



# SINGULAR SPACES

From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments Jo Farb Hernández

# Cesáreo Gimeno Martín June 10, 1910<sup>1</sup>–August 22, 2005

35

*LA ERA DEL TIO CESÁREO [UNCLE CESÁREO'S GARDEN]*  
BUENA (TERUEL)<sup>2</sup>



Cesareo Gimeno Martín, n.d. Photo: courtesy estate of the artist



Twisted-wire ornament of a peasant woman with water jug, n.d. Photo: courtesy estate of the artist

IN A VILLAGE OF LESS THAN 100 INHABITANTS, everyone knows everyone. It is also true that in a village so small, a single individual might take on several jobs: blacksmith, postman, electrician, storyteller, and even head of the weather station. But in this village, this individual, widely known as *Tío* [Uncle] Cesáreo, became so much more than the sum of those positions, and became widely known beyond the village—at least as far as the provincial capital—not simply for the myriad of positions he carried out with grace and pride during his working years, but for the inventiveness and creativity with which he created a very special “garden” after he retired.

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Cesáreo Gimeno Martín was born and raised in Bueña, a village whose one through road veers off the main highway and just barely skirts the town, winding its way through the arid hills. Gimeno’s son, who later became mayor, complained that the area was “so poor because it has neither mountains, pine trees, nor people” (“Una esperanza bajo los fósiles” n.d.),<sup>3</sup> and because of this has experienced a continuously declining population. In his father’s days, as now, the few families dedicated themselves to subsistence agriculture,<sup>4</sup> and Cesáreo was the second of four children born to such a modest family. A quick learner, as a young man he became skilled at the trade of blacksmithing and, in 1934, married Paz Rubio, with whom he had three children: Cesáreo, Celia, and Divina. Two years after the marriage he joined the forces fighting in the Civil War and was put in charge of all blacksmithing needs for his brigade.

Upon his return, he continued not only with steel production from his forge, primarily agricultural implements for his neighbors but, thanks to his dexterity and a quick mind that understood how machines worked and how things were put together, he also helped his neighbors with their electrical problems, regulated their scales and balances, built them *trillos* [harrows] with which to thresh their grain, fabricated locks for their homes and outbuildings, and delivered their mail from the back of his scooter. He was also asked by several area churches to fix their clocks, and later he took charge of the meteorological station in the village as well. Besides taking on the tasks of his neighbors, he creatively confronted and found solutions for his own challenges. In the 1950s he designed and fabricated a sensitive scale to weigh the mail and an intricate analogue box-style cash register

Postal scale, designed and fabricated by Gimeno

Mailbox, designed and fabricated by Gimeno

Cash register, designed and fabricated by Gimeno



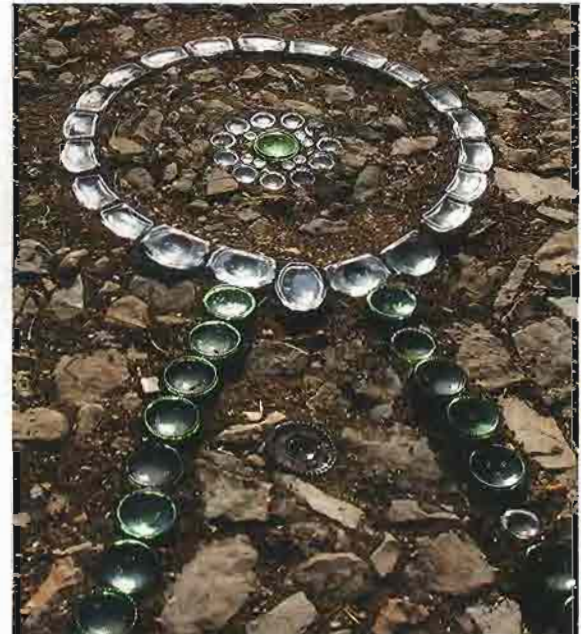
to calculate and hold his earnings from his blacksmithing business, both beautiful as well as eminently functional tools. He was widely regarded as the smartest man in town; some to this day even call him a genius. Some of the implements he created have been accepted into the permanent collection of the ethnographic section of the Museo Provincial de Teruel.

After his "retirement," Tío Cesáreo continued to creatively think about finding solutions to the daily issues that would arise in the village. One seemingly innocuous domestic problem turned out to have a long-term solution that went far beyond the original concern: because his home was right on the road, his chickens would sometimes venture too far away from their corral and would get run over in the traffic. He therefore decided to take them up the hill to a small property that he owned at the end of town, building an enclosure to keep them safe, but where they could still roam and feed. That hilly terrain was rocky,

generally unsuitable for growing produce, but once he had his poultry there, he planted some fruit trees as well as pines, jasmine, and cypress. And, as it was slightly remote, he decided that while he was there he would decorate the area, using materials that he found at the dump or that people were throwing away. "From the time that I retired, I went around picking up all the old things that were being thrown out. I also put trees and plants there. With the bottles I made floors that had designs on them. There are more than 3,000 bottles" ("Cesáreo Gimeno construye un jardín con viejos cacharros" 2002, 38).<sup>5</sup> He buried each whole bottle with its bottom up, so that the smooth surfaces would create jewel-like patterns that glint in the sun. Some of the images formed by the bottles are geometric, others floral, and still others with motifs such as arrows and flowerpots with blooming flowers. He even spelled out his wife's name, PAZ, in large capital letters. He also took advantage of the different shapes and sizes

Ornamented entrance pathway of Tío Cesáreo's garden

Inlaid bottle decoration into pathway



Inlaid bottle decoration into pathway



Stairway with inlaid bottle decoration

Pathway ornament, 1986



of his bottles, thoughtfully considering their placement vis-à-vis each other, carefully inlaying them among the sharp, rocky pathways that crisscross the site. He used them to line the pathways as well and, given the hilly terrain of this area, also created small terraces, building up the levels and setting off one short level from the next by burying the different sides of the bottles at different heights. Some of the designs were dated with small numbers also composed, of course, of bottles.<sup>6</sup>

More interesting than the bottle work, however, are the constructions made from various recycled objects, as well as those twisted out of the wire that was used to bind hay bales. As a blacksmith, Gimeno understood steel, but the work he did for the locals was—while at times ornamented with designs, such as the mailbox still posted on the side of his house—functional and forthright. With the wire, he was able to branch out into representation and even figuration, braiding and twisting the wire, using nothing more than wire pincers to shape them into outlines of such images as an elaborate map of Spain, demarcated by provinces and accompanied by a well-dressed male figure pointing out the little village of Bueña; a map of the zodiac; a flowerpot with flowers; a monk with a hygrometer (mounted on an old water heater); a peasant woman with a water jug; various animals; a provocative nude; and more. Some of these were installed against the walls of the buildings at the garden site, while others were mounted on top of other structures so that their profiles could be seen against the sky. Unfortunately, very few of these works remain on the site (the family has retained some of these, in addition to additional smaller examples of his work in the house). Gimeno wrote out short phrases with

his twisted wires as well, formed in a fluid cursive script that recalls the handwriting of earlier days. Among these is the almost wistful "*Que verde era mi era*" by which he probably meant "how green was my garden," but which also could be translated as "how green was my time." This particular text, dated 1994, was accompanied by his self-portrait in wire as an old man, seated on a straight-backed chair, wearing a smart jacket, a little handkerchief peeking out of the pocket, a collared shirt, and *boina* [beret], his customary crooked staff in his right hand.

The objects created from varied discarded materials were generally somewhat more expressionist in feel than the wire works, at least partially due, no doubt, to the juxtaposition of widely different media with significant differences in scale. One of his main sources for raw material was his old Seat 600, the only car he ever owned. Once he could no longer drive it, he used its doors and hood to create a greenhouse, the seats were converted into rocking chairs, and other components became parts of freestanding sculptures and a hood for an outdoor

Map of Spain, with figure indicating the location of the village of Bueña, n.d.  
Photo: courtesy estate of the artist



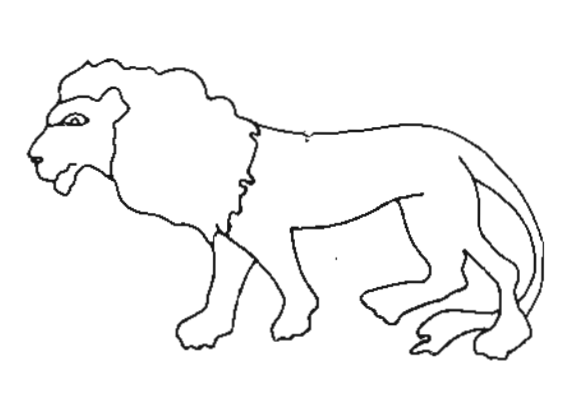
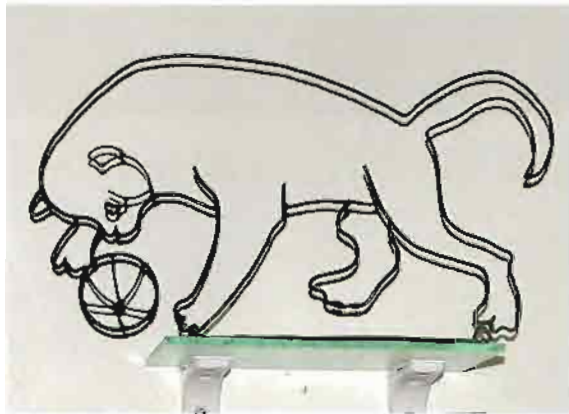
Twisted-wire ornament adorning an outbuilding window



Twisted-wire ornament relocated to the family home



Twisted-wire ornaments relocated to the family home



The artist's son, Cesáreo Gimeno, holds a twisted-wire ornament relocated to the family home.



Twisted-wire ornament relocated to the family home



Greenhouse partially constructed from an old washer and his old Seat 600 automobile

Children's swing (detail)



Entrance sign: "Good Day / Good Night, Come In."

Interactive calendar



cooking area. Bicycle wheels fitted with steel cups to catch the wind became a power source for a child's swing that was topped by a weather vane; a bell was attached so that each time the swing was balanced, the bell rang. A windmill was created from roll-up window blinds; a planter box from the drum of a washing machine (its door had become a window for the greenhouse); a staircase from old tires set into the hillside. At times the place looked littered with the piles of old metal machine parts, old stoves, pipes, metal springs, broken tools, paint cans, and, of course, bottles, as he considered ways to incorporate them into his garden, but ultimately he seemed to find a place for everything.

Gimeno welcomed visitors to his garden, not only locals and schoolchildren, but those from farther afield, who somehow found their way to this remote spot that is neither visible nor accessible from the road. Some of his work was occasionally exhibited, in regional displays featuring the crafts of the county of Jiloca in Villafranca del Campo, or in the Pradilla room in Barcelona organized by the *Centro Aragonés* [Aragón Center] in that city, when focusing on the province of Teruel. Although the garden area was fenced in, a steel construction made from various recycled parts invited visitors to *pasen*, come in, and another twisted-wire sign identified it as "the garden, everything with discarded objects."<sup>7</sup>



Arbor canopy with twisted-wire inscription: "The Garden, Everything made with discarded objects."

Self-portrait twisted-wire ornament located on an outbuilding window: "Tío Cesáreo, 1994, How green was my garden."



The bulk of Gimeno's work was carried out between 1980 and 2000—as memorialized in another steel sign—but he continued to go up to the garden until 2004, at which point he could no longer walk up there himself nor see well enough to do so. Three years after his death, a local admirer, José Ibáñez Cebrián, organized a local exhibition of his work, issuing a call for all who owned pieces to lend them to the display but, in general, although he is warmly remembered—as well as vaunted on the village's website as a fine example of *"la cultura de reciclaje [the culture of recycling]"* ("La era del Tío Cesáreo," *La Web de Bueña*), there is little or no interest in taking the steps necessary to preserve the site, either by family members or others. Although one of the daughters still keeps chickens in the coop, none of the children, nor the grandchildren, are willing to invest their time and labor to maintain the place, so the sculptures are rusting and falling apart, and the weeds are growing over the constructions and bottle walkways. Within a very few years, no doubt, there will be few physical reminders on-site of Tío Cesáreo's "garden," a garden once so green and so full of life.

1. The main published account on his work (Alcañiz Gutiérrez 2002, 13) dates his birth June 7, but June 10 was the date given to me by his family.
2. On-site field documentation and interviews with the artist's family took place July 9, 2010.
3. *"Muy pobre al no tener montes, ni pinares, ni población "*
4. Most working adults commute to Monreal del Campo, some 6.5 miles (10 kilometers) away.
5. *"Desde que me jubilé fui recogiendo todos los trastos viejas que vela y estaban tirados. También iba poniendo árboles y plantas. Con las botellas he puesto suelos, a la vez que hacía dibujos. Han sido más de 3,000 botellas."*
6. His house in town, now owned by his son and his family, also has an ornamented bottle patio as well as other decorative elements, including a decorated steel fence preventing access from the street to the patio. It is likely that the bottle adornment of small areas of the house was added subsequent to the initiation of the bottle adornment up in his garden.
7. *"La era, todo con objetos de desecho "*