

Carlos Mare139 Rodriguez

By Henry Chalfant

One artist who has successfully incorporated the so-called High and Low streams of contemporary art in his work is Carlos Rodriguez aka Mare139. A veteran of the golden years of New York subway painting 1978-1983, Rodriguez began his art career wielding a spray can to do burners on parked trains under the cover of darkness. He learned to paint not in school but as an apprentice to older graffiti artists such as his brother, Kel First. You might think that the upper reaches of culture would have been inaccessible to a youth who was working in an outsider art medium, like graffiti, and living in New York City in a time of economic crisis. But even though the public schools had eliminated art and music programs, the city still offered a wealth of opportunities for a curious young artist to learn about art. In spite of its difficulties, New York was still a place where you could see all the art of the world, both from a historical perspective, and in contemporary art galleries showing the best current work. In the case of Rodriguez, the untutored teenage graffiti artist attended the large retrospective Picasso show at MOMA. This and other eye-opening experiences encouraged the young man to consider art as a career choice for his life.

As graffiti evolved in the seventies, and wild style emerged as the predominant style, the components of colors, designs, fades, arrows and pumps gradually coalesced into a quasi three dimensional form. In fact 3D became one of the building blocks of most graffiti pieces. Wild style pieces, the invention of urban adolescents, resemble a frieze, autonomous with respect to the surface and suggesting three-dimensional relief. Several graffiti artists, Mare139 among them, saw the possibilities in taking a sculptural approach to the letter forms, moving from the illusion of depth in painting to concrete forms in sculpture. At first most of these sculptures were executed, not in the round, but adhering to the format of a relief, to be viewed from only one point. Rodriguez' first pieces on sheet metal were like drawings of the shape of the letter, with sculptural form created by cutting and bending the flat metal plane that faced the viewer so that it swelled and receded to define volume.

During the late seventies and early eighties in New York, the cultural scene was a blend of avant guard artists looking for new ideas and strategies encountering outsider artists from the marginal neighborhoods of the city. The latter realized that they weren't alone, as artists, and that the city was teeming with their peers and with many alternative venues besides the subways. Curious and inspired to look further, Rodriguez came upon the works of Frank Stella and he was struck by the way these sculptures resonated kinetically and rhythmically with his own sensibilities honed by painting art on a moving object. Rodriguez, still working predominantly in relief, was able to jettison much of the graffiti imagery from his palette, and to work in a non-objective mode, deepening the relief, incorporating textural variety and line with sheet metal, grids, wire and steel rod. At the same time he was working on paper models using some elements of graffiti without necessarily doing letterforms. He explored many variations on the arrow, a symbol that suggests movement and direction and one of the elements that gave traditional train graffiti its nervous energy and dynamism as an artwork bred on a moving object. Rodriguez expanded this route of inquiry to larger paper and metal works and castings utilizing the arrow and other forms derived from graffiti. It is the emphasis on movement within a mechanical, industrial context that relates his work to a large body of 20th century sculpture.

Rodriguez, began peeling back the layers of modern sculptural idiom to look at the Russian Constructivists and the openwork drawings in space of David Smith which are in turn rooted in the earlier sculptures of the twenties and thirties of Picasso and Gonzales. Iron-work forged sculpture has its origins as much in industrial technique and the detritus of the industrial age as in fine art. Not taught in art schools till after World War II, industrial

metal working had to be learned at first in technical schools and on the job in American shipyards and auto manufacturing plants as with David Smith, or in the decorative iron work fabricating shops of turn-of-the-century Barcelona, where Julio Gonzalez once worked. Rodriguez, in keeping with these industrial roots, learned welding and metalwork at a New York City technical school. With the influence of these earlier sculptors and through his mastery of metalworking technique, Rodriguez began to discover the possibilities of utilizing metal to create form and volume with planar and linear elements in the immaterial air and space that surround all life. His latest sculptures are now fully realized in the round and to move around them is to watch the shapes of incised space come in and out of focus as if in a kaleidoscope, as new shapes in space come into being. Never completely abandoning the imagery of his early years, he often uses the letter as a point of departure to explore sculptural form. Thus there is in Rodriguez's work, a lingering flavor of the post-modern movement of outsider art that was embraced by the New York and European art worlds of the eighties, now fused with a sculptural language deeply rooted in modernism.

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