

Cultural Daily

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The LA Arts District Welcomes ICA LA

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, September 20th, 2017

Adding to the galaxy of new art museums and galleries in the Los Angeles Arts District and DTLA, on Friday evening September 8, ICA LA (Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles) opened its stunning new 12,700 square foot facility at 1717 East 7th Street in the LA's Arts District. Designed by WHY under the direction of founder Kulapat Yantrasaat, in addition to galleries, there will be an educational annex, indoor/outdoor café, and a garden. Formerly a commercial warehouse with overhead trusses, the galleries offer high-ceiling unobstructed exhibition spaces which can readily accommodate large scale works popular with contemporary artists.



Formerly, the ICA LA was the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Founded in 1984, with an illustrious history spanning a thirty-year period, SMMoA worked with more than 300 artists, welcomed 1,00,000 visitors, served 100,000 students and forged 100 community partnerships. Currently, under the stewardship of Director Elsa Longhauser and Curator Jamillah James, ICA LA promises “to build a dynamic curatorial program that continues its long standing commitment to experimentation, and places artists and communities in meaningful dialogue.” There will be exhibitions of Los Angeles artists, offsite events and outreach programs involving partnerships with neighboring community organizations and “an initiative to catalyze young people from Boyle Heights into leadership roles in the arts.”



Of its logo, designed by artist Mark Bradford, he said, “I wanted to be part of propelling ICA LA and its long history forward. The logo and treatment reference merchant posters found from LA's Westside to LA's East Side, which point to the fluidity of both economics & culture.”

ICA LA is a ‘kunsthalle,’ a type of art exhibiting facility without collections popular in Germany and Switzerland. A kunsthalle's programming can be imaginative and fluid. In contrast, most modern and contemporary art museums accumulate collections which, in a sense, brand them. In promoting their possessions, these modern and contemporary art museums function like brokerage houses enhancing value and reputations.

For its opening exhibition, ICA LA is presenting *Martin Ramirez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation*. Martin Ramirez, a Mexican immigrant who spent nearly half a century of his life in US mental hospitals, is now being hailed as one of the giants of 20th century art. Recent sales of

his work have been in the six figure range.



At the age of thirty, Ramirez left his wife and three children in Mexico seeking work in Northern California. He worked on railroads for five years, knew no English and became unemployed and homeless. He was institutionalized at Stockton State Hospital in 1931 and diagnosed with schizophrenia. Transferred to DeWitt State Hospital in 1948, he began making drawings and collages utilizing brown paper bags, scraps of examining table paper and book pages glued together with a paste made of potatoes and saliva. His imagery is a melange of Mexican folk traditions and symbols of twentieth century modernization. Conspicuous are images of Madonnas, horseback riders, as well as trains entering and leaving tunnels. Common themes are undulating fields of concentric lines evoking landscapes, tunnels, theatrical proscenium and decorative patterns. He worked on both a small and a grand scale.



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Fortunately, a professor of art and psychology visiting Ramirez's ward recognized the significance of his creations and began to save some. In addition, the director of the mental hospital where he was last incarcerated saved approximately 140 drawings and collages from the last three years of his life. Ramirez died in 1963.

The exhibition, drawn from a number of sources, provides a well-documented panorama of his work from small and intimate drawings to scrolls that reach from floor to ceiling. It confirms the fact that he was an artist of major proportions who managed to overcome the limitations of both his schizophrenia and incarceration.



Plato might have been the first in Western civilization to equate madness and genius. Artists such as Hogarth, Goya, Gericault and Fuseli had taken an interest in the insane, mainly as subjects for their paintings. In the 19th century, the subject became a popular feature of cultural discourse. In the 1920s, the French surrealists embraced this association. Their inspiration originated in Dr. Hans Prinzhorn's (of the Heidelberg University's psychiatric clinic) 1922 groundbreaking book, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*. In it he discussed and reproduced selected artistic creations of patients from his and other clinics. The same year, Max Ernst, a German member of the *dada* movement, brought the book with him to Paris, creating a stir among his surrealist colleagues. Although few members of the original Parisian group could read German, the 187 reproductions in the book were a testament to art created outside of regular (bourgeois) institutions and conventions, and the book's illustrations in particular, are considered to have influenced many surrealists and among other artists, Pablo Picasso.

More recently, in 1961, the French philosopher Jean Foucault's *Madness and Civilization A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* reviews the history of mental illness and incarceration in Europe. He states that in the mid-seventeenth century, the rational response to the mad, who until then had been consigned to society's margins, was to separate them completely from society by

confining them, along with prostitutes, vagrants, blasphemers and the like, in newly created institutions all over Europe – a process he calls “the Great Confinement.” The condition of these outcasts was seen as one of moral error. They were viewed as having freely chosen prostitution, vagrancy, blasphemy, unreason, etc. and the regimes of these new rational institutions were meticulous programs of punishment and reward aimed at causing patients to reverse those choices.

Unfortunately, this guiding philosophy persists and still has lingering exponents.



Equating schizophrenia with genius is a bitter pill for some mental health professionals to swallow. Fortunately, there were some psychiatrists who recognized Ramirez’s genius and preserved his creations. Ramirez’s work is often described as “Outsider Art,” art that does not conform to mainstream canons. LA is the beneficiary of other significant manifestations of outsider art. Simon Rodia’s *Watts Towers* and the *Jurassic Museum* qualify.

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