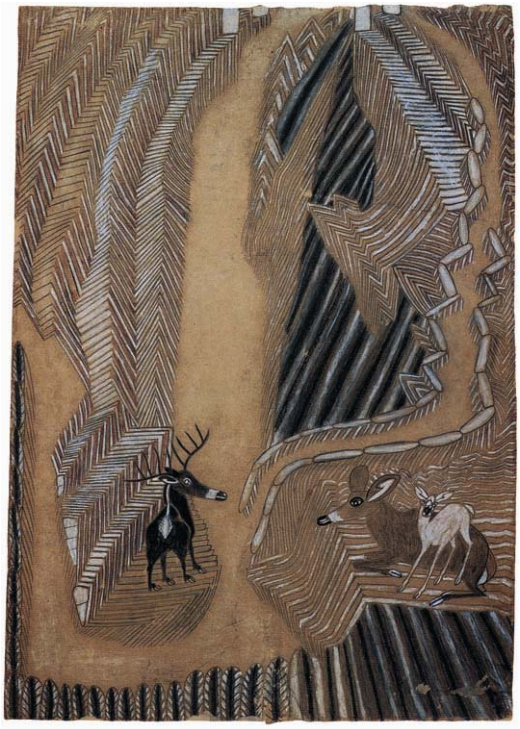
MARTÍN RAMÍREZ.
Reframing Confinement



Sin título (La familia de venados) ca. 1950

DATES: 31 Mars – 12 July 2010

PLACE: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
Sabatini Building. 3rd floor (C-D)

ORGANISED BY: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

CURATED BY: Brooke Davis Anderson

COORDINATED BY: Rafael García

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Working with a limited range of materials and supplies, Martín Ramírez (1895-1963) created an astonishing oeuvre, over a period of some fifteen years, while an inmate of DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California. Ramírez made his art in a room that he shared with dozens of other men who were also confined on account of their mental and physical disabilities, and, perhaps, because they were homeless, impoverished, and unemployed. Ramírez's workspace was in a corner of the ward. His drawings were placed underneath his mattress for safekeeping. His art supplies were stored in a bedside table. In this communal space, he embarked upon his self taught artistic endeavor. This act of creating within a culture of confinement marries him to a rich tradition of individuals who responded to the same impulse. Making art in prisons and asylums, and developing expressive formal and technical strategies specific to their constricted atmospheres, has proven a not uncommon reaction by inmates and patients from the late nineteenth century onwards. Transcending the category of art therapy; the work of the most significant – the most gifted and/or visionary - has been recognized under various rubrics: *art brut,* or "outsider", or "self taught" art.

Ramírez devised a singular artistic style that, with its reliance of flexible linear structures, created spaces whose complex topographies inscribe multiple viewpoints. In addition, he was a master bricoleur who used whatever was to hand. Collecting papers of various kinds, such as discarded nurses' notes, cigarette rolling papers, magazines, newspapers, book pages, flattened paper cups, and examining-table cover sheets, he attached them together with homemade glue (made from potato starch, bread dough, and his own saliva). His medium was crushed crayons, colored pencils, and water-based paints that he deployed with the aid of a matchstick as his stylus (rather than a brush). For a straightedge he used a tongue depressor. Collage and chine colle were also incorporated to enrich his drawn line. On occasion, he would display the finished scroll-like drawings on the porch door of the ward, hanging them on hinges expressly designed for that purpose.

Between 1948 and his death in 1963, Ramírez created some 450 drawings. From the start of his career as a draughtsman, he found champions: during the 1950s a clinical psychologist interested in art, Dr. Tarmo Pasto, studied his habits, collected his works and organized several exhibitions, mostly at university colleges; Chicago painter, Jim Nutt, discovered Ramírez's work in 1968 and with gallerist Phyllis Kind and artist Gladys Nillson, soon acquired a large cache of his work. Beginning in the early 1970s the Phyllis Kind Gallery exhibited and documented Ramírez's drawings in a series of solo shows. While these exhibitions received high praise from art critics and were admired by many contemporary artists, Ramírez's work did not garner widespread national attention until 2007, when a large-scale retrospective was organized by Brooke Davis Anderson at the American Folk Art Museum in New York. Today, he is considered one of the pre-eminent self-taught masters of the twentieth century.

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The diverse repertoire of imagery found in Ramírez's drawings fuses elements drawn from both Mexican and American culture, from the environment of his childhood in a small rural community in a remote part of the Mexican province of Jalisco, and from certain experiences, derived from weekly film screenings and a constant supply of magazines, that broke the monotony of his confinement at DeWitt. Within the limited range of subjects he repeatedly explored, modified, and refined he developed a richly expressive range of forms and idioms. His favorite subject appears to have been a rider on horseback. This equestrian figure is often framed in a box-like room reminiscent of a stage, a structural device which the artist used not just to contain but also to valorize his subject. By playing with shading, color, texture, and scale, Ramírez modified it tellingly from one version to the next. Also among his favorite motifs was the railroad, the means of his exodus from his native land in search of more lucrative employment abroad. Born in 1895 in Los Altos de Jalisco, a deeply Catholic area, Ramírez married, fathered four children, and acquired land and farm animals before leaving his home in 1925 in search of work that would help him pay off the loans on his modest ranch. Travelling with friends to California, he worked in mines as well as on the railways for some years. By 1931 however, partly due to the Depression, he was jobless and homeless. Arrested by the police because of his confused state and inability to communicate, he was soon afterwards committed to Stockton State Hospital, where he was diagnosed as an incurable catatonic schizophrenic. In 1948 he was moved to DeWitt where he remained for the rest of his life.

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During his decades of confinement, Ramírez rarely spoke. He was never interviewed about his drawings; nor did not leave any writing about them. While his intentions and motivations will never be fully understood, his biography undoubtedly informed his work in multiple ways, as recent research has made clear. In the last decade scholars have investigated such key factors impacting his life as immigration, regionalism, and institutionalization, in order to create a more nuanced, dimensional portrait of this institutionalized artist in place of the longstanding stereotype of the mentally disturbed autodidact who works unwittingly.

Since the 1920s the art of the insane has been greatly admired by vanguard artists of many persuasions, notably Max Ernst, Paul Klee and countless Surrealists. Stimulated by what they considered its pure or unmediated forms of expression, these professional painters adopted its formal and technical features as transgressive modes that would enable them to subvert the stylistic and formal conventions they had imbibed during their academic training. A half century later, during the 1970s, and in parallel with the growth of critical recognition and wider institutional support for several types of unschooled practice (the art of the insane, and visionary or spiritual modes), came recognition that far from embodying an untrammeled expressiveness, it attested to the maker's struggle to affirm a sense of order in a world that he or she experienced as deeply fractured and chaotic. That is, what these creators sought was ways of controlling and giving meaning to a matrix that they experienced as horrifically unstable, dislocated and fraught.

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Today, what is now stressed are parallels and similarities that ostensibly align the work of the two groups in contrast to that earlier period which emphasized the substantive differences between the art of self taught outsiders and that of professional practitioners. Those fundamental distinctions that separate trained artists whose work circulates through mainstream critical discourses and distribution networks from socially and culturally excluded individuals cannot be ignored however when responding to their works.

In introducing Ramírez's remarkable drawings to European audiences for the first time, this retrospective was not conceived as a gesture of recuperation, that is, it does not attempt to reposition him within the mainstream art world. Ramírez' achievement is indisputable: together with Swiss Adolph Wolffli and American Henry Darger, he is widely recognized as one of a trio of great art brut masters. Rather, *Martín Ramírez. Reframing Confinement* provides an opportunity to question how such work should be situated and discussed within a new framework, a museum of modern and contemporary art (as distinct from the types of institutions in which it has previously been shown, namely, museums devoted to the presentation of folk art or encyclopedic museums that showcases art from many cultures and eras). In addition, it invites consideration of the roles played by Ramírez and kindred artists in the context of contemporary visual culture today, far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of modernist art practices.

Biography

Martín Ramírez González was born in 1895 in Rincón de Velázquez, Tepatitlán, Jalisco, Mexico. In 1925, he left his family and in order to seek work in the United States. From 1925 to 1930 he worked on the railroad and in the mines of northern California. In 1931 he was picked up by the police and committed to Stockton State Hospital, where he receives a preliminary diagnosis of manic depression. He escapes several times and was again committed. In 1933 he was diagnosed with dementia praecox, catatonic form. In the middle of 1930 he began to draw in a more regular basis. In 1948 he was moved DeWitt State Hospital in Auburn, California, where he met Tarmo Pasto, professor of Psychology and Art at Sacramento State School, who followed and supported his work. In 1951, his first solo show was held at the E. B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento, and in 1954, another solo show *The Art of a Schizophrene*, took place at the Mills College in Oakland, California. In 1963, he died at DeWitt of a pulmonary edema. In 2007, a major retrospective of his work was shown at the American Folk Art Museum in New York.

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