

Inside the Outsider

We introduce 2 art novices to the work of self-taught artist Martin Ramirez

STORY BY LILLEDESHAN BOSE

The term “tragically misunderstood artist” is given a new dimension when talking about Martin Ramirez, considered one of the most important outsider artists of this century.

Outsider art was a term used by French artist Jean Dubuffet for art not within the boundaries of official culture, particularly made by patients from mental institutions. Later, the term grew to include artists who were self-taught, who had little or no contact with the institutions of the mainstream art world.

From the 1950s until a few years ago, the art community barely knew Ramirez. Exact dates of his birth, migration and death were unknown. He was thought to be mute. There was talk that he was even Chilean.

Until 1999, when sociologists Victor M. Espinosa and Kristin E. Espinosa started researching Ramirez's history, the art world was surprisingly comfortable with that “paragraph of misinformation” about him, said Brooke Davis Anderson, curator of the Ramirez exhibit and the American Folk Art Museum. The Espinosas' research gave birth to the exhibition currently at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Milwaukee attendees luck out, as the final stop of the exhibit (it was first shown in New York and San Jose, Calif.) is the biggest collection of his work to date. Eight pieces not shown at the other destinations — courtesy of Chicago collector Jim Nutt — are on display at MAM.

So when MKE asked for volunteers to give feedback on the Martin Ramirez show, we were lucky to have new parents Aaron Krel and Kelly Bresler.

“We’re not anti-art,” Krel, an engineer, said. But they’re not art enthusiasts, either.

The last time they attended an art show was two years ago. “I



AARON KREL



KELLY BRESLER



COLE KREL

don't remember what it was for,” Krel said.

We toured the exhibit the way a casual viewer would (“I meant to Google him before coming here, but then I decided that was too artsy for me,” Krel added.) They also brought their 7-month-old son, Cole. Halfway through, we talked about Ramirez's life and creative process.

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

The Espinosas' research reveals that Ramirez, considered one of the most important self-taught artists of all time, was born in Mexico in 1895. He migrated to the United States in 1925 to work on railroads and mines, and he sent money home. After six years in America, he was arrested for “erratic behavior.” Diagnosed as demented, Ramirez was institutionalized in 1931. (Current research reveals that he may have been misdiagnosed.)

All his surviving work was made in mental hospitals, where he spent half his life. He was diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic.

While at the DeWitt State Hospital in California, Tarmo Pasto, a professor of psychology and art, found Ramirez's work and saw its value. By then, Ramirez was making large drawings and collages using paper bags, scraps of newspaper and book



Martin Ramirez was a self-taught artist whose legacy has been shrouded in mystery and misinformation.

pages. To make 12-foot drawings, he glued paper together with a paste he made from saliva and food materials.

His drawings contain imagery from his hometown in Mexico and from American icons. Strong line work, repetitive images of a horse and rider, Madonnas, trains and tunnels were arresting features of his work.

By the time Ramirez died in a California hospital, his work had been shown in smaller exhibits. But it was often exoticized.

Hearing about Ramirez's history made the exhibit much more special for Krel and Bresler. “Sometimes you’ll see a pretty painting, and it’s nice, but knowing about the artist makes it more interesting,” Bresler said.

Bresler also appreciated the size of Ramirez's workspace and the supplies he had. “He pulled together anything he could find, and some of the pieces were large compared to what he had to work in. Without knowing his history, I don’t think I would’ve been as impressed with it.”



“Untitled (Man at Desk),” circa 1948-’63. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper.



“Untitled (Madonna),” circa 1948-’63. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper.

ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM