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Martín Ramírez, outsider.

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Martín Ramírez, a Mexican laborer who spent the last thirty-two of his sixty-eight years, until his death, in 1963, as an inmate of California mental hospitals, is my favorite outsider artist. Come to that, he's one of my favorite artists, period. His retrospective at the American Folk Art Museum is a marvel and a joy. The power of his often large drawings of trains, horsemen, and madonnas almost renders moot the old, crabbed issue of outsidership, the wildwood creativity of asocial and eccentric—perhaps mad—loners, which is sentimentalized by some art people and shunned by most. Ramírez remains obscure, though his work has been widely shown since it was discovered by art-world insiders (the Chicago artist Jim Nutt and the dealer Phyllis Kind), in the late nineteen-sixties. Outsider art—lately euphemized as “self-taught,” a vapid label that inconveniently describes originality in general—comes from and goes nowhere in art history. (The outsider is a culture of one.) It defeats normal criticism's tactics of context and comparison. It is barbaric. Can we skirt the imbroglio and regard Ramírez as an ordinary artist with extraordinary qualities? Let's see.

Remarkably little is known of him. From a family of sharecroppers in the conservative, largely Spanish-Creole state of Jalisco, Ramírez became a small rancher, with a wife and four children. Local legend remembers him as a superb horseman. In 1925, deeply in debt, he joined a mighty flow of Mexican workers to the United States for temporary railroad and mining jobs. Starting in 1926, the three-year Cristero Rebellion—in which pious Catholics battled the Draconian anticlerical measures of President Plutarco Elias Calles—raged in Jalisco. Tens of thousands died, on both sides. The Ramírez ranch was devastated. Recent research has uncovered a strange tale: Ramírez misunderstood a letter from home to say that his wife had joined the hated Federal forces, and he vowed never to return. In any case, the family lost track of him for years and, but for a nephew's visit in 1952, had no further contact with him. In 1931, he was picked up by police, apparently deracinated, in San Joaquin County, California, and committed to Stockton State Hospital. In 1948, he was moved to DeWitt State Hospital, near Sacramento. It seems that he made drawings from at least the late twenties on. A sheaf of them sent from Stockton to his family, in 1948, was hung outdoors and later destroyed. What survives is only his mature work, from fifteen years at DeWitt, in a style that must have undergone considerable evolution. Ramírez attracted the enthusiastic attention of Tarmo Pasto, a psychologist and artist who collected and showed his drawings—one exhibition was called “The Art of a Schizophrenic”—and provided him with materials and privileges. In a corner of a ward of some seventy inmates, Ramírez alone had a worktable. He rarely spoke but had, by all accounts, a pleasant disposition. He was given a diagnosis of incurable schizophrenia, tending toward catatonia. Could he have handled normal life among his own people in rural Mexico? There's no telling now.

Rhythmic, expertly managed compositions carve out pictorial space in either, or both, of two ways: with straight hatchings that establish stepped, stagelike recesses; or with curved hatchings that describe receding mounds and valleys. A horseman (at times, a woman), festooned with banderillas and aiming a cocked pistol, or the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, a snake at her feet, commonly inhabits the proscenium. Trains or lines of cars slither amid the mounds, entering or exiting dark tunnels. Incidental figures and decorative motifs are deftly integrated in extended formats as much as eight feet high or ten feet long. Except for many reworkings of the horseman—which I surmise was popular with Ramírez's audience at DeWitt—variation of design and image is constant, full of surprises. The imagery—which includes stags and other animals, cityscapes with churches, and mysterious arcades—looks childlike but is far from crude. Figures that are jiggered together from odd shapes and objects that are reduced to simple geometries bespeak choice; they aren't failed attempts at representation but refined emblems. Paul Klee and Saul Steinberg, among other modern artists, come to mind, but Ramírez's command of pictorial construction, a kind of strictly paced visual music, is all his own.

Technically, most of Ramírez's drawings aren't drawings at all but encaustic-like paintings, done in a fluid paste of melted wax crayons, at times augmented with charcoal, fruit juices, shoe polish, and saliva. He applied it with matchsticks over pencilled designs. The bizarre medium yields a subtly potent density of colors, including black, which is lost in reproduction. Seen in the flesh, the lines and shadings stamp themselves on the eye. (It's as if your sight had suddenly improved.) Material textures give some works painting-like presence. Even with good paper at hand, Ramírez liked to quilt his surfaces from scraps, gluing them with a mixture of bread or oatmeal, saliva, and phlegm. He might attach strips of paper between his hatch lines, with a tactile appeal like that of chine collé (printmaking on layered sheets). Occasionally, he collaged images from magazines. The results, such as a glamour girl's head and shoulders on a drawn rider, are charming and even witty, but formally ragged. Beyond such japes, the only weak pictures in the show are what are quite likely large worksheets, on which Ramírez rehearsed miscellaneous ideas with little thought to their over-all unity.

What is it like to be an outsider? Outside what? Ramírez worked cogently from within his memory, imagination, and talent. He also belonged to an actual culture, that of a mid-century American mental hospital. His wombish mounds and tunnels lend themselves to psychoanalytic interpretation with suspect alacrity. I'll bet they excited the doctors. (We all develop our personal styles by noticing what people like about us, and exaggerating it.) A weekly movie night at DeWitt in the fifties probably featured Westerns, which might have reinvigorated Ramírez's memories of his equestrian days. Trains came and went near both Stockton and DeWitt. Bold drawings of a man seated at a table and, framed above him by converging walls, a passing locomotive—shades of "Folsom Prison Blues"—economically summarize the artist's situation. But Ramírez's work does exude distinct and poignant psychological content: a self-consoling, voluptuous escape into states alternately, or at once, maternal and virile—raptures of a loved boy. He surely suffered, but his subject was an accessible happiness.

Ramírez is one of the Big Three of twentieth-century outsiders, along with the institutionalized Swiss Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) and the reclusive Chicago janitor Henry Darger (1892-1973), both subjects of memorable retrospectives at the Folk Art Museum. Ramírez differs in key respects from the two others. Unlike them, he seems not to have suffered a traumatic childhood. Nor did he evince pedophilia (acted on by Wölfli, projected in an epic narrative of girl warriors by Darger). Ramírez's art is less rich in formal invention than Wölfli's and in poetic resonance than Darger's, but it is more stylistically resolved and emotionally concentrated. He has in common with them an extravagant giftedness. All would have been stars in any art school, had they attended one. That they eluded contact with institutions of fine art owes something to personal disarray and something to chance, in a ratio impossible to gauge. It's a small thing, which makes them hard cases, exceptions proving the existence of a rule—that art, to be recognized as such, requires grounding in both individual biography and common culture. What can we do with and about the rush of pleasure and enchantment that the unlicensed genius of a Ramírez affords? I recommend taking it as a lesson in the limits of how we know what we think we know. Unable to regard such work as part of art's history, we may still have it be part of our own. ♦