

A Minimalist Romance

by Richard Shiff, 2017

Dan Ramirez devotes significant mental and emotional energy to writing about his experience as an artist. His texts are not mere records of the activities or thoughts of the day, but exercises in a process of reasoned observation that passes through numerous variations. He labors over his writings, progressively refining them, though with no intention of publication. Analogous to his aesthetic practice, his writing has evolved into a sustained exercise in self-understanding. Often citing philosophical texts, it constitutes a philosophy of its own.

Ramirez uses the language of his writings as an expressive medium in contact with his life of sensation. But the use of language, or of any system of signs, tends to render first-hand experience second-hand, perceiving it through a rhetorical filter. This is a philosophical problem of ancient lineage—distinguishing the appearance of a thing in its linguistic representation from its direct presentation in reality. What ought to count as contact with reality is yet another issue. As Ramirez musters the forces of shape and color, he knows that the devices of aesthetic expression can fail under the weight of their own rhetoric, just as language can fail.ⁱ He developed his art in terms of geometric abstraction and clearly articulated color, in part because these elements are immediately accessible to visual comprehension and relatively rhetoric-free. Even when the titles of his works allude to aspects of Christian theology or problems in analytical philosophy, a viewer has no cause to seek the location of the Virgin in the spatial complexity of *Contemplation of the Virgin, Variation #3* (1981 [cat. xx]) or to attempt a demonstration of Ludwig Wittgenstein's claims by referring to the internal divisions of the rectangle that constitutes *TL-P 6.421* (1976-1977 [cat. xx]). In both instances, Ramirez's geometry makes its own case.

What is the case?

"The world is everything that is the case": this was Wittgenstein's initial proposition for his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the "TL-P" that Ramirez enlisted to title a number of his works of the 1970s, in homage to the study that stimulated his thinking about communicative signs and the relation of doubt to certainty.ⁱⁱ Wittgenstein argued that language cannot itself demonstrate its truth; it is tautological. This analytical dead-end, which opens to other areas of intellectual experience, continues to fascinate Ramirez. In equal measure, perhaps more, he has focused on the perceptual conundrum of the Necker cube, a geometrical figure of competing illusions [fig. 1]. He refers to the tension it establishes as it sets "visceral versus intellectual" aspects of perception in conflict.ⁱⁱⁱ The ambiguity of the Necker cube is compelling; it holds the attention of eye and mind despite a lack of authoritative verbal explanation. A general point can be made: we recognize that we perceive visual illusions—such illusions are real perceptions, a lived reality—before, if ever, we understand, or can represent, their existence and significance in our lives. As a painter, Ramirez is an accomplished illusionist: "The spatial illusions and ambiguities I use are ultimately metaphors for point of view. Our multiple points of view challenge ideas about what is real, what is true, what can we know with certainty." In *Nuages: La Luz/dos* (2002 [cat. xx]), a black line or bar, which bisects the upper register of the composition, extends at a consistent width along the top of the canvas to the upper left corner where it begins to taper as it descends along

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the left edge. This skewed element of visual framing—Ramirez refers to it as “slicing”—causes the upper left quadrant of the painting to appear to tilt, bend, slip, or warp, even though its connection to the upper right quadrant is secure.^{iv} *Something* is happening, though precisely what is difficult to determine. Illusion is a reality that sometimes seems more than it is and sometimes less. In any case, it is a fact of our lives, despite our customary efforts at suppressing it. Ramirez creates his own “Necker cubes” to shake a viewer’s faith in habitual patterns of observation. Habit makes a life efficient, but it prevents a multitude of phenomena from being perceived. Unseen because unnoticed, such phenomena never become aspects of “the case.”

Language has its own problem of illusion. Let it be said that language must fail in adequately representing visual experience—or rather, that representation of any kind pales before the (chimerical?) real thing. Despite the abundance of philosophical admonitions, Ramirez enjoys the challenge of using verbal reflection to explore his practice of painting, illusion and all. He is his own critical theorist. Thinking aids his painting, though it may be more to the point that painting aids his thinking. The exercise of putting words to sensory experience becomes especially complicated when the available vocabulary is incapable of conforming to an artist’s intuitions. Our culture conditions us not to sense our thoughts but to reason them—and to recognize and respect the difference. But thinking and sensing, logic and poetry, are so closely related in Ramirez’s studio experience (and nearly everywhere else in his life) that the customary divide, both lexical and conceptual, obscures what the painter actually *feels* when he is most aesthetically alive—an immediacy of thought and sense compressed into an acute state of awareness, a state of being.

In his alternative creative capacity, Ramirez is a musician. He plays double bass, primarily jazz. In one of his writings, he uses his experience of sound as an analogous case to connect the intellectual aspect of painting to sensation, where his verbal resources might otherwise come up short: “There are moments of resonance ... with the bass placed against my body ... while searching for the appropriate string of notes ... Like in a painting ... the feeling [happens] as an intellectual event.”^v The intellectualism of creative experience with sound is easier for our culture to grasp than thoughts of adding red to expand an area of red. To what purpose, we might ask: If the red looks red already, will more of it look redder? Articulate reasons do not come forth, despite an artist’s intuition, which in this example may have involved an intuitive estimation of scale rather than color. Much to the contrary, we can reason (or believe we can reason) a way through a passage of music by graphing chord structures or mathematically analyzing the harmonics. Music, even free jazz, has always seemed more of a science than painting, if only because so much of it can be translated into systematic notation. But Ramirez was feeling the resolution of the line of sounds “against [his] body.” The experience was visceral, and he could understand it as it happened. No analysis after the fact would enhance the feeling. Rather than think through a series of notes as preparation for playing and experiencing the music, Ramirez realizes that he feels the *thought* of the music at the same moment that he feels it in his touch on the strings of his instrument, in the sound that emanates, and in the vibration conducted not only to the ear but to the hand, arm, and torso.

“I remembered a technique described by one of [John Coltrane’s] critics as ‘sheets of sound.’ ... [The verbal image] afforded me with a visual image.”^{vi} For Ramirez, the metaphor of a sheet suggests a type of layering characteristic of both his thinking and his painting. One thought leads to another not so much sequentially, but as if the second were breaking through the surface of the first—summoned forth by it rather than entailed by it. Ordinary conversation can work this way, with one speaker either provoking a

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swerve in the thought of the other or interjecting words that seem to guide a sentence toward an unimagined conclusion. Ramirez enjoys animated conversation, but the verbal exercise can also be solitary, with thinking becoming a one-person multi-party exchange.^{vii} He sometimes refers to the process of thought as durational, alluding to Henri Bergson's speculations on consciousness and our awareness of multiple events in time, experienced as intersecting or multidimensional layers.^{viii} He has also discovered the writings of C. S. Peirce, who refers to "the *sensuous* element of thought"—a notion that allows the linguistic to approach the aesthetic, locating each in the other.^{ix} If thinking has a sensuous and emotional component, if even the most logical analysis has a visceral feel to it, then it should follow that Ramirez perceives his process of thinking at moments of the most intense visual and tactile sensation, the moments he devotes to painting. Painting is sensing, but painting is also thinking; and when illusions appear, they affect both sides of this cognitive split, perhaps only to demonstrate that the split remains a whole.

Layers

Since the 1980s, to conduct the exploratory drawing for which he previously used sketchbooks, Ramirez has been working with a variety of computer software. The computer screen, with its overlays and backlighting, facilitates a layered process of thought and visualization. It is at once Bergsonian and Peircean. On the computer, neither of the two mental operations, thinking with concepts and visualizing (sensing) with images, takes precedence over the other. Ramirez can pass through a great number of variations quickly, as if all were present in consciousness simultaneously. A single configuration rises to hold his intuition steady at a certain moment. In a technical sense, and perhaps mentally also, the configurations not selected remain present in the chosen one that seems to epitomize the durational experience, somehow visualizing the thought process or provoking completion of the thought by its image. What the computer extends and condenses as temporal experience, Ramirez, when painting, activates as surface matter.

Ramirez has developed a particular way of applying color—often a single hue gradated light to dark, a progression from luminous to obscure.^x The technique generates an emanating light, similar to that of a computer screen: "There is a very strong felt relationship between computer light and the gradated light that I use in my paintings to suggest space."^{xi} A distinctive variation on his method of capturing and projecting light is the use of gradated washes of iridescent particles, such as acrylic silver iridescent and pearl iridescent (*TL-P 6.421; Caelestis/Spatium/Res (Celestial/Space/Object)*, 1988 [cat. xx]). Ramirez also makes use of acrylic micaceous iron oxide to build deep blacks that absorb light and yet remain subtly reflective because of a rough surface texture (*Nuages: La Luz Azul en sus Ojos (Tres) (study)*, 2002 [cat. xx]). A quotient of luminosity is always a factor in the impression made by his areas of color, whether light or dark. A black can be matte (latex) or have a sheen (graphite); the paintings known as *TL-P series* sometimes exhibit both (1978 [cat. xx]). Regardless of their "light," whites have an analogous range, dull to shiny. In recent years, Ramirez has been applying pearlescent acrylic thickly to create a wave-like surface that "reflects" the peaks and valleys of the sheet of paint (*Epoche: L'échange II (The exchange)*, 2013-14 [cat. xx]). White of this kind has a particularly mellow shine.

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In a number of works, Ramirez creates the illusion of a layer of color that curls to reveal another illusory layer beneath. When both layers are gradated in tone, a spatial illusion of distance or indefinite recession results, added to the illusion of physicality (the curling). And sometimes the curl exposes what amounts to nothing—nothing painted—a “nothing” that *presents*, rather than represents, the physical reality of the material support of the painted illusion. In the trapezoidal canvas *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* (2016 [cat. xx]), one of three areas of curl reveals the substrate of birchwood panel. (In Ramirez’s current terms, consistent with his use of *aletheia* in the title, the illusion of curl “unconceals” the solid base of wood—on this, more to follow.) The game of perception does not end when vision hits bottom. The various levels of illusion continue beyond ground-zero because, to the right of the exposed panel, an area of atmospherically gradated gray appears to recede into deep space. Within the gray, the appearance of a single “planet,” a small illusionistic sphere, articulated as ochre-day and blue-night, evokes space on an interplanetary scale. Here, Ramirez plays with representational irony, as if to disturb an environment of graphic forms that are insistently abstract. The circle-sphere alters the internal scale of the work, but not entirely, not without leaving the large size of the object itself, over six feet in height, as a challenge to visual reckoning. We face this object as if it were our human equal, human-size and utterly real. Then, in a turnabout, we lose ourselves in the fantasy of the fathomless space of planetary motion. As an object, the scale of *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* compares to the scale of any number of modernist works, more or less “minimalist” in effect—the art of Tony Smith or Richard Serra, works that impressed Ramirez in his early years as an artist.^{xii} But the scale of the *image*, so distinct from the *object*, remains in question, its illusion and ambiguity as boundless as the space between galaxies.

Just as the canvas ground anchors *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans* and yet contradicts the gist of its imagery, similar sensory provocations arise when Ramirez introduces reflective materials into his visual orders. *Aletheia: Kosmik Cathedral*, a work on shaped aluminum, is an example (2016 [cat. xx]). Its configuration includes a spatially ambiguous area that received no pigment, reflecting light rather than absorbing it. Ramirez’s set of “illuminated manuscripts,” an unbound “book” of digital prints, also uses aluminum as the support (2016-17 [cat. xx]). It constitutes a sequel to the set of etchings dedicated to the composer Olivier Messiaen (*Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*, 1980 [cat. xx]). In both series, Ramirez pays homage to Messiaen’s demonstrations of faith and religiosity. The “illuminations” reflect actual light, which shines through the graphic configurations of sound that Ramirez inscribes on the sheets of aluminum. The metal grounds the inscriptions as paper grounds ink, but it also reflects, mirror-like, an image of the viewer—a visual correspondence to Messiaen’s establishment of self-defining presence through musical composition.

Irresolvable illusion—not the naturalistic illusion-*ism* of an apple in a still life or the sky in a landscape, but Necker-cube illusion, *real* illusion—has been a consistent feature of Ramirez’s art. It affects him as much as he expects it to affect his viewers. It stimulates his mind and senses; and if it ceased to do so, he would make a different kind of art, or no art at all. As an exercise in understanding his aesthetic intuitions, he recorded his thoughts orally after completing *Aletheia* (2016 [fig. 2]), another work that includes a form that curls. Within his rich commentary is an explanation of the visual device of “slicing,” used to suggest that a painting, like any object, must be more than a surface. Surfaces reveal, if only to reveal themselves—they constitute what is accessible to sight. Obviously, surfaces also conceal; they conceal not only depths but other surfaces, other layers.

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One of Ramirez's strategies is to paint the sides of a stretched canvas, not just as a wrap-around, but as a revelation of what might lie beneath the frontal plane—perhaps another layer with distinctive characteristics such as a gradation of light that suggests spatial depth, an illusion within the illusion [side view, fig. 3]. "As I work on the side," Ramirez says, "I introduce spatial planes related to the picture plane on the front."^{xiii} The "slicing" element is the black linear band that occupies the upper right corner of *Aletheia*, tapering down the right hand edge of the canvas, the so-called picture plane. It seems to force the gradated area that it borders to lift forward and detach from a space underneath, which is partly, perhaps only *gradually*, revealed. We extend our comprehension of this space by viewing the side of the canvas as Ramirez has painted it, as a bar of light itself gradated. The configuration of the side joins that of the front at the bottom corner of the canvas. At that point, both front and side are colored the same deep black. The character of the side causes the frontal plane to seem paper thin—which, of course, it is, since its existence is superficial. Or is it? It contains several forms of depth illusion of its own, all perhaps contradicted by the actual depth of the sides. But the sides, too, are "painting."

Describing the surfaces, planes, and layers of *Aletheia* with respect to the device of slicing, Ramirez refers to another type of illusion of longstanding interest to him. It occurs when a line of surface demarcation—such as the boundary of a geometric form or a line of bisection—shifts to become the edge of a would-be volume. In *Veritas/Lumen/Res #13* (1986 [cat. xx]), for example, a line that appears to mark the edge of a rectilinear area of gradation becomes the leading edge of an acutely angled and textured pyramidal form, which itself seems to pale in relation to the segment of a vault-like form beside it. However the forms shake out in the visual perception of the moment, no linear or geometric element remains secure in a given identity. A similar kind of ambiguity occurs when Ramirez breaks the frontal surface plane of a painting-object by slanting or projecting one element forward or back in relation to an adjacent one (*Kiss of the Infant Jesus*, 1981 [cat. xx]). Light then articulates the spatial identities, the places held by the parts within the whole, in curious ways. The perspectives multiply. "Things can be other than what they are," the artist remarks, paraphrasing Wittgenstein.^{xiv} As he muses over lines, shapes, and surfaces, he realizes that he lacks full comprehension of the art he himself has created. The only solution is to continue making paintings.

A meaning to be sensed

"The paintings reveal to me that there is meaning to be found in the painting."^{xv} The simple syntax of Ramirez's statement masks its radical implications, both counterintuitive and countercultural. It recalls Wittgenstein's introduction to his own work, which may well have dissuaded potential readers: "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts."^{xvi} How similar might be sufficient, Wittgenstein did not indicate. On his part, Ramirez suggests that the meaning of the art of painting will need to be rediscovered for each painting as it is made and viewed. He may have imagined a meaning for a painting before painting it, but if he did, the thought would not have been accessible to him without his having produced the painting. The thought would be the dream of a painting, not a painting. Viewers must accept that "there is meaning to be found," even though an artist cannot guarantee having inserted meaning of any kind into the forms and colors. The meaning of Ramirez's art consists in an extended questioning, like a text entirely rewritten with each additional line put down. The "case" is ever new.

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A condition of this sort is counterintuitive for those locked into the belief that every object, situation, or action has a determinate cause. The cause lacks only to be identified, as if for every case—for every world, as Wittgenstein might say—we can identify another world to explain the first. Ramirez presumes no causes; like Wittgenstein, he regards explanations as tautological. A set of causes would establish a genealogy of meaning, the kind of meaning-in-advance that results from a system of reasoning, not from sensory perception. He states that meaning appears to him only as he creates the painting, experiences the process, and perceives the result. His art may be immune to conventional historical analysis that reveals a meaning by investigating a cultural context—everything outside the work of art that supposedly enters into it, one world into the other. By Ramirez’s experience of his art, it takes nothing of its context in; it projects itself out into the context, an environment of sensory phenomena. It is the “matter at hand,” the case.^{xvii}

If the implications of painting are so local and personal, why paint? Beyond the delight taken in crafting an aesthetic object, Ramirez believes that he benefits from being present as the object he creates assumes its meaning—again, not a meaning that he expresses or instills, but a meaning that the work offers to perception. Painting is not solitary; Ramirez understands it as social. If it affects his senses, emotions, and intellect, it should affect others analogously. The beneficial perception can be anyone’s: “I am hopeful that the spirit that resides in the object of contemplation that I create ... will alter a viewer’s perceptions [and provide] a conduit to truth and meaning.” In the same set of typescript musings, he alludes to the passage from an absence of perceptible meaning to the presence of meaning—perceptible but ineffable—in a specific situation: “A painting is an ‘is,’ as an ‘is’ that has no content, until—*it is!*”^{xviii} A painting just is, he seems to be saying, until it exists *just for you*. Or, to extend the thought: until it *is* you; until it holds the entirety of your attention and has become your consciousness. This condition applies to both artist and viewer. We might counter that it could be instilled by any object of attention. Yes, it could. But a distinctive painting, a true challenge to perception, is especially capable of assimilating consciousness to itself—no indiscriminate instance of conventional beauty, it presents a sublime vision to which nothing seems comparable.

The playful repetition of the word *is* in Ramirez’s statement acquires in each instance a different sense. It tracks a linguistic path that opened to the artist when he read a number of essays by Martin Heidegger. Heideggerean philosophy relates the use of language to human presence as vigorously as Barnett Newman’s art—an inspiration for Ramirez—relates visual scale to a human state of being.^{xix} Heidegger’s philosophy converts logic to poetry; Newman’s painting converts geometry to sublime gesture (*Cathedra*, 1951 [fig. 4]). His essay of 1948, “The Sublime Is Now,” has for years been notorious in art circles; Ramirez read it as a student and has probably reread it a number of times since. Although Newman had little interest in painterly illusion, his sense of the sublime—and why it resumed significance for the new “atomic age”—resonates with Ramirez’s concerns. The sublime is hardly beautiful. To encounter a condition of sublimity is to subject the mind and the senses to disorientation and, as a result, to become hyperaware of the process of perception, engaged in a struggle to perceive. To the contrary, when encountering beauty, the mind and senses find a reassuring satisfaction in an order and harmony that seems always to have existed. Beauty is ideal, eternal. The sublime is existential. Newman gave the difference a history:

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The invention of beauty by the Greeks, that is, their postulate of beauty as an ideal, has been the bugbear of European art and European aesthetic philosophies. ... [The] artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity. ... In the Renaissance the revival of the ideals of Greek beauty set the artists the task of rephrasing an accepted Christ legend in terms of absolute beauty as against the original Gothic ecstasy over the legend's evocation of the Absolute.^{xx}

Ramirez often refers to a quest for the absolute, not because religious fervor drives him or because he expects to realize an absolute form or an absolute truth, reliable as a resource for the future. A certain faith nevertheless sustains him; it is faith in his own effort, which generates a passionate art—the passion of sublimity, not beauty. Like the minimalist artists of the 1960s who were Newman's heirs, Ramirez presents materials and forms that directly affect the senses and the sense of place that sparks an awareness of existential being. In agreement with Newman, Ramirez takes inspiration from the Gothic expression of religious faith, not the Renaissance version. The eccentric dimensions of *Batlló La Luz V*, 2003 [cat. xx]), nearly six feet in height but only eight inches wide, relate to the Batlló Cross, gothic-thin in appearance, which Ramirez encountered in Barcelona at the National Art Museum of Catalonia [fig. 5]: "I was struck by ... its verticality, its objecthood. In response I painted a series of tall, thin works and called them *La Luz* or *The Light*. ... And of course blue suggests a celestial realm."^{xxi} The combination of a forceful material presence with an evocation of the heavens qualifies as a gesture toward the sublime. Along similar lines of inspiration, a number of Ramirez's works, such as *Celestial City #9* (1983 [cat. xx]), develop intersecting curves that relate to a type of gothic vaulting known as the tierceron star [fig. 6]: "With these paintings I was creating spatial maps of linear and curvilinear architectural space filled with light. To me these spaces represented something of the unknown, something you're drawn to explore physically and emotionally."^{xxii} General statements are risky, but one seems to suit virtually all of Ramirez's work: the manifest tension that he generates between object and illusion—as between the canvas substrate and the painted atmosphere in *Aletheia: Kosmik Alska Dans*—fails to resolve into a formal order of compositional harmony and conventional beauty. Some aspect seems always to suggest that one of the links to perfection is missing. There is no synthesis, no resolution, no denouement. The best we can do is to invoke the concept of the sublime, even though twentieth-century critics overworked it dreadfully. Through sublime effects, Ramirez reaches for an absolute and perhaps touches it, but only in the instant, now but not forever.

If Roman and Renaissance vaulting is beautifully logical, by comparison the tierceron star puts engineering efficiency in doubt. It extends beauty into the sublime, with unpredictable consequences—a suitable resource for Ramirez's aesthetic investigations. A number of his plays on curvature, some inspired by the tierceron, are contained within an odd format, the trapezoid. Its geometry seems inherently ungainly, possessing neither the dynamism of the triangle nor the stability of the rectangle. From relatively austere presentations, such as *Untitled* (1975 [cat. xx]), to the Gothicized complexities of *Caelestis/Spatium/Res* (*Celestial/Space/Object*), Ramirez has deployed the trapezoid with limitless ingenuity. Think of it as a triangle that lacks its top. Unlike the full triangle that seems to rise from its base, the trapezoid both rises and falls as a result of its truncated top and extensive bottom. Ramirez's versions of the trapezoidal format always have a base that measures greater than the height. He notes an irony, which applies especially to a work like *Caelestis/Spatium/Res*, since it alludes to vaulting: "The trapezoid pushes down! Its gravity challenges the transcending implication of reaching toward God and

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the heavens.”^{xxiii} Even the Gothic sublime, invoked by Newman and reemerging in Ramirez’s arch-and-vault-like curves, encounters a dubious fate, immersed in the ambiguities of perception.

At this point, one of the artist’s statements merits repeating: “The paintings reveal to me that there is meaning to be found in the painting.”^{xxiv} To the contrary, we often regard artists as setting out to generate cultural meaning by expressing their thoughts and feelings. An artist expressive in this sense engages in a limited form of creative action; for if the thoughts and feelings already exist to be expressed, they might well benefit from being expressed by other means, in other forms. The meaning lacks a determinative connection to its means. Perhaps such a connection, inexplicable when it does appear, is sublime. Like Ramirez now, Newman could never predict the success of his work. He expected to learn—or un-learn, de-familiarize himself—in the face of his result, just as others might: “It is as I work that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me.”^{xxv} Ramirez has similar expectations and aims: to generate “a situation that provokes the kind of curiosity that would engage questions of truth and meaning.”^{xxvi} His novel spatial illusions create ambiguities that affect eye and mind simultaneously—enough to cause a person, the artist included, to doubt the ways in which matters of certainty have been settled on the basis of sensory input. Yet what the senses reveal is as real as the matter at hand becomes. “For me,” Ramirez states, “the spatial illusions and ambiguities I use are ultimately metaphors for point of view. Our multiple points of view challenge ideas about what is real, what is true, what can we know with certainty. ... I like my work to provide many possible interpretations for both myself and the viewer.”^{xxvii} His art is first for himself, the first to doubt the cultural certainties.

Things other than what they are

Wittgenstein wrote of the possibility—perhaps a virtual certainty—that “whatever we see could be other than it is.” We know only what our language can reveal to us through its descriptions—it is our world, it is the case—yet “whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.”^{xxviii} Language says nothing reliable about the essence or being of things. But there may be other ways of knowing to be discovered, more attuned to contradiction and illusion than rational language is, if only we were to let sensation into our thoughts. Here, Peirce’s notion of the sensuous aspect of thinking aids *our* thinking.

Ramirez did not need Heidegger or Wittgenstein or Peirce to avoid the pitfall of an aesthetic expression too general to suit its medium. His art has never availed itself of clichés and conventionally beautiful gestures. His sensory experience is a certainty—he knows it is happening as it happens—but fixing the *meaning* of sensory experience is not the “matter at hand” for his art. There are numerous unfixed meanings, revelations of the moment that fit our conventional world no better than a Necker cube fits within a warehouse box. The term that Ramirez has incorporated into a number of his titles—*aletheia*—conveys something of the evolving truth that he seeks through his art, concerned to offer to others a path to the same type of realization. “I do not believe there is a ‘hidden’ meaning of life. I believe that truth is a search for meaning in life.” A “search,” but not for anything “hidden.” The truth of art, not identical to its cultural meaning, is a “truth of the matter at hand,” which ought to be eminently present.^{xxix} Ramirez’s remarks accord with the philosophical understanding of *aletheia*, a sense of truth (or true meaning) signified by a Greek term returned to modern consciousness by Heidegger. The Greek goddess of truth Aletheia corresponds to the Roman Veritas; but something profound, according to

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Heidegger, had been lost in the exchange. Heidegger (Ramirez, too) associates aletheia with “unconcealment”: “We know too much and believe too readily ever to feel at home in a questioning which is powerfully experienced. For that we need the ability to wonder at what is simple, and to take up that wonder as our abode. ... Unconcealment [aletheia] is the chief characteristic of that which has already come forward into appearance and left concealment behind.”^{xxx} Illusion can generate “questioning which is powerfully experienced.” It is “simple,” and yet we wonder at it. If the wonder in a painting reveals a meaning, the revelation is a truth. Such truth is fluid: “‘Truths’ are objects of flux,” Ramirez says.^{xxxi} The truth revealed by painting is that meaning will be found in its process as much as in the result. So painting, according to Ramirez, becomes a search for truth that bears its truth in itself. This position reduces to what seems like a logical riddle. It is the condition of painting when the painter assumes a romantic attitude to life and reality, where neither meaning, nor understanding, nor even truth can be fixed. Like life itself, the truths of life evolve and are to be sensed only within live experience.

Ramirez relates a thought process he underwent at an exhibition opening—not voluntarily—when he was challenged to define art and its process. His account is worth quoting at length:

When I began to respond as to what I thought a painting’s function was, what art’s function was, it struck me as to how intuitive it must have been for prehistoric hominids, such as Neanderthal cave dwellers, to respond to the need to ‘picture’ on a cave wall the subject of their need to understand and survive. In many ways, perhaps in all ways, that is what the artist feels: the need to survive through a felt experience of ‘the matter at hand.’ To feel and then understand what that reality is and how it will impact one’s survival. In this particular instance I felt myself trying to survive the initial feeling of my inadequacy to handle the question as it had been asked. In essence, I believe what I was feeling was the self-defining activity that all artists come to know and to embrace as the sentient nature of a life of art as well as the sentient nature of reflection.^{xxxii}

As the conditions of life change, including its modes of survival, the nature of truth changes. But the truth that we sense and think sets the conditions of life.

Romance

In 2005, then in 2010-11, and again in 2013-14, Ramirez created groups of paintings that allude to Francisco Goya’s *Duchess of Alba*, the so-called “White Duchess” (1795 [fig. 7]): “I was moved by the color and the contrasts of light and dark in this work as well as by the beautiful paint handling of the white dress—its texture and brilliance. In my painting, *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa* (2005 [cat. xx]), I used the red, black and white of the portrait. I let some of the paint bleed into the canvas, suggesting the black of her hair.” Ramirez adds: “I’m always exploring the possibility of creating metaphor and narrative through geometric abstraction. I love storytelling.”^{xxxiii} He freely admits to being a romantic at heart, touched by what he learned of Goya’s life and his putative affair with the portrait subject of the “White Duchess.” Goya probably never pursued his erotic dream through to reality.^{xxxiv} But his painting of Alba is real, as is Ramirez’s abstract sensory fantasia in red, black, and white.

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The sensuosity of Goya's paint strikes Ramirez as worthy of the most intense carnal desires. Aware of the connection to a passionate Goya, a viewer might interpret the abstraction of *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa* in a literal (though metaphorical) way: the white is her opulent gown, the red her provocative sash, the black her abundant hair—the painter having allowed the dark color to bleed (or be feathered), to yield an organic quality. Ramirez encourages these associations, which energized him as he painted. Yet, how much of a narrative have we? If the narrative is essential to the work, if it has become the unconcealed truth, we should be feeling it rather than interpreting it. The painting includes a black bar above the large area of white at the right that turns at a right angle and tapers downward, as if to penetrate the white and disappear into it; this black splits the area of white, perhaps to reveal what lies beneath (if anything).^{xxxv} Does the penetrating line enter into the paint, or enter into the light, or enter into the flesh beneath the gown? There are many allusions and illusions that open to potential responses, and the story we tell to ourselves—aware of Ramirez's metaphors—will reflect no more certainty than the story of a love affair that may or may not have happened. The truth of the romance is indeterminate, and all the more “romantic” in a nineteenth-century sense for being the product of experience left unresolved, unconsummated. What matters for Ramirez is how he felt as he made the painting.

From a narrative that hinges on questionable historical facts, the metaphorical storytelling associated with *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa*, we can turn to autobiography, presumably more “truthful.” With respect to *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* (2017 [cat. xx]), Ramirez has provided an introspective narrative of his feelings as he created the work. Four birchwood panels comprise the structure: an acute triangle at left, with the raw material exposed; a vertical rectangle at center-left, stroked horizontally with dark but luminescent graphite in two columns, divided in the making; a narrower vertical rectangle at center-right, part painted, part exposed; and at right, the symmetrical counterpart of the triangle at left, its wood similarly visible. The narrower of the two vertical rectangles contains a dramatic instance of a curl that reveals the wooden substrate; it unconceals it. The “sheet” that “curls over,” painted with oil and acrylic, reveals not only the wood but also its own white underside, while its frontal surface is gradated dark to light. Just as the curl introduces the possibility of layering (or its illusion), the gradation suggests depth or a physical warp that would result from bending—that is, a curl along the opposing axis of the “sheet” (or its illusion). Here, our every moment of perceiving layering, depth, warp, or bending is simultaneously denied by the persistence of the ground of wood, which gives an utterly flat appearance. It seems without illusion, as if it would surely resist our gesture, were we to touch it. As in a Necker cube, what one feature offers to understanding, another just as immediately removes.

But how flat is the flatness of the wood? When is “flat” flat? The question is a variant of another: When does language mean what it says? Or: When does a picture show what it represents—not something else? Ramirez ponders questions of this sort. They sustain his interest in generating a mental openness that can accept more than one aspect of the experience of illusion, a state of mind that can perceive the *reality* that illusion unconceals. In terms specific to its physical state, *Aletheia: Scribe's Reveal* put this matter to Ramirez as the “matter at hand.” He recognized that the effect of his painstaking application of the two columns of graphite bars within the center-left rectangle had not produced an expected result. Since the 1970s, he had stroked graphite in long parallels on a number of different support surfaces (*Bild 12/für/S, W, B #6*, 1979 [cat. xx]; *I Sleep, But My Heart Keeps Vigil*, 1980 [cat. xx]). In all cases, the graphite produced a visual quality that the artist willingly accepted as “beautiful”; its deep luminosity, from silver to coal, offered aesthetic reward to the attention of the eye. But now, in 2017,

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something had failed: “I experienced a shock at not feeling the kind of beauty in the central panel of my *Aletheia: Scribe’s Reveal* when I stepped back and saw what appeared as smudge marks. They were a disclosure of the patterns that were an integral part of the substrate of birchwood.”^{xxxvi} The slight texture of the surface of the panel had interfered with the disposition of the graphite, so that the stroking lost its evenness. Light reflection magnified the irregularities, leaving an appearance of “smudge marks.” And this had happened even though Ramirez’s effort involved all the skill he had acquired over decades. He had not “seen” the texture of the wood; but in the immediate retrospect of looking at what he had done, he recognized that this texture—an illusion rising to the status of reality—must have been an aspect of the tactile experience he had lived through. Perhaps an analogy would be the vibratory sound of the bass becoming tactile as Ramirez the bassist touched the strings. The sound passed into his body, not so much silently, but tacitly. He required a certain level of awareness to “hear” the sound as touch.

Why the shock of the smudge, Ramirez asked himself. His lengthy statement merits quotation:

Applying the graphite, I knew that I was approaching the work freely, relying on spontaneity and intuition as I’m accustomed to; but the substrate, the birchwood, snuck up on me. I’m coming to sense that my fear of losing some kind of authorship, something that I have always felt was crucial to a work of art, may be misplaced. It’s misplaced because I don’t think of myself as the *sender* and don’t approach the work with any specific *addressee* in mind. The generality of the work has more to do with the context of the work itself. It finds its own context. ... In the act of marking I was not sending a message, I was *consuming* [receiving a message, physically]. The sound of the scraping across the surface was inadvertently revealing the pattern of the birchwood underneath. But my focus was on the sound of the pencil scraping up and down and how the haptic nature of the feeling and touch reminded me of when I play bass or any one of numerous examples where touch enters the experience. Perhaps it was the substrate that was “sending.” As for me, I was just listening and feeling the message [of the material, unconcealed]. But it would be ridiculous to infer from the experience that the substrate had a *voice* or *fingers* with which to “speak” to me. The Northern German Romantics like Friedrich were pretty big on anthropomorphism, but that was then and this is now (Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, c. 1818 [fig. 8]).^{xxxvii}

With his stress on the primacy of experience—on the sensory passion felt beyond the limits of conceptualization—Ramirez is a romantic, even, it seems to me, from the perspective of a Friedrich or a Goya. In my professional role as critic-historian-*scribe*, I needed to settle some points of fact to avoid relying on a rhetorical illusion of accuracy where there was none. I asked Ramirez to confirm the title of the new work that contained the problematic area of graphite strokes. He replied that he was wrestling with whether it should be *Aletheia: Scribes Reveal* or *Aletheia: Scribe’s Reveal*. We explored the ramifications in an exchange of several emails.^{xxxviii} In the case of “Scribes Reveal,” *reveal* functions as a verb; and the unwritten object of this verb becomes the information contained in the marks. When a scribe copies Scriptures, the interpretation of the legible text reveals divine instruction, thanks to the scribe’s mediation. With respect to Ramirez’s painting, the scribes would reveal through their indexical markings the character of the wood beneath their instruments, as well as the manual effort they expended.

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In the case of “Scribe’s Reveal,” *reveal* functions as a noun. But by metonymy, the noun can mean virtually all that the verb signifies. The scribe’s reveal is whatever is revealed by what the scribe does. Still more derives from this nominative version of *reveal*. A reveal is the space between the opening of a door or window and the walled area to which the window or door gives access. So the reveal amounts to a go-between layer of surface or space, both dividing and integrating and neither inside nor outside. The reveal is analogous to the thin black linear elements in many of Ramirez’s paintings, including the tapering line that penetrates an area of luminous white in *La Duquesa de la Luz en Gallifa*. A reveal is also the moment in a narrative when otherwise undisclosed information becomes known. It is the truth (to faith) of the Contemplation of the Infant Jesus as well as the truth (to desire) of Goya’s erotic romance. In the matter at hand, it is the unconcealment of presence, a presence both material and human, sensed in the tactile feel of a scribe’s writing—Ramirez’s graphite marks on birchwood panel. As he applied the strokes, he felt the graphite, the wood, the blackness, his body, himself. The reveal is the *consciousness* of a matter-at-hand.

ⁱ Philosophical concepts at the base of Western culture distinguish reality from appearance, as Richard Rorty, in a text that Ramirez admires, explains, without acquiescence to the tradition. Plato sought to identify the “really-real” as the ineffable, “what is not describable at all [and] cannot be described differently”; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 21. If language can characterize a situation one way, it can characterize it alternatively; and the designation becomes subject to rhetorical embellishment, distancing it from its source or target in reality. I thank Dan Ramirez for sharing his thoughts, many of them expressed in the unpublished writings cited in this essay; I am grateful also for the time I was able to spend in his Chicago studio. And I thank Jeannie McKetta and Gilles Heno-Coe for essential aid in research.

ⁱⁱ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 [1921]), 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ramirez, in conversation with the author, Chicago, June 13, 2017.

^{iv} “I call ‘slicing’ a linear tapered element that I have used over the years on the edges of my painting and inside areas of spatiality in central sections to create illusions of bending and separating areas of space” (Ramirez, unpublished text, June 8, 2016; see also below).

^v Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

^{vi} Ibid. The critic was Ira Gitler in 1958, composing liner notes for the Coltrane album *Soultrane*.

^{vii} See Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Gradual Fabrication of Thoughts While Speaking” (1805-06), in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. and trans. Philip B. Miller (New York: Dutton, 1982), 218-22.

^{viii} See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910 [1889]); [Matter and Memory](#), trans. N. Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Dover, 2004 [1896]).

^{ix} Charles Sanders Peirce, “Deduction, Induction, and Hypothesis” (1868), *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958-1960), 2:387 (emphasis original).

^x This technique, first applied during the 1970s in works such as *TL-P 6.421*, was inspired by Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings *Monk by the Sea* (1810) and *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (c. 1818), which Ramirez had seen reproduced in Robert Rosenblum’s *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (1975). He refers to the look in question as “a rolling cloud-like effect” (in conversation with the author, Chicago, June 15, 2017). “Rolling” was a quality he could actually achieve; initially, he lacked the expertise to produce smoothly gradated transitions. He nevertheless decided that a slightly irregular

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quality was preferable, perhaps because it conveyed a greater sense of the hand; and he has continued to incorporate this effect in his painting.

^{xi} Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

^{xii} Ramirez, in Julie Karabenick, “An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez,” *Geoform*, June 2014, at <http://geoform.net/interviews/dan-ramirez/5/> (accessed July 7, 2017).

^{xiii} Ramirez, transcription of an audio commentary, June 2016.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Ramirez, unpublished text, July 21, 2016.

^{xvi} Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 23.

^{xvii} In recent years, Ramirez has used the locution “matter at hand” with a Heideggerean resonance (Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016; and see below). He states that truth—in the matter at hand—is “discernable not only as intellectually reasoned but as a ‘felt’ experience”; email to the author, July 7, 2017.

^{xviii} Ramirez, unpublished text, July 14, 2016.

^{xix} Ramirez’s interest in Heidegger was spurred by his reading Claude Cernuschi, *Barnett Newman and Heideggerean Philosophy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012).

^{xx} Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now” (1948), in John P. O’Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 171-72.

^{xxi} Ramirez, in Karabenick, “An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez.” The term *objecthood* refers to the capacity of a work of art to establish a presence in the here-and-now, as opposed to referring to a general cultural context. It can have negative connotation as well as the positive connotation that Ramirez gives it.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*

^{xxiii} Ramirez, email to the author, June 29, 2017.

^{xxiv} Ramirez, unpublished text, July 21, 2016.

^{xxv} Newman, “The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966” (1966), *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, 189.

^{xxvi} Ramirez, letter to the author, June 30, 2016.

^{xxvii} Ramirez, in Karabenick, “An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez.”

^{xxviii} Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 117.

^{xxix} Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

^{xxx} Martin Heidegger, “Aletheia (Heraclitus, Fragment B 16)” (1943), *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 104. See also, Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth” (1930), *Pathmarks*, ed. and trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 136-54.

^{xxxi} Ramirez, email to the author, July 9, 2017.

^{xxxii} Ramirez, unpublished text, June 28, 2016.

^{xxxiii} Ramirez, in Karabenick, “An Interview with Artist Dan Ramirez.”

^{xxxiv} Robert Hughes, a source for Ramirez’s knowledge of Goya’s life, concludes that the love affair was more Goya’s fantasy than otherwise; Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 157-64.

^{xxxv} Ramirez refers to this type of line as “sliding” and “penetrating”; email to the author, July 6, 2017.

^{xxxvi} Ramirez, email to the author, July 4, 2017.

^{xxxvii} Ramirez, email to the author, July 6, 2017 (original emphasis).

^{xxxviii} July 4 to July 7, 2017.