



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Guadalupe Maravilla Interview

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Guadalupe Maravilla. It was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa as part of the In Colors project. Guadalupe Maravilla and Fernanda Espinosa have reviewed the transcript, and their corrections and emendations appear below.

This transcript has been lightly edited by the In Colors project for readability. Readers should bear in mind that the original document and medium of this interview is the spoken language and that the audio recording should be considered the original source, with its particular tone and grammar.

In Colors is a project by Fernanda Espinosa, a 2022 Oral History Association oral history fellow funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is one of several interviews conducted under this fellowship and in collaboration with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this interview, do not necessarily reflect those of the Oral History Association or National Endowment for the Humanities.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: This is Fernanda Espinosa interviewing Guadalupe Maravilla, who is joining from his studio in Sunset Park, New York. This is an oral history with Guadalupe, which will be stored at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution as part of the In Colors project. And today is Wednesday, May 31st of 2023.

So, Guadalupe welcome to this space. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me and to be part of my project. I am really honored. I would like you to start telling me when and where you were born.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Hello, Fernanda. So, I'm so glad you invited me. My name is Guadalupe Maravilla, and I'm an artist based in New York. But I was born in El Salvador, in Central America and I was actually part of the first wave of undocumented children to come to the U.S. from El Salvador escaping the civil war. It was 1984—and should I just continue going?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yes, please.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Si, well, okay.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: *Si tengo una pregunta*—if I have any questions, I'll let you know.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Okay. So, I'll just continue. Can you hear that sound? No?

Okay, good. Because there's that, like, construction in the back, so I'm happy you're not picking it up.

So, it was 1984 when I actually migrated to the United States, and I was part of the first wave of undocumented, unaccompanied children to come here. Obviously, this migration has continued since then from El Salvador and many different parts of Latin America in the world, people are migrating to the same almost the same kind of route, almost. So, for me, it started with my—sorry, for me started with my uncle, and he was actually a student in university in San Salvador and youth was protesting the war and civil war that was happening in the South. And the military was very aggressive, and they were US-trained military.

And they started to formulate these types of death squads against civilians or whoever they thought was a communist, because there was actually a communist uprising happening at the time. And they considered the students to be communists. So, they actually got my uncle, and they actually tortured him and a bunch of other protesters, students. And they cut off their heads and hang them upside down in a tree. And my father really recognized him because he was wearing the shirt that he was wearing. So, then after that, they started coming after my father and everyone in my uncle's family was

considered a communist.

So, they started coming after my father and started coming after my mother. And then my parents had to flee El Salvador immediately. My father went first because they were coming for him. And then my mother actually stuck around for two years, moved to *el campo* with my grandmother, and we just kind of—they weren't really looking for her.

But at some point, they did. And when that happened, my mother left.

Then for two years, we were with our grandmother between San Salvador and San Vicente in the countryside, and the war started to escalate and escalate, escalate. I have so many—I was eight years old, I was from 6 to 8 years old—but I remember everything. I remember the whole—like, a lot of details. But, you know, like the war in a child's perspective is very different in adults, right? I would still have beautiful memories of El Salvador, of the war itself, right? And I still remember playing with animals and insects and playing with other children in the street. I would walk to school by myself and like bullets and bombs would be falling in the distance. I still remember that.

And it was still—I'm still like kicking the rock as I'm going to school and playing with a ball, right? So, there's a beautiful innocence with children. Even though they don't, they—they kind of see, sense danger, but it's like they don't really understand it. So, it's like there's a sense of innocence to it, you know, with the reality of what's happening.

So, I have a lot of memories about my childhood and a lot of my work is based around that. A lot of the paintings that I make—it talks about all these experiences of as child.

[00:05:00]

So, then the war escalated and eventually my parents had to actually—my family pull my grandmother out because it was too dangerous for her. They got my sister out, but they couldn't get me out. I was eight years old, so they decided to get *coyote* to help me cross the border. So, then I went from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, all the way through Mexico by land into Tijuana. And then once I crossed over to Tijuana from San Diego, they put me in a plane to JFK, and I reconnected with my parents and my sister. So, during that journey, I was gone from *coyote* to *coyote*. A coyote would drop me off for a family. I would stay in someone's house. Then I would travel by car, by foot, by train, and cross the rivers. And it was a two-and-a-half-month journey all the way to Tijuana.

And that's kind of how—that was my journey, right? And in Tijuana, I was stuck there for two and a half weeks trying to cross the *frontera*, the border.

And I was really blessed, you know? I'm just feeling very blessed that I'm okay and I was able to become the person that I am now because in that experience, you know, I am not the first person that has gone through this by any means. You know, there is millions of people that have gone through this journey since then from all over Latin America. And they're still going, they're still arriving. I work with communities; I work with undocumented communities here in New York and constantly working people that are just arriving like this week. So, I know that it's like it's like never ending.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you for sharing that, Guadalupe. And I'm very sorry for all the losses that you went through your uncle that you were talking about.

I'm wondering if you can say a little bit more about those memories that you said you remember the war, but you were still having a child's life, you know. So, if you can describe a little bit more of your family life when you were still in El Salvador and who were important people that were around you and that raised you up until you were leaving El Salvador?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, after my father left, my mother stayed with us two more years, and I remember her playing José José and Juan Gabriel, and this type of singers, at full blast, all the time. And it didn't really occur to me until recently that she was actually trying to muffle the bullets and the bombs falling in the distance.

So, you know, I have memories like that. I actually made a painting like that, for my solo show at ICA Watershed that just opened this week. And these are the memories that I had. You know, I have a fond—and I still listen to José José and Juan Gabriel and I think of my

mother and really thinking about what she was doing, I was like, Oh, wow, she's really trying to cover the sound of the violence that's happening out there, you know? So, memories like that often happen.

And then yeah, you know, I used to run around, and I was the youngest boy in the neighborhood of like 12 boys. And we used to run around a little pack, and we still climbed trees, we still played sports, and we used to knock down beehives. I was actually in a boy band—in a Menudo cover band—in El Salvador during the war. And I would be the smallest one in the group with synchronized dancing. We could make our own outfits and would entertain the crowd, you know? And I think the performer in me that came out. So, those are beautiful moments. I mean, I need to make a painting about that, by the way. I just thought about that [laughs].

But yeah, so that's the thing. I remember *como El día de los muertos* and celebrating, getting dressed up and doing these Halloween kind or Halloween-esc kind of costumes, making them ourselves. And so, again, like people think of the war, but from a child's perspective, it's a whole different—whole different thing.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: What was your school life, like when your parents had left, and I imagine you were still living your daily life and your routines. Can you say more about what that was like?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah, You know, to be honest, that's something that I remember a lot. But I don't remember much of school because I don't really like the school. I remember being in a school play and that's about it [laugh].

[00:10:00]

Because I guess that was performing. That's maybe why I remember that part, but I really don't remember much about the school. I do remember walking to school and hearing the war in the distance. So, that's really that's one of the memories that I have about that. But my grandmother was like a really big part of it. You know, she took care of us. My mother was absent, and she was very superstitious. And when in El Salvador, we get this kind of storms that will come in like in just pour for an hour. And she was very superstitious, and she would be really concerned about the spirits entering the house. So, she would be like yelling at me, to cover the mirrors immediately before the storm hit. So, basically, she had towels or blankets in front of every mirror I rolled up. So ,every time it would rain. My job was to cover every mirror. We had a lot of mirrors for some reason. I remember just running up and down the whole house, covering every mirror, and she's just like yelling at me to, Hurry Up! Hurry up! You have to cover the mirrors. Because if a lightning hits the house, spirits kind of emerge from the mirrors.

You know? So, these are the memories that I had of growing up in El Salvador and my relationship with my grandmother. So, it was that part of the superstition and the magic is still part of my work even today.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, once you arrived in the United States—I know you've spoken at length in different interviews and documentation about the journey for a child to cross to the United States—so, I'm going to try to focus in other parts that perhaps you haven't spoken about as much—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —yeah, totally.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I was wondering if you can say more about what your impressions were once you arrived in the United States and how your life developed, once you changed lives basically, and reunited with your family?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Okay. Hold on a second. Again, I have to blow my nose.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, go ahead.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: This is something that I really don't talk about often, not that I don't feel comfortable sharing. But, yeah, life coming to the United States is something that that's a really good question because it's something that no one normally doesn't ask.

So, when I arrived to the United States, I arrived in JFK, but my parents were living in New

Jersey and Elizabeth, in Newark. In Newark, New Jersey.

And, you know, coming from El Salvador, where I was running around with a pack of like 12 boys, climbing trees, playing with animals and insects and being covered in mud at the end of every night. It was very different to come to, you know, Newark or Elizabeth—really industrial kind of brick city, kind of landscape in the eighties. So, my mother didn't allow me to leave the house. She was just like, Okay, I have you now; you're safe. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again" kind of mentality, I understand.

So, I was pretty much indoors the whole time. What was really beautiful about that is that I made thousands and thousands of drawings, I would draw all day, all night. I was obsessed with drawing everything. There's a couple of pictures of me, like just kind of drawing with markers and crayons, and I had stacks of drawings. I started putting drawings all over the apartment, like my studio [laughs]. And my parents were just like, What is up with this kid? And they were just giving me markers and I was just constantly drawing everything.

That was a big part of, I guess, my immediate kind of transition into the US. Like, that's a big shift for me. But I was indoors, but I was obsessed, and I was loving it. I was watching MTV in the eighties and just kind of like HBO and just kind of drawing everything, everything that was on TV, everything that, from my memories drawing the New York City landscape. I would draw the New York City landscape a lot because I had seen it as soon as I got off to JFK and I was so obsessed with it. And I've been a New Yorker since then. But basically, I was obsessed with New York. And yeah, so that's been that.

[00:15:00]

Yeah, that's kind of what happened. And eventually I had to learn English and get all that, take ESL classes. And I eventually—when I turned into a teenager—I would pretty much move to New York City, and I was kind of coming to the clubs in New York when I was 16. I went through a very dark gothic phase—with my friends—and just lived the city to its fullest. In the early nineties, in the East Village, in the Lower East Side, and that became my home.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: What were your parents doing? What was their life like once you moved in with them in the United States?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, my father was a mechanic, and my mother was a factory worker.

That was the challenge of being displaced—coming from El Salvador or to here didn't end—because my mother was actually deported. She was working at a factory. And I think they reported like 70-something people at once. Immigration came in there, and this before ICE. And they took her, and they took a bunch of friends of the family, and they deported everybody. So, I lost my mother again. From age 11 to 13 I didn't see her again. And she was sent back to El Salvador and when she arrived to El Salvador it was the height of the war. It was a really, really difficult part of the war for her to kind of experience. And then she migrated back. We got another *coyote* there and we were able to bring her back. And yeah, she came back when I was like 13 or 14 or something like that. So, it was twice—we had so we had been separated again for the second time.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And you mentioned before—and let me know if I'm jumping around too much—but I have two sort of images that I want to make sure I talk about—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And it's about the way art started showing up in your life? You had mentioned that as a child in El Salvador, you were already sort of interested in some performance, having the *Menudo* band—*Menudo*, just for the audiences, is like a boy band, I don't know what to compare it to, but basically a boy band from the eighties—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —[Laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And then you said once you arrived in the US, and maybe before that, I don't know, you were drawing a lot. So, can you say more about these practices that started as a child? And if your family or the people that were around you—like how they accompanied you, or didn't, during this phase?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, basically, my mother told me that I used to draw before I can talk. I started drawing when I was one year old or something. I was already drawing even before like one, I think. So, she was always really curious about the artist in me, even though we didn't know anything about art so that she just knew that I had something there.

And then the *Tripa chuca* was a big part of my childhood also, which is a drawing game that actually is a big part of my installations, even today. Basically, it's a drawing game that I played in a El Salvador with other children and we put pairs of numbers down on a piece of paper and we put up to like a hundred numbers or 20 numbers, or whatever, but always pairs. And the trick of the game is you got to connect one number to the next but you cannot touch any lines. And it starts to form like this pattern on the piece of paper. Almost like a labyrinth. It looks like a topographical map, almost. It looks like, you know, like so many like—a labyrinth—almost like a fingerprint. But for me, it was like a mapping between two people, almost like a bonding between two people.

Even when I was crossing from El Salvador to the US, I would play this game with the coyotes. I would play with these other children that I would meet along the way. Every house that I would go to, I would bring my little notebook and teach them the game and we used to play this game. And it was a way for me to bond with people. I would play with other children and show them a really cool game, and everyone would get excited about it. And now during my exhibitions, I actually—it's really important for me to build micro-economies around my work—so, it's really important for me to go in and activate the space in the private ceremony by playing this game with someone who is formally undocumented.

[00:20:04]

So, I had the museum pay someone who's undocumented to play the game with me. And this is something that I've done many, many times, with very different shows. I was just in the Gwangju Biennale and I was very fortunate to have played the game from someone that had defected from North Korea, and we played the game on the walls of the biennial exhibition and we got into conversations about being displaced, and completely—her story is very different than mine—but we completely lost so much, and were displaced for different reasons.

This is my way to connect with other people that have gone through completely different experiences but similar—at the same time—from other lens. I play with other people from the Middle East, in other exhibitions, other people from El Salvador, from Mexico, from Colombia, from many different places, and that kind of almost immediately creates the energy that I want space to have before these sculptures show up, or even the paintings on the wall, or anything else that's in the exhibition.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Do you know where the game comes or what the origins are? That's such an interesting name to me. But I know the *tripa*. But I don't know what *chuca* means.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Chuca, is a Salvadorian word. That's why I know is a Salvadorian game, right? [Laughs]. No one knows it, but the people in El Salvador. So, I guess the origin is from El Salvador. It's called *tripa chuca* and *chuca* in El Salvador means "dirty." So, it translates to dirty guts. If you look at it, they look like intestines that are just kind of forming and just kind of melting and morphing into each other. So rotting guts, *tripa chuca*. That's why the name comes from. Yeah, it's like the name is just really interesting. Then you're saying, like, most people in Latin American use the word *chuca*, *chuco*, *chuca*. And we that's a Salvadorian word [laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Well, thanks for sharing. You've already like starting to make all these connections, of course, of where some of your art comes from. And we had started talking about some of the early stages of your art, where you started drawing very, very early around one. Were there other people in your family that were doing any kind of practice and creative practice around you? I don't know if you can say more about who you were looking at, or if this is something that comes from inside of you and that wasn't really being influenced by outsiders.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: No, I didn't have any formal art training at all. There was no one in my family, or around me, that made art. It was just coming from me.

I think the only thing that I vaguely remember is looking at a Bible that had paintings of like Rafael DaVinci and things like that. And I was obsessed with looking at it. That was my only source. And I was looking at these master painters and I would constantly be obsessed looking at these images, but that's about it—zero.

And when I went to SVA—when I was in my early twenties—was literally the first time I actually went to a museum. You know, I was already calling myself an artist, but I had never been to a museum. I went to it, took me to the Met. I was just so kind of intimidated to go into these spaces.

But yeah, I learned about art formally very late. But I have always been an artist.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That is so amazing. And, you know, you're not the only one who can live next to the greatest museums or what we think of the greatest museums and art institutions in the world and like, live right next to it. And then yet not ever having been exposed to it in like a formal way.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —if you want to get some water or tissue. I can pause it—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —yeah, I know. My nose is running. Excuse me—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, go ahead.

So just for the record, Guadalupe is having some allergies, so—[they laugh]. He just got up to blow his nose. I was also like, Please! Because I also have allergies, but I don't have them right now.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: It's allergies season today.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I know, But yeah.

[00:25:04]

I was saying, you know, all of these spaces that are there for the public to access and yet someone like you who was really nearby in so many ways and who was really interested in art, have never gone to one until you were you were in your twenties.

Can you say more about some of that formal education that you ended up acquiring, how and how you got to those choices?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: . So, basically, when I was 15 years old in my high school in Elizabeth, I won a contest and there was someone that chose me, and I started learning from him. His name was Manuel Acevedo, he's an artist from Puerto Rico, and he became my mentor. So, I started going to his studio, and started to explain to me how the art world works and just kind of talking to me about being an artist.

And basically, that's kind of like how my brain started functioning, I guess. Like, Oh, well, you could be an artist and you can just live in New York, and you can just do these things. And then he told me about SVA because he had gone there and dropped out. And so, I looked into it and that's how I applied. It was the only school that I applied to. And I eventually got in, but it was a different time back then. And then, eventually, I went to Hunter College for a sculpture, ten years later after I graduated. So, that's also the same only school that I applied to. I didn't want to leave New York. So those are the two schools that I went to.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And can you say more about your professional experience and what you were doing during these years? And yeah, just some of like your practices and how you were navigating the world as an adult.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, in my early twenties I started to meditate. And this is something that I felt I somehow picked it up. It was not a popular thing, like it is now. I guess, one of my other mentors during that time was Ralphie, and he was a *Santero*—a Puerto Rican *Santero*—that used to live down, he was my landlord. And one day—very early when I moved in, I was like 17—and I got my own place in Newark, New Jersey, and I went to pay the rent and I heard like some drumming happening. And I went to open the door and I saw people dressed in white and there was a whole Santeria ritual happening, the chickens and the whole thing in full rhythm. And I was like, What is

going on? And I was like 17. And I had no idea. And this whole world just opened up to me. And then Ralphie snuck behind me and covered my eyes and said, Let's get out of here. He took me out. Ralphie, he was blind also, but he was really powerful. He's just so powerful. He knew I was coming like even 10 minutes before I even arrived.

And after that, I just kept bothering him and asking him a million questions, like, Why was that? I was so fascinated with the mysticism and the magic and the ritual and the whole thing. And I was just like, Ralphie, tell me. And we always joke around like, No, no, I'm not telling you nothing. You were too young, stay away from here. You know, like in a very playful manner, and then ask the—excuse me, sorry—[Sneezes.]

So, Ralphie came up behind me and he covered my eyes, and he pulled me to the side, and he said, "You didn't see anything." And then I would just kind of constantly be asking him, What was that? I want to know everything. And my curiosity was driving me crazy. And then one day he said—he sat me down, he said, I'm going to read you the Tarot cards. And, remember, he was blind. So, he actually had a deck of cards that were made out of Braille. And I still remember them, super beautiful. They were off-white and a little worn because of the Braille. He had them custom made and he laid them out.

He goes, "This doesn't make any sense." He made me shuffle again and I was like, Wait a minute, what it saying?, " It just tells me a lot about war and this kind of thing. But you were born here, so this doesn't make any sense." I was like, No, I was not born here. And it was like, Wait, what? And then he pretty much told me a lot of things about my childhood. And that's when I really kind of clicked for me and I was like, Oh, wait a minute, there's something more than just this daily life that I'm living.

[00:29:59]

And so Ralphie really opened up a lot of the magic and the possibilities and spirituality for me. And then, you know, I was a wild kid. I would go to the clubs, underage in New York City and come back. And one time I came home, and I slept like an hour, and I was wide awake because I had a dream about Ralphie, that he was like playing with me and slapping my face, joking around and saying, "Get up the little drunk kid!" And I got up and then I went downstairs to get a coffee. And the lady—was a lady that's coming out of the house, sorry the shop where the Santeria rituals happened—and she said to me, "You know what happened last night? And I say, What? And she said, Ralphie passed away" So, I was like, *wow!* He actually came and said goodbye to me, just literally woke me up. So, again, these coincidences and connecting to spirituality really kind of started kind of forming my curiosity.

And, somehow, I realized that I needed to kind of like really take care of my body and my spirit. I just didn't know how to. So, I started—I was very into film there in those days—I would go and watch three films every Sunday at Film Forum or, you know, like Angelica. And I was obsessed with film, and I started watching a lot of films, and that was my main influence, more so than museums or anything, you know? So, the film in me was a big part of it.

So, I had seen some films about meditation, I just figured—learn how to do it. And then I started fasting and I started exercising, and I would go into my phases of just being a complete monk in the studio [laughs], making art, meditating, fasting, not seeing anybody, just really focusing on myself and my practice and my healing. And I didn't know at the time what I wanted to heal; you know? I didn't realize that the trauma of my childhood and everything that I have gone through manifests into an illness that was coming later. But I had an urge to try to heal it and try to understand it. So, always there, always very curious about shamanism and spirituality, and the power of plants, and these kinds of things. And it's kind of really not understanding but having the need to heal.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Now, at this point you were going to the School of Visual Arts, New York, near your home, so you had your own studio in the School, in the city?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Mm hmm [Affirmative].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay. And you were starting to explore and understand these healing practices and meditation.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Mm hmm [Affirmative]. Totally. Again, it was like 98, 99 at that

point and that wasn't really that popular, like it is now.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Although before you mentioned that your grandmother, who you stayed living with during some time in El Salvador, had some practices that you also weren't quite sure what they meant, but that you were a part of.

Were there other places in your life or in your family? Were some of these more, maybe traditional forms of healing were showing up in your life?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: No, honestly, not really. But I do remember for me, I used to play in the steps of the pyramid. So, sometimes they would take me to the pyramid in El Salvador—these pyramids in El Salvador are ruins. Only parts of it are uncovered and parts of it are still underground because of the need to preserve them, like they uncover the whole thing. I remember playing in the steps all the time. I remember climbing volcanoes with other neighbors that would take up field trips over the weekends and be obsessed with climbing the volcanoes and seeing the crater and the whole journey of being connected to the rocks.

That whole part, it's like a different type of spirituality. But to me definitely—I was always curious who were the Maya, you know? And because they didn't have a museum next to explain who the Maya were, they didn't explain to us that they were our ancestors you know? [Laughs]. And even the locals that lived were like, Okay—they see them as "other" people and I say, Wait, those are your direct ancestors. You live, literally, across the street from the pyramid [laughs]. So, it's like the same mindset, you know? But I remember them, just the whole experience of feeling the energy of those pyramids and feeling the energy of those volcanoes.

[00:35:03]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Now, you've spoken about different influences, and you also said that you were going to the city to watch a lot of films and that that had a lot of influence also at that time in your life, can you say more about what was happening in terms of this other part of the art world and how that was blending with all of these questions that you had around healing?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah, So film for me was—I felt like—I still feel like I'm going to be a filmmaker at the end of it. Once it's all said and done, I'm going to be a filmmaker.

I feel that way. But back then you know I studied photography at SVA, so I kind of started with that before sculpture. So, that's always been a big part of my practice. I understand light composition and colors in the way things move and sound. So, I've always been kind of aware of all those things, but I always felt like the stories that I wanted to tell, I wasn't mature enough. Like I felt like I wanted to learn and live more and live life more in order to be a filmmaker and to understand this format more.

So, I'd say, Okay, I'll put that in my backpack and it'll kind of reemerge later with it, and it feels like I'm ready for that now, to be honest. I'm actually making a film right now, so I think feels like, Okay, this is the right direction. I've made other short things along the way over the years, but it feels like now I really feel very equipped to try to take that on based on my life experiences and my experiences as an artist. So, yeah, that's been like a big influence for me, always.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, you were— I'm like trying to figure out how to ask this, but you've spoken publicly about your migration—migratory status, and how that has affected you or what the impact of that has been. As a person who started going to school, who had come from El Salvador, what was your status by then and how was that showing up in relationship to the other students and the people that surrounded you in this art world that you were starting to become a part of?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, when I was in SVA, I was undocumented.

I didn't become a citizen until like 28 or 29, or something like that, you know? So, I already had graduated, and it was really hard because I actually had to—I took almost like a 75,000 of the loan to go to SVA with interest. I actually paid it off last year, it had gone up to 250,000, just on interest. But I was undocumented, but I didn't care. I was like, I want to go to school.

So, yeah, just like that. My status was I was undocumented and it's something that I think maybe I was already in the Green Card process for a little bit. So anyway, I was still—I couldn't do a lot of things that the other students could do. I couldn't travel, I couldn't do a lot of you know—I didn't have the privileges that U.S. citizens had.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And at what point were you able to travel and start, you know, going back to your place of origin?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: So, I went back to El Salvador when I was 16, just to kind of start the refugee paperwork that I had to figure out, only for like a month to resolve all of that, to get that process going, to apply for a Green Card and like these kinds of things. And then I started going back to Central America as soon as I got my Green Card. I went to Guatemala a lot, I spent a whole month in Guatemala. I went to El Salvador a lot. And I started kind of seeing Latin America—I went to Colombia a couple of times—you know, eventually, I started going everywhere. That's kind of like how it started for me. And I talked to a lot of my friends and former students that are DACA recipients, and they're in the same boat. They don't remember when they arrived here because they were so young. And then when they get their Green Cards, *Wow!* Travelling traveling for the first time, you know, seeing the world.

[00:40:02]

So, that's like something really important that I believe everyone needs to do. Is part of the growth; see the world.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And in some ways, it sounds like you were getting a lot of your education outside of school from all these interactions that you had with people from around the world in New Jersey, but also actually going back and going to Latin America and traveling.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Mm hmm [Affirmative]

Well, you know, ultimately, I do feel like New York City has been my biggest art teacher. The City itself and all the interactions that I've had in the city. Eventually, once I got into a flow, understanding the museums and the art world, I felt like I needed to catch up to every other artist that I knew, who knew everything about the history of art [laughs] and what's happening in contemporary. So, I felt like I needed to—there was a couple of years there, that I felt like I needed to work overtime to catch up to everyone else. And I was at SVA to understand what art was, you know? But then I do feel like just the vibrance of the city and all my connections—and then in my thirties, then it started becoming like *wow!*—like the healers that are coming into my life and in the City itself, and everything that it offers, it just came to me—like really—I dove deep into it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: At this point. Once you graduated from SVA, can you say a little bit more—shifting to your art trajectory—if you can describe some of the work that you were doing at that point before you started working more explicitly on the themes of healing?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. I always wanted to talk about healing, but my teachers would tell me not to make work about healing and they didn't understand where I was coming from. I think there was only like three students of color in the whole school when I was there, and they just didn't get what I was trying to say. They would say, Oh no, you cannot make work about healing. And I was trying to, and and I would fight with them like, No, I need to make work about this that you don't understand. And I personally don't understand either why I needed to do it, but I wanted to make work about healing even back then.

But what was really important for me was during those days at SVA, I started making this little kind of photograms and I was sort of putting things in the microwave and just seeing how they're reacting. And then one day, like I actually put the right ingredients into the microwave, and I got this piece and I was like, *Wow!*, one day this is going to be a sculpture. And to this day, I'm still making things in the microwave to cook my material that become my Disease Throwers. So, that was a major discovery and it's something that I'm going to patent and I'm very secretive about it because it's a mixture based on cotton and other ingredients that I mixed in the microwave and cook for a certain amount of time and they become all malleable and then they become hard and strong and almost indestructible

and they become part of my Disease Throwers. That's the skin of the material. And that's something that I developed when I was in school, kind of experimenting. You know, I always encourage younger artists to try to develop your own materials.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's so fascinating. When I see your sculptures and also when you talk about the things that you make in the microwave, like wow! This alchemist for the future—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: [Laughs.]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —you know, which I really like. I think that's been the theme throughout these interviews and trying to really bring in new technologies and methodologies that are a mixture of many different times—sort of like you put them in the microwave and then they become the new reality. So, thanks for saying more about that.

I was interested in knowing a little bit more. So, we've stayed in your time in school and you mentioned that there's some time that went by before you decided to go back to school to study Sculpture. If you can say a bit more about that transition in your arts education.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: I graduated from SVA in 2003, and then there were some galleries that were interested in showing me representing me already. And I said, No, I don't, I don't want to, I'm not ready yet.

[00:44:57]

So, then I just decided to become an art handler for the next eight years. I had a studio in Brooklyn and didn't want to show anyone my work. I said, I'm going to my cave and I'm not going to show my work for seven years to anybody. I don't care. No one needs to see my work. And I went crazy in the studio. I didn't know how to even use the drill properly at the time, and I will work as an art handler once a week. Once every two weeks I would get a paycheck, I would buy myself a new tool and then learn to use it. And I started teaching myself sculpture.

At the end of this—and I was in total monk mode—I was meditating, I was fasting being in the studio. I was working like 40, 50 hours a week. I would come after my eight-hour shift. I'll go to the studio for 2 to 3 hours with the very little energy I had, and I will continue a little bit in the weekends. I would go off for 14 hours on the weekend, like on Saturday and Sunday, and I would start building up hours and hours, and hours of experience becoming a sculptor, teaching me how to be a sculptor and learning about my materials and my tools. And eventually, after I came out of seven years, I was like, Wow! I got a body of work. I want to show it.

And that's kind of what happened during that phase. And then, eventually, I got into Skowhegan in 2009 and then went to Hunter. So that's like the whole bridge that happened there. But for me, I think it was really important to have that time when no one is giving me feedback and I'm just focusing and playing around and making mistakes and just learn and explore without pressure of someone looking over your shoulders and telling you that this doesn't work, you know, like we do in crits in school. So, that was a big growth moment for me, and I felt like I needed that. And it's probably one of the wisest decisions that I've made in my whole life, I was in no rush.

You know, younger emerging artists today have the pressure of social media. They're seeing their colleagues succeed and the pressure to show and to be exposed. That would be a very big challenge for me if I was in my twenties right now. But I was able to shoulder it off and I wanted to make really great work and that wasn't ready. Same thing I felt about filmmaking. I need to have my life experience and I need to learn more about sound. I need to learn more about how to communicate with other people and working together as a team, right? I need to be wiser in so many different ways and to become a choreographer, and a director, and the communicator, and have the stories to tell. So, I wasn't ready to do that in my twenties, but I guess in my 40s I'm ready for that. And I am super excited about it because I've been holding off [laughs], and now feels like it's the right time.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I interviewed artist Carolina Caycedo and she was also talking about

how do you—and I'm not sure actually if she said it in that way, but that's how I interpreted—how do you think about becoming someone in the art world or living through your art and also not let it be this huge thing that just grows and grows, and grows, sometimes with no motive other than that's the only way to be successful. And I don't know if I'm making sense here, but from what you're saying is, sometimes you just want to learn and become a better artist. And that doesn't necessarily mean that you are exposed, you know? It doesn't necessarily come together.

If you can say more about that, like how do you know at these different phases of your life, where were you? Where do you think you found that sort of wisdom at that point where you're like, No, I'm not going to show right now. You know, I'm just going to really refine my practice or really learn about these things?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah, I mean, I guess I'm just being very honest myself. My work wasn't ready, and I'm not comparing myself to other artists. I'm just like, I'm not happy with this. I'm because I don't feel comfortable showing in a gallery or a museum or to the world. I have very high expectations of what I expect from my work. I'm just always honest. I'm just I'm not ready yet. I can totally show all this, and people might like it, but I'm not going to be happy with it. And that's something that—I'm super strict on myself when it comes to the quality of my work, and I will not rush it or force it. And that's something I believed always. I don't believe in forcing anything. Let these things happen naturally. And that's something that I've learned over the years that that's how life is. You know, I can't force it just let it happen naturally.

[00:50:08]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Actually, now that you're talking about going in your studio, if you can describe more of what your daily studio practice looks like. What's your everyday life as a working artist?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: That's really hard [laughs] because it changes. Literally, I just spent seven months in Mexico City building *Mariposa Relámpago*, you know, and I can talk about those seven months.

So, I would just work all day with my team working on metal, and it was very physical. And in the weekends, I would go into the markets and look *los tianguis* and look for parts in antique shops and in markets—and look for the parts. And I guess accumulate around 700 objects for that sculpture. So, everything was very specific. And now—I guess it just vary from project to project—now my studio in Brooklyn, I just kind started working yesterday, and I'm getting ready for my Paris show at my gallery, Mor charpentier, in Paris, and I'm going to have the solo show there. So, the practice changes. For the next two months, I'm going to be here working on sculpture, and then after that, I'll be going to Mexico City again and just editing the film that I will show in the same show. So, it just kind of like every—it goes based on projects, basically. And then something else will happen after that and I'll be somewhere else, working on a completely different thing in a different way. So, I don't really have like this way of working that's always the same.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, I had many questions right in the tip of my tongue but I'm going to try to orient myself because I know we don't have a whole lot of time. And so, the idea is that in this interview—which is like a shorter format than longer oral histories that I might do with older artists—that we can try to capture kind of like the breath of your life and work. And that's kind of hard.

You've spoken about that big transition in your life, which was when you found out you had cancer, and how that has shown up in your work, including that transition. Are there other big moments in your life, like transitions, that you'd like to document here? And also, if you can talk more about that moment and how that changed you?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah, there are so many transitions, but it's hard to compare to my journey from El Salvador and, also, having cancer, right? So, those are the two ones that stand out the most and by far. I've had many, many challenges and other transitions, but those have been the ones that really have molded me into the person that I've become now, you know?

The story about the cancer—basically, my birthday was coming up, and I was born December 12 of 1976, and that's the day *se celebra el día de Guadalupe*, is day of the

Guadalupe. So, that's where the name comes from. I was having a birthday in 2012, it was going to be all 12. So, 12th month, 12 day of 2012. So, you write 12, 12, 12, and I was turning 36. So, it's like 12 plus 12, plus [12], equals 36. So, I was like, Wow, what a crazy birthday! That number is. And for the longest time I knew this, for years I was like, Okay, I'm going to have this crazy birthday. I'm going to have this crazy party, and whatever. Or I'm going to go meditate in the mountain, which one? it's like one of these things, and so, five days before my birthday, I didn't have any plans. And I was in Art Basel, Miami. I remember sitting in the beach and my friend I was like, I have to make a plan. And this big year coming for me, this big day, this magical day. And literally, after I said that someone called me and said, There is a *curandero* and they're doing a plant ceremony in Brooklyn, New York on your birthday, do you want to go? And I was like, Yes, sign me up!

[00:55:00]

So, we met with a *curandero* and we did plant medicine ceremony and it changed my life. Something really kind of crazy happened to me. In doing the ceremony, I saw my ancestor, I saw my own birth. I just saw myself as a 120-year-old person. So many things! My diseased mother appeared, like so many beautiful things. And then something kind of happened with my stomach, like light was coming out of my stomach, and the plant was cleansing my stomach. So I talked to the *curandero* after, I was like, What? What's happening? It felt like I was just glowing from my stomach. And he said to me, "Go check your stomach because the plant was trying to cleanse something there." And I didn't have health insurance at the time. So, I went to a clinic and got health insurance, I was worried, there was no symptoms. And then I found that I had stage 3B colon cancer and that's how I found out. The plant told me; saved me, basically. And that's how I found out I had cancer.

And that's how I found that I had it, because otherwise I would have never found out, and that was already late stage three, so I would have gone into four; I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you right now. And then, everything that I mentioned before, about my curiosity with spirituality and all the meditation and talking to Ralphie, the *Santero*, to my grandmother's influence, and everything else that I had seen kind of started coming together. Then I was like, Now the healing starts and I had to figure out what that is.

Then, I didn't have health insurance and then I had to apply. So, I had to actually had to hold off almost three months for cancer treatments to start because I didn't have health insurance. In the meantime, I started doing more plant medicine and talking and that's the time when all the healers in New York City started appearing out of nowhere. I learned a lot about sound as medicine and learned more about plant medicine. I worked with healers, *curanderos*, *brujos*, *brujas* from China to Tibet to Israel, Native Americans, *curanderos* and shamans from El Salvador, México, South America. I learned ancient ways, new ways of healing, I learned about nutrition, I learned about the spirit, then the spirit—I learned about healing the body—, and the mental health. The whole thing. It was just like *puff!* [signals with hands], everything that I've been kind of slowly working my way to was in front of me, and I needed to do it to save my life. And along with that, then I got, luckily, Medicaid and a blessing that after a year and a half chemotherapy radiation, two surgeries, I didn't owe 1 dollar.

So that's how I overcame cancer after a year of this crazy experience that I had. And then, after that, I actually learned—I just kept going with all the ancient and holistic ways of healing post-cancer, that I'm still dealing with. And that was that was the journey and it's still continuing. It's going to be ten 10 years cancer-free in December.

So, I found out that I had cancer on my birthday of 2012 and then I had the surgery to recover from cancer on my birthday the following year, 2013. So, it was like this one year from birthday to birthday. It was like my rebirth and conquering cancer on my birthdays. So that day and the "Guadalupe"—I was born in *Día de Guadalupe* and my name is Guadalupe. So, the whole thing is to say that birthdays are very significant—my birth and rebirth—in overcoming cancer. So, I feel very protected on that day [laughs].

Let's see what comes next.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thanks for sharing that, Guadalupe. I wonder if you can say a bit more about how those experiences, especially these very near experiences to your body and to your own healing, have influenced the work that you've been doing since then?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, part of the work working with the plant medicine was to find out where the cancer came from because I was very curious.

Sometimes I was like, I need to figure out where this came from. Why? I was 35 years old.

[01:00:00]

Or 34, probably, when it started to form within my early thirties—when it started to form—and then a lot of meditation, a lot of plant medicine. They found out that the cancer had manifested from the trauma of my childhood, all that trauma of experiencing war, being separated from my mother and my family. That journey from Central America to El Salvador, had manifested into an illness, into a tumor and I held it in my gut. And then I started realizing that my sister had lupus—has had lupus for years. My mother died of cancer as well. Everyone in my family was sick, all the time. And then I started seeing the extended undocumented community. Anyone that's been here for more than ten years, oh, everyone is sick, everyone is unhealthy. And I started connecting the dots and realized, Okay, trauma can manifest into illness. And it almost took my life. So, then I started really working with the undocumented community in 2018, and I got a Soros grant, and I started forming undocumented holistic circles and we'd meet once a week and I would do the sound baths and share the knowledge that I picked up along the way. And I would hire practitioners to teach us different ways to heal the body and the mind, and the spirit. I brought in everyone from my college [ph]—a herbalist, a nutritionist, someone from the City of New York that taught us about organic, or how to get affordable organic produce—and so on. You know, Chi Kung, Tai-chi, Yoga, like everything. I brought *brujos*, a pastor [laughs], everyone into the space, shamans came in there and taught us.

What I learned is I don't really believe in healing anyone with my work, but I believe in teaching people the tools so they could do the work themselves. I also learned from cancer that I'm my own medicine, I'm my own healer, and I have to do the work and overcome it, but I need the tools, right? I need therapy, I need the right nutrition, I need the right plants, I need the right tools to heal and do the work. I need to know how to—learn how to meditate and do the work—for years.

This is the knowledge that I picked up and this is the knowledge that I share to this day with the undocumented community. And it has kind of evolved. I've done workshops and talked to thousands of people over the years already, and this is what I'm doing. Now, with the sound therapy and the gong baths, I open up the space for the healing to happen. Again, I don't plan to heal anyone with my work, but I really think it's important to show people the tools and to bring awareness that we all have a lot of healing to do. And the healing can come in many different forms because there are so many different types of trauma and challenges that people have gone through.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, and that's actually how I found out about your work at first, through Cynthia—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —oh, really?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I was interviewing her, and I think that's how it came up back in 2020—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Okay, wow!

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —or how I found out more closely about your work. So, I appreciate the full circle—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —beautiful.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I really hope to be there in person, as well, pretty soon.

So, just to start closing this part of our recording for today, I'd like you to say more about what you're working on right now. You mentioned your show that just opened on May 25th, and also some of the interest and concerns that occupy your body and your mind right now.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Yeah. So, last year I was closing out my show at the Brooklyn Museum and MoMA, and it was a very different year than this year has been because I had done over 120 ceremonies in the first nine months, and we were getting really affected at the church with the influx of the asylum-seekers coming from Venezuela. And I kind of over-

exceeded myself and I think I did 50 ceremonies at MoMA, 25 of them were for the cancer community. So, I was just kind of giving and just kind of doing a lot of, a lot of the healing work for the first nine months. And then once we got really slammed with asylum-seekers from Venezuela, I got triggered by some of the stories that they told me about losing family members along the way, and these kinds of things. And I was like, Okay, I need a break. I just have no energy left to give.

[01:05:00]

And we have this wave of thousands of people coming in and I told the pastor, I'm going to take a little break. And just in time I was actually flying to Mexico in August to start working on *Mariposa Relámpago*. So, that was the break that I took from doing the healing work here at the church. And then I just switched to sculpture mode. And then I was in Mexico City from August to March just working on *Mariposa Relámpago*—this giant bus sculpture, that kind of changed my whole life [laughs].

So, I went from doing all this healing work, along with other shows, to just focusing on *Mariposa Relámpago*. And now I literally just came back this week to New York and got my studio ready and getting ready to go in sculptor mode for another two months, here in the studio. But also, the church is right here. I'm in Sunset Park, it's in Bay Ridge, so it's like 10 minutes in my car. So, I'm going to start doing the sound baths every Saturday that I'm here and go on for as long as I can.

But my role kind of shifts with the pastor and what my lifestyle is and what they need. Because also the church is constantly changing all the time. What's happening there—seems like every two months a new plan—depending on what is happening with I guess with who's arriving in this country and what they need. So, the pastor is in constant flux at the church. At some point, 120-something people were sleeping at the church and there was a full kitchen, 24/7. And now it has a different role. And during the Pandemic, it literally looked like a storage warehouse. We had hundreds of thousands of bags of food that were donated, and we'd pick up and there was no church service. It was just, literally, a warehouse with pallet jacks and things like that.

So, the pastor, who is doing great work over there—Juan Carlos Ruiz. And again, I adapt to it and, during the Pandemic, I did hundreds of sound baths in the church before the vaccines were even out. I put my life out there, you know, the healing can't stop, right now is when we need it, especially people who are undocumented that are crossing during the Pandemic. You know, we can't put the healing on pause and the pastor has been really supportive and great to share. He is giving me space to do my work in there. That's been really kind of a beautiful relationship that I developed with him.

So that's kind of what it's in my mind.

As far as the future is, I have all these exhibitions lined up, but I'm really thinking of ways to kind of expand what I'm doing in my role in the church as well, as a volunteer, as a healer, as a friend. And it seems like the challenges are not getting easier. Even after doing this all these years, it feels like it gets even more difficult, more challenging being there because there's always new things that come up.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And just to be a little more specific. The challenges that are happening right now—because this is a document that is also a historical document—but if you can say more about what is happening in terms of the migration crisis that places like the church, but also many other organizations and people, are trying to care for in the absence of [inaudible]—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —yeah.

So, during the Pandemic in the church we were helping the undocumented community that was here. You know, that has been here for years. And in some cases, we'd have someone that just arrived, right? But there'll be like a few people here and there that would arrive to the church, that just crossed. So, we'd see people all the time that were,

Okay, I just arrive, I need help, any help trying to figure out where to sleep and get a mattress. But it was it was something that we could kind of manage because it was maybe like a dozen a month. And after this whole thing from Venezuela started happening—basically people are fleeing Venezuela for so many reasons and they were arriving, being

caught at the border, and I guess the governor and people in power, they were using them as political pawns by sending them to Sanctuary Cities, which in Chicago, D.C. and New York. And over the last year—I think we're getting close to over 70,000 Venezuelans have arrived in New York City in the last year.

[01:10:04]

And a lot of them are arriving to the church looking for food, for backpacks, for clothing. In the winter they show up in shorts in New York City. So, a lot of the work that I was doing—again, it shift—during that time, I was like, Okay, we need clothing, we need coats. So, I got the Brooklyn Museum to help me have a clothing drive and we got three giant truckloads of things. And my gallery also got a truckload of donations. So, that's what I'm saying—my role shifts depending on what's happening. During the Pandemic, our group got clothes and we did sound baths every Saturday. And then I would help the pastor pick up 1500 pounds of grains once a week. So, it just depends on what the situation is and what's needed. So right now there's still more people arriving from Venezuela, but there is also the existing community of undocumented that's been here too. So, there's lot of different ways and challenges that this presents. There's people that come and just have a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. They have nothing.

And then there's also the community that already has a job, more stable. But they need to do the healing work and cares about healing whatever illnesses they have. And there's also people in Mexico that are reaching out to me now. You know, I'm working with—there's a four-year-old in the hospital in Mexico City that her mother said to me just this week, and I've been trying to help her because the family is sleeping in the street outside of the hospital waiting for their daughter to get healthy. So, the little girl can't go on to the street after she comes out of the hospital. I started working with some nuns in Mexico City through a friend, and they were trying to get her some housing. So, when their little girl comes out of the hospital at least is not in the street.

So, there's a lot of this new things, of people reaching out. Or the pastor telling me, "Look, there's a family in Mexico City and you're there." This is kind of expanding now [laughs] and new challenges are presenting themselves all the time. I sit there with a pastor like, how do we figure this out? How do we help them? So, that's what I mean, those are the challenges, and it changes every day.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And do you see that work as part of or as an expansion of your own life and practice, or how do you conceive that work you are doing?—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —you know. Once, in my twenties I started really researching who the Maya were because when I was playing in the pyramids, I didn't really know anything about them. Then I really learned that's part of my ancestry. I also learned that the artists, whoever carved those stones, whoever made those paintings, they were also the shamans, they knew about astrology, they invented number zero in their mathematics before the Europeans did. They knew about plant medicine, they knew about—they would do everything. The shaman was the artist, was the priest, was the politician, was the astronomer, was the nutritionist. They did everything. And I was like, I want to be like that, you know? So now I sculpt, and I make paintings, and I make performances, and I work with sound, but also my role as a healer, and being involved in the communities, and giving back and in some ways just like really being present for people and doing the whole thing. That's me. There's no separation for it, it's all one thing.

Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much Guadalupe. I think we've been able to document a lot of the many different things that you're doing right now and how your trajectory has kind of evolved in the past couple of decades, I guess—

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: —[Laughs]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —in a short time. Is there anything else—I'm sure, having asked you a lot of things—but is there something that you personally want to make sure you document here that I haven't asked you about?

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: No. I think I've said a lot and there's a lot to process here [laughs]. I always try to hold off a little bit because there's so many layers to my life and to my work

as well. But I think we're good for right now. Thank you for asking.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay. Thank you so much. I'm going to stop the recording now.

GUADALUPE MARAVILLA: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]