

# Martín Ramírez: Narratives of Displacement and Memory

*The term Outsider, often applied to Ramírez, poorly serves an artist whose work meets the highest standards of mainstream modernism on both formal and expressive grounds.*

**BY RICHARD KALINA**

Martín Ramírez's marvelously expressive and formally inventive drawings of horseback riders, animals, landscapes, trains and tunnels, as well as the Madonna and other religious subjects, have been known to the art public since the 1970s. That was when Chicago artists Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, along with dealer Phyllis Kind, bought nearly 300 works (virtually all of Ramírez's existing oeuvre) from Tarmo Pasto, a Finnish-American artist and psychology professor who had discovered Ramírez in a California mental hospital in the early 1950s. Ramírez's drawings, with their complex yet orderly topographies measured out in cascades of meticulously rendered parallel lines, their vertiginous perspectives, their engaging recurrent themes, their beautiful facture and lush but low-keyed materiality, are immediately engaging. Although scarcely a household name, Ramírez has had his ardent supporters over the years. The American Folk Art Museum and the curator of its Contemporary Center, Brooke Davis Anderson, have done a great service by presenting what is on all counts the most thorough exhibition to date of this extraordinary yet often misunderstood artist.

Ramírez's work has fallen under the general descriptive category of Outsider art, and the consensus seems to be that he, Henry Darger (1892-1973) and Adolf Wölfl (1864-1930) are the three greatest artists of this ilk. (There is a fine line between Outsider art and the many varieties of folk art and the art of the untutored. Ramírez, Darger and Wölfl are telling examples of artists who would seem to be classic Outsiders, if one judged

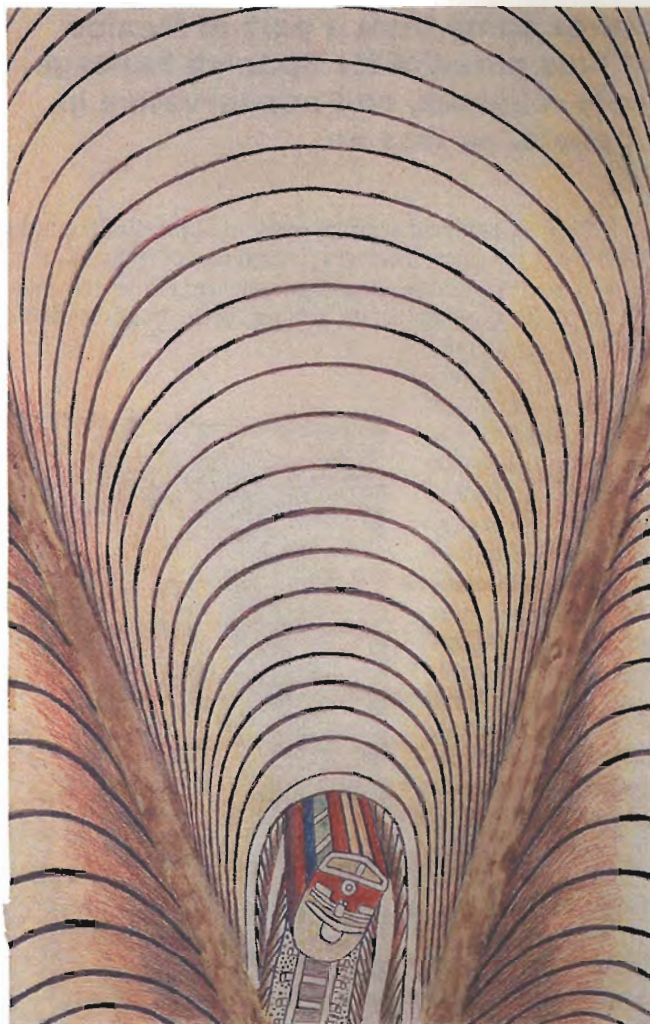
*Left, Martín Ramírez: Untitled (Alamentosa), ca. 1953, colored pencil and watercolor on pieced paper, 80 1/4 by 34 5/8 inches. Gelman Collection of Modern and Contemporary Mexican Art, Cuernavaca, Mexico. All photos courtesy American Folk Art Museum, New York.*



them by their isolated circumstances and mental states.) Outsider art is a term with which I, like increasing numbers of other observers, have considerable difficulty, particularly when applied to artists like Ramírez. It is, I believe, a sloppy categorizing tool, and tends to be both patronizing and prescriptive. If you are an Outsider artist then you are quite likely to be excluded from the normal channels of research, critique and analysis (although not of commerce). Rather, the meaning of your work resides in some kind of odd cul-de-sac. Cut off from anything other than simple biography and psychology, the work becomes an inexplicable expression of personal genius, of the untethered (and generally tormented) self given coherence only in the work of art.

While this might be the man in the street's perception of van Gogh, any beginning art history student knows that van Gogh, unhappy though he was, was thoroughly connected to the art of his time and must be seen in that context to be properly understood. This contextualizing is more difficult in the case of Ramírez, but just as important. The American Folk Art Museum not only brought together approximately 100 of Ramírez's drawings but also managed to look at the artist's work and life in new depth, and show how it was shaped by his social context. The exemplary catalogue and wall texts (from five different scholarly perspectives) brought the artist into much sharper focus than he had been in the past. There have been numbers of exhi-

*Untitled (Man at Desk), ca. 1948-63, crayon and pencil on pieced paper, 34 1/4 by 23 1/2 inches. Collection Stephanie Smither.*



*Untitled (Train and Tunnel), ca. 1950, pencil, colored pencil, crayon, watercolor and collage on paper, 35 1/4 by 24 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.*

bitions of Ramírez's work over the decades (I first saw it many years ago at Kind's New York gallery), but it has not been until recently that the facts of Ramírez's life have been fully gathered and interpreted in relation to his times and origins. Much of this is due to the work of the sociologists Víctor and Kristin Espinosa, who have contributed considerably to this exhibition. Our esthetic and emotional connection to the work of a great artist (and I believe Ramírez is one) can be sustained in the absence of supporting material. But with Ramírez, it is easy to get fundamental things wrong and miss out on much of his art's complexity and depth.

**M**artín Ramírez was born in 1895 in Rincón de Velázquez, a small, rural farming and ranching community about 40 miles east of Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, and died in 1963 at DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, Calif., in the northern part of the state, near Sacramento. He had been a mental patient since 1931, first at Stockton State Hospital, located in approximately the same area as DeWitt, and from 1948 until he died at DeWitt. Except for several early escapes, once committed he never lived outside of those two institutions, and spent nearly half his life categorized as a victim of incurable psychosis. The diagnoses varied over the years—catatonia,



**Ramírez came from a part of Mexico that was proud of its Spanish heritage, deeply religious, and conservative in its beliefs, as was he.**

manic-depression, paranoid schizophrenia—but practically speaking the results were the same, incarceration and lack of real medical care for his psychiatric condition. As a long-term ward of the state mental health system, in the days before anti-psychotic drugs emptied out the large state hospitals, Ramírez fared no differently from thousands of other warehoused mental patients, except of course for his artistic brilliance. He never took art courses, nor, as the son of a poor sharecropper in Mexico, had he any formal education, although he did know the basics of reading and writing. From early on in his hospitalization he made drawings, but it wasn't until he was transferred to DeWitt, a less crowded and more congenial institution, that his art flowered.

Early reception of his work, promoted by Tarmo Pasto, who admired both the man and his art, centered around its status as "art of the insane." Misconceptions abounded—about Ramírez's age, his mental and physical condition (was he mute, for example?), and certainly the meaning of his art. Much of the interest in such art was well-intentioned and seems to have had at its base greater interest in psychology than in esthetics. Ramírez's work led people in this direction. Rearing horses and serene Madonnas, two of his favored motifs, had an archetypal ring, and there was not much difficulty in seeing the trains

he frequently drew as phallic and tunnels as vaginal or womblike, or his repeated linear patterns as evidence of compulsiveness and rigid thinking. Once his work began to circulate in the wider art world the interpretation of it broadened, but it still tended to be viewed as something that operated in an isolated psychological-esthetic space. It was wonderful, to be sure, but more related to the sharply focused detail-

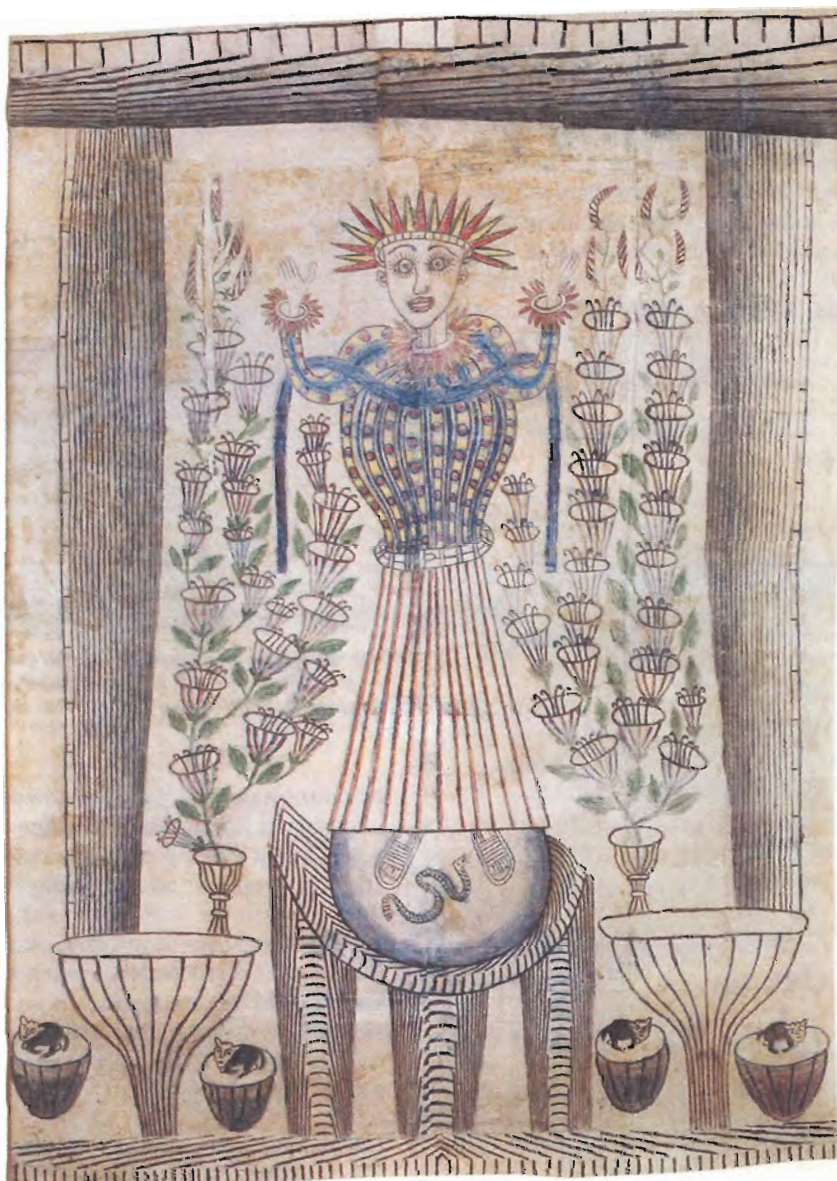
dependent work of other naive artists than to a particular historical and cultural matrix.

It would of course be wrong to downplay the work's beauty and energy, or, I think, its formal sophistication. Ramírez's mastery of linear rhythm, his controlled spatial warping, along with carefully constructed shading and a spare but powerful use of color, imbue his work with the draftsmanly dazzle of a Saul Steinberg or a Paul Klee—artists who knew how to tap into the essential economy and springiness of the cartoon's line. This feel for line can be seen, for example, in Ramírez's *Untitled (Alamentosa)*, ca. 1953, which is nearly 7 feet high by 3 feet wide. There are two trains in the picture. The bottom one leaves a tunnel and runs downward in a

chasmlike but straight-walled space that vertically bisects the lower two thirds of the drawing. In a witty and elegant touch, its locomotive contains the sole bit of color, a cherry red headlamp located on the drawing's midline, a few inches from the bottom. The top third of the image shows a horizontally oriented and rather large locomotive that emerges from one tunnel and is about to enter another, and hand-written block letters that run across the entire top of the drawing and read, "Alamentosa." The linear patterns that compose the bulk of the drawing are even more emphatic than the trains they frame. They suggest a series of regulated but dizzying three-dimensional spaces whose sense of depth is augmented by carefully applied shading—even the sign's lettering is shaded. The essentially symmetrical composition is artfully destabilized by the upper train, which runs from right to left and is in turn counterbalanced by our left-to-right reading of the sign.

Formal considerations aside—and all of the drawings warrant complex formal readings—our appreciation of Ramírez's work is made even deeper by an understanding of its

historical, cultural and emotional context. Of overwhelming importance in Ramírez's life and art was something that he did not personally participate in but—as explained in the exhibition catalogue—that changed his life completely: the Cristero Rebellion in Mexico. Ramírez had married, fathered four children and managed to purchase a small ranch in his home area. It was a barely self-sustaining operation, but



*Untitled (Madonna), 1950-53, wax crayon, graphite and watercolor on pieced wove paper, 43 7/8 by 32 3/8 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.*





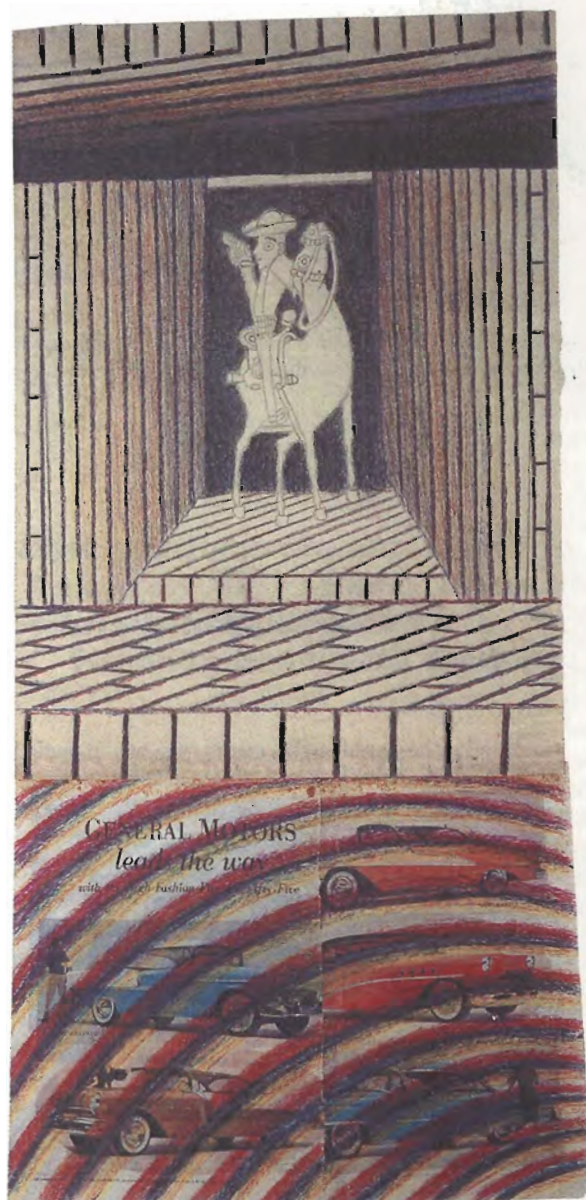
Untitled (Collage), ca. 1952, pencil, colored pencil and collage on pieced paper, 35% by 18% inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Bern.

he had a pistol and a horse (which he loved), and a number of other animals. He and his family led a traditional rural life that was satisfying and emotionally rewarding. Ramírez came from a part of Jalisco that was proud of its Spanish heritage, and where the local people of Spanish descent tended not to intermarry with the indigenous population. They were deeply religious and conservative in their beliefs, as was Ramírez. All would have been fine, except that his property was bought on credit, and it became clear that if things continued as they were he would never be able to pay off his loan. So in 1925, he took the path followed by so many of his countrymen, leaving his family and going north to the U.S. to make the money he could not earn in Mexico. He believed his absence would be temporary.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of 1927 his family and his region became ensnared in the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29). This armed revolt by Catholic partisans—Cristeros, or soldiers of Christ—was directed at the federal government, which had aimed to break the power of the Catholic Church in Mexico. The government used extremely cruel and violent tactics against the population of areas thought to be sympathetic to the Cristeros. Persons suspected of aiding them were summarily executed, whole towns were evacuated, crops were torched and animals shot. Needless to say, the religious life of the people in the affected areas was upended. (The classic 1940 Graham Greene novel of faith tested,

*The Power and the Glory*, was set in this period.) Ramírez's property was destroyed, his brother Atanacio almost hanged, and, saddest of all, he completely misinterpreted a letter from the essentially illiterate Atanacio and thought that his wife had left her family, run off with a friend of his and joined the federal army to fight against the Cristeros (a delusion he apparently could never fully shake). He vowed not to return to Mexico, and never did. Except for a visit by a nephew in 1952, he did not see his family again. During that visit he was asked if he would like to go back to his home. He replied that he would rather stay where he was.

As if the sense of loss, upheaval and betrayal engendered by the Cristero Rebellion were not enough to unsettle Ramírez's life and mind, the Great Depression soon followed. The uncertain status of Mexican immigrant workers, who had been needed but barely tolerated during the prosperous '20s, was rendered even more tenuous during the high unemployment years of the Depression. Ramírez worked on the railroads and in the mines of northern California from 1925 to 1930, but by the following year (the records are not entirely clear on the matter) it appears that he was unemployed, wandering, confused and incoherent.



Untitled (Horse and Rider), ca. 1950, pencil, colored pencil, crayon and collage on paper, 36% by 18% inches. Guggenheim Museum.









In *Untitled (Man at Desk)*, ca. 1948-63, a man, presumably the artist, is sitting at a desk, which is set, as are most of Ramírez's horse and rider drawings, in a complex stagelike environment, rendered in a highly detailed pattern of vertical and diagonal tile and board forms. The high walls that enclose the seated man recede sharply and frame a tall dark space where a locomotive moves from left to right. What seems depicted is an act of memory and imagination—a fusing of inside and outside, movement and stasis, past and present, rather than some kind of universal sexual psychodrama.

As for tunnels, to experience one is to go from light to dark and back to light, to enter from one place and emerge into another. Barriers are passed, difficulties mastered. It is an ideal symbol of passage, a link from one world to another. Going into the dark is also frightening. Will you in fact come out the other side? Ramírez's experiences in an alien world must have scared him. It is understandable that he used his art, deliberately or not, to express those fears and to overcome them. It is interesting to note how often his tunnels are shown in reverse perspective—that is, the parallel lines which describe their contours trace wider arcs as they recede. This is used to powerful effect in *Untitled (Train and Tunnel)*, ca. 1950, now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In this vertical drawing the tunnel occupies almost the entirety of the page. The front part of a locomotive, brightly colored in red, yellow, green and blue and tilted a bit to the right, is shown just about to emerge from the tunnel's mouth. The tunnel itself (seen as usual from the outside, its hill-like

form indicated by a series of arched, evenly spaced parallel lines) expands upward in a pronounced V and fills the whole sheet. This of course runs contrary to our normal spatial experience, in which receding lines seem to converge. As in Picasso's and Braque's early Cubist landscapes, where a variant of this technique is employed, reverse perspective flattens the space and pushes it toward us. For Ramírez, this technique not only makes for a more formally compelling picture but also serves as an emotional intensifier. If physical distance can be equated with temporal and psychological distance, then its collapse by perspectival manipulation brings the past closer to the present, and old pain closer to the surface.

Religion figured prominently in Ramírez's personal background and artistic world, and his remembered connection to his Mexican past comes through most clearly in his drawings of the Madonna. The Espinosa's research has shown that these Madonnas are based on Ramírez's recollections of an oil painting and a small statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in the church in his home parish of Capilla de Milpillas. Ramírez's Madonnas feature a crowned woman with her hands raised, wearing a robe and Mexican sandals. She stands on a blue globe, with a snake writhing at her feet. The Madonnas are an amalgam of traditional Spanish colonial religious art and Ramírez's personal symbols and themes. In a lovely drawing, *Untitled (Madonna)*, 1950-53, the Madonna is portrayed in what appears to be a curtained, stagelike alcove. Snake at her feet, she stands on her globe, which rests in turn

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on a three-legged altar that recalls the *molcajete*, the traditional basalt mortar used for grinding corn and chilies. Flanking her are two tall, extravagantly flowering lilies, and at the base of the picture are four drumlike pedestals each holding a seated and vaguely human-faced cat (the ones on the left half of the drawing facing left, the ones on the right facing right). The composition is elegant, airy and open, and the coloring and shading subtle. These qualities imbue the drawing with a sense of quiet and contemplation that is enlivened by the unexpected presence of the wittily rendered and rather odd cats.

One of Ramírez's favorite motifs was the horse and rider, or the *jinete*. The rider is most often a man, although at times it can be a woman. He (or she) is usually armed with a pistol, and sports bandoliers crossed over the chest. The horse is poised in action—head raised, neck and body twisted. Similarly energized, the rider's torso is turned in the saddle, pistol pointed. These *jinetes* are generally centered in carefully articulated stage sets, sometimes realistic prosceniums with what appear to be footlights, curtains and the kind of ornamentation often found above the stages in movie theaters. The *jinetes* are evocative and somewhat mysterious figures. Ramírez was an accomplished horseman, and the riders must have recalled for him his younger days, when he could control a powerful animal and had a pistol of his own. The horse was an important means of travel in the Mexico of his youth, and Ramírez was clearly interested in modes of transportation. In one drawing, *Untitled (Horse and Rider)*, ca. 1950, automobiles and equestrians are mixed: the top of the drawing contains the rider, and underneath the stage set in which he is enclosed, Ramírez has collaged five colored pictures of General Motors cars and partially obscured them by rainbows of crayoned lines. *Untitled (Collage)*, ca. 1952, puts together collaged images of a young woman on horseback waving to an approaching Rock Island Line train (Ramírez skillfully "completed" the photograph where it was cropped) and a view of San Francisco's boat-filled harbor, as well as other upbeat scenes of American life clipped from copies of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Besides bringing to mind images from Ramírez's own life, these riders also recall the Cristero rebels and the heroic figures of the Mexican Revolution (although quite possibly some riders might be associated with the federal army that repressed the Cristeros). It is thought as well that some of the female figures, such as one (ca. 1948-63) in which the face of a woman from a magazine is collaged onto a linear drawing of a pistol-wielding rider, could represent his wife, who, he thought, had joined forces with the enemy. These figures call forth complex references, including (if we consider the stages in which they are set) not just players in his theater of memory, but characters out of the movie Westerns he saw in the hospital. In any case, the horse and rider motif meant a great deal to the artist, for of the roughly 300 drawings in his oeuvre over 80 deal with this subject.

Ramírez also drew the landscape, and this subject—often executed in very large formats—allowed for a mixing of many of his motifs and an extended use of collage. The extraordinary *Untitled (Landscape)*,

ca. 1948-63, stretches out horizontally almost 9 feet and contains a wealth of original and found images. There are beautifully rendered Mexican churches he had known, houses, riders, trains, tunnels, religious figures, magazine pictures of Amish people at work, animals, plants, a complex calligraphic "R" (a signature?) picked out in flowers, and, running along the entire top of the drawing and down the right side, a veritable automotive parade (both drawn and collaged). In addition to its iconographic mix, this drawing is materially varied. It is pieced together from numerous sheets of paper, and the different shades of white and beige of the support, as well as its irregular rectangular shape, lend the drawing great textural and tactile interest.

In all his work, Ramírez's mastery of materials is evident. He turned his practical limits (he was scarcely in a position to drive over to the art supply store) to his advantage, making the most of what was at hand. He drew with ordinary pencils, colored pencils and crayons, and used the wooden tongue depressors common in hospitals and doctors' offices as straightedges. The odd papers that he glued together made a richer working surface than a simple store-bought sheet, and he devised a method of applying color with matchsticks (his pigments were mixed from crayons, charcoal, fruit juice, shoe polish and his own saliva) that ideally suited his purposes.



*Untitled, ca. 1948-63, pencil, tempera and collage on paper, 19 by 14 inches. Private collection.*

As this exhibition unmistakably shows, Ramírez was an artist who transcended simple ideas of Outsider (or insider) art. The fact is that once art is labeled Outsider (or indigenous or folk or craft) it is somehow narrowed. It becomes, for all intents and purposes, critically and curatorially (although not necessarily commercially) devalued—a specialized taste. Sympathetic people might respond enthusiastically to Ramírez, but there is still a good deal of institutional resistance. While the three museums that have hosted this exhibition are fine ones, we can't help but notice the absence of bigger and more powerful mainstream venues.

It is my belief that Ramírez is a mainstream artist. Granted, his illness, relative isolation and lack of formal art education put him nearer the margins. But a significant number of modern artists were also essentially self-trained, and if

we look at the art before us it is hard to see how his work differs from that of other artists with more conventional lives and careers. It is formally and materially complex, nuanced and inventive; it reflects the artist's development of coherent themes and iconographies over many years, and his thorough exploration of them; and it sustains a style that is original and unique: Ramírez's art cannot be mistaken for anybody else's. In a critical environment that values cultural observation, the exploration of memory, fantasy and identity, and the invocation of complex social, historical and psychological signifiers, how can we judge Ramírez's art to be peripheral? But, most important, Ramírez's work is animated by necessity. This is art that *had* to be made. In our highly professionalized art world today, how invigorating it is to see art that comes not just from academic skill sets and a keen eye for the market's needs, but from inspiration and invention coupled with utter conviction and perseverance in the face of true adversity. □

"Martín Ramírez" opened at the American Folk Art Museum, New York [Jan. 23-May 13] and traveled to the San Jose Museum of Art [June 9-Sept. 9]. It is currently on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum [Oct. 6, 2007-Jan. 6, 2008].

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