

Reconstructing the Facts According To Marcos Ramírez, ERRE

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◀ *Gold for Mirrors*, variable dimensions, 2000
(mirrors and wood covered in "gold" leaf).



Marcos Ramírez ERRE, self-portrait.

The installation *Century XXI* by Tijuana artist Marcos Ramírez, known as ERRE, was presented almost two decades ago on the grounds of the Tijuana Cultural Center as part of Tijuana's inSITE Exposition. It was a temporary home made of pieces of recycled wood, sheet metal, lengths of drywall, and second-hand furniture, all put together with a great deal of ingenuity. Today, in retrospect, we could say that the work had a certain naïveté in the sense that many homes like this one are thrown up along the border, and it is easy to note the disparity between the houses where emigrants live and the concrete and glass buildings that line the main avenues of Baja California's biggest city. However, ERRE's house was his home; that's where he received friends and visitors, where he gave interviews, and occasionally spent the night.

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All photos are courtesy of Marcos Ramírez.



▲ *Crossroads*, 12' x 40', 16 structures built from 2000 to 2013 (steel and aluminum).

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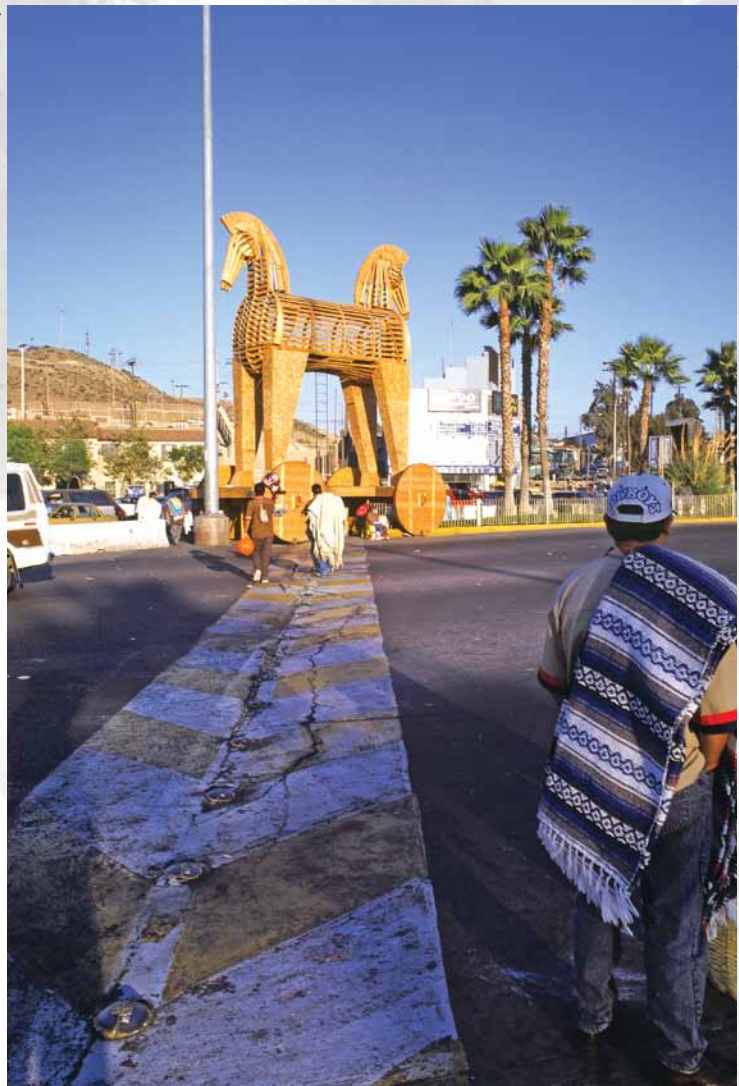
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There was an inalienable authenticity about it; more than a work of art representing a house, it was a statement about a way of life, a proclamation that Marcos made about his own history and that of many who, like him, lived along Mexico's northwestern strip of border.

Two decades have passed since we met there, on that plot on the border, and over that time, I have followed his career with great interest. The reconstruction of our friendship involves his stunning artistic career, an itinerary marked by his sincerity, because Marcos has experienced everything his art is based upon. Nothing that occupies his imagination and creativity is alien to him; he expresses his experiences through surprising metaphors and then materializes them in multidimensional installations that always allude to that scar called a border.

ERRE began working in carpentry and construction from a very young age. This explains his life to a great extent; like many other Mexicans, he has sold his labor power on the other side of the border, but enjoys living on the Mexican side. In that constant crossing of the imaginary border, ERRE discovers situations that are the raw material for his work, situations he combines with the visual signs populating the border. The translation of his experiences into metaphors points to an explanation, through linguistic constructions and deconstructions, of what could be the dual face, the contrast, in migrants' lives: motivated by their hunger for success and at the same time betrayed by their own people and strangers alike, who see in them a source of exploitation or a threat to the American Way of Life.

The installation *Flag* (2000) is one of these works-signs in which the economy of meaning and the use of the waste materials it is made of points to the contrast between two neighboring cultures. The piece was presented at the Whitney Biennial held just after California's racial strife following the police beating of Los Angeles black worker Rodney King. The chicken wire and the corrugated sheet metal that made up the effigy





◀ *Flag*, 2.5 x 4.5 m, 1997 (metal, paint, soil, cement blocs, and bricks).

Marcos Ramírez's work is art that emerges from the migration of meanings, from the fusion of popular stories and cultured parables, and from materials that make it possible to construct and reconstruct historical events.

of the U.S. American flag, formerly a symbol of a country of immigrants, are a sign of the times in a country full of contradictions, a place of barriers and guarded borders, the site of paranoia and fear of the different and the unknown. ERRE's piece, like many of his works, occupied a prominent place in the public space—at the Whitney Museum, it was situated right on the avenue where the museum's entrance is—because its symbolism feeds on unresolved tensions and the public's reactions. The system's contradictions are the fuel for social conflicts, and also for the public art ERRE proposes.

ERRE and I once talked about the almost complete absence of love in contemporary art. We agreed that that emotion was of no interest to artists as a

theme of their work. Art centers on the narratives of society and the customs that define them or the forms that redefine artistic languages, but love is exceptional in art; and in public art, it is practically anathema. So, for an artist like ERRE, who has the reputation of having created transcendental symbols of migration like the monumental Trojan horse (*Toy-an Horse*, 1997) placed on the border between Mexico and the United States, embarking on a project about love seemed to be the last frontier that he would have to cross in his discourse.

As a child, ERRE's mother told him a story that seemed simple, like parables often are, about the duality of the love and hate running through the story. The characters could be called Abel and Cain, or have other names; that's not the important thing. What seemed distinctive to him was the fact that the homey anecdote was woven in time and emerged from Marcos's artistic production to become a sculptural metaphor. The piece *Sing-Sing*, which includes a bed with a sheet on it, like in a prison cell, represents the story of two brothers united by love and facing off because of hatred. The piece starts off with a heart made of steel bars that nevertheless offers sanctuary for a child unaware of the fact that outside, the world is separated into rich and poor, winners and losers,

North and South. Love exists in the heart, and is a feast, a giving of oneself, that ennobles and protects human beings, but at the same time, it is a cell.

The epic narrative, which constructs and is the emblem of the history of nations, is a recurring motif in ERRE's aesthetic factory. The anecdote, the detail translated into a symbol, the translated image that throughout his work speaks for itself in all languages: none of these escape him. In the installation *Gold through Mirrors*, he takes up the theme of the colonial conquest, but turns the form upside down so that we are reflected in the very uncomfortable bed where our ideals lay sleeping. From the border, on the margins of culture, where identity is negotiated every day, ERRE sees legendary Mexico as the country that has diluted us in lamentations, expressed in the need to search for the foreign enemy to blame him for our internal debacle, or the country where we have been settling up because of the pain of being less, due to the loss of our indigenous beginnings, so idyllic and pure. The murder of immigrants, buried in clandestine graves, is a terrible example of what we have done to our own people, and it undermines our dignity and legitimacy to be able to protest to others what Mexicans suffer beyond their borders.

The philosopher Néstor García Canclini writes that metaphor in art, particularly the art of Marcos Ramírez, represents a movement and displacement that articulates different senses, beyond the limiting rigor of the concept. García Canclini quotes Paul Ricoeur when he says that, "In addition to bringing constructed languages alive," metaphor "incites us to 'think more,' understand what we cannot name together with what poetry sketches or announces."¹

The black humor and sensibility to the urban, popular culture that ERRE channels in his work offer the probability of jumping between a familiar anecdotal past and the possibility of a future with consciousness.



▲ *The Multiplication of the Loaves*, variable dimensions, 2003 (boxes of light, metal, bread, rug, sand, rocks, and aluminum).



▲ *City Map* [name of the city in the image], diameter 6', (aluminum, wood, paint, and vinyl appliqué).

In the installation *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (2004), the narratives of Hollywood film turn into images of violence as the justification for Manifest Destiny, manipulating the facts to see history unilaterally as a succession of stories of domination of some peoples over others. From helicopters, miniature versions of armored vehicles placed near the ceiling shoot images of dozens of films at the four corners of the darkened room. This operates like the mind of any spectator, a place where stories of domination and superiority are constantly being projected: the heretic, the savage, the barbarian, the fundamentalist.

In a 2011 street installation, at the crossroads of two avenues, ERRE placed a signpost pointing to different states of Mexico. Each sign includes the statement of a president that at one time caused controversy or traced a policy. From Benito Juárez to



▲ *Sing-Sing*, 16' x 12', 1999 (metal, wood, cloth, and pillow).

Mexico's most recent outgoing chief executive, Felipe Calderón, Mexican presidents leave epigraphs for posterity. Outstanding among them are the words of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who attributed to himself having freed the country from communism through the repression of 1968, or of José López Portillo, who promised to defend Mexico's peso from stock market speculation "like a dog." The black humor and sensibility to the urban, popular culture that ERRE channels in his work offer the possibility of jumping between a familiar anecdotal past and that of a future with consciousness.

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ERRE's work leaves to one side the furor about concept that has become generalized in today's art and centers on the translation of historical symbols into metaphors that give us food for thought to those of us who live in a present bereft of ideals. His bi-cultural experience allows him to see both sides of the wall of history: on one side is the land of invisible subjects who, in constructing their day-to-day lives, recycle the meanings of their existence, and on the other is the land of the powers that aim to erase the history of peoples, blocking out the sun with a hand. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Néstor García Canclini, *La sociedad sin relato. Antropología y estética de la inminencia* (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2010).