



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Victor Mantilla
Chalela, 1964 July 28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Victor Mantilla Chalela on July 28, 1964. The interview was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Also present is Robert McChesney.

Interview

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Victor Mantilla who lives at 110 Grand Avenue, Pacific Grove, California. The date is July 28, 1964. Present also this evening is Robert McChesney. I'd like to ask you first, Vic, where did you get your art school training?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, I studied at Ohio State University, majored in fine arts. I was there for about three years and then I went to South America to the University of San Marcus and I studied mosaic work there for about six months. That was in 1930 until they had a revolution.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What country was that?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Lima, Peru. In Lima. And I did some work for a couple of small churches down there but I didn't get to see it placed because of the revolution. I think the last six weeks I was there, they had about five residents and the people weren't paying much attention to art work. After coming back, I finally, got on the Federal Art Project I think in 19 - I'm not sure of the date, but I was on it, I guess, for about a year, something like that. And I did quite a few mosaics for various small schools and worked also with Barbara Stevenson. She made a great many designs and I did most of the technical work, applying the mosaics to the paper and then putting them in place and cleaning them and grouting them, finishing the work. Some high schools locally have some of that work, and some grade schools. I've forgotten the names of the schools. That's the extent of my schooling, as far as that goes, which was approximately four years that I studied.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You studied mosaics mainly in Peru?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Mainly in Peru.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Had you done any in the States before you went down there?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Not very much, no. Just I studied at Ohio State, it was just a matter of design but it was all on paper; we didn't get around to cutting out the tesserae. We didn't do any of the technical work. I was interested in it when I went down there to Peru and I found out there was a class, mainly because they have so many mosaics down there in their cathedrals. They have a lot of cathedrals down there in Lima, and churches, and outside Lima in various other towns. Then I learned the practical part of applying mosaics to paper and then to concrete surfaces, or stucco surfaces and grouting and finishing.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you actually place them down there in Peru?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. I placed them - quite often we placed them on stuccoed outlines which in themselves later would be applied to various buildings, so I completed them and stood them up but they had not been in place when the revolution came along. The churches had been chosen but the revolution got there so I don't know what happened to them after that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Were you paid for your work there or were you working as a student?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, I was going to school there. This was just student work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, part of the project of learning?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, part of the project of learning. So I didn't do it alone, I was involved - it was part of, as you asked me in the beginning - it was part of my studies and I was not paid for it actually, until I returned to the United States. And then the Federal Art Project was the first one that asked me to do mosaics. They had heard that I had done them down there - had been studying down there. And so that was how I began with the mosaics and that was practically the only thing I did for the Federal Art Project.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You didn't go down there just particularly to study mosaic work, did you?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, I hadn't. My reason for going down there was that I had relatives down there and I heard from them about the school. The University of San Marcus is, I believe, the oldest school in the

Americas, North and South. I've forgotten, it was founded in 1546 or something. So it was a chance to take a trip; and I didn't have any money anyway and the schooling didn't cost me anything; my relatives down there were willing to send me to school. That's how I came to go there and that was in 1930. I graduated from high school in 1926 and entered Ohio State University the same year, 1926. I had been previously to America before that - I had been there in 1926 but at that time I hadn't gone to school and hadn't decided on art as a career at that time.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You said that the WPA people asked you to do mosaics. Who was it that actually approached you? Was it the head of the Project down here?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, it was Amalie Kneass.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh! She was the supervisor at that time?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: She was the supervisor at that time, and she was the one who asked me, which I was very glad to do, not being employed at that particular time. Now the year I've forgotten; it must have been around 1935.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember the first project that you did?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, the only thing I just vaguely remember was for a grade school here locally. I've forgotten which one now; it was a mosaic of a horse, a pink horse with two children riding him. The size of it was approximately four by five, or four by six. We used colored glass - nearly all Italian glass. It didn't come cut up in those days. We bought it in strips and we had to cut it up ourselves. There was a little more work involved then than it is now. The other thing is that I brought back from South America, the thing that helped here is a formula for putting the tesserae on to paper because when it comes time to take it off, you apply the mosaic backward. In other words, you lay out your design and then of course, you're going to reverse it so everything is going to be done backwards. But you have to know how to be able to wash the paper off without loosening up your tile when you go to pull it off. So there is a little formula that I have. I still have it somewhere that you make it with brown, let's see it's something like - there's a little brown sugar in it. There's also flour, some few other ingredients that go into it that you paste on the brown paper. We use fairly heavy brown paper, and we lay out tile on that. Before you put it in, if it's a good size, something that you can't hang up in one strip - which is hard to do anyway - then you cut in between them and cut odd designs out; and for that reason again that's why you have to be able to easily remove the paper so it won't shift the tesserae around or alter the design as it originally was. So that was the only thing I brought back other than the looking at so many mosaics and studying different styles down there. So many of them had been done by monks down there. The Franciscan Order had done a lot of work down there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Vic, when you apply the paper, what do you call it - grout? or...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, the grout is after you take the paper off. You fill in between each little tile. Of Course, you don't wait too long. You wait till it's almost set real hard so you still have an opportunity to move a few of the pieces if you want to.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, in other words, that's your big problem getting the paper off...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: That's right.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: ...because the grout hasn't set up.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: That's right.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I see.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, then after you get the paper off, then your grout comes. Normally we used the grout to fill in the spaces between the tiles. It's just like tile work and we put it on with a trowel normally and go over it. We didn't use any colored grout. It usually was just plain cement and water. And that's what we call grout; and then we take that off with a cloth and polish it and buff it up and shine it up. But that fills in the spaces between the tesserae.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This one you mentioned of the pink horse, did Barbara Stevenson design that?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I believe she did. Now I'm not sure. She designed several of them that I worked on and I don't know whether she did that one or not. She may have, I'm not sure.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That was about four feet by...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think it was four by six, and it was to go against a wall of the school some place.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: An outside wall?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, an outside wall.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Would you place a mosaic up outside, all in one placement?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. Well, that one we did because we did it on the floor on a piece of plywood and we did it in about an inch and a half of concrete. So this one was done in one piece, and then they came and they had made a place where this thing could be plastered into a wall as one chunk, as a finished product. Normally when you do it, you would go to the surface and you would trowel it out and screed it out to the thickness that you want and then start applying your tile. And sometimes we would only do, say, half of it; I mean, if it's very large we'd only do half of it and then you have to have a large room where on the floor you can cut out the designs, and then you can take up half of these and apply them for a day's work and then you can go back the next day and take up where you ended and then push them back up. But you never see anything except the back of the paper. So the only time that you see your design is when you make the cartoon to begin with in color. And then you just go over that and put all your tile in and then when you get through, then, you cover it with paper, so then you sort of feel tiles to feel where they are so that when you're cutting through with a knife, you make uneven cuts so when you look at it, it doesn't look as though it's been all cut out with a knife.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: The type of mosaic you were doing, you laid the mosaic and then you put the paper on the back of it afterwards?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Afterwards, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh! A lot of it is done just the opposite, isn't it...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, you can do it just the opposite.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Glue the tile to the paper face downwards.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. You can do it both ways. But if you're going to do it like this one I had reference to - where they wanted it on two inches of concrete and they had a place, a space for it - and they were going to apply it; then first of all, I made a form and put in two inches of concrete on it and I used just as much; then we had the cartoon and the tile face up on it and then we removed those and put them in the cement; and then we would add a little more, not too wet cement, so that the juice didn't come through. But the only time you do that is when they're going to take it with them. That was how that happened.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Too bad a few more of those mosaics weren't done that way because a lot of them were destroyed simply because the building was destroyed.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: That's true. You know several of them, I know, have been torn down. It's still popular. The schools I think could use a lot more but they just...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, it's a great technique for wear and tear.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Practically indestructible. And it's a good form - it's one of our oldest forms. You still see floors that have been found, that were left by the Romans and the Phoenicians, I guess, where they had done so much of mosaics...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, I know Jeanne Reynal. I don't know whether you remember her or not. She was around San Francisco for a long time. She worked in mosaics...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, I don't.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: She did it more or less as an easel project in her studio. But she's still working on it in New York. She's quite famous for her mosaics, and she works mostly in abstract forms.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I know there are two young sisters - they're not young - two sisters down the Coast who have quite a reputation for mosaics. I've only met them once or twice but I met them, unfortunately, when they were just starting out and they weren't too accomplished with the rough part of putting it in; they would rather have someone put down the work themselves. And I like to do the whole thing myself. But when you're applying it to a building that may be twenty or thirty feet above the street, why it takes somebody that has a little bit more intestinal fortitude than the average person. I'm even afraid to get up on the top of this house any

more. I think I must be getting a little old because one time I didn't think anything of throwing a rope over and going hand over hand and fixing a chimney. Now I don't think I have enough strength to throw the rope over.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, I suppose it must be a sort of a problem to keep the surface fairly flat, isn't it?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: It is, some of it is, but if you - that depends on your bed that you're putting it in. It has to be the right consistency so that when you put them up you take a wood plank and a mallet - or a rubber hammer is better - and then run the plank over and you tamp them down so that they're all about the same, have all gone in the same - unless you're using oh, pebbles - and quite often you leave some blanks in it and those, after you take your paper off, you cut the cement out and put a few things in by hand; but if you want to change the texture - if you want to use stones and pebbles instead of all glass - I mean, you just cut it out and add some in and grout them back in. That's a few different techniques but I think most of them are generally known. I think I've read quite a few of them in books at one time or another on the various techniques. But that was my forte - and in those days no one wanted to buy art, so I became a carpenter and then I became a contractor, and now I just received a notice by the State of California, I am now a licensed building designer - but I still would like to do a few mosaics, which I do now and again for friends, just to keep my hand in. I even do small ones, oh, four by five. I use a pair of pincers or tweezers.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You mean four by five inches?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Use tweezers and just pick out tiny little slivers and do maybe an inch a night or so, little slivers and do a little cartoon, but then I just put a little cement in, just put them in one at a time. And it's effective, I mean, if you don't have anything else to do with your time in the evening, why it's absorbing.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Miniature mosaics...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, miniatures. But that's an interesting technique too. It's not original with me. That's been done for many hundreds of years too. I don't think it's anything new.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: What do you do? Shatter your material...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, shatter it, use a hammer to break them up and if that isn't fine enough, then I'll swat it with a hammer until I get what I want.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What were some of the other designs that you did while you were on the WPA project here? Do you remember any of those?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, children with umbrellas on a rainy day and things like that. They were mostly for grade schools.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What were the largest ones you did on the Project?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, I think the largest ones that we did - I don't know what happened to and I don't even know which direction now; Amelie might know if you could ever find her - what happened to them I don't know. I think the largest one we did was about ten by ten, which was a good-sized one. And all we did on that was to cover the design on the paper and cut it up and it was boxed. Whither it went, I don't know. That took several months altogether, but that was ten by ten feet...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: How is it when you build those, you build a form and you set them - in other words, they come out as slabs?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: They come out as slabs, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: And how are they fastened to the wall? Bolted on, or...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well you can bolt them in; some of them bolt them in. Usually, what we do, we cut a hole in the cement in the back with a chisel, knock it out; and then we take Plaster of Paris and if we're going to set it in more cement, we just take a piece of plumber's tape, stick it in the cement and glob Plaster of Paris on it until it sets up, get it smooth, and then you've got these hooks all sticking up; then you just shove that into wet cement, the wet mortar, put a few props against it and leave it there for about eight hours and that's it. It's fixed. It's the same way as you would apply marble. That's the way they applied marble. Plaster of Paris...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was the design of this ten foot by ten foot mosaic that you did?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think it was children playing in a forest I believe; as I remember it was a pine forest. These long, tall pine forests and very faint colors of children. Barbara did that one, the design of it, I mean. Faint colors of children coming out through the fog was the effect. So it was mostly these pine tree and

then small, little children, quite a few of them, little colored dresses but very, very, very faint dresses; it was in fog and the trees were very grayed out, almost like fog. That was the idea. It was, I think it children - I've forgotten - something to do with fog and children. But Barbara did that. She was an excellent designer.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you work with any other artists who did any designs that you executed?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. No, I worked with Barbara. Just the two of us.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Graham didn't do any of them?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, he did mostly oil paintings. Very capable.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: But he was on the Project, though?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, oh yes. I know he was, both he and Barbara were.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Practically everybody down here, all the artists, were on the Project.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. I think most of the artists down here were on - well, they had to be. At that time you couldn't earn money at anything. Certainly not at art, certainly no one was buying...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That applies to Carmel as well as to Monterey?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You know, it's strange but I was under the impression at one time that all artists in Carmel were quite prosperous.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, no. Not then. No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That's the reputation they had in San Francisco.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, was it! No, no. Gus was an excellent artist who was living in Carmel and Gus wasn't making any money.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This was August Gay?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He was a supervisor here for a little while, wasn't he?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't know whether Gus was or not. I don't remember. He may have been, but I don't remember. That's where I met with Fitzgerald who was working - well, I had known him before but I met him while we were doing a mural for the local fairgrounds out here. They, at one time, had a great big canvas that wrapped around the horse ring and we had done a mural; and I think it was about eight or nine or ten feet high or something, and it must have been five hundred feet long. I know we worked on it for quite a while. Gus was on it and Fitzgerald and Bruce Ariss and...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: What Fitzgerald is this?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, he was a watercolor man, had come out here originally from the East someplace and I think since has gone back East, but where he is, I don't know.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This mural you did for the fairgrounds, for the horse stadium, that was oil on canvas?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, that was oil on heavy canvas.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where did you ever find room to roll up five hundred feet of canvas?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, it was all hung in place there around the arena...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, I see!

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: So we used step ladders, and Gus and Bruce and Barbara, I believe worked on it; and Elwood [Graham] worked on it too for a while. They went ahead doing the cartoon and we came along with a palette, putting up the colors behind them. I remember Gus and I had quite an argument because they didn't like the way Gus was drawing his donkeys. They didn't look like a donkey; they looked more like a horse. And we had quite an argument about the difference between a horse and a donkey - we washed out his donkeys. Gus

and I didn't get along very well after that. But they definitely looked like horses and he wanted it to be a donkey, but as I remember there was something wrong with the ears. They weren't big enough or something. He said they were donkeys - I said not with those ears. They had donkey faces but they had little short ears, you know. That was it, they finally told him to put big ears on the donkey and everything was all right after that.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I think that's the same project that Patricia Cunningham mentioned this week for the second time.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, I guess so. That Andre Moreau worked on it too apparently; or maybe he didn't work on it but just remembered it. I'm not too sure.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: It's possible. Oh, it was such a huge thing. I worked with this bunch and there were some more coming around to meet us from the other side...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, really!

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Just like tunnel work.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. It may have been that they had been working on the other side and I didn't meet them.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long did it take you to finish this mural?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I didn't stay that long. I left along about the time that Viscayena [?] came into Monterey Bay, why - I mean when we got to that particular part, why then, I think, I left for San Diego.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It was the history of the county...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, Monterey County; history of Father Junipero Serra and the horses and a few donkeys, as I mentioned. But there were a number of us on that project.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: What year was this, Vic? Do you remember?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think it was 19...it must have been 1935 or '36...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: When they were doing that? This particular job you're speaking of?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, then, you left the project about that time?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think that was the last thing I worked on. I believe that was the last. I had been doing mosaics when I got this hurry up job to work on that, so I went over to do that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was this used for the fair just that one year, or was it used again?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh no, they used it for ten years...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, they did!

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Until they built this new paddock they have out there, or arena I guess you call it, about five years ago; so they used it from 1936 till less five years, whatever that subtracts to - I'm not good on computing. But I would imagine, it must have been about twenty years that they used it. I remember the last time that I did see it before they tore it down, what's happened to it I don't know, but it was fading quite a bit.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It's amazing. Was it never repaired?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't think so. We had to cut a few holes in it to let the wind blow through it because otherwise it was beginning to get a little bit tattered. The history of it we could probably find out at the fairgrounds; I don't know what happened to it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was it left in place from fair to fair?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, it was!

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: It seems to me - well, now, left in place? Now I'm not sure. They may have taken it down. I can't recall. I believe they took it down.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I should think the weather...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, it was only put up for the fairs. And the reason it was put up in the beginning was there was no place large enough for all those to work on it at one time. But I'm quite sure it was not left up. Because otherwise the wind...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: How did they hang it? Did they have grommets in it?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, I believe, we had grommets in the top, as I remember now; and I think it was just pulled up from the one side with rope and it was lashed to the top. It seems to me it was about eight, ten feet high. And I believe that was the way it was put up. But the only thing I remember, it was up when I started out there and heck, I started in the beginning when they first started on the project. It seems to me - I can remember it hadn't gone on very long because they had only - I can remember approximately where I started; I remember shocks of wheat, I remember an oak tree and a few hills in the background, that's where I started...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: And when did you leave?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I left when Viscayena came in here - when he entered the Bay. He sailed in and I sailed out.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This is a very unusual idea. It's one of the most interesting projects I've ever heard of being done on the WPA. I wonder who originally thought of it? It seems like a good idea to do something for a community because it was put to such long use and at the same time to be so enjoyable, it seems like.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. I think, well, for practical purposes, it had been discussed. They had to put it up because of the wind; and during the fair the horse show was held in the evenings - and we had some excellent horses and excellent riders - but it was so cold that people wouldn't stay out there, particularly when the wind was blowing and the fog was coming in, so they put that up to protect the people. I don't know whether it was ever put up before we painted it or someone suggested that it could be painted by the Federal Art Project. And I believe, that's how it came about; but it was going to be put up whether or not it was painted - it would have been put up in place but fortunately the Federal Art Project was available to make it a lot more attractive. It certainly was attractive, but what's happened to it I've often wondered. One day I think I'll ask somebody at the fairgrounds what happened to it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, a lot of canvas.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, a tremendous amount of canvas. It's probably under a roof someplace.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did they sew it together or...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, it was sewn together.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, ten feet high you said?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I believe - it was either eight or ten. That's going back quite a few years for me to remember, but it must have been at least eight feet. Because I know I was standing on something, so I can reach about eight feet; so I mean it was more than eight feet.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You mentioned earlier that you did some mosaics that you had designed yourself. Do you remember what the designs of any of those were? Were they children things?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: They were children. They were for grade schools mostly. You see, it was not so much assignments that we had but what they called projects. Actually it was a project for a school - for a small school - and they gave us the locale of the school, the number of students and whether it was in, you know, a cotton picking district, north over near Fresno or...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, you did mosaics for that far away?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, I see.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Wherever it happened to be needed. I just happened to pick that. I don't know whether they went to Fresno but wherever they went, wherever they wanted a mosaic; they would give us a description and that was our project, to work one out for that because they was always plenty of little schools to do them for. So if it happened to be there was any cotton planted, why then cotton was featured. And if there were artichokes, like we did some for Watsonville over here, everybody knew it was Watsonville because that was the background, artichokes. So we had to do this. Those are nice to do anyway so there were children and artichokes fields. And usually horses got in too, for some reason or other. You know, there are so many horses around here, they're nice to do. So it wasn't just this particular area. Now I don't know that the mosaics were going there but that was the project. Now maybe that was just the idea for that design was to be formed around that particular subject. Where they went to, I don't know. But I know I did one with cotton pods in it and children hoeing cotton. I don't remember if I did one with children working in cotton fields though they still do, with the long white - oh, I did somebody - have you ever seen them pick cotton?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: With those long bags...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, the long bags. Very interesting design; the long white bags and the fields of cotton on either side, the green and the white puff balls, you know, tugging along with it. So I remember one of them had to do with cotton. Now whether that went to a cotton area, I don't know but that was the project. I don't know how many I did. I don't think I did more than possibly ten at the most. I think that would be the most. One reason is we didn't have a great deal of material for one thing. We couldn't afford to waste any and quite often after they were done and laid on, if they weren't liked, we took them off the paper and used the tile over again...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, you reused them?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: We reused them. If the colors didn't come off or the design wasn't right, we did it over again, that's all. We couldn't afford to waste anything; even the Federal Art Project didn't have money to waste. I think all it did, it kept us busy.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have a building here in Pacific Grove or Monterey where you worked?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, we had a building over in Monterey. They just tore it down about six weeks ago...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Really!

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, getting ready for urban renewal. It's one of the places that went down. It was an old green two-story building. It's pretty - well, it adjoined the Japanese restaurant. I don't know the name of the restaurant now. It was right across from the wharf in Monterey. You know, where that little park is in Monterey there across from the whaling station? It's also across from the wharf.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: There's a little park in there and then further back is a Japanese restaurant. Well, northwest of that restaurant was a two story green building and we had all the lower floor, down below, in which to lay out or tile and do our tile cutting and that's about all we did. I think Amelie had her office there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Is that the only thing that was done there? No painters...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, the painters worked mostly outside...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: On their own, either, doing landscape...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Either in their studios or doing landscape on the outside. We were about the only ones that I remember that had reason to be inside all the time when we were working because we had a fixed project. It wasn't something you could get away from. Barbara did quite a bit of work at home. She would bring it down there and we'd lay it out; blow it up to a larger size.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have any assistants working with you?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No, there were two or three other people occasionally who worked with us, just to learn how it was done; but as I remember, it was just Barbara and I. I believe we did most of it. There was somebody else, I don't recall who it was - whether male or female - who worked a little but most of it, I think, we did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have any contact between the mosaic people down here and the people who were working in mosaics on the projects in San Francisco?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. No, we never did have.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You never had any reason for going up there...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. If we ever went anywhere, it was at our own instigation because we didn't have the money to travel in those days. I don't think I had a car. So we didn't do too much traveling. If we went to San Francisco, it was on the old Hotel and DelMonte Express or on the bus. We couldn't do too much visiting and I can't remember ever having gone anyplace to see anyone else's work in those days. I'm recalling now from 1936 and that's a goodly number of years ago and I'm trying to keep from getting anything that I may have done in between there involved with what I did on the Federal Art Project and I'm sort of hesitant. I've done a lot of things myself and I don't want to get them mixed up with the Federal Art Project. Not that it makes any difference but for your own interest I don't want you to be misled. But I think the story is pretty well straight.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: The same way with my interview. I found big gaps in there that I'd forgotten all about.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, that's true. I know if I could talk to Bruce or to Barbara and if we could reminisce about these things; why there are probably a lot of things I have forgotten and I'm quite sure if all of us could get together there'd be a lot of things we'd remember that I have probably forgotten.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: There were people in this area working on frescoes on wet plaster...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you ever have any connection with that or know any of them?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. No. I think Barbara did work on some of them, I'm not sure, and I think Elwood might have. I remember they lived up on the Hill. They lived next to Bruce, Bruce Ariss, up on the Hill and I think that I saw them working up there one time. They had a very nice studio up there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: What was this section called?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think Strawberry Hill.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Strawberry Hill.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: are you too warm?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: No, I'm fine. Did any mosaic people like you who worked on mosaics in this area have much connection with any kind of a sculpture project? There were a few sculptors working down here. I understand there was a man named, let's see, Roy Zoland who did that...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, the one over in Carmel...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: In the park in Carmel.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But some of the artists - Patricia Cunningham said this afternoon that that had been begun by what was his name? He was on the Sculpture Project...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Scardigli

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Scardigli...Remo Scardigli.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, Remo...Remo.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Remo, that's right.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Scardigli.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Scardigli, I think. All I ever call him is Remo. Yes. The last I heard he was designing and making jewelry in Carmel. I don't know if he's still there or not.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Patricia said he'd gone to Mexico. I don't know how recently.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh!

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Roy Zoland also did a stair carving at the Beach Chalet in San Francisco. I was

wondering if you knew him or...?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, I think Roy lived over here in Pacific Grove, I'm pretty sure that's the Roy I knew. He carved mostly in redwood and it seems to me he did a wood carving of Father Serra, I believe, and it's in that little park in Carmel right across from the shopping plaza.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, that's his.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, that's it. Well, I remember when he was working; he lived two or three streets down here. We lived in the same area more or less. He was the only one that I knew very well of the sculptors. Roy was one. As I remember, Roy was mostly self-taught. And his work was interesting and it was evident that there was not too much academic training there but it was always in good taste, I thought, and I always enjoyed it because it wasn't too sophisticated. And he tried very hard.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Was he the same man that worked in redwood at the Fair?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: No, no, that was a man named Dudley Carter.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: That's Dudley Carter. Now Dud used to - he worked down at Carmel Valley - he lived down in Carmel Valley near the river there for a long time and he hewed things with his broad axe...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, he worked the same way at the Fair.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, I know; I sharpened his axe for him a couple of times. Man, he could shape with it all right, a beautiful axe.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It was wonderful to watch him working on this huge piece of redwood. He used tree spikes and he had a big safety belt around the thing and he was up there whacking away at it...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, Roy a...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He did marvelous work.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Very good. I know he used to take an axe and he used it just like a plane and just shave off very, very fine shaving. I don't remember that Dudley was ever on the Art Project. He might have been. I don't know. I haven't seen him. I didn't meet him until the late 30s, I think, until after I had left the Project.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Wasn't he on the Project?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I'm not sure, actually. He might have been. He was at Treasure Island, working there, but some of the Art in Action at Treasure Island was sponsored by the WPA and some of it was sponsored by different organizations and by the City, so that unless I'm able to contact him, I'm not really clear. You don't know where he is now, do you? He's not still here in Carmel?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. The last I heard he was in Alaska. That's been several years ago now; I don't know.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He's probably competing with the Indians on totems.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: It's probable.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: did you know a man - you must have known him - a painter named Armin Hansen.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh, yes, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He did the mural at the Sunset Grammar School in Carmel. I wonder if you can tell us anything about him.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, Armin Hansen, of course, was, - I believe he belonged to every society, painting society, in the United States and he's been honored in practically every country in the world, and they're still selling his paintings over in Carmel. Some of the galleries have them. Well, Armin was an academic Salvador Dali - is what I'd like to have said. He was of the old school, a very good mechanic and he was not like so many of today's painters, who buy a tube of paint without any idea of how the paint was made or what's in it. You know some paints you just can't - metallic paints and certain ground paints, earth paints and colors - you can't mix together. They'll last maybe ten years and then they're all gone. But Armin was of the old school. He ground his own colors and so some that I've seen are forty or fifty years old; and the greens and the blues are

just as vivid as when he first put them on there. There's not a crack in them. That's the only trouble with the young kids today. They have not studied enough. These paintings that they're painting, they should last for a hundred, two, three hundred years; but after five or six years, they start to crack or flake off. And we have so many synthetic colors today that you really have to be a chemist and a painter to know whether you can use them or mix them or not. Well, anyway, Armin was unquestionably the best painter that ever came to this area - who was in this area. That's my opinion. Then there was Ritual who was another outstanding artist. He died quite awhile ago.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Hansen was with the WPA though, as I understand it?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't know.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He did a mural in Carmel at the grammar school?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, I believe he did a mural for the Federal Art Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where was he from?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Hansen, I believe, was a New Englander. It was Maine? I know it was back East someplace.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He did a great deal of etching too, didn't he?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oh yes, he did beautiful etchings, etchings and dry points. His etchings are very good.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What kind of paintings did he do usually?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Marine mostly. I wouldn't say mostly, but at least he painted a lot in France and Brittany. He traveled a lot. I don't know, at one time of course, when I met him, he was fairly old then. He must have been seventy, late sixties I guess; and that was thirty years ago, and he's been dead quite a while. But some of the art galleries over in Carmel - I saw one a few months ago I wanted to buy, but it was four hundred dollars and I didn't have four hundred dollars to buy it. Otherwise I could have had it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember a painter in this area named Burton Boundey?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Boundey. Yes. Burton Boundey was a - he did mostly watercolors. It seems to me he was on the Art Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I have a record that he did a mural for the Pacific Grove High School.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, I believe so. Yes, Burton Boundey died here not too long ago. I don't know why; he was not so old. Tired, I guess. And he also, after the Project, or after that mural, he was an instructor with several night schools around here; taught life and watercolor. It doesn't seem to me that Boundey, as I recollect his paintings - there was not too much academic painting. Where he got it, where he went to school, I don't know, but they're a little staid and a little muddled, but he was a nice guy. Then we had a character out here, he may be still around here, who wore boots up to here. Now, I believe, he was on the Project too. He lived up in Pebble Beach. Not Joe Mora. Now Mora was more of a - was Joe Mora ever on...?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I don't have that name.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Now Joe might have been. I'm not sure about that. You might ask some other people. Joe M-o-r-a.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: M-o-r-a.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, Joe Mora. He might have been. Joe did mostly Western things, horses. And I think he did etchings too. Now this other fellow, what's his name - he's dead too. He did rather flamboyant sunsets and things. I don't know where he got it from. The sun was always going down. There was always lots of yellow and a few straggly cypress trees around. What was his name? It seems to me he was on the Project too. Otherwise I wouldn't have remembered his boots, his knee-length boots that he wore...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Not Howard Bobbs?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Were these laced boots he wore?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Laced boots. He was quite a character. I think he's dead now.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember Boundey's mural that was at the Pacific Grove High School? Do you remember if that was a fresco or did you have any contact with that at all?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't remember ever having seen it. I just knew that he had done it, that he was painting it. It seems to me that it was on canvas but I'm not sure. I believe it was on canvas; I'm not sure. I didn't think it was a fresco, but I could be mistaken.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It could have been on canvas. I really don't know. We were talking earlier about August Gay working on this large mural you did for the horse show. Did you ever see any work he did around here? Did he do any other murals?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. He worked with some - I believe at Sunset School, it seems to me that he and someone else were involved in some work in Sunset School in Carmel. Bruce would be, he would be a fountain of knowledge, he's - because most of those fellows have moved on. I can't think of anyone else now. Pat Cunningham, I just vaguely remember her and her husband, I don't think they were married then.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What kind of painting did August Gay do?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Oils, mostly oils.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oils.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: And they were landscapes of Carmel Valley. I can't remember this fellow's name. Gay was also a furniture finisher. He restored old furniture. He used to like to chop around the wood. It was interesting. If you do talk to Bruce, he'll remember this character that wore the high boots, high boots and it seemed to me, a mounted policeman's hat; you know, the four deals pinched in the top of it, you know, that straight brim...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh yes, that was like an Army hat.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: ...not a curled up brim but a straight one with those four - it was more like the Canadian Mounties wore. It wasn't too high and it had the four pinched things that just went straight around. He wore it straight on his head. He was a small man. He wasn't very big. I can't remember his name.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember a woman from this area that was on the Project named Henrietta Shore? She must - might have done a mural at Pacific Grove in the Post Office.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: The name is familiar but I don't remember...Oh! Oh yes! That's right, she did. Henrietta Shore, yes. Yes, it's still down there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: In the Post Office here?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, in Pacific Grove. I'm pretty sure.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: She died just recently.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Now there's another gal over in Monterey who did a lot of all the public buildings in Monterey. I believe she worked for the Project. She did nothing but draw, do all the old historical buildings - the County Court House...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Suzanne Scheuer?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: No. She did all of those. She's also dead. We're really going back - you don't have any live ones! No, I don't remember her name but if you're ever in the City Hall over there, in the Tax Department, they're hanging all over the walls in there; of all the old buildings, the whaling station and the first house - wooden house. I don't know. They're interesting. The House of the Four Winds - she did all those. So it must have been for the Project, otherwise they wouldn't be there. I'm pretty sure she was on the Federal Art Project. I don't remember. I can't recall her name now. It's been a long time ago. She's been dead for twenty years, isn't it?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: About how many people were on the Project when you were on it here in this area, do you remember? Thirty or so?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Around - between twenty and thirty, somewhere around there. Since we worked mostly in the office, there were quite a number of them we didn't meet. They were working at home, or out in

the field someplace.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What kind of effect do you think being on the WPA Art Project had on your career as an artist?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, excuse me. Honey, do you remember the name of the artist who lived up in Pebble Beach who wore the boots up to here, laced boots, and a square sort of hat and did those horrible sunset pictures...

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Ferdinand Bergdorf.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Ferdinand Bergdorf.

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think he's still alive, isn't he?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't think so. And what was the name of the woman who painted all the paintings over at Monterey of the whaling station, and the House of the Four Winds...? It wasn't Payno...

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I don't remember.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: You remember the paintings?

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes, yes...

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I know I was over in the Building Inspector's Office the other day; I've forgotten which one it was, just one I happened to see. I can't recall her name...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: They're probably signed. I should go and take a look. Usually, they're signed somewhere either at the bottom or in the mural.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes.

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: It's a very well known name. We should remember it.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Her name?

MRS. VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Yes. Well known locally.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I can't remember it....Could I freshen your drink for you?

[BREAK]

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I've just been asking you, Vic, what sort of an influence you thought that the WPA project and your year on the Project had on your career as an artist.

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, I think it was very enlightening. I met so many people who were working in different mediums and they gave me a deeper appreciation of art; and I think that what little work that I may have done, that is lasting some place in some obscure schoolhouse some place will - may not be remembered by very many people, but at least it is evidence of work that was done by the government or helped to be completed by the government. And we did provide, for a lot of people, some enjoyment, and I believe a lot of the children appreciated the works that we did. I know one particular school in Monterey - or New Monterey, I believe it is - a small mosaic that we did over there and the children still remember it, and it seems then to be of interest, and I think that it has given me a better appreciation of what art can mean to young people; and I think that, particularly for the grade school children, that it works a good influence on them and whether it's subconscious or not - nevertheless - I believe they carry on with them the remembrance of things that were particularly nice in school; and I think if the Art Project contributed that much for me, then it also did that much for others of the generation behind me. It did a great deal for me. It gave me a great appreciation for all types of art because we met so many different people, not just mosaic people, but I mean muralists, and portrait painters, and landscape painters, and oil painters, and water color painters, and etchers and dry point people; and so it did that for me. Whether the government benefited from it, in that respect, I don't know. But it certainly did a lot for me.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But after the WPA Art Project, you didn't continue mosaics?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well, I'm still doing them now, but much smaller. I only do them on assignment now for some people that know that I have done them. And when I say on assignment, probably in five years I've done four very small ones. But I still have the desire to do them, but I'm not pursuing that so much now since

most of my work now is in the designing of houses and commercial buildings, so I've gone from the particular art of mosaic work more into construction work. But it's still designing and mosaics still are an important part of the building industry - the design of even commercial buildings. You see so many of them today that have mosaics in them. So I still think there's a possibility I might continue on and I certainly added to my knowledge; and whenever I get the opportunity to try and sell somebody the addition of a mosaic, why I certainly try to do that. But it isn't always successful.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government to sponsor art again in the United States?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: I think so. I think it's probably one of the finest things that the government could do. I think that today in the public schools, there are few pretty things for them to look at. And I think paintings and mosaics and handwork, handcraft of any kind - once the children appreciate the fact the such beauty can be made by hands - it gets them a little bit interested, more interested than in going out and running around and seeing what they can do with their feet in the way of a swim or the watusi or something similar to that. In my own home, you notice on the walls, those are prints and the dates on those are 1439; and to me those are exquisite. They were done in some monastery in Italy. But I was taught appreciation of those things as a young boy at home and I think, a school is for so many children a different kind of home; and I think if the younger people of today had the same opportunity as I had to study art and to be subsidized by the government, then I couldn't think of a more worthy project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you have any other general comments to make about the WPA period?

VICTOR MANTILLA CHALELA: Well I think of course, politically speaking, it had to happen. I mean, something had to happen at that time because then it was a question of there not being any work; being unable to support yourself. There was no money. No work available of any kind; and the government was trying, in every way that it could, to help you make a living. Now, I don't think that good things like that should stop just because it is now possible for you to find work. Certainly, I'm sorry that I can't continue painting. I know a lot of other artists who can't continue. They can make a better living doing something else. But all their talents are being wasted; whereas the government could save so many of these talents and give them to the children to study and to learn and to become acquainted with. It seems a shame because the older men, the older artists have so much that they can teach the younger artists, but there's no place for the younger men to meet the older men. We're just completely shut off. Now, if there were projects being, work made available by the government and where the older people could go in just - not necessarily to advise - but more or less - not necessarily to criticize either - but to try and understand the ideas of the younger people, I think possibly, that's one reason we're having so much trouble. There's no way for us of my generation, at least, to talk to the young teenagers of today. There's no common basis to talk to them. I have so many friends of mine who are teenagers. It's a difficult thing to talk to them. There's no common base, ground, where you can reach them. And I think, if in the beginning they can be taught the niceties of the things; the value and the beauty of art and can see it and be surrounded by it in the schools, I think that would do so much good and it would certainly be a step in the right direction. And I do believe that it's a shame that the government does not help or do what they did back there when they had the Federal Art Project. I think, it was one of the finest projects that was ever made available. It's no longer - I don't need it any longer but I would certainly like to see other people have the same advantage that I had.

END OF INTERVIEW

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