

Gleaning Martín Ramírez: Outsider Art and the Problem with Potatoes

Forgive me while I get ahead of myself. This paper concerns the art of Martín Ramírez, but before I can dive into that, I feel compelled to cover some background information. And to be certain, an attempt to situate Ramírez's work before examining it is common practice. The path is a well-trodden luxury assumed by almost every other paper, gallery placard, or critical text dealing with his work—and a luxury I hope you'll afford me.

Within minutes of encountering his art, one is invariably subjected to an account of his life and the conditions in which he produced his body of work. And after myriad thoughtful opening paragraphs and succinctly penned “about the artist” inscriptions, his story becomes his work's selling point and justification. But within this presupposition of narrative, Ramírez's art ceases to exist as art-as-art and is instead framed as art-as-artifact. We quickly find ourselves on uneasy footing in a space where situations seem to produce corpses.

This presents a serious problem with how we approach his work—or rather, how we tend to approach his work through an invented construction of him. With unfortunate irony, I must now outline that backstory myself in order to push against it. If you've never encountered this artist before, flip to the images at the end of this paper before reading any further. Spend at least a few minutes with them. Try to read them on their own terms. With regard to Ramírez and his work, you'll never be able to get back to where you are now, and the entirety of this essay outlines how equally frustrating and essential that endeavor ends up being.

With that out of the way, let's look at Ramírez. It doesn't much matter which text we consult to locate his general history, as they all operate similarly. Although particular details get fuzzy between accounts, the story goes that he was born in Mexico sometime around 1895. After getting married and having children, he immigrated to California to support his family through the possibility of employment. Notably, he worked railroads for a period of time. Police apprehended him in the early 1930s and committed him to Stockton State Hospital. There, Ramírez was deemed non-verbal and diagnosed with schizophrenia, though there's some contemporary doubt cast on both of these diagnoses.¹ In the late 1940s, he was moved to DeWitt State Hospital and began producing collages with drawn-upon scraps of paper held together with spit and mashed potatoes. He hid these pieces from the hospital staff, as they were instructed to burn such materials in the interest of sanitation. Ramírez lived the remainder of his life within the confines of the asylum, and died in 1960.²

¹ Brooke Davis Anderson, “Drawing Landscapes of Longing: Martín Ramírez's Worldview,” in *Martín Ramírez: Reframing Confinement*, ed. Lynne Cook (London; New York: Prestel Publishing, 2010), 19-25. The “non-verbal” bit is generally attributed to Ramírez speaking a particularly rural dialect of Spanish, and, more importantly, no English. The “schizophrenia” conundrum is a good deal more complicated and not really within the scope of this paper.

² Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Elliot, *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 60. This primer is paraphrased from that text, which seeks to put outsider art in conversation with modern art, and largely succeeds in that pursuit. But again, really any piece about Ramírez is going to spell out this same narrative in one form or another.

If his story has taken us this far, the story of his story will take us a bit further. He was “discovered” by Tarmos Pasto,³ a professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State College who conducted research at DeWitt. He occasionally employed Ramírez’s pieces in lectures, and also organized a few exhibitions of his work. If we are to understand Ramírez as a product of his situation—as these backstories seem to suggest—we should certainly begin with Pasto’s own account. A press release for Pasto’s 1954 exhibition of Ramírez’s work entitled *Art from the Disturbed Mind* begins by describing the archetypical schizophrenic disposition:

The schizophrenic’s life is characterized by withdrawal from a world of reality into a world of fantasy, reverie, and dreams...The schizophrenic actually fashions a world in which even his language and thought function solely to protect him from hurtful reality. To avoid hurtful reality he often turns pain into joy and clings to a higher authority, the abstract symbol. He disguises the meaning of his speech and lives in allegory.⁴

Preceding Ramírez’s exhibition with this vivid diagnosis, Pasto invokes a sort of “mimesis of madness” wherein the images depict schizophrenia itself rather than simply exist as images. He frames the work within a landscape of dysfunction where symbolic gestures themselves are ascribed their own symbolism, and the art-object reveals a transcript of that alchemy. He then continues to describe Ramírez specifically, though he does not name the artist:⁵

About the artist: He is a chronic schizophrenic Mexican about 68 years old, considered incurable, having been institutionalized for over twenty years...He does not speak to anyone but rather hums in a singsong way when pleased with his visitors. Conversation as an exchange of ideas is impossible. His manner of work is unique. When good paper is not available he glues together scraps of paper, old envelopes, paper bags, paper cups, wrappers—anything that may have a clear drawing area...He fashions his own glue out of mashed potatoes and water...⁶

This tendency towards establishing a sketch of Ramírez in advance of his work may begin with Pasto, but it does not end with him. One need only look to Peter Schjeldahl’s retrospective review in *The New Yorker*, or the exhaustive writings of Víctor M. Espinosa, or even survey Ramírez’s Wikipedia entry to find examples. To vastly different ends in various different ways, they all do the same thing. They tell of the Mexican immigrant who comes to America to provide for his family, is confined to the asylum, ceases to speak, and prolifically produces striking works of art held together by potatoes.

³ In much the same way the Americas were “discovered” by Columbus.

⁴ Tarmo Pasto, “Art from the Disturbed Mind,” (Press Release, Stanford Research Institute, July 1954).

⁵ In all likelihood, this was to respect Ramírez’s privacy and was probably policy at the time. Still, one can’t escape the feeling that Ramírez himself is somewhat incidental to Pasto’s research.

⁶ Pasto, “Art from the Disturbed Mind.”

It is at about this point where one starts to wonder: what's with all the potatoes?⁷ Why does every text treat their inclusion in establishing Ramírez as absolutely essential? Why is it seemingly impossible to locate an example of Ramírez which doesn't mention them? To get to the root of these questions, we must first explore the root vegetable itself.

Beyond providing backbone caloric content with its rich starches, potatoes are packed with protein, calcium, iron, fiber, potassium, and B vitamins.⁸ It has even been speculated that potatoes—supplemented with a little butter or milk—could sustain a body for considerable lengths of time, though it *really* isn't recommended. As an incredibly versatile vegetable, they're applicable to almost any cuisine and can be prepared in innumerable ways. They have also proven a startlingly resilient crop; not only genomically varied enough to grow almost anywhere, but also easy to store and preserve. They can be chopped up, dried out, and rehydrated whenever necessary. They are cheap. They are abundant.

Taken holistically, all of this distinguishes potatoes as a common and essential dietary staple; that is to say, they hold diets together.

They also hold together the works of Martín Ramírez.

They also hold together Ramírez himself.

Like the poor and foreign Biblical gleaners who gathered the harvest's last remnants,⁹ Ramírez scavenges for discarded pieces of paper, collects them, and assembles them into an object which can be framed and situated and reflected upon. Like Ramírez, Tarmo Pasto and Peter Schjeldahl and Víctor M. Espinosa scavenge for biographical fragments, clinical diagnoses, and “unique manners of work.” Sifting through the soil of his life, they glean for Ramírez and find potatoes. Mashed together with the spit of their pens, a paste is formed to bind bits of narrative and scraps of confinement together in the shape of a man. To the critics, the anecdote of the potato paste colorfully illustrates the man's desperate, unassailable drive to create. The potato reifies his poverty, then his resourcefulness, and finally his resilience. To us, its ceaseless retelling gestures towards a sort of critical obsession with scarcity and insane abandon. The historical assemblage of Ramírez becomes a sort of Mr. Potato Head; a figure whose legibility relies on fungible adornments. By producing Ramírez through potatoes, they obfuscate what he himself produced.

Of course, we cannot in good faith simply ignore the circumstances of the man who produced this art. Such erasure neglects the lifelong hardships Ramírez endured, the reality of the asylum, and his persistence within its confines. But neither can we let those circumstances wholly dictate our understanding of that art and relegate it to the realm of the incidental. Surely Pasto, Schjeldahl, and Espinosa provide us with essential heavy-lifting in our ability to

⁷ Having now entered the realm of folklore, tellings occasionally swap out the potatoes for bread or, occasionally, oats. It's possible they're all true, but I'm not sure it matters: the overwhelmingly referenced foodstuff-paste remains potatoes.

⁸ Redcliffe N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 121-125. The revised version of the 1949 text.

⁹ Take Leviticus 23:22 for example: “And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God.” (KJV)

earnestly approach the world which frames Ramírez's work. But they're also precariously situated. By the time we actually encounter Ramírez's art, we read it through the lens of a constructed man. A train is no longer a train; it's an abstract symbol ripe for inscription. It recalls his time on the railroads, or modernity slicing through pastoral rurality, or an avenue home to his family in Mexico. A wall isn't a wall; it's a cell, or a stage. Even the paper isn't paper; it's refuse bound by potatoes.

Herein lies the danger. It's impossible to talk about Ramírez without talking about his life in confinement. But in doing so, we neglect the work itself. It is as if state authorities deem the man mute only for critics to then deem his art mute. The reliance on a biography and lexicon held together by potatoes precedes his work and dictates its meaning in advance of its utterance. When Ramírez is produced, his work is reduced.

Herein lies the danger once more. Potatoes hold diets together, but they're also instruments of exploitation. Take the Spanish colonization of the Americas, where conquistadors established a self-sufficiency fueled by potatoes to the deaths of millions of indigenous people.¹⁰ Or the Irish Great Famine, where a blight on the crop devastated years of harvest and forced farmers to starve as they sold what little they gathered to pay absentee landlords exorbitant rents.¹¹ The potato's roots run deep; its resilience and utility are the boon and bane of its subsistors. From Peru to Ireland to the asylum, "the potato can, and generally does, play a twofold part: that of a nutritious food, and that of a weapon ready forged for the exploitation of a weaker group in a mixed society."¹²

I do not mean to equate genocidal atrocities with the misrepresentation of an artist. I only suggest that a potato is not simply a potato. It's an instrument whose implementation is historically one of subjugation. For Ramírez, a potato was glue for a canvas. It held together drawings on paper. For people like Pasto, Schjeldahland, and Espinosa, the potato itself is the canvas upon which the fetishism for the gleaner is painted. It is the stuff that shapes Ramírez and shapes our reading of his work, and reliance upon it is a reliance upon that subjugation.

If we are to make any sense at all of this mashed-potato man, we must look beyond him. We must seek to consider—even briefly—the work of Ramírez in its absence. We must remove the muzzle from these muted works and regard them in the terms of their own images. We must abandon the notion of the schizophrenic who "disguises the meaning of his speech and lives in allegory." We must let a train be a train; a wall be a wall; paper be paper. Without potatoes.

¹⁰ John Reader, *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 61-74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153-169.

¹² Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, 600.

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