was then misdiagnosed as schizophrenic, catatonic, and manic depressive, and committed to California's Stockton State Hospital. There, he spent the next 17 years of his life. In 1948 he was transferred to DeWitt State Hospital, also in northern California, where he remained until the day he died in 1963. He never saw his wife and family or the outside world again.

The aesthetic part of this 32-year season in hell began in 1949 when, by an act of art-historical grace, Tarmo Pasto, a gifted psychologist working at DeWitt, fell under the spell of Ramírez's art and began saving it. After amassing around 300 works and arranging several exhibitions of Ramírez's work, Pasto left DeWitt to teach at Sacramento State College. There, he made Ramírez's drawings available to other teachers for art and art history courses. In the fall of 1968, artist Jim Nutt happened across these drawings. Utterly floored, he contacted his art dealer, Phyllis Kind, and the two of them arranged to purchase almost all of the Ramírez works from Pasto. The two Chicagoans then



Ramirez's "Untitled (Horse and Rider)"

Courtesy of L. & L. Feiwei

Martin Ramirez
American Folk Art Museum
45 West 53rd Street
Through April 29

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set about restoring the drawings and diligently spread the word. In one last bittersweet twist, however, Ramírez's grand-daughters saw their relative's art for the first time only the day before this retrospective opened last month, and according to a recent New York Times article, no one in the Ramírez family has ever made a dime from this work.

Ramírez's genius is a confluence of stylistic influences, pictorial inventiveness, private musing, and sheer visual revelry. Although he is a great linear artist, his regularly repeating and parallel, careful-but-not-fussy lines form enticingly beautiful, powerfully built pictorial wholes that congeal into supple undulating or radiating masses. Everything seems to emit a glow that is at once otherworldly but also very much part of the world. Interweaving elements of abstraction, naturalism, ornamentalism, calligraphy, modernist collage, and visionary verve, Ramírez's art has a way of being asymmetrically symmetrical – compositions are balanced bi-laterally, but not quite; things on the left often repeat whatever is on the right, but not exactly. This is why his drawings rarely collapse into bull's-eye neutrality or deadening equilibrium. Like many early woodblocks, or even Ingres's riveting "Napoleon Enthroned in Majesty," Ramírez's work exudes a shocking frontality. His space is at once modern, pre-modern, flat, illusionistic, and fanciful: cave painting by way of illuminated manuscripts.

Ramírez's subjects fall into several basic categories. His beloved horse and rider almost always appears in an archway, atop a stage, in front of klieg lights. They are centaurs and saints, circus performers, movie stars, and memories of days gone by. In his pictures of trains in rolling landscapes, we're treated to a combination of mathematical precision and chaos, odd visual combinations that morph into relief maps and prayer rugs. His enthroned madonnas, meanwhile, bring us back to Ingres as well as to classical Greek vase painting where the material, mythological, religious, and symbolic worlds merge. The connection to Fra Angelico is always there in the way that Ramírez's art, as ambitious, worldly, and austere as it is, is also humble, devout, filled with presence, reverence, poise, and love.

Positively 27th Street Carving out a home for good nature in Chelsea

A little more than a year ago, more than a half-dozen intrepid art dealers proved that the high-priced mega-mall known as the Chelsea art district was more hospitable and affordable than many thought. Colonizing a series of grungy loading docks on the north side of West 27th Street (in an immense building that had once been home to The Tunnel nightclub), these galleries carved out small, comfy ground-floor spaces. For fans of these galleries, like me, a first flush of excitement about these dealers vying for greater visibility was soon followed by the realization that each of these galleries had to now reinforce and define their pre-existing identities so as to avoid the too-easy, potentially deadly rubric, *27th Street Galleries*. Happily, this is happening. Watching the ups and downs of this process is getting exciting.

Picking one of these galleries at random, rather than by pecking order, consider the current OK show at Foxy Production, a gallery fast confirming that it has an eye for notably original artists like Sterling Ruby, Chris Moukarbel, Ester Partegas, Michael Bell-Smith, and the collective known as Paper Rad, among others. "Networked Nature," the nicely weird, somewhat generic group exhibition now on view was curated by Rhizome, a collective that claims the exhibition "explores the representation of nature through the perspective of networked culture."

Although that sounds vague and tautological to me, the show still manages to intrigue. Among the standouts, there's the inflating-deflating starfish ceiling sculpture (a bit too reminiscent of Sarah Sze) by the nevertheless very talented Shih Chieh Huang; "Photosynthesis Robot," two houseplants riding atop a cart, by the collective known as Futurefarmers, who say the piece is a "possible perpetual motion machine driven by phototropism." Also nice is Gail Wright's time-lapse video of a dyed slime mold, as well as the so-called "self-contained survival capsules for living plants" by Phillip Ross. Then there's Steven Vitello's houseplant with little speakers. Listen carefully and you'll discern snippets of that frightening exchange accidentally recorded at a recent conference of world leaders in which our president—interrupting Tony Blair's sober attempts to discuss the war between Israel and Lebanon—needles the British prime minister about whether or not he liked the sweater he sent him for Christmas. Now that's weird nature.

Networked Nature, at Foxy Production, 617 West 27th Street. Through February 18

jsaltz@villagevoice.com