

Recreating, Transcending, and Transforming: Marcos Ramírez, ERRE, Uses Art to Reshape the United States/Mexico Border
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This is my home
this thin edge of
barbed wire.¹

The border between the United States and Mexico has been a constant reality, a political presence in the development history of both nations, and a symbol of human division and cultural insecurity. The border is a lived in space. It is seen as landscape, physical and social, as well as cultural and artistic. People who live along the border have an innate struggle within to understand this extremely vibrant and unique geographical region, making the United States/Mexico border one of the most unique and challenging of border regions. Different cultural dynamics, government policies, economic structures, and languages, have created a place where its inhabitants confront questions of self and cultural understanding, a constant wrestle. According to Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui, “The border is also the map of the divided heart. The border has become the locus of contradictions, displacements, desires, migration, ethnicities, nations, corporations, capital and cultural location and dislocation.”² As the dynamics at the border shift and change, it would make sense that throughout the last few decades, while population expands along both sides of the border, that people, artists, would begin creating visual reminders of the border and its effects. This geographic and cultural landscape serves as a rich place for vibrant and significant works of art. As the artists along the border, both in the United States and Mexico, continue to process the cultural struggles of this region, a new landscape is created.

Marcos Ramírez, or ERRE as he is referred to (and will be for the duration of this paper), is a complex artist who consistently draws upon the elements of the United States/Mexico border to create art that asks many questions of basic human values, the ever-growing societal acceptance in the United States of cultural ignorance and fear; while he encourages humanity to process and remove the social ideas created at the border, as they are carried into an understanding of the world. ERRE is a valued artist and voice of the San Diego/Tijuana region, as he continues to emphasize the importance of transcending borders by and for the purpose of illuminating key issues that affect human values.

ERRE was born in Tijuana, Baja California in 1961. He studied law and humanities at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, obtaining his J.D. degree. As well as a background in law, ERRE is a skilled carpenter and worked in construction for 17 years prior to beginning his career as an artist. His background in the humanities and carpentry, as well as his geographical residence, inspires his work, he has never had formal artistic training. He lives on the United States/Mexico border, with both Mexican citizenship and a United States green card; a studio in Tijuana and in San Diego. From this position, he is able to analyze activities along the border, and abroad. While his focus today includes issues spanning many continents and border regions, ERRE is committed to the San Diego/Tijuana border region – a region whose significant problems and unique characteristics provide him with continual creative inspiration. The art of ERRE between 1994 and 2006 poses a question worth investigating: *Who* really is the victim here? ERRE states, “I like to deal in my work with being on the other side of the border, the other side of the knife.”³ ERRE is a voice for change and border

transcendence, and will be a key figure in the resolution and transformation of the border region, and therefore, the relationship between the United States and Mexico.

One of ERRE's first major works was *Century 21* in 1994. *Century 21* was created for inSITE94, an important binational art exhibition held in Tijuana, Baja California and San Diego, California. *Century 21* is a house, constructed on dirt carpet. It was placed in the plaza of the Centro Cultural (CECUT) in Tijuana, Baja California. The home is a full-size and completely working one room, common of the homes along the hillside in Tijuana. Along with the home, the building permits and architect's plans are displayed. The plans include each cardboard piece carefully drawn, as if this one room house was equal to the homes built along Las Playas, Baja California or those in the United States. ERRE's comment on the inequality of humanity is clear in this piece. He adds, "Art critics described the houses as temporary migrant shelters for people waiting to cross the border and that's not necessarily true, they are also used as families' homes. It says a lot about how the United States perceives Mexico."⁴ Another piece of historical relevancy that is acknowledged in *Century 21* is that the land used for the construction of CECUT was once occupied by these shanty homes. ERRE stresses that point with the placement of *Century 21* in the plaza of CECUT. Although there is a beautifully structured and educational opportunity within CECUT, the people who sacrificed their homes for this extravagant establishment were those who struggle the most, and would not be able to afford admission to such a museum and cultural center as CECUT nor the ability to establish their family and home elsewhere.

ERRE's most acclaimed project was his creation for the inSITE97 installation, *Toy an Horse*. It is a 30-foot (10 meters) tall, two headed (bi-directional), empty – with

the ability to see through the body – wooden horse that was placed directly on the line of demarcation between the United States and Mexico, at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, one of the busiest international crossings in the world. As the symbol of the Trojan Horse, which is historically connected to battle between lands, deceit and manipulation, stood significantly between the border of the USA and Mexico, it was transformed into a symbol of the border as both a physical and emotional divide. There is a line literally drawn between two nations, and figuratively, the line separates the people of the two nations from building a shared culture of trust and common advancement. As Malagamba-Ansótegui suggests,

The work of Marcos Ramírez, el Erre, *Toy-an-Horse* from 1997 addresses this point of creating from the border at the border within the border...In the words of the artist, ‘the position of the sculpture questions the relationship of the two countries.’ The full meaning of this installation piece can only be achieved by its location in space and place. Built from the border, at the border within the border, the Toy-an-Horse can only convey the intention of the artists by its spatial location, right there on top of the thin wire.⁵

Perhaps ERRE conveyed that one side will always be attacking the other, and in ERRE’s point of view, shared by most, the United States stands as the stronger predator, like the Greeks against the Trojans. While reflecting on *Toy an Horse*, one wonders of the cultural pain ERRE may have endured in creating this modern symbol of the Trojan horse. The Trojans accepted this gift from the Greeks, a gift that is of the highest of honor to receive. The horse was considered a sacred animal, and it was custom for the

defeated side to surrender his horse to the victorious, as a sign of respect. Perhaps ERRE was reflecting on the many moments through this shared history of “amnesty” or signs of cultural collaboration on the side of the United States only to betray the people of Mexico by shutting down the border, conducting deportation sweeps, and never really allowing or accepting people of Latin American descent to feel accepted, acknowledged, and equal in schools, communities, government, etc. Or did he display his version of a Trojan horse to highlight the way the United States feels as year after year the communities are growing in population of people coming from Latin America, primarily Mexico? Along with the migration of people from Mexico is the inaccurately perceived loss of jobs by legal residents of the USA, as well as an influx of students in schools, marked as those who will inevitably lower test scores with their limited or no English language ability. Perhaps the significance of *Toy an Horse* was meant to showcase the confusing paradox between the two countries.

ERRE would frequent a cemetery along the road that carries travelers from Tijuana to Tecate and back. In 2002, upon his many visits of the cemetery, he began spending time in the section of the cemetery dedicated to deceased children. He noticed that the altars created by the children’s families, as is custom in Mexican culture, were beginning to leave the roots of this symbolic custom, in order to take on a contemporary look, adopting images and symbols of not only contemporary time, but of popular cultural items in the United States. *Garden of Angels*, an exhibition of photography, color and light, was created in response to those trips to the cemetery. ERRE began taking his camera to the cemetery, documenting the children’s gravesites he was particularly interested in. These gravesites had replaced the traditional religious

iconography with commercial and American toys, for example and most notably, Mickey Mouse. *Garden of Angels* is 25 photographs mounted inside light boxes similar in size to actual tombstones (approximately 30x40 inches). In the gallery space set up for *Garden of Angels*, some light boxes hang on walls while others are freestanding. The photos are bright and the boxes are decorated in metallic colors of baby blue, pink, and yellow, similar to the colors of a nursery. “The place looks more like something out of Alice in Wonderland than a graveyard,” ERRE states, “the light itself is a symbol of the divine, of eternal life and the placement is so that when you look at them, you will see them as if you were in the graveyard. The whole idea is to bring you into the place.”⁶

This strange collection of cultures replacing something so sacred is what ERRE was stating when he created this piece. He acknowledges that the people of Tijuana and along the border with the United States, have grown accustomed to seeing their sacred customs manipulated for a commercial audience in the USA. He acknowledges that the people of Tijuana and along the border with the United States have grown accustomed to seeing their sacred customs manipulated for a commercial audience across the border. Just like the gifts sold to waiting border crossers from Tijuana to San Diego, these gravestones, representing the tragically short lives of children, have been changed to highlight the culture that is so close in proximity, so large and overwhelming in influence, just across the border. ERRE goes on to say, “The graves are part of another long tradition: we make altars and all these things, paying homage to the dead. But now the tradition is changing. It’s mutating to include new elements that aren’t from our own culture. The graves are a hybrid.”⁷

The final work of art in this analysis is *The Prejudice Project* of 2006. *The Prejudice Project* was created for the opening of *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana/Extraño Nuevo Mundo: Arte y diseño desde Tijuana*. According to Rachel Teagle, the curator of *Strange New World*, the exhibition was the first in-depth study of the history and development of contemporary art in Tijuana, surveying the 35 years of art from Tijuana, beginning with work from 1974, but focusing on the work from 1994 to the present.⁸ It was an effort in addressing themes of a globalized reality, a world where borders take second priority to expanding economy and industry, as well as culture. Richard Chang of the *Orange County Register* says, “The exhibit explores issues of urbanism, transportation, and the pressures of a globalized economy.”⁹ ERRE’s project was inspired by the reawakening of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, whose mission statement is: “To secure United States borders and coastal boundaries against unlawful and unauthorized entry of all individuals, contraband, and foreign military.”¹⁰ ERRE partnered with Mike Davis, a San Diego writer and urban theorist at UC Irvine, and constructed a billboard of 4x10 feet, featuring a man with his back to the camera, staring at the San Diego/Tijuana border from the United States perspective, wearing a camouflage jacket with a statement at the top of the billboard: “DON’T BE A MAN FOR JUST A MINUTE, BE A MAN YOUR WHOLE LIFE.” The billboard was positioned at Interstate 5 and the Via de San Ysidro exit for the duration of the project.

The culture along the United States/Mexico border is searching for an honest and comprehensive representation. Artists who reside and create along the border, are capable of addressing the issues being confronted daily in a way that enlightens, informs, and inspires change. ERRE has been able to address significant issues and ask valuable

and immediate questions that define the border and its people and one can interpret that ERRE's goal is to remove the symbolic border that surrounds the people who live in all border regions. If it is possible to address the issues of basic human needs, as they are for all people, not just for those living on one side of the border, perhaps it is possible to begin making progress in an attempt to acknowledge each other with compassion and understanding. Malagamba-Ansótegui writes,

The border is seen as the place where everybody meets, intersects, lives and negotiates. It is where peoples' lives are constantly challenged by change and where one has to live with fragmentation as part and condition of the place. *La frontera* is a distinct place marked by the constant tension between cultures and asymmetric powers. As the line in form of the barbed wire fence took its place in the landscape, the Mexican people on both sides of the border initiated a historical process of making sense of the new situation by creating. This effort has created a new cultural and artistic landscape, which draws from the past and looks at the future. Many of the symbolic spaces of the border continue to be part of the symbolic landscape of *la frontera*.¹¹

ERRE is an admired creator, as mentioned, as a common thread exists throughout his art: equality, not as the border regions and neighboring nations know it now, but as it could be, as it should be. ERRE affirms this common thread and intentional idealism, "In the end, human problems are the same whether they are between Mexicans and Americans, Russians and Chinese, or Africans and Europeans...Illegal is not immoral."¹²

Endnotes

¹ Anzaldúa, Gloria. (As quoted by) Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui, *Tracing Symbolic Spaces in Border Art: De Este y Del Otro Lado* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 75.

² Malagamba-Ansótegui, *Tracing Symbolic Spaces in Border Art: De Este y Del Otro Lado* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 152.

³ Ramírez, Marcos. (As quoted by) Wagner, Negotiating Boundaries: “Artists Explore the Tijuana – San Diego Border,” *Sculpture* 17.2 (1998): 32.

⁴ Ramírez, Marcos. (As quoted by) Wagner, Negotiating Boundaries: “Artists Explore the Tijuana – San Diego Border,” *Sculpture* 17.2 (1998): 32.

⁵ Malagamba-Ansótegui, *Tracing Symbolic Spaces in Border Art: De Este y Del Otro Lado* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 77-78.

⁶ Ramírez, Marcos. (As quoted by) Jeanne Schinto, “Weird Things,” *San Diego Reader*, July 11, 2002.

⁷ Ramírez, Marcos. (As quoted by) Jeanne Schinto, “Weird Things,” *San Diego Reader*, July 11, 2002.

⁸ Rachel Teagle, “Art and the Logic of the City,” *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana/Extraño Nuevo Mundo: Arte y diseño desde Tijuana*, ed. Rachel Teagle (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2006), 43.

⁹ Richard Chang, “Exhibit: The border debate as art, *The Orange County Register*, June 11, 2006.

¹⁰ The Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, Homepage, <http://www.minutemanhq.com/hq/>.

¹¹ Malagamba-Ansótegui, *Tracing Symbolic Spaces in Border Art: De Este y Del Otro Lado* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 146-147.

¹² Ramírez, Marcos. (As quoted by) Kate Bonansinga, “False Borders: A Conversation with Marcos Ramírez ERRE,” *Sculpture* 25.9 (2006): 27.

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