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ART REVIEW | MARTÍN RAMÍREZ

## Outside In

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

The American Folk Art Museum's transporting exhibition of the scroll-like drawings of the Mexican artist Martín Ramírez (1895-1963) should render null and void the insider-outsider distinction.

Ramírez, who created the roughly 300 drawings that make up his known work between 1948 and 1963 while confined to a mental hospital in Northern California, is simply one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. He belongs to the group of accessible, irresistible genius draftsmen that includes Paul Klee, Saul Steinberg and Charles Schulz. Well selected and beautifully installed by Brooke Davis Anderson, a curator at the folk art museum, this show of 97 drawings, some mural-size, is the first museum exhibition of Ramírez's work in New York and one of the best shows of the season.

Whatever ideas about art you hold dear, expect them to be healthily destabilized here. If a purely visual, white-cube experience of the autonomous art object is your thing, you may be startled by the illuminating correlations between the artist's newly excavated biography and his pulsating images.

If you think art is anything but autonomous and that, rather than speaking for itself, it mainly says what we want it to say, then you must deal with the way these works made enough noise to survive against almost impossible odds.

If you revere outsider artists as pure, isolated, often insane visionaries who exist outside time and place, make way for a so-called outsider whose work reflected many of the specifics of his cultural and historic moment. In addition, Ramírez's art was in step with the explorations of many "insider" artists of his time, especially in his use of collage and images from popular culture.

Ramírez had an indelible style built on a supreme sense of economy and shot through with a mix of sly humor and sunny optimism that coats deeper, darker feelings. He had his own way with materials and color — buoyed by an unerring sensitivity to the power of blank paper — and a cast of unforgettable characters, including mounted caballeros, levitating Madonnas, and deer and dogs on high alert. But most of all Ramírez had his own brand of pictorial space, which he regulated with rhythmic systems of parallel lines, curved and straight. He played spatial illusion as if it were an accordion, expanding and contracting it in a mesmerizing play of stasis and movement.

He might orchestrate the curved lines into stepped, hivelike hills punctuated by dark tunnels where ornate trains and buglike cars or buses chug in or out along extravagantly banked roadways or railroad beds defined by further lines. The straight lines might form fluted, beautifully shaded proscenium stages that bring to mind old-time movie screens. Here we usually find the caballero aiming his pistol in one direction while pointing his reined-in steed in another, as if ready to wheel and dash to safety. This character is Ramírez's signature motif: the show begins with a posse of 19 caballero drawings, double- and triple-hung on a single wall.

Ramírez changed my art-world view 21 years ago when I was invited to write an essay for the first large, high-profile exhibition of his work, at the Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia. At that time the facts about his life were scant. His birth date was calculated as 1885 instead of 1895. He was thought to have migrated from Mexico around 1915, not 1925, to work on the railroads being built in Northern California, where he was hospitalized in the early 1930s and shortly thereafter found to have schizophrenia. He lived out his years in DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, near Sacramento. (It was later discovered that the initial years of his confinement were at Stockton State Hospital.)

At DeWitt in 1948, a psychologist and artist of Finnish descent named Tarmo Pasto discovered Ramírez and began to save the large drawings he made on available bits of paper glued together with a paste made of bread or potatoes and saliva. In the first gallery at the Folk Art Museum, note the handle of a brown-paper shopping bag at the top edge of a tall, narrow landscape dominated by winding stairs interspersed with white churches and roadside chapels.

Dr. Pasto began bringing Ramírez art materials, and at one point lived on the grounds of DeWitt, a former Army camp, so he could observe Ramírez every day. In the early '50s he helped arrange four solo shows of Ramírez's work, most of them on college campuses, including Syracuse. In 1955 Dr. Pasto sent 10 drawings to the [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#), but never heard back. A museum intern rediscovered them in the mid-1990s, and they were officially accessioned in 1997; all of them have been lent to this exhibition.

In 1968 the Chicago artist Jim Nutt met Dr. Pasto when both men were teaching at Sacramento State, and eventually persuaded him to sell most of his Ramírez drawings to Mr. Nutt and his art dealer, Phyllis Kind. Dr. Pasto wanted to send his son to medical school, and the drawings needed extensive conservation. He could not afford either.

This show is in a sense a tribute to the dedication of Dr. Pasto, who died in 1986, shortly after the opening of the Moore College show, which he was too sick to see. But the Folk Art Museum exhibition and its catalog also benefited from the efforts of Víctor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa (until recently his wife), sociologists who specialize in the history of immigration.

Mr. Espinosa, who is Mexican, was disturbed by the art world's failure to research Ramírez's roots. He eventually discovered that Ramírez had a wife and four children in Mexico, a stream of descendants there and in California and a painful story of separation and isolation on all sides. The Espinosas' research, which extended over 15 years,

enables this exhibition to align Ramírez's art with his life.

Among the facts the Espinosas unearthed: Ramírez drew in the margins of his letters home before he was incarcerated, which questions his inclusion in the art-of-the-insane category. The churches depicted in his drawings are recognizably those of the region he came from, the west-central province of Jalisco. There, it turns out, Ramírez owned a horse and was a skillful rider, which sharpens appreciation of the deft fusions of his caballeros with their mounts. As for the fluted post-and-lintel proscenium that frames them so glamorously, DeWitt had a movie theater, so the caballero is probably part Hollywood cowboy.

Ramírez's shaded lines segue effortlessly from abstract to descriptive and back again, just as his shapes are constantly being adjusted or assigned new roles. When shaded ellipses crown the prosceniums they suggest stage lights; in landscapes they read as cactuses. In one drawing, they are clustered together to form an enormous mountain, complete with a tunnel, that glows from within like a giant jukebox.

Rhythmic surfaces, plunging spaces and various modes of transportation (boats also shunt out of the tunnels, turning the roadways into canals) make visual the themes of distance and separation, isolation and longing. In one drawing, a tiny woman appears at the bottom of a long corridorlike path, while a small man is far above her, boxed in by lines.

Sometimes the prosceniums are inhabited by a man who has shed his sombrero and ammo belts and sits quietly at a table writing letters or perhaps waiting for inspiration to strike. In one of the show's best drawings, the sides of the stage resemble half-open shutters through which this man is seen against a dense black background. The velvety field is broken by a locomotive trundling over a little hillock, like an ever-present memory — an emblem of the way Ramírez revisited his life through his art.

In still other images, the proscenium becomes a portable altarpiece inhabited by a fabulously garbed Madonna with beaming cabochon eyes, a movie-star smile and a spiked crown reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty's. She is a kind of phantom ur-wife. In three exceptionally large drawings, the Madonna breaks free of Ramírez's repeating lines and looms over us nearly life-size — the only figure to be so honored and the only one to assert a full-fledged personality.

Outsider art is often conveniently artist-free; it has been made by someone who is, as the term implies, on the margins — poor, uneducated, nonwhite, mentally ill, dead or otherwise inaccessible. All this makes for an aura of purity and innocence, but also a blankness. The work becomes a vessel, open to interpretation, in need of protection and available for a reverential possession and habitation that is almost a form of colonialism. This exhibition counters such possession by suggesting that Ramírez's art was, like all great art, typically site-specific, that is, firmly rooted in real experiences and memories that he reshaped and distilled according to his needs and talents. The more we know about this artist, the clearer it becomes that we are just beginning to fathom his extraordinary achievement.

*"Martín Ramírez" continues through April 29 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040. It will also be seen at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Oct. 6 through Jan. 6, 2008.*

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