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Pictures from an Institution

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Maybe it's time to retire the idea of "outsider art". That's the catch all term for work produced by self-taught artists who may also be hermits, mental patients, religious obsessives and so on. As much as anything it's been a marketing device, a word that hints of rebellion and feverish disorder. Artists are supposed to have that mad gleam in their eye. So much the better if they're actually certified as crank cases.

I realized just how misleading the notion is today during a stop at the American Folk Art Museum here in New York, where I spent a good part of the afternoon at the completely fascinating **show devoted to the work of Martin Ramirez**. One of the better known outsiders, Ramirez was a Mexican who left behind his wife and children in 1921 and came to the U.S. to find work in mines and on railroads. Within ten years he had descended into some kind of serious mental confusion. He died in 1963, and the last 32 years of his life were spent in California mental hospitals, diagnosed as a catatonic schizophrenic and almost never speaking. But always drawing. And drawing. Though never trained as an artist, Ramirez produced scores of clenched, bristling pencil and crayon drawings. This was not run of the mill art therapy stuff. It was powerful and original, literally going to the origins of anxieties and desires. It had the intricacy and invention, if not the range, of Paul Klee or Saul Steinberg.

It's not hard to believe he was mentally disturbed, and our knowledge

of that gives the climate of paranoia and isolation in his drawings a feeling of authenticity you don't get from artists who were merely depressed or eccentric. (Compared to Ramirez, Edvard Munch looks as placid as Mr. Rogers.) The work is full of obsessive motifs, confining palisades, segmented tunnels that swell like weird birth canals, with trains that pop out of one only to be swallowed by another. And weirder still, despite all their forcefields of parallel line his drawings can also feel locked into stalemate and paralysis. You can easily picture the man who made them as a glassy-eyed catatonic.

And yet still a man with some kind of mysterious and powerful internal life, and with a fully achieved mature style. So what was he outside of? Ramirez, who was not only institutionalized but further confined within himself, may have been outside most human companionship. He was certainly outside the networks of the artworld, which didn't begin to discover him until a few years after his death. And he's still outside the customary borders of art history. But he was as deeply in touch with certain profound currents within ourselves as any artist I can think of. Outsider art? Looks more like insider art to me.

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