



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Jerome Caja, 1995  
August 23 and September 29

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Jerome Caja on August 23 and September 29, 1995. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

SESSION 1  
TAPE 1, SIDE A

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with the artist Jerome Caja in his apartment on Haight Street, San Francisco, California. The date is August 23, 1995. This is the first session of the interview, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape 1, side A. Well, here we go, Jerome. We have the beginning of your papers in the Archives, so your career to a certain extent is going to be documented in the research collections of the Smithsonian. But that, of course, ends up telling a story that's in a way more public, with photographs and some clippings, and tells a bio CB, I guess, tells something about your involvement with radio, rather television, and that's all part of the story. But it doesn't tell the complete story. The purpose of an interview like this oral history is to try to get at something more private and more essential, to round that out, and that's why I am here today. You indirectly, or through Anna, your good friend Anna, who is a key player in all of this, were in touch with the Archives something over a year and a half ago. And it seems to me that there was a reason for that. And before we move on, it's something that I would like to touch on, or to make clear, as we move into the interview, that you earlier were talking about your own understanding of mortality, an issue that you have faced and dealt with. The fact is you are sick and I guess at that time were and probably, although I should let you say it rather than my saying it, there was an awareness that there were these things that, this story you had---

JEROME CAJA: I've always been a frail, sick man. I've always been thin and delicate and weak, so I've always had a sense that life was fragile and that is especially clear in my work. The sickness now, whether it's AIDS or whatever it is, I happen to have AIDS. All illnesses have the same kind of demoralizing and crippling effect. Like now I have a-- I don't know if I'm so much dying from AIDS as I am dying from the medicines they're giving me to keep something alive. I don't know. I have CMV retinitis, so I'm going blind, and the treatment for that is [parsecarnid?] Now the [parsecarnid?] has given me pancreaticis and I have wasting syndrome, and wasting syndrome means that I need to eat as much as I can and the treatment for pancreaticis is not to eat at all. So I don't have a problem of losing sight; that kind of thing doesn't traumatize me. The problem I have is with the physical discomfort and pain when it's constant. If I was in pain once in a while I can handle that, but when you're in pain all the time, you become very irritable, and that's what I don't like. I think that going blind, I can still paint because I still can create what I want to see. And I'm not sure, but I think it's interesting to look through drawings I've done from when I was in good health to when my eyesight has gone, to see how that change is. Now I've gone and done that with some of my friends, but they haven't noticed any change. [laughs] So I don't know how to work that theory out, because it doesn't seem to be working. But I figured that I probably don't have a problem because I'm creating, and of course, I'm going to create what I can see, so my work will lend itself to being seen, where as opposed to taking something that was already created and trying to see that, like I'm looking at a photograph or a writing or something. When you're looking at that you don't have that control, so you have to conform, and if you can't see it clearly, well then, it's not so easy to conform. I know I'm adjusting, I'm learning how to live without sight. So there are certain things people take for granted, or that I used to take for granted, that I can no longer do, like I have to look at the steps when I go down the steps. I have to do things like rely on my memory. If I can see the shape of a person, OK, I know it's a person. I don't need to see the detail.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You know who it is?

JEROME CAJA: No, not unless they have a very unique body movement. See, there's certain things, like there's some people I can know just by the way they move. I have a friend, Michael Blue, who I can tell it's him across the street just because the way he moves is so ingrained in my mind.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm going to describe where we are. We're in your parlor, your sitting room, and I have to take a minute to describe this, I hope to get some photographs because it's one of the most extraordinary---

JEROME CAJA: I had someone come and photograph the entire house.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Good, good. Will copies come with your papers, I hope?

JEROME CAJA: Yes. That's why I had them do it. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it's really one of the most extraordinary settings with your work, and sometimes it's actually difficult to tell what are things that intrigue you or delight you and you then set around and which things are the works. But you're sitting in here on a sofa, and earlier you had your feet up and you reminded me very much of Odalisque which, I suppose, you wouldn't mind that. And we're sitting doing this tape and I'm about, probably about six feet or eight feet from you.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, you're not that far.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: About five feet, if I lean back it's six. But would you recognize me from this distance?

JEROME CAJA: It's hard to say because I already know your voice.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: My voice is a give-away?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, the voice is a give-away and even though I can't really see the detail, if I have the slightest clue I will probably guess. That doesn't mean I can see it though. It just means that I'm taking the other factors and allowing them to dictate to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you know, you're an artist and this story will all unfold as we talk. You're a trained artist. You attended the [San Francisco] Art Institute and had other art training. Somebody who operates very much in the world of sight and vision.

JEROME CAJA: Well, actually though my early training is very tactual.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really?

JEROME CAJA: I did ceramic sculpture. Now I've always painted and I've always drawn, but when I was in school I concentrated on mostly ceramic sculpture, which is very tactual. I think my tactual senses are probably much stronger than my visual senses, not that they're not strong, but those, tact and then vision. Audio, I'm not very good in that area, I must say. But oral, I'm very good. I think that comes from having come from a large family, where you have to compete, where, if you can't physically beat someone up, 'cause they're all boys, ten brothers, then you have to learn how to use your tongue like a knife. You have to learn to have a sharp tongue.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mentioned that you went just this week, I think, with your family that were visiting. Your parents, is that right?

JEROME CAJA: My parents and two of my brothers came.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And they came out and you did go to the new Museum of Modern Art, here. How did you find that?

JEROME CAJA: You know, I can't go to that museum and not be thrilled. I must say, they had some of the most wonderful things and a wonderful building. It's a thrill. It's kind of interesting to see what I can see and what I can't see any longer. Because some of the things I remember, so you go back this time and it's like you can't even see it. It's amazing, too, the things that I can see. Like I know the room where the, oh, I can't ever remember names, [pause] Bruce Connor's work, there's a black painting that looks like tar and feathers and that I could see perfectly.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Even though it's very, very dark.

JEROME CAJA: Even though it's all one tone. And I couldn't understand that because I was looking at some of the monochromatic white paintings and couldn't see a thing, couldn't see a thing. And some of the photographs that are real low contrast, couldn't see a thing. But in some ways it does make it a little easier because now I don't have to stress out about what I can see. I just walk around and if I see something I go look at it. [laughs] If I can't see I don't bother. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, there's something to say to that.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, the only thing I regret not being able to look at, see well, is the Bruce Conner piece, the big one with the stockings and the photographs. I think that's one of my favorite pieces in that museum. There's a piece that's so fragile and so delicate. I really do love fragility, it's a beautiful, beautiful thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you identify then with fragility? We started this interview you said that you were a fragile child.

JEROME CAJA: I most certainly do.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so it has for you an esthetic, as well as a physical descriptive quality?

JEROME CAJA: And a personality trait. I can be, not that I can't break and still go on, but I have a fragility, although I think, I don't really have a fragile personality. My personality is pretty strong, but my body is fragile. I am a hard-driven person, but my body is just not able to keep up. That's what's fragile to me. It's always been fragile, so I've always had this sense of gloomy, doomy, you know, even before I was sick. And we knew, my friends and I knew, that when I was sick they were going to try and associate my artwork with the disease. It was kind of irritating because before I had the disease I was doing the same type of thing. It's not that I'm ashamed of the disease, it's just that I think the suffering and pain that I'm portraying in my work is more than just my pain. It's the pain everyone goes through when they reach a certain point in their life that it becomes overwhelming, 'cause everyone has to go through that crap. You don't have to have a special disease. The only way you can avoid it is an accident. If you get run over by a car, you can probably avoid a lot of the hassle.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: True. It's probably the neatest exit.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you think that, here I'm sort of groping, I have several ideas going around in my head. When were you diagnosed?

JEROME CAJA: I always knew I was positive for a long time before I was even tested. Because I remember having sex with men when it was called "Gay Cancer." I was reassured it wasn't contagious. And that was for years, and that's when I first came out, which was when I was most promiscuous. And so when I did get tested, which was probably, oh god, that's a hard thing for me to remember, I would say maybe six years ago, maybe six years ago, but I really can't honestly say I could tell. And when I got tested they were upset. Well, I got tested in Cleveland, and then they called me with the results and they were rather upset because they said I'm too healthy to be positive, so they think there might have been a mistake. And I said, "Listen, you didn't make a mistake, I'm already quite aware. I'm not surprised." So then I was positive for probably about, oh, I think I started getting really sick, in fact, I really didn't start getting sick until I came back from Thailand and saw a doctor. He asked me if I was seeing anyone and I said "No." And he was very upset about that. Of course, then when I started seeing him, he started giving me drugs and is when I started to get sick. The drugs they give are really bad.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When was that? When did you start seeing a doctor and getting drugs?

JEROME CAJA: Well, right after I got back from Thailand, so maybe three years ago. I have it in one of those photo album. It should be dated, but I can't remember. I think about three years ago.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me ask another question related to this. It's not my intention to dwell on this for the whole segment.

JEROME CAJA: No problem.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But when you recognized, you said you recognized that you, you assumed you were positive?

JEROME CAJA: I assumed I was positive because of the activity that I enjoy. I liked getting fucked.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you think the one came with the other basically? It was inevitable that the one then naturally followed from the other.

JEROME CAJA: That's the most common way it's transmitted and that was my favorite form of sex. And since I was not stingy with sex--- [laughs] The other problem is the social settings, too, like in Cleveland. Cleveland is a very cliquish place, so I didn't even meet anybody from Cleveland for five years after coming out of the closet. So the people I met were all travelers and visitors, which also increases the risk.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So, in your mind, this was inevitable, it was really in the cards because of the ...

JEROME CAJA: I think I have a pretty fatalist mentality. I think that whatever's going to happen is going to happen and you do the best with what you have. This is one form of death I could get, not cerebral palsy, but Parkinson's disease at any time it kicks in and totally devastates. They're all different types of those things. This one is the one that I got.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you don't feel particularly singled out? You've accepted it?

JEROME CAJA: No, I don't. I think that's a bad way of looking at disease because I don't think anybody is really

singled out. Maybe they've made some bad choices and decisions, but that's a learning process. You can not expect people to just know things. If there's no communication or talking about things, then there's no learning. And if there's no learning, then things perpetuate, which doesn't mean it's that person's fault. They simply don't have access to the information or they don't understand what information they have access to.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Or don't believe it.

JEROME CAJA: Well, that's part of the value of information. I could see the difficulty in believing things that come from certain organizations.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why they go counter to what you want to do. It seems to interfere with ...

JEROME CAJA: Well, yes, that's kind of a selfish view though. And people are selfish, that's part of human nature.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When you discovered that you actually were sick, you had AIDS, did your self-conception change in any way, your self-conception as an artist?

JEROME CAJA: No.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No change at all about that?

JEROME CAJA: Because I was already dealing with mortality and the sickness and that sort of thing. I don't think so, now maybe there is. Like everything, it may be something I haven't seen yet. That's one of the reasons I like to have my paintings around is because some things I'm blind to for a long time, then all of a sudden I understand. And then I learn from the painting and then I move on.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel this is still happening, even though it's difficult for you to see that clearly?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, of course. I'm still seeing it, but maybe not as clearly as you're seeing it, but I still am seeing it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You're probably understanding it better now.

JEROME CAJA: I'm understanding it and I'm narrowing it down. I'm seeing what is clear, done clearly. And those things which are not done clearly I'm not seeing, you know, so in that way they've been clarified, I guess. But also, I'm seeing them in a different way, softer way, perhaps. The color is much more important. I've noticed I've been adding white to my colors because it brings more light to the paint, which makes it easier to see. And I think, also, I've been doing more contrast, more dark, dark black and white, white, white.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It sounds to me that then too this process is increasing insight into your own work, possibly. And then you said something earlier---

JEROME CAJA: I think maybe if you're functioning properly everything seems to bring increase to your insight. I can't imagine anything would not, unless I think that would be a sign that you're just being overwhelmed, you know. Because, when I'm delirious I'm overwhelmed, so I'm not benefitting from anything.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But your senses, your sense of sight, are definitely affected here?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, definitely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It sounds to me as if what you said earlier that memory is playing more and more a role in how you see---

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I must say.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And I think that's a very interesting observation because that is quite different than just responding optically---

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: ---to a surface, to shapes and forms and then it's filtered through memory. One would expect that it would open different doors, let's say, into perception. And it's for you to say, not for me, but this is what struck me as very much possibility in what sounds like, in some respect, as a new relationship to your work, through this process. It's a side product of a symptom of your disease, which if you want to get philosophical about it, in some respects, you could say, this is a positive result.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, yes. I believe that from any situation you can derive positive things. I don't think that, even though some things you can derive positive things from, are necessarily worthwhile to go through. You can be beat and raped and from that you can get a lot of positive things, but I think you can get those positive things in a little less traumatic of a way, [laughs] or maybe not. Maybe only through trauma can you get certain sensitivities, and certain, you know, things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, if seeing the details of your own work of art is becoming more difficult, there isn't the same kind of clarity.

JEROME CAJA: Right, I have to look at other things within that work.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So, I'm wondering if one of them isn't the content of the subject, the symbolism, what these things represent, not exactly the way they're realized or drawn in or painted. You work, I should mention, you generally work very small.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This should be known because we're talking about vision, and one would think it would be absolutely requisite, because you work so tiny.

JEROME CAJA: Bottle caps.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But given a decreased power in clearly seeing, there being perhaps, to work quite as minutely as you did before, does your attention or concern turn more to the "meaning" of these works?

JEROME CAJA: No, because when I work, I have a working behavior and it's even less intellectual thought; it's more habitual. It's something that I just do. I just go into it and just do it. Usually I'm telling a story and playing and chatting with myself. 'Cause that's what my painting is, it's me talking to myself, telling jokes, or making a statement, or losing my temper, or whatever. Usually that's what I'm doing, when I'm painting, I'm talking to myself, I'm having a private conversation.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So these works really are a rather direct expression or state of mind, your temper, your concerns, your interests, maybe being interrupted and having your thinking shifted a different way and that would show up in the ---

JEROME CAJA: Oh, yes. Well, the thing with working on the small things that is beneficial is that if my emotional state changes I can easily work on something else. I'm not wed to a piece that I have to finish it before I start something new. So if I lose interest in it, I can simply put it aside and pick something else up. Usually I start, just lately, because lately I've been working in this room here. Now I have paint in another room, and when I feel well enough, I work in there. I have a much bigger range of color and paint in there. Here I'm limited; I have black, white and a few color things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is the light better here or is it just more comfortable?

JEROME CAJA: No, it's just that I get a lot of cramping and a lot of times I just have to lay [sic] down. When I have to lay down, I can't get up and go into another room. I have to lay down. So if I'm working on the sofa, I could put up my legs and lay down and put things on the floor. It's not a problem.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it's very practical consideration---

JEROME CAJA: It is, I'm a very practical man, despite what it looks like. I try to convince my parents I have common sense, and now I know the mistake I made. It's not common sense, I'm practical. I'm very practical. So, I forgot where I was going.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you were talking about the connection between---

JEROME CAJA: Where I was working?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where you were working, but you were saying working on the smaller things. Another thing you were saying then, that if there was a shift in interest, you could move from one thing to another ---

JEROME CAJA: OK. So what I usually do is, [pause] is I usually start by looking at what I did the night before. If there's anything I see in those that I missed or could go further with, then I pull it aside. After that, then I look through, sometimes I look through different envelopes. I have a whole pile of graded envelopes, things that I have interest in going down, like things I have least interest in and things I have more I would like to see finished. But, then sometimes, I like to make new things. I get these urges where I just want to make new things. And so then I just go through envelopes of materials and I look through the different types of papers and

see which kind of paper I would like to try with, you know, play with. And I pull those out, I just make new things. In that splurge of making new things, some of the things are finished, some of the things need more help, and some of the things need a lot more help. And so then they get put in their proper envelopes with the other ones like that. And I work on them until I feel they're good enough to be framed and then they go in the envelope with things to be framed. I must say, I am not an avid framer though, because it requires a lot of busy work, and I feel I have a strong urge to make as many paintings as I can while I can see.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You go around and collect frames, don't you? I think I remember that.

JEROME CAJA: I used to, yes, but lately I've tried. I'm not a good shopper, I don't like to go shopping, so I have frame slaves, boys that I tell what, who understand what kind of things I like---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: About the size you need. Do you do works to fit into existing frames?

JEROME CAJA: You can't do that. You are a slave to the object, because I had these five popes over the hallway, identical size, and I for years was looking for five identically sized. I didn't care if they looked alike but they had to be the same size. Could not find it, but I did have five frames that were the same size, so I ended up having to cut the painting down, which I always hate doing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [laughs]

JEROME CAJA: Although I must say, there was one time when--- I have a really bad temper, I don't lose my temper very often, but when I do, I'm unreasonable. This one night I was painting and every single time I put that brush on that painting, I made a bigger mess and I just got to this crescendo where I was furious, so I took a scissors and cut that painting into a ton of pieces and from that I got a beautiful painting. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sometimes it works.

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I was pretty shocked. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel then, that there's a strong component of real emotion that underlies your work?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I think emotion is something that is undeniably in control. I don't think you could, I think emotion is very strong part of what I do.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SESSION 1  
TAPE 1, SIDE B

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: An interview with Jerome Caja. This tape 1, side B, Session 1, on August 23, 1995. Jerome, we were working backwards, in a sense. We began with right now, which I think is a fine light to proceed and acknowledge the fact that you are ill, you have AIDS. This not a major factor. You believe in your work, that your work has a certain continuity, that predated any kind of illness and we talked about that and how you are able to work now. I want to ask one or two other questions related to this before we ditch that subject and jump way back into the past. We all have a limited time to live and I guess one of the hardest things, this is what I would assume from watching my parents die, I know this is true. Although we all have to go until we are diagnosed with something as terminal, it's ambiguous, it's somewhere off in the distance or not too distant future. With a diagnosed disease that's terminal that becomes a different story. You're working in a situation where time is very important and what's relevant to this discussion is your attitude towards that in connection with your work. Do you feel a greater urgency to paint, to decorate?

JEROME CAJA: Definitely. You know the thing that I'm doing which is probably not a good idea is that every time I'm well enough to work, I hit that slave whip again and I push myself much harder than I should, because I want to get as much done as I can while I can do it. So every minute I can do something, I want to do as much as I can, especially in painting. Now the framing I could easily go by and not be concerned with that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because someone else could frame them.

JEROME CAJA: Someone else could frame them and they'd probably do a much better job. I'm not that kind of technical person. It's not that I'm not technically proficient, it's I don't have the quality of tapes and glues and things like that. Yes, I think it's a big pusher around now.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How much are you able to work now, under the circumstances?

JEROME CAJA: It hasn't been consistent, so it's hard for me to give you a general term. What happens usually is

for a week I'm doing well. When I'm doing well, I'm able to do a lot. I have good working habits and I'm extremely, what is that called when you're absorbing your work?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Focused.

JEROME CAJA: Focused, yeah. I could paint for ten, twelve, thirteen hours without doing, considering anything else.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really!

JEROME CAJA: No problem. If I'm feeling well.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Even on these little, small things that seem so painstaking.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. No, because they're not, that's just the way that I work. I did big paintings, it would be the same but it would be on these big exhausting things. Once you find your area of expertise, you're comfortable there and it's not work. It's not like doing work. For me it's pleasure, it's excitement, it's exploration, playing, so, of course I can do that for as long as I don't have to go to the bathroom. Even than I usually push it to the [laughs] where I run into that bathroom.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you ---

JEROME CAJA: I don't know, I think that this year has been particularly difficult; I've been really physically ill a lot.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mean this year of '95?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. Most difficult year so far. See the disease, what happens it comes in waves, you get sick, you get better, you get sick, you get better. It gets worse, you get better for a less amount of time, it gets worse. So it's that kind of a progression. So like what happens, I've noticed is that almost every month, I have a night of insomnia, and that usually comes after I've been feeling well, and after I have that night of insomnia, I need a week or two to recuperate. I wear out. I just can't go without a day of sleep. It just wears me down too much. So that means maybe once a week or month I'm able to work now. Of course, this month haven't done a thing. Mainly because, not because I haven't been feeling OK sometimes, but because I've had a lot out-of-town company.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A lot of people are visiting.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. So I really, I mean, when I went to school I had no problem working in front of people and stuff, but as I acquired personal privacy, I've become more dependent on it. I'm no longer comfortable working with people in the house. I'm much more to become distracted. Now there are a couple people who I can do that with.

PAUL KARLSTROM;Whom might they be?

JEROME CAJA: Jeffrey, my friend Jeffrey. He can be in the house and I can still work, because I know he can entertain himself and he's like family. So that's fine.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Anna, when she visits?

JEROME CAJA: Well when she visits---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Probably you're too busy doing stuff.

JEROME CAJA: Problem is I want to spend time with her. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She's distracting.

JEROME CAJA: She's distracting, but not in a bad way. Like my family when they came. I want to spend time with them, so it's not a bad distraction.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this and we're going to talk eventually quite a bit, I think, or certainly something about your family. Do you see them often, or is this more an acknowledgment on their part, the recent visit, that we better get a visit in?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I kind of let them know that. But, you know, I have a big family and the last thing I would do is try to demand their attention. I have ten brothers and most of them, all but two of them, live in the Cleveland area, and they all have children and all those children want to have their grandmas, too. It would be selfish of



me to, if I would ask them to come, they would come at the drop of a hat. But I think that would be very selfish, seeing that much more people would benefit from them if they stayed in Cleveland. Plus, it's not good for them to come, they don't like it here, they get too nervous. They're not accustomed to city living. That kind of stress is not good for them or for me. I think it's better for everyone involved if they don't come.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Aside from the fact you have AIDS, how does your family deal with you anyway, one you're an artist, two, you're a gay artist?

JEROME CAJA: I don't think that they really deal with the gay part. I don't think, I mean, I remember the last time I was home, one of my brothers wasn't returning his girlfriend's car, and I said, "Maybe he needs to find a boyfriend." My mom said, "One single son is enough." [laughs] So I think that's the way she deals with it. It's not that, they just don't understand, you know. And I don't expect them to; they have no way of understanding. They're Catholic and when it comes to what the priest says, that's it. Don't question the clergy. So, they just don't know, and they don't have the tools to deal with it properly, but at the same time it's not an issue.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So this hasn't in anyway alienated you, as they call it, your lifestyle; your career has not alienated you from your family?

JEROME CAJA: No, definitely not.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's good.

JEROME CAJA: I have a good family.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. That's not always the case

JEROME CAJA: I'm quite aware, almost rarely it's the case, and I'm quite aware of that. My parents are the best parents you could ask for, all my brothers, too.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They support you basically.

JEROME CAJA: Well, yeah, in the ways that they can. My one brother, Ed, he loves my things. He's always trying to get things from me, and the bad thing is that he really has good taste, so he tries for...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You can't sort of foist off the dogs.

JEROME CAJA: My thing, I think sometimes, I'm more concerned with the future of the work than what he has. Of course I want him to have whatever memories he can, or things that he can hold on to, but his wife doesn't let him put them up in the house. So they have to sit in the garage and that kind of ruins any future thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's too bad.

JEROME CAJA: That's too bad, but that might change. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You'll have to acknowledge giving your subjects which are quite... some of them fairly extreme---

JEROME CAJA: No! I understand completely; I have no problem with her at all. She's great. I think she's a wonderful woman and she's a good wife to him. I have no problem with that. The problem I have is that he likes such nice ones. It would be a little easier for me to give him whatever he wanted if he didn't want such nice things. [laughs] 'Cause some things, I think, more people could learn from, but no one's going to learn from something they don't have exposure to.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's true.

JEROME CAJA: And although that might be a good treasure for him, if you have something that's a good learning tool, you should use it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Besides, it's a important that these things be shared. I mean, you make them presumable and not all artists are interested in having their works seen widely, but I suspect that part of your pleasure of your work is a response.

JEROME CAJA: No, not really. No, I don't work with that in mind. I know that the interesting thing with me and Charles, my friend that I used to paint with, that I painted with his ashes. His portraiture was that. For him the most important thing was to share, was to share the experiences he was going through and that has not been my case at all. I am perfectly happy to just surround myself with these images. Now I like sharing. I enjoy it. I've done ..., but it's not a major driver. I think a major driver for me is, I'm just more selfish a person, I like to play

and art is play for me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you don't care about the audience, whether it's one person or two or ten or a hundred, it's not necessary to your process?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I think that's the wrong thing-- It's not necessary to my process, that's correct. And it's not that I don't care; it's that it is not a major driver. Of course, I want to share and I want people, but it doesn't matter who it is. Anyone who enjoys it that's good enough. Now I don't want to force my opinion on anybody. I'll share with whoever wants to share. Whoever wants to look, that's fine, but I don't want to say, "Look at this." I let them make that decision.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I want to make sure I get this right, now that we get this right. Do you feel that first and foremost you are making art for yourself? It's a dialogue with yourself?

JEROME CAJA: Yes. I think first and foremost my art is the way that I communicate with myself. 'Cause you can't communicate with someone else until you know what you're saying. That's the first step. You have to know yourself and know who you are. And that is the way I clarify those confusions in my mind. It's almost like form of thinking, a more physical form of thinking. Well, I guess Zola's right.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK, well, that's certainly not unique and then let the chips fall where they may in terms of how people respond, who responds and that's reasonable enough. But on the other hand you do seem concerned about some sort of, your work continuing after you're gone.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, yes, definitely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What are your hopes for that? What form does that take? What do you expect? What would you like to see happen?

JEROME CAJA: I would like to see people. I would like to have it accessible to everyone. I think one of the hardest things I have to do with the art world around here is that really the art world is pretty much geared toward the wealthy you know, people who are highly educated or wealthy. I would like to see the work accessible to everyone. I really think that's important to me, only in the sense because the people that it will affect may benefit from it are in all those realms. I like to make people laugh; that's my favorite thing. If I can make people laugh, then I'm happy. So that's why I have such a humorous streak in the work. They call it black humor. 'Cause I'm still a pessimist, but I am a joker, too. I like jokes; I like laughing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Some people would say that these jokes are dirty jokes. [laughs]

JEROME CAJA: Oh, definitely. [laughs] I like dirty jokes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Ryeball humor, I guess that's what they called it.

JEROME CAJA: Yes, Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There're so many issues around this. Fortunately we're going to have time to glide around into them, but even though some of this may seem premature and out-of-order as the thoughts come, as the questions come I'd like to ask them.

JEROME CAJA: Please do.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You are part of a gay community in San Francisco and there is a sub-set within that, it's the gay art community. I've never thought too much about that interestingly enough, it's not something that I've really considered. Could you describe within the art community, a gay artist community? Is there such a thing that mutually re-enforces, or is this a construct that's ghettoizing.

JEROME CAJA: It's one of those things that so --- It's ghettoizing and it's all those bad things it is. It's just one of those things isn't as easily ghettoized. You know, there're gay artists, I know a lot of them. They're very supportive, but at the same time it's not a community sense that I ever see them or that I have great exchange with them. When I do see them it's always very pleasant, but they're not, I don't think, I have any artists who are personal friends. But it doesn't mean that I don't hold them in high regard with other gay artist people. There are a lot, there are a lot of gay artists.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Are they primarily though---

JEROME CAJA: They're as different as the artist is different. No, as different as the art they make. There's Michael Brown who did that lamp. He designs water fountains and falls, and things like that, very clean, very minimal, very beautiful. Then there's Mayland Blake, who does very esoteric, very thought orientated work, provokes

thought and thinking; the story behind it is what's most important. So you have to read and things like that, although they're pretty overwhelming just to look at. And then there's, I know, I love photographers, all of them a lot of good photographers. I must say I have a weakness for photography. I collect photographs. I've been fortunate to meet a lot of good photographers. So each, depending on what the artist is involved in, I mean, of course, I think elements of their homosexuality will be in their work. I don't believe that you can successfully eradicate yourself from your work. I know people who try. I know people whose whole goal in life is to make something that has nothing to do with them. Why they would do that I don't know. I do know people like that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They must not like themselves or find themselves interesting.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. To be honest with you I can't understand that, really; that's not something that I'm capable of comprehending. Like why bother?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This is important. I want to really make sure again that we have this right and that is this issue of a specifically gay art community within in the art community.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. Then you're thinking of a specific gay community. Of course, they have that, but it is the most uncohesive. I mean, that's community that's really pushing it up, really pushing it. Because you have people from each extreme, you have extreme liberal, extreme conservatives, you have people who can't sit in the same room together. But they are part of this gay community. It becomes really evident in the drag world, because a lot of homosexuals hate drag queens and it's because the drag queens are the ones who get all the attention. So when people think of homosexuals they think of these extreme nut cases and they get stereotyped into that and they resent that. 'Course I don't understand that. If you want attention, you get it. That's the nature of attention. You can't expect to get attention and be nothing to be looking at. Not everyone wants attention and I can understand that, but that kind of sour grapes thing, I don't go for that. So you're just trying to organize things and it's OK as long as you realize that no one is going to stay in that boundary. Sure you might be a gay artist in a gay artist community, but that doesn't mean that's the only community and only thing you're a part of, and it doesn't mean you're a part of it. You just happen to fill all those requirements, but you may not necessarily do the things that are usually associated with community. Now I have benefitted a lot from the gay artists community.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How's that?

JEROME CAJA: My whole career. I am not a self-promoter. I have never asked to show anywhere. I have never given my slides to anybody, but gay people and people in the gay community, especially the gay art community, have promoted and pushed my work to the point where it's at now. Every show I've gotten because of word-of-mouth and it's usually from other gay artists who adore my work and want to see me become successful. So everything, all my success is because of someone else. In the social sense, in the drag sense, every performance I ever did was because someone else organized it. I would never assume that people would come to see me. I would never assume that I had those talents and abilities. Now, of course, I have learned in the time that I did have those talents and abilities, but it's not something that I ever assumed I had and never thought I had. I grew up with an extremely low self-image. I grew up being different. It was just no way around it. No one in my family was like me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you put it to work for yourself finally.

JEROME CAJA: Yes, yes. Well, once I became an adult and moved on my own and grew up, life has been a great big pleasure ball. It's not stopped forming. The problem comes when I don't have control. [laughs] I have a great desire for control.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, some of the rest of us do, too.

JEROME CAJA: Well, I think it's a good thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Rather than trying to force you to make a generalization, which is always a nasty thing to do to anybody, but in your own case, do you feel, as an artist, more identification with the broader art community, with being an artist, with art itself, than with the fact that you happen to be a gay man?.

JEROME CAJA: That's a difficult one.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Or is it possible --

JEROME CAJA: Could you say that again?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel more identified with your career as an artist. Is being an artist the more essential you or your homosexuality, being a gay man or your sexuality?

JEROME CAJA: To be honest with you both, the same.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There're both the same.

JEROME CAJA: I just can't separate my personality from my body.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you would identify with both groups equally?

JEROME CAJA: I identify with both groups; I would have to I guess. I never thought of it like that, because I tend to be a loner not wanting to identify with any group.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Un huh. See I'm asking this question, and this is groping a little bit, excuse me, because there are many artists, primarily straight, heterosexual artists for whom their identity as an artist, their making art primary, it determines them, it's their concept of themselves, beyond their sexuality.

JEROME CAJA: Oh see, I don't think that's true. I don't think that's true at all.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, I do.

JEROME CAJA: Do you?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: On the basis of interviewing dozens of them, yeah.

JEROME CAJA: Is that because their sexuality is taken for granted?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's very possible, yeah.

JEROME CAJA: As a heterosexual you weren't even assumed to ask the same types of things as if you're researching something that you're not familiar with.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, but it's not a community in the same way. See when you're talking about--

JEROME CAJA: What the straight artists community is not--

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, it isn't the straight part, isn't the part that defines the community.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, OK. Yes, that's because you're giving me two definers and then you're just getting the art community.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But even their sexuality, and they may not be--

JEROME CAJA: They may not be sexual things. I have brothers who are not sexual creatures; one of them, he's asexual. It's not that he's straight, I assume, I really think he's asexual.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let's put this another way. With a number of these artists, and I can't generalize across the board, that's a mistake.

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I get this sense that more important than their relationships when they are really being honest, these are men and women, more important than their relationships even in their families, there are things--

JEROME CAJA: Is their art.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right, and--

JEROME CAJA: I would say that's true for me, too.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK, this is a different way then of asking the same question.

JEROME CAJA: I would definitely say my art is the most important.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So there is some kind of an allegiance, an individual, a personal allegiance, to this occupation and this activity and that in effect is mainly what you're about.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. Well, it's a major point. It's not mainly what I'm about, because I'm about everything I'm in. If

you graded, it is the A+, it's the first top-of-the-list thing that is the most important to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about politics in art?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I don't like politics.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm talking about specifically identity politics or gender politics, not the--

JEROME CAJA: I kinda have a hard time with that, just in the sense I have never had any really bad thing happen to me. I seem to have avoided a lot of the, for some reason, the pitfalls that I see other people have a problem with. I think it comes because I'm so self-confident. But the only things I remember, like in graduate school, one teacher I had told me after the first day of the class that he really didn't like homosexuals. Well, I said, "That's fine because I didn't take your class because I liked you; I took it because I have no option." He was trying to be complimentary, because he saw something in my work. Another teacher said that he was degrading the art scene of San Francisco because it was run by faggots. Then he said, "Oh, no offense meant, Jerome." And I say to that kind of thing OK, but that doesn't traumatize me. I think I've used my homosexuality to my advantage, because I'm confident, I don't care what people think about me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This, of course, what you're describing is really ---

JEROME CAJA: Well, it's ...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Homophobia or racism, they're all the same.

JEROME CAJA: That's part of it. I'm assuming that's what enters into politics. I've never felt that people did not listen to me because I was a homosexual. I've never felt that people did not take me seriously. They may not take me seriously because I'm a prankster, but that's the nature of being a joker. I'm not going to be denied what the results of that behavior can do.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When I said politics, more specifically what I meant was imagery that could be viewed as ideologically or politically making a case, telling a story overtly homosexual.

JEROME CAJA: I certainly do that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, then the question is, what does that mean to you, because does it have to have a political--

JEROME CAJA: I think what it means to me is that it's a part of me. Since I tell you this is me and I'm sharing myself, exposing myself, I'm exposing a part of me. And my sexuality, as you can see, is a big, big part of me and that's probably because it was oppressed for so long, that it became more important, when I was finally able to confront it and deal with it in a reasonable manner.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel in your own words---

JEROME CAJA: I'm not a hedonist, too, so that anything that's pleasurable, I'm going to tend to agree with.  
[laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So the imagery, whatever it may be, but the homoerotic imagery is more than anything else in your work, a sharing of self, self-revelation into a real rapid life.

JEROME CAJA: Most of it is just direct desire.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SESSION 1  
TAPE 2, SIDE A

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with the artist Jerome Caja in his San Francisco home and studio, I guess we have to say, because this is where you work. The date is August 23, 1995. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is Tape 2, side A. Now Jerome, we started, we're going ass-backward here, we started with the present, beginning to work back to the beginning, to the past. You talked a little bit about your family, the fact that your family visited recently, just this week, your parents and brother. And we referred to your growing up, or at least your family experience in Cleveland, and I think now is the moment to get back to your family background, circumstances of your growing up. Tell me about your family, ancestors as far as you want to go.

JEROME CAJA: Well, all my grandparents were immigrants from Czechoslovakia before the second World War and

my mother's folks came from one village and my grandfather's folks came from another village. My dad's family, he only has one brother who's kind of far apart. His parents' marriage was not a very good marriage. My grandpa was an alcoholic and beat my grandmother a lot and my grandmother was a worrier, worried about everything. My mother's parents are very practical, industrious people, who had a large family. My immediate family, I have ten brothers, I'm the third oldest of ten boys. The boys are all athletic boys, their main interests are, most of them are engineers, so they have a lot of interest in sports. So quite early on I knew that I was different.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did you know that?

JEROME CAJA: Well, because I didn't like anything they liked, I wasn't comfortable doing the things they were comfortable doing and you just know. You know, those little signs let you know.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You weren't interested in sports.

JEROME CAJA: I wasn't interested in competitive sports, winning wasn't important to me. I actually felt that I was an alien from another planet and I was switched as a baby. Every night I would hope that my space ship would come and exchange me back to where I belonged. I very early on developed an attachment to objects. I remember I married my blanket, and then I used to chew holes in it and I thought that it was, you know, how things unravel, I thought they were growing back together. And, of course, I told my brothers and they told my parents and they took the blanket away from me and cut it up.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, no.

JEROME CAJA: Any times I've had problems or emotional trauma it was to objects that I went to for comfort and consolation.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Didn't you resent this, the fact that they took away your blanket?

JEROME CAJA: Of course, I resented it. When you don't have a choice, of course, it made me terribly upset. It also encouraged me to become more withdrawn. I also knew that if I didn't talk about it then, it wouldn't be a problem. If people don't know something, then it's not a problem anymore. Now the positive aspects of this, especially as far as my art career goes, I remember my mother took art in high school, so quite frequently when we would go on family picnics, she would draw landscapes with pastels. She liked pastels a lot. And she always encouraged the kids to color and draw, because it was a nice activity that kept them quiet. When you have so many kids you've got to have something to keep them busy, and it was an activity which I became very attached to and I always was alone with my mother. I always got full attention from at least one of my parents when I was doing art because all the men wanted to watch sports on Sunday and that left me and my mom to draw together, which was a real supportive thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did this make you think of art as an effeminate activity, as having gender?

JEROME CAJA: No, I don't think as a child I was, it's a hard thing to say because I was a big sissy all the time, but I don't know if I attributed activity to being a sissy. I don't think I did that myself. Like I was a sissy because that's what everyone called me, but I didn't consider myself a sissy. I didn't look at myself with those eyes, I just knew that they were using that to get me upset. They would call me "sis" until I cried. It was that kind of thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who would do this, your brothers?

JEROME CAJA: My brothers. Well, you know, it's pecking order. That's all it is.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did you fall in the---

JEROME CAJA: I'm the third oldest.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Third. And you were born in what year?

JEROME CAJA: 1958.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In Cleveland?

JEROME CAJA: In Cleveland.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What kind of a neighborhood was it?

JEROME CAJA: I lived in three different houses. The first two houses I was too young to remember what they were like; the house I remember where I grew up, my parents still live at. It's a suburban neighborhood with lots

of children, lots of large families, Catholic school at one end and public school at the other end, and lots of trees, lots of ground space, quiet, safe.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What would be the economic level?

JEROME CAJA: Well, our family is working class. But I think on that street you would range from working class to middle class.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did your father do?

JEROME CAJA: He did many things. He worked for the East Ohio Gas Company, he painted houses, he bartended or bar-bagged, he did a lot of work for little old ladies. And I'm the only son that they pushed into that field, partially because I really liked old ladies, and I always got along with the old ladies. I guess they thought it would be good for me to help little old ladies.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did you help little old ladies?

JEROME CAJA: You know, clean out their basement, or get their medication, mostly just visit. You get the medication and they have to give you cookies and milk, and chat. I didn't mind it, it was fine with me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you identify with them in any way that you can---

JEROME CAJA: I don't know if I did concretely. I think I was just more interested in having the attention. I think I was just so happy to get the attention, well, part of it was that I really didn't have a choice. We weren't allowed to choose what we could do. We had to do what we were told. So I didn't have a choice and I made the best with what I had.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now even though you got pushed on, beat up on a little bit, at least emotionally, not physically, ---

JEROME CAJA: Well-- [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Physically, too by your brothers? It sounds to me like it wasn't an easy--

JEROME CAJA: Actually my dad remembers that more than I do. 'Cause he's always saying, you know, rationalizing why I don't like to come home, because I'm always getting beat up. That's just because the boys are [laughs], you know, they're boys, they're just boys.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Boys will be boys.

JEROME CAJA: This is how they say, "Hi," they punch you.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But did you feel at the time, or can you remember this, that, well, you felt different?

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But did you feel unloved?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, definitely. I thought that no one wanted to understand me. I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't feel that I could tell people how I was, because early on you're immediately. Adults are telling you that homosexuality is a sin and it's bad, it's awful, it's ugly and you know, you're a homosexual, Where do you go?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You knew that then, that early on?

JEROME CAJA: I was sexually aware, probably in the third grade, by the third grade.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you remember, did you have an epiphany, of some sort, a revelation that helped you understand yourself?

JEROME CAJA: No, I just, I mean, I had a great way of dealing with sex. I had two sides of me, the side that no one was allowed to know of and was secret, private secrets, and then the side was private but I could share. And the secret part never left that part and that includes a lot of dreams, fantasies. And, of course in third grade I wasn't aware what an erection was. But I often dreamed of standing on the other side of the urinal watching men urinate. Being able to reach out and play with it without them seeing who I was. Or having a conveyor belt go by completely dark with different places where I could go and molest men lying on the conveyor belt. Although I didn't, I kept that in the secret private life, that never had a chance to get out. Of course I guess some of it came out pervertedly in eighth grade when I used to design torture chambers for homosexuals.

[laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you know such things existed at that point?

JEROME CAJA: No, I mean, I knew of the torture chambers like the Nazis, that kind of thing, but no, I didn't know anything about S & M.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you want to torture them because you thought they were bad or because it was exciting?

JEROME CAJA: No, I think it's because they're being traditional scapegoats.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

JEROME CAJA: I didn't even know any homosexuals.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you think by any chance, is it possible, that you thought that you were punishing yourself to some degree?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I'm sure I was. I have an extremely strong self-destructive personality trait. I'm extremely self-destructive. When I did finally come out, when I was born again, and the priest couldn't deal with the homosexuality, so he told me to see a counselor and the counselor told me my problems. And I'm a homosexual, he said I'm self-destructive and that made sense to me. It wasn't because I was a homosexual, it's always because I was always not allowing myself to succeed, setting it up so I would fail.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said you were born again, what do you mean by that? You rejected the church. Were you raised as a Catholic?

JEROME CAJA: I'm a Catholic, but in the Catholic church there is a group called the Christmatics [sic], they're as close as you can get to a fundamentalist Christian that the Catholic church is willing to let you go. The thing that was beneficial about that, 'cause during that time when everything is so stressful, it made me take my mind off myself. I did a lot of volunteer work, I taught art to ghetto kids and retired moms, they were my favorite students. I've always had this like for nuns, this great admiration for nuns. So it's that sort of thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you want to be one?

JEROME CAJA: A nun? Yes, definitely, I wanted a discard nun with no shoes. I always had loved the idea of living in a cloister, you know, having a cell there, you're alone there, and you don't talk to anybody, maybe an hour a week. That's always been a very attractive life style to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Obviously religion has always been important in your life and it's seen in your work, and in your imagery and we'll turn to that at some point. What about your schooling. What do you remember from school?

JEROME CAJA: The things I remember from school that were either traumatic or helpful was in kindergarten, which is the grade before first grade. A substitute teacher had asked me to stay after class to color. We colored American flags, and she asked if I would stay after class and color her one. And I think that alone gave me such great self-confidence and made so happy. That also happened in the third grade. Again a substitute teacher asked if I would color her a picture for her to take home. The traumatic thing was in the first grade. The principal stood me in front class and humiliated me for coloring outside the lines. And then the teacher, herself, when we were in line to go home, said she couldn't believe that she would pick on me because I was such a colorer.  
[laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Those are mixed signals.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, very mixed signals.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Made you even more confused?

JEROME CAJA: Made me even more confused. Of course in high school there were only two people in the art class, so I got a tremendous amount of attention there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I wanted to ask you about your art training in that early primary and secondary level, your grade school, junior high, whatever you had in high school. Was there much? You said there was only two people in the--- Just two people?

JEROME CAJA: High school. Yeah, just think of the attention you get when there are only two students. I was



encouraged to stay after classes as often as I wanted, which I did. I spent all my time in that class. I was encouraged to try things; I was encouraged learn and use the equipment. I was able to make mistakes and not have it be something bad, just as a learning experience. High school was a good art department at that time. The school itself that I went to I wish would burn to the ground.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was it called?

JEROME CAJA: St. Edward's Catholic School. It is the most disgusting place in the world.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why was that, may I ask?

JEROME CAJA: Because I don't think their interest is in, I think mainly because I resent how they treated me. I'm dyslexic and have problems, but I was put in the situation where they segregated, called dumb kids here, smart kids here. Here I needed extra attention and they put me in a class full of people who need extra attention. Most of the time the teachers they gave them were the lowest quality teachers, which meant forget it. They were writing that section off. A lot of jocks couldn't make it on their intelligence. This was the "I feel sorry for you" class. And all the things that I was interested in, like history and religion, I wasn't allowed to take those classes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really.

JEROME CAJA: Because I didn't have a high enough grade-point average. That I think I really resented. Plus I resent the fact that I didn't get to go to the school of my choice. I wanted to go to the public school in Lakewood because they had a whole building just for art. But because it wasn't a Catholic school, I couldn't go there unless I was willing to be humiliated daily.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How?

JEROME CAJA: By having to wear shirt and tie and short hair, which would make me stick out like a sore thumb. And the school order wouldn't dress as comfortably with jeans and a shirt.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, they would make you dress in a uniform in a public school?

JEROME CAJA: I think they just thought I was trying to get out of wearing a uniform. There were a lot of problems when we were younger with me and my parents because here they are raising me and everyone the same, not make anyone different, and I was different. And in a lot of ways they treated differently, but at the same time they didn't want to treat me differently. They wanted me to be like everyone else, so they kept trying to make me like everybody else and that just further alienated me. But, they didn't know better, they had no any idea. I don't think they knew what homosexuality was. I think my parents were the last in my family to realize, because my brothers, I think it was quite clear early on. I don't think none of them are surprised.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said that you, well, one of your brothers visited recently, and which one is that?

JEROME CAJA: That's Edward.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And where does he come in the---

JEROME CAJA: He's younger than me. He's, let's see, Michael, Paul, Chris, Edward, so he's the fourth one under me. And him, I got to know because he moved out to L. A. See anyone who's under Christopher, Christopher, which is right above Ed, is probably I know well. But after that, I moved out of the house as soon as I could, and so all those younger ones, I only know them if they'd been out here, otherwise I don't really know them well. David and Edward though, I know because David lived in San Diego and Ed lived in L.A. and they'd come up and visit and spend time together, so we were able to learn about each other and understand each other.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So even though they were mean to you when you were kids--

JEROME CAJA: I don't know if that's a good thing to say, mean. They were, although it was mean, they weren't being mean, it wasn't malicious.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They couldn't help it.

JEROME CAJA: It was just how they were trained to be. Boys are competitive, you have a whole group of boys, you have to have a pecking order. That's how they are. It's different, I guess, if you have boys without that competitive nature, but when sports is your main drive you're going to be competitive. That's the nature of sport and it's a masculine trait. So what are you going to do?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So very early on you developed an interest in art. Did you see that as some sort of a refuge?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I think so. You know what, it was a refuge, but also it was an area where I could get positive re-enforcement. I couldn't hit a ball, so I wasn't getting any positive re-enforcement playing baseball. I couldn't catch a football, so I wasn't going to get any positive re-enforcement there. I wasn't a particularly bright child. I was subject to get "D"s and "C"s. If I got a "C," that was really good. [laughs] But then when I went to college, I got straight "A"s with no problem because I had mastered that self-confidence. That means a lot. You can't do well if you don't feel well about yourself. Once you have that confidence, you can do whatever you want.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was your dyslexia verbal.

JEROME CAJA: No, I don't think so.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You had difficulty writing?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, it's writing, we have a problem writing. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You're not the only one. Even some of us who write ---

JEROME CAJA: I think part of the problem was that they weren't sure what that was at the time, when they could have done the most help. They put into every possible reading help class that they had.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you had problems, so it is a verbal thing in terms of the verbal skills of reading and writing.

JEROME CAJA: I don't think of those things as separate. I don't think I have any verbal problems with verbal communication at all.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We've been reading some---

JEROME CAJA: Reading is something I just don't like to do because it's tedious. Writing is where I have the problem. Pretty much just writing. If it wasn't for my eyesight now, I wouldn't have a problem reading. I don't like to read because it's tedious to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You're reading the wrong things, perhaps.

JEROME CAJA: No, it's the nature of the action. All the letters are, the variation is not very great, the physical variation of the letters.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it's an aesthetic thing almost?

JEROME CAJA: Probably closer to that. I think maybe if I knew Sanskrit, I would enjoy reading more. Or one of those elegant alphabets like, you know, where the letters are beautiful things in their own light. But English is kinda boring.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So now all these reasons that re-enforce your interest in art and drawing--

JEROME CAJA: Escapism, support, reaffirmation, and just the plain joy of playing with colors. I mean color has it's own beauty, all its own, it's so nice, comforting.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What kind of instruction did you get or what kinds of projects did you do in school?

JEROME CAJA: I did whatever projects we could do. In grade school the variety was often not very great. In the Catholic school art was not an important subject. It usually meant coloring some xeroxed thing. In high school I had access to anything in the art room. I know a lot of the other students would be so jealous because I finished the project immediately and was off doing other funner things, and the teacher would say, "Well if you do the project, then we can move on." They didn't want to do the project and so they were stuck doing that one. But I think that kind of environment created a great interest, too. The environment where I got all the attention I needed and had access to all kinds of things, which I wouldn't have access on my own. I know that as a child the only thing I used to steal, you know how kids steal candy and toys, and things like that, the only thing I would steal was Magic Markers. I was a compulsive Magic Marker addict. I just loved Magic Markers because it was bold color that came out instantly. I've always hated pencil because you really have to work to make it deep and Magic Markers, just one swipe of that pen it's rich and it's deep. So I've always had a fixation with those types of things. And then in college I started taking collage, I went to the community college and I didn't go to college to get a degree; I just wanted to see if I could go into a field that would be socially redeeming. So I tried all kinds of things. I went to early childhood education, I went to social welfare, I went into the prison-type things, just to see if I was good at any of them or if I was interested in any of that, but I always took art classes. And then the next thing I knew, I was told I should go to Cleveland State because I had used up all their facilities. They encouraged me to go on.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you do a two-year program?

JEROME CAJA: I didn't do a two-year program, I just took a lot of classes. So then I transferred, that's why--- I didn't decide to a degree until my last year at Cleveland State, and the only classes I didn't take that I needed for a degree were freshmen English and freshmen math. I don't have a problem with math, but freshmen English was probably the hardest class I took. Even then at the university, I did what I wanted. I didn't do something because the teacher told me to do it. I did exactly what I wanted and if they had any problems, I confronted them with it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did they say?

JEROME CAJA: For one thing, I took the environmental biology class and the teacher wanted me to rewrite my notes. I said, "If you want to see my notes, you can look in my damn notebook. I'm not going to spend my time rewriting the god-damn thing. What's wrong with you?" Of course he couldn't argue with that. So he brought up another point, which he didn't because I was probably the smartest person in his class. So he had to submit. He didn't submit all the way, but he submitted enough. You see the problem was that I didn't care what grade he gave me. I took the class. If you're not concerned about grades, then obviously that's not going to be very good at holding over your head to motivate you to do what they want you to do. I remember in high school a history class I took, the whole grade was based on a presentation, a research paper and a rewriting of that research paper, and I was talking to the teacher and found out that he grades the research paper while he watches the Super Bowl. So for my rewriting of my research paper, I xeroxed the original paper and cut it up and put it together in a different way. He's not going to read it so why bother.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did you get?

JEROME CAJA: A "D." Well I passed. I passed and I don't care.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What art history classes do you remember?

JEROME CAJA: Yes. Tom Donaldson was the instructor. It was the female images in art history.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you passed?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, my research was on transvestism.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was your topic?

JEROME CAJA: That was my topic, transvestism. I forgot the narrow. I don't know what I narrowed it down to, but that's the basic area where I studied.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Presumably by that time you had been introduced to the whole history of art.

JEROME CAJA: Oh yes. I love art history.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever go to the, Cleveland has a wonderful museum.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, many times. It has one of the best museums and they never charge to get in. I think that was the most heart-breaking thing I found out when I moved to this city, because I had no idea that a museum would charge to get in. I knew that a special show might require something to come. Cleveland has a good museum. They have a good orchestra, good ballet, and they have really good architecture and good public art.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were you at least, to some degree, able to participate in the cultural life in Cleveland? Did you actually go to the ballet?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I did all that. The thing in Cleveland is, Cleveland is pretty terrified of me. When I would go to an opening or event there was always five feet around me, no matter what. One of my friends, Mary Jane Boil[?-Ed.], made a joke. If she wanted to see a painting, she'd just bring me over to that painting and it would clear out.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This is true?

JEROME CAJA: This is true, this is true. And I'm not sure what it is, because it's probably a mixture of the fact that I have long hair and that's not that common now and because I dress kinda ...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's a strange reaction to long hair.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, but Cleveland is, they're pretty extreme in their reaction to anything. It's a very racist city,

it's a hate-filled city. Not that there aren't good people there, and if you need them they're wonderful. I mean, Anna lives there and she is fabulous teacher. And I know a lot of good people there; it just takes a lot longer to get to meet them, because there people who aren't as open to different things and they have a tendency to ghettoize[?-Ed.] and stay around things they're familiar with. Which they do here, too, but it's just that I can get so concentrated here. There's not as much of that here. But even here people ghettoize and stay around things that they understand.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We're about done with this side, and so I suggest that we can pick up next time back in Cleveland.

JEROME CAJA: You're going to drag my ass back there again?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Thank you.

[END SESSION 1]  
[END TAPE 2, SIDE A]  
SESSION 2  
TAPE 1, SIDE A

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with Jerome Caja. Session 2, an interview conducted in San Francisco, September 29, 1995. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is Tape 1, side A. Just to reprise a little bit, the first session was over a month ago on August 23rd, and it seems to me that it covered a number of things and it bounced around a little bit in time. We started with the present and acknowledged the fact that you are ill, and we talked about that and related issues but then we moved back, and talked about your early family history. So there is some of that biographical information already committed. Where we left off, it seems to me that we were getting back to the chronological development of your life, your art and career. Where we left off was still in Cleveland, according to my notes, at least notes I made on that, we talked about going to junior college and then going to Cleveland State, right?

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was it Cleveland State College?

JEROME CAJA: University.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: University. And you were there about--- Well, why don't you tell me, remind me. What I would like to do is to get us from there to San Francisco.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I went there after college. I graduated from there, I don't remember.

[third person's voice]'84

JEROME CAJA: '84? Yes. And I did a lot of art classes, of course, that was what I was interested in. I decided to graduate, when I decided to get a degree, 'cause I was running out of grants to go to school, so I thought the only thing I didn't have was freshman English and freshman math. Of course math is very easy for me, but English was very difficult for me because I'm such a bad speller. But I did that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was your major?

JEROME CAJA: Ceramics.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were working in the arts?

JEROME CAJA: I was working in clay, but I was doing everything. I always took several art classes, like painting and printmaking and drawing classes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that at that point you had determined really what you wanted to do with your life?

JEROME CAJA: I think so. In that period is when I decided what I wanted to. Like I said, when I started I just took classes in different areas to see what I should do. I was kind of socially-minded. I wanted to do something to benefit society, like teach or something like that. Then I decided, I just wanted to make things. I just wanted to make things. I was always pretty much a compulsive maker of things. I've always liked to draw, paint, clay. I love the tactualness of ceramics. When I applied to graduate school out here at the San Francisco Art Institute.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did that come about? What led you to apply there?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I applied to schools where I would want to live. Because I know me, once I went to school I would never move again back to Cleveland. This was the only place that accepted me. I applied here, Rhode Island and Chicago.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that's what determined the whole rest of your life?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, existence. Pittsburgh, that school in Pittsburgh, Carnegie-Mellon, they wanted me, but I didn't want to live in Pittsburgh. It was really a stroke of luck that I got accepted here, because I love this city a lot.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Had you been in San Francisco previously?

JEROME CAJA: I was once. I went across the country and we were here for a couple of days or something.

[third voice]: You were very young though, right?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, that was before I went to college.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it wasn't the great unknown entirely? You had an image of the Bay Area.

JEROME CAJA: Well, I had ideas about, I must say I was shocked at how cool, how cold it was. I'm one of those people who thought, oh, California, hot, sunny all the time. So I was a little taken a back by that. But now I can't stand the heat, so I love the cold, the fog. I really love that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What image did you have in your mind of the city?

JEROME CAJA: The city?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, in terms of the social life?

JEROME CAJA: I knew it was a gay mecca. I knew a lot of homosexuals, always a plus. I knew it was beautiful because I had been here. [pause] I guess this was the only real image I had.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the school? Did you know anything about the art institute?

JEROME CAJA: No, I didn't know anything about the school. I knew that if I majored in ceramics I would get space to work. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did they give you any kind of fellowship or financial aid?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I got all kinds of grants.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's good. It is pretty expensive.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, it's super, super expensive. Actually though, when you're there, the administrators are really, really helpful. This one woman who does the financial managing goes out of her way to get money for you, so you can be there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were you aware at all of the art community here? In other words, any of the history of the artists who were working out here?

JEROME CAJA: No, no. Oh well, yeah, I was aware of [Robert] Arneson, Peter Volkus and ---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you knew about that whole ceramic set up?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, my ceramic teacher suggested that this was the best place to go. He had come out here for school, or something, and he had said that's where I'll fit. That's the best place for you to go because you'll fit right in. It's very into funky.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your interest, maybe you didn't even know the word at that time you were really attracted to funk?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I liked all kinds of things. I'm a very tactual person. Well, I love Arneson's things, I love Peter Volkus's things. I like rocks, all kinds of ceramics, I like funky ceramics, I like vases and clay, you know, I like ceramics, I like clay. It's a wonderful feeling, it's a wonderful medium. You can do so much with it. You can manipulate it in so many ways. Of course, once I graduated and I didn't have my own equipment, I knew that I would be doing other things because the things I don't like I would dust with toxic chemicals. I love toxic chemicals. To get the best glazes you've got to use the most awful toxic chemicals. [laughs] They really are fun.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But they're not good for you?

JEROME CAJA: No. And you have to wear a mask.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: They're so ineffective.

JEROME CAJA: Well, it's just you can't do your best work when you're uncomfortable. It just doesn't make it too well.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So did you continue at all with the ceramics?

JEROME CAJA: No, Once I graduated, I accepted that summer, that was it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When did you enter the Art Institute? What did you say?

[third voice]: I think it was September of '84.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: '84 and then what was it, a two-year program? How long were you there?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I really, they were kind of upset with me because I went straight through. So every year they'd raise it so much, and eventually I got away with missing one of their raises. I was there for probably two years and a semester. It was the program I had. I liked the program they had. They send you all the information because it was just working. When I got here, they had changed the curriculum and the classes you had to take were really awful. One was business of art and it was so impractical and so stupid because the way they figure out how you should price things. If I did that, no one could ever afford anything. Another one was a criticism class, which was really awful and I did not like at all.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you remember any of your teachers there? Any in particular?

JEROME CAJA: Oh yes. Robert Hudson. He was a fabulous teacher. I was the only person in the class that liked him. And the whole class petitioned to have him fired.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why did they do that?

JEROME CAJA: Because he didn't say anything if there was nothing to say. You know, a lot of these people, they wanted to hear... I would say probably maybe 75% of the graduate painters are pretty awful. And there's only like 10% of the people in schools that really do any work. Most of the people that were in were like painters, it was a bad thing to do then because they didn't get anything. You had to have your own studio and you had to bring your stuff in. It was kind of an awful thing and so I think it was the way they made money. They allowed a lot of really awful people in who just weren't very good. They want to hear from teachers how wonderful their work is or they want to talk about the inner-content of their work and you know, I've nothing to talk about. Plus you know I'm a talker, so of course, he's going to talk to me. My favorite teacher is Sam Chakaglian[?-Ed.]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sam?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, he is just the most fun person who's my type of man. The type of man I find extremely attractive. Every class we fought.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This was a painting class?

JEROME CAJA: No, it's a criticism class on sculptors and painters.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

JEROME CAJA: He was just my most favorite teacher. Most of the class was terrified of him, actually frightened to bring their things in. But I really loved him. We had a lot of fun.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was Shaw teaching there at the time?

JC: Oh, yes. Richard is such a good teacher. I learned so much from that man. He really has a great sense of looking at things, at art and things. To him, a billboard is art. It's a beautiful piece of art. You know how when they stuccoed buildings before they paint them? That to him is art. And then John Robhov I had and he is really a smart man. He made me do things that I really didn't care about.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Like what?

JEROME CAJA: Well, he'd redo a glaze class. I just like to mix things up. We had to be very technical which is against my nature, but I learned so much about chemicals from his way of teaching. He's a very smart man. I also had Bob Rasmussen and he's kind of odd; he's the sweetest guy, but he's one of those people who has

aliases and I just never really understand.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Aliases?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, he goes by another name in the art world.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is it?

JEROME CAJA: Redd Ekks or something like that. Who else did I have that was really good?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Carlos Villa?

JEROME CAJA: I didn't have him, but he was a super man. I had Ivan Majdrakoff as a-- You get, every semester, you get one teacher who you talk to and its private, personal. He does great things, but he didn't very have much to say.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, all in all, what do you think you got from the program and from these individuals?

JEROME CAJA: I got so much from students [laughs] there. The exposure to things that I wouldn't normally, I would never expose myself to. I was exposed to all kinds of thinking, all kinds of different, even in the classes, even with the bad artists, it's just different. That's always really helpful to have as many ideas and differences as possible. When I was there I tried all kinds of things. The only thing I wasn't real good at was making big things. I think that's the criticism that everyone had on me. Everyone wanted me to make bigger, bigger, and bigger, which made me make smaller, smaller and smaller. That big thing stuff, I did make some big things, you're stuck with these white elephants that you have to carry around. So that's one of the reasons why I don't like big things. I like to have things that I can carry.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's why you do so many little things?

JEROME CAJA: Yes! Well, little things are fabulous because you can work on something until, and if you get bored or stuck, you work on something else. Plus, like the paintings, you can carry them around and look at them in different environments. It's easy to deal with that, the small ones.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you, or did you, develop some idea of an aesthetic at the Art Institute, something that is fairly close---

JEROME CAJA: No, I think you have an aesthetic and all the influences of life; not just school, but everywhere around us affects makes what your aesthetics are. I love narrative things, because I love to tell little stories, so that makes making narrative things. I'm sure that the school had influences on me, but I don't think it's something that's conscious. I think its something just kinda comes into your, you know, subconscious.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who were some of the students that you were interested in?

JEROME CAJA: Ann Mueller. She did really beautiful decomposed things. She was an undergraduate.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In ceramics?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. Debbie Soo. She did the most fun kinda goofy things, which I really loved. I love the goofy things. My friend Charles, he worked really hard. He was a perfectionist and he is someone, after I graduated, that I would go to his house once a week to paint together. He did beautiful things, and, of course, loved what I do.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: To paint together or to paint each other?

JEROME CAJA: No, just to paint together.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever have models?

JEROME CAJA: No, I mean, smoked pot and worked. I've worked from models, but no.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you were still doing some ceramics at that stage. Is that right?

JEROME CAJA: No, once I got out of school, ceramics was gone.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did you choose what to do next?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I always painted and I always loved painting, so it's not something difficult. It just was the natural thing. Even when I was taking ceramics, I was painting.

[third voice]: Didn't you do more drawing than painting long before?

JEROME CAJA: Well, yeah. When I was in school I did a lot of oils, pastels, and paint sticks, and pens ---

[third voice]: Magic Markers?

JEROME CAJA: No, that was before. That was when I first moved to the city. I had a set of really nice colored markers and I was staying in a residency hall for a couple of months. I just did a lot of Magic Marker drawings. That was more in Cleveland State, I would say.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I probably should acknowledge that we have a third person in the room here sitting in Jerome's boudoir as it's turned into, but sitting in his living room. Anna van der Meulen is here, a good friend from Cleveland. In fact I thought I would ask at this point how you two met because obviously---

JEROME CAJA: She's a photographer. And I went down with a friend of mine 'cause he was taking photo classes and she was there. She said something like, she was dissatisfied because she doesn't know any people. I said, "Well you just have to meet some nice people."

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I don't remember that at all.

JEROME CAJA: That was the first time I saw you.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I remember being up in the painting room and Paul Jonquitz[?] brought you by.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And we were talking about like horror experiences. Jerome told the story about when he got shot and I told the story about when I got beat up, and then we realized that we lived very close to each other.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, we lived in the same neighborhood.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: We started walking to and from school together.

JEROME CAJA: And we used to go to her house and listen to music.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And cook food.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This was in Cleveland?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. That was in Cleveland.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Cleveland State?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you obviously kept up your friendship over the years, is that right?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, ... something that grows.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting because not everybody does, you know, when one person moves far away ---

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: There were periods of time, because Jerome doesn't write and I rarely wrote. You wrote me a few letters when you first moved away. But over time I would see Jerome when he would come unannounced to town to ---

JEROME CAJA: Like to get his letters.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: So that kept him coming to town, at least once a month.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, every time I would come to town I saw you.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Anna, would you come over here a little closer, move your chair, or however you want to do it.

JEROME CAJA: You can move your chair.



PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because I want to make sure that, you're not obliged to chime in, but when you do have something to say we want to make sure that's on there. Now it seems to me that this might be a good moment, if you would like, for you to perhaps say some of the things that interested you, to recall some of the things that interested you about Jerome and about Jerome's work and try to get another person's impression, perspective.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: As far as his work goes, it was obvious right away that he took it very seriously. Jerome always worked incredibly long hours. He was always there, came in early, left late, slept there sometimes. He had a ... in his little studio and that's where he slept. He integrated different interests into his work always, like he had collection of dry rotten fruit.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's funky.

JEROME CAJA: If I had it shipped through my mother and she'd get really upset, she felt really guilty shipping garbage to me. I remember when I got my first box of "tools," I was at the school. I opened it up and people there were just shocked, 'cause it was all rotten fruit, pieces of trays and trash. But I use it for texturing, I just have a thing for rotten fruit. [laughs]

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Well, you were experimenting with different materials---

JEROME CAJA: The reason I had so much rotten fruit because that year, before I came here I was doing garbage fires. You make a little sack or fill it with as many pieces of garbage and then fire it real high. Different garbage leaves different things.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Jerome did all that as part of a work study for the ceramics department for part of his tuition. He would handle most of the fires for Dick, right?

JEROME CAJA: I was his assistant, yes. I made all the clays and glazes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was his name?

JEROME CAJA: Dick Schneider. He was so great. He really encouraged me to do whatever I wanted, to experiment, do whatever.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, on the whole, I've put you on the spot. I am really personally interested to know what it was that you found special about Jerome, special enough that indeed you've kept up, over time, this friendship.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Jerome is actually one of the most fair people I've ever met, not judgmental, kind, and generous and still not ... You're not a fondling person ... [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: [laughs] She is, isn't she?

JEROME CAJA: [laughs] I never have denied that.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And we have a lot of fun together. We laugh a lot together and we just don't have similar attitudes about living in the city and the kinds of interactions with men in particular. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: With similar experiences?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: We go cruising together, we go cruising the same places.

JEROME CAJA: [laughs] Oh, yeah. [laughs]

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: [laughs] Only I'm not as good, I'm not as professional like Jerome. Jerome taught me how to basket lodge[?]. I never knew what that was.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, really, how corruptive.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: [laughs] So just his attitude in general, perseverance. He's always looked like a frail person, but he's not afraid to walk anywhere and those are his street smarts which I have a lot of respect for. And just a hard worker and a frail person.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What connections do you see between this frail person that you were attracted to and soon to be great friends, and the work and the imagery that you see. I guess the obvious connection is that you watched the work evolve and change.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Uh, huh. Over time I think it's become more direct and his stories are more obvious

and some of the ... always have been some violence in some of his pieces and the strange situations depicted. I think over time it's become a lot more clear what that situation is that you're looking at. Sometimes the title helps tremendously and nails the whole picture down, but it is still a lot more clear than it used to be. It's also a lot broader now. I don't know, it just seems-- I've noticed over time while he'd be gone and he would come back from graduate school and it seemed more mature somehow. He was able to really put on the paper what he was thinking. I don't know. Would you agree, Jerome?

JEROME CAJA: Uh, yeah. I think that's the natural growth process.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: But you were successful, when a lot of people aren't.

JEROME CAJA: A lot of people don't grow.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: A lot of people don't change, and there's no improvement.

JEROME CAJA: I think that hard work does help a lot. And I really admire people who work hard. I love hard workers because you have a tendency to learn and advance and not everyone does. I know some people who work really hard but for some reason they don't make very interesting art. No offense.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: He's also never gotten stuck, like I've heard you say several times that you were finished with that kind of material or that kind of ...

JEROME CAJA: Yes. I have no ...

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Yeah. You've explored something as far as you can, and on to something else.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK.

[SESSION 2]  
[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]  
SESSION 2  
TAPE 1, SIDE B

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK, here we are continuing the interview with Jerome Caja. This is the second session, Tape 1, side B. Anna's been sitting here and she's been chiming with some of her observations but, of course, what we really want to do is, Jerome, get your thoughts about the inner connections between your life experience and much of it being in San Francisco the formative part of it in some ways and then the imagery. I think it's best not to talk too much in generalizations.

JEROME CAJA: I think that's another very subconscious thing. What influence your life included, what comes along you put out.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Let me ask this, and you don't have to necessarily say a direct connection or a manifestation in the work, but are there certain experiences or individuals whether here in San Francisco or this community that you feel have marked you to which have affected you in a strong way, and which then, perhaps, one could see it reflected in your work?

JEROME CAJA: I think just the way I live. I think just the way I live affects. It's hard to say. You want to know what individual, something specifically? Specifically a lot of influences are the world I live in. The people that I have associated with. I have always been really fond of trashy garbage, the lowest part of that I guess you would call it. I've pretty much kept myself as alone as possible and very choosy about who I allow close to me. I talk to everyone, but the people that I keep as close friends, I'm very, very selective. And all the friends that I have are very virtuous in some way. They all are really nice, nice people. Some influences, it's hard to say. It depends on the paintings, actually. The painting of the drag queens on the drag queen. I'm fascinated with gender and crossing those gender lines. I'm fascinated with sex changers, both men that become women and women that become men.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Weren't you before you even came out here?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I've always been fascinated with that. And I've never been into a group person, I don't like hanging out with a group doing things. And it was easy for me to do that because on the weekends I would want to go and get laid and so I'd go to gay places. And I have lots of straight friends. I have known a lot of people that were either still closeted or who were straight. And so, they would do things together as a group, and I could easily avoid having to be stuck in that situation, because my personal pleasure always comes first.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so when you make a statement this...

JEROME CAJA: It depends on the painting, like Clowns, all the clown things come from other people.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How so?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I've never even used to think about clowns. When I came here I met so many people who were so adversely, either one way or the other, affected. A lot of people just found clowns to be so horrific, I felt, as I developed the clowns, I thought it's a nice thing because it's something that you'll never know who it is. They're totally hidden, so they're totally anonymous. And I like that thing about it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why do you like that?

JEROME CAJA: Because I like anonymity, I like extremes. I'd like to be a fly on the wall and I like to be the center of attention. I'm a very extreme-minded person. I love extreme things. I've never been a middle person, I always jumped off this side, then jumped off that side.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I think essentially you like disguises, like being the fly on the wall.

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I love to hide, but to be in public. I love to-- like clowns. I love to be unknown and do things. Plus it's a really interesting life to interact with people. The drag queen thing is pretty obvious and just the fact that I love to tell stories. That's a big influence in my work. I like to tell stories.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: As you look at your work, as I've done on several occasions, virtually all of them are figurative.

JEROME CAJA: Not all.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not all, but I would say that what's available to look at around here. This would be the majority and it seems to be, as you say, narrative, in almost every case, and in some often strange situation you have human beings, many hermaphroditic images that possibly ---

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, well, Hermaphrodites, hermaphrodite that includes both sexes, it's like a wholeness to me because I think people all pretty much have both of those things in them. Actually I'm a realist. I'm a man, so there are the female things that I'm attracted to and male things I'm attracted to.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Then would you say that has emerged as as one of the themes in your work---

JEROME CAJA: Oh, definitely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: --- and that is the duality, the gender ambiguous? In fact, we're all some of this and some of that in different proportions, but that's the human condition.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I would say so, I would definitely say so.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that is, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but that has certainly in the past maybe still really not been acknowledged and it's difficult for many people to ---

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I think it's a very hard subject for most people though because I think most people want to be more like everyone else. There's a big sense, and that's true even with gay people. There's always a big sense that you be like the people in the group, that social grouping thing. And I think that I am opposed. I don't want to be like anybody else; I want to be like me. I'm very individualistic type of person. Again that goes into the art, but it's a subconscious thing that's part of my personality. Part of my make up is I'm a very destructional, I'm very rebellious and I'm not a intolerant. I don't care what other people do, but I don't want them telling me. I don't want to be what they want. I'll be whatever I feel like being. When I think I'm allowed to do work, that's another duality, the conflict, the difference. Color, that's kinda of more my personality.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what's that you're continually talking about the female side of you? There's the reflection of that, we agree, on some of the work. These dualities do emerge. What about the male side? In other words, what would you ...

JEROME CAJA: I love men. I just love men. My male side ...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's not facing...

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: It's complete avoidance ...

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, that's the male side.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That answer would be more in the heterosexual sense the attraction to the opposite sex in conventional ways of thinking.

JEROME CAJA: What is my maleness?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I have a lot of maleness. I think I have some. [laughs] It's a difficult thing because I don't generally think of either, so if you see, I guess. Do you see any paintings that, any masculinity, because I don't think of it personally. I don't personally think of them in their masculine, except there are a lot of males in my work. Well, clowns are male, most of the clowns are male.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I wouldn't describe, and I'm not the subject of this interview, but, just for the sake of conversation, I think it is useful to actually get specific and look at some of these works. If I had to do a critical writing of some sort and try to understand your works in these terms, I wouldn't see too much in the way of imagery in the stories that are told as feminine at all. More or less more masculine, I would see it as gay.

JEROME CAJA: Right, I could believe that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think it's to me what is essential homoerotic imagery and which you know.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I'm a homo.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you think, Anna? How do you feel?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I guess that depends on the picture. There's a drag queen that is obviously a drag queen, like you see a ... or you see, depending on the anatomy. Then that strikes me more in those terms, calling it gay. But in all of his stuff I don't even, I don't know, like that Bloody Mary's there. Is that what ...

JEROME CAJA: Bloody Mary's from heaven.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which one?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: In the toilet seat, the woman with the blow dryer.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, yeah, that's great. Now you see you're right. That's sort of expressionism to me, that is much more connected with---

JEROME CAJA: Well, I think my influences are sex, religion, and things that I have experienced. I think those are my big influences.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about people? There was one example I can think of and that is the work, or several works, portraits of your lover. What was his name?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: No, that was Charlie, from the Art Institute.

JEROME CAJA: I never had a lover.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I guess I misunderstood that---

JEROME CAJA: I never have relationships, I have friends.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Jerome has never had relationships.

JEROME CAJA: I have friends. I have no desire to have someone be with me all the time or be with me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So this wasn't what I understood and might not be the case, but a close friend at any rate.

JEROME CAJA: Charles was a friend. He was a man that I painted a lot with. We both liked narrative works.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, you mentioned that right after school...

JEROME CAJA: After school we had a lot in common. We both liked a the same kind of music.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, tell what that means. Will you please describe this is fairly unusual phenomena? This is the painting. It looks like a Caravaggio, or something with John the Baptist's head on it. This is one is one of

them, isn't it?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Uh huh, yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why don't you tell about them. What are they? What do they mean? How were they done?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Tell the story about the ashes.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, well, me and Charlie made a pact of whoever died first, the loser would have to use their ashes to make some paintings. Charlie was very interested in having his work seen and perpetuating his ideas and his experiences. The suffering he did have from having AIDS, you know, just that and that experience. He really was a teaching kind of guy. He would have loved to be a teacher. He thought that the things he experienced were important for people to know, to see. I'm much more selfish. I just like to do things that I like to do. I'm very pleasure-minded. I'm a total hedonist. Painting is something I like to do. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What are these somewhat unusual productions, particularly, how many are there, that incorporate his ashes?

JEROME CAJA: Well, what we did was we had a show. He had always wanted to have a show with me and I knew that would never happen because we were both strong, hard-headed men who want everything our way. So this was a way we had a show together. We had a show of his work and of my work and then my work with his ashes.

AV This is after Charlie died?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, after he died.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was when?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: January of '91, I think.

JEROME CAJA: I was in New Orleans.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: That's when he died. The show was the following October.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was the show?

JEROME CAJA: "Southern Exposure." And the first thing I did with the paintings was give them to the people he liked, his friends.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where's "Southern Exposure"?

JEROME CAJA: South of Market.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Here in town.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: He had some of the paintings called "Remains of the Day." That was the name of the show.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. So I gave the ashes paintings, and I still have a ton of ashes, the ones I did. I gave them to his friends, his family, his friends, people I knew he knew and liked.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it was really two separate shows and the one incorporating the---

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, yeah.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Within one gallery space.

JEROME CAJA: Within one space. Charlie was on these two walls, I was on these two walls, and Charlie's in the middle.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Your paintings of Charlie ---

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well what did these works, again let me reiterate, quite notable and unusual works, what do they mean to you other than the obvious and you had an agreement with Charlie ---

JC; Yeah. Certainly they're all things that we--- Like I did some of them using the imagery that we both

understood. It's Charlie.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Isn't it also true that you had a big interest in relics and that kind of a thing?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I love quarries and Charlie did to. I love them. Old dead pieces of things. [laughs]

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Doesn't that tie into the religious---

JEROME CAJA: No, I think the ashes paintings are, that was really Charlie's idea, 'cause he knew that I was going to go far. So he knew that one way or another, because he was not going to go far, he would go far. And plus, he just loved that idea of being a painting; he became a painting.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, this was really a rather profound concept, when you think the artist truly becoming a work of art.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It seems to me this is, in my estimation, appropriate in many ways to your story. That was what I was trying to get at. That is the subject matter and materials in a sense, become one. Identifying so closely to a work of art, and in that case, your friend Charlie is transformed literally into a work of art.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Does this sound reasonable to you?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, it sounds right on. I think all art is a--- I mean, like that's as far as you can go. I think all art is me, all my paintings, these are stories of me. That's where that kind of selfishness is in there. Everything is about my ideas, my thinking, me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK, what are some of those ideas?

JEROME CAJA: Well, the sexuality and the life experience, like I have of violence because the world has been very violent. I've run into a lot of violence.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Personally?

JEROME CAJA: Personally.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: In Chicago.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Un huh. We talked about that in the earlier tape.

JEROME CAJA: I've been shot at, raped several times.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You've been shot?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, yeah, I have a bullet in my leg.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, how were you shot? How did that happen?

JEROME CAJA: Well, I was walking home from West 25th in Cleveland and this guy grabbed me and said--- And he started to pull me down and I saw this big guy, and I said, "Let go of me, you jerk. There's a cop car right there." He immediately let go of me and I took off. I had no idea he had a gun, and he shot me. Of course, you're immediately go into shock and I'm walking, because there is a hospital just a block away. So I'm walking and someone in a car said, "Do you need some help?" I said, "No, I'm just going to the hospital." Of course I had no idea that my whole leg is bleeding. It was very difficult to find the entrance to the hospital. I finally found it and I walked in and I said, "Where do you go when you get shot?" Of course, the nurses were all running frantically insane. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You still have the bullet in your leg?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. Well, it's in the middle of the muscle, so it's much less damaging. They give you a shot that builds some calcium over it, so it's like a little bone, you can feel it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How does this violence reveal itself in the works? Give me some examples.

JEROME CAJA: I think with the killing, the stabbing, there's a lot of paintings of ---

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: ... rapes

JEROME CAJA: ---where someone is getting hurt or killed or---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the rapes? You say that you yourself had been raped. I'm not going to ask you to tell stories about that on the tape. That's enough to know. This is presumably after you moved to San Francisco or not?

JEROME CAJA: In San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Un huh. And were these people, was it a date rape?

JEROME CAJA: No.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: These were strangers then.

JEROME CAJA: People who just picked me up. Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Any of the depictions, as I'm looking around and trying to find something that would fit this. Are there representations of that kind of assault and brutality, male to female representations or male to male?

JEROME CAJA: Actually, most of the female imagery that you see is drag queens. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No biological females?

JEROME CAJA: I do some females, biological females, but not very many.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Un huh.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And they're pretty obvious actually. They look a lot more womanly.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. What was the question?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, it doesn't need to be a much longer answer than that, but I was asking about the representation of the rape.

JEROME CAJA: Violence.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And the other was, a little later, on male rape---

JEROME CAJA: Well, I was raped by a male.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your image is then due to take that or represents that?

JEROME CAJA: That violence---

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: What matters between men is what Paul's asking. That's how you would depict that?

JEROME CAJA: Well, depict that, I guess, men and drag queens.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. So it could stand for violence against biological women?

JEROME CAJA: After you've lived through so many beatings and assaults and things; at the time, it's really degrading and there's no pleasantness, but after you've gone through all that shit, it's interesting. Violence is interesting to me. It's a weird thing, I think. None of the experiences were good or pleasant, but I would never want them to happen again. But that's what life gave me and I'm not going to keep me down or stop me. You just move on. It is going to come out in the things I do, because it's part of me, it's part of my thinking, it's somewhere in my brain at times.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: They're at extreme. Like you said you're interested in extreme things.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I think a lot of the more brutal sex paintings aren't really because of those. It's just rough sex and I just love rough sex.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

JEROME CAJA: I don't like lovey-dovey things. I'm not a very sentimental person in that way.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In some other ways, you are?

JEROME CAJA: I think so, I think so. I think there are some very sentimental things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is, I don't want to say difficult, but it's unusual and it's pretty hard to place or classify. You've obviously have taken a very independent course in almost every respect.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. Of course, you know, every time you go to some function, people want to know, "What would you categorize your work"? I think that's something other people do, because I don't do that. I say narratives, figuratives, you know, miniatures.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Nothing comes from full blown emergences all by itself without any antecedents, and you obviously charted your own course. I would be interested to know what other artists, perhaps some of the old masters you may have seen and were interested in and maybe see as your ancestors as an artist. Who might they be?

JEROME CAJA: I have always loved art. I love Gauguin. I think he has the most incredible sense of color, most superb. When I'm in the Museum of Art, that's the first thing I see. I like Van Gogh, I like things that, historical things. I love Caravaggio, I like Botticelli, I love beautiful things, I love the whole history of art, really.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The artists you've mentioned, four or five, I'm not at all surprised, because they certainly, Caravaggio in one respect, there's one side of your work that would seem to reflect that. Then you mentioned Gauguin and van Gogh, post-impressionist or symbolist artists. We have to stop.

[SESSION 2]  
[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SESSION 2  
TAPE 2, SIDE A

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Continuing interview with Jerome, Session 2, tape 2, side 1. The date is September 29, 1995. You were talking, Jerome and Anna, who's still present during this taping, trying to identify, not sources necessarily, but admired artists that may in one way or another appear in your work.

JEROME CAJA: You know, I was very fortunate that Cleveland Museum of Art is one the most fabulous places. Every time, even as a child, that I got to go, I just loved it. I delved in it. I like all kinds of things. I love African art. I loved the Indian miniature paintings. I love Indian sculpture, gorgeous, from India. All like every culture's art. There's a lot of Japanese that I like. But the Cleveland Museum is such a good museum. Makes it easy to appreciate things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can see bits and pieces of these various admired schools or artists in your work, but there are certain things that really strike me as perhaps more intellectual. What about the aspect of your work that ---, well I see you have a clown that looks like an El Greco. I mean, actually there's no question. And I guess a simple question here, in some cases, they're out and out borrowings, appropriations almost, or parodies. Is that right?

JEROME CAJA: Appropriations.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Would you use the word parodies?

JEROME CAJA: I don't think a parody is true, I think appropriations, definitely appropriate. I can take something that's already done and by adding to it, change it. Turning a crucified Jesus into a, would you call him a gypsy?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Uh hum. Yeah.

JEROME CAJA: I've always loved El Greco and who did that ...? I liked his work always. It has nice a kind of oddness, wasn't perfect, it was kinda of gooey, figures were all kind of off. Who did that?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which one?

JEROME CAJA: El Greco?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah. No, you did it. [laughs]

JEROME CAJA: [chuckles] But, El Greco, you know, he had a wonderful style. I heard of somewhere that he had stigmatism in his eyes and that's why [laughs] his people are elongated or that's the theory I heard from somewhere.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Un huh. ... kidding, I mean, ... There's also a degree of expressionism, which is another thing that comes to mind, like the German expressionists.



JEROME CAJA: Yes, Yes. They're very interesting.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You know colorism. But your themes, and the brutality, you certainly wouldn't win awards in family values.

JEROME CAJA: [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Talk about sex and violence. You're very direct about that, and that's a big, very important part of your work and part of your life as we were saying earlier. There is this direct connection, but it's interesting to me the ways that you have chosen to reveal this aspect of you, your interests and the styles and the subjects and then also the humor involved. Expressionism, general expressionism especially, is really rooted with, in some cases, extreme violence and I'm wondering if you have had any special interest in these artists in a conscious way? Like Kirchner and Nolde[?]

JEROME CAJA: Nolde, definitely. My only problem is that I'm not good at remembering names. Yeah, there are a lot of German expressionists that I really like Schiele.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Kunst [?]

JEROME CAJA: Kunst, oh yes. His things are just gorgeous.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And Schiele is one of particular interest.

JEROME CAJA: His work is very interesting. His work is really beautiful.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's also very disturbed

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I've noticed. It's very disturbing.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Existential.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Very much so, yeah. Not that we're looking for a direct influence necessarily, but it's useful to kind of make some of these ---

JEROME CAJA: Well, that would definitely be a result.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: It would be good for you to mention the influence of the Japanese. I know in college you were very interested in their ... art and, in fact, were complaining that the Art Museum didn't have, even though they had a good collection of Japanese and Indian stuff, they never acknowledged any of that.

JEROME CAJA: Right. I still like them, though.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: You liked Tom Donaldson, art history professor, because he liked to talk about that.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I liked him partially because he was interested in sexuality and sex.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And how it is depicted in art, in history.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, let me get this a slightly different way, if I can formulate this question. It is one thing to be interested in sex. First of all, almost everybody is in one form or another. And it's another thing to make pictures that express this interest. But it's still a vigorous thing to make pictures that express this interest and inspire to be art. And when we're talking about these schools that you call sexuality artists, we're also doing, let's face it, fine art, making fine art. You're artists and I wondered how you see yourself in your work with them in that way, within that category of people, beyond Jerome having fun. Is it fun and good enough to make these last images that are dirty or sexy?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And beautiful.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Gravity is, as Jerome said in another interview, you said that you really didn't care too much about how these were perceived, how they were received, that you really did them for yourself. And that's a very admirable situation to be in at this moment, shall we say. I'm sure it's very genuine, but many of these other artists, who also make these things very clear, operate or, as we see them, as artists making art that aspire to be fine art. Isn't that the case here? Don't you like the idea that these works may well take their place?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That may not be a primary goal but it's certainly a subtrend?

JEROME CAJA: It's something that other people do, will do, but I don't need to categorize myself, you know. I know I will be. Those are things I know will happen.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Anna, what are your thoughts on that subject?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I think I might be reading too much into it, but I think that religion is a very important influence, and I tend to think, this is just my opinion on this, Jerome, you can correct me, I tend to think that sometimes there are depictions of people and sex, and even if there is no religious context in the painting, it comes out as some sort of reaction to what's suppose to be proper. Like when you're taught when you're little do this and do that. Like an altar boy is a perfect example, you know, the altar boy is being raised by a priest.

JEROME CAJA: Clown.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Priest/clown. OK, well there you go? [laughs] Right. That seems to be the perfect integration of a lot of different themes; it's sexual, it's violent, it's religious, it tells a story. It tells a story of someone that you know is very true.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I agree.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And ...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well sure. The issue of religion, we really haven't talked about that except at the very beginning. We touched on it in our last interview, but that's a whole and important theme in many works and you may as well go on record perhaps identifying yourself in those terms, your relationship to religion---

JEROME CAJA: I was brought up Catholic, real strict, but what I think attracts me to religion or the thing that I like is the material things, the statues, the paintings. In church I always loved the statues. And then the things I really love eccentric people most or a lot of the saints. The saints either they were in the wrong places at the wrong time, they got killed, or they were martyred or what ever, or they were really strange, intent people. There are a few things that I really love because of the story that surrounds them, like St. Lucy. I love that because this myth around her is that she was this beautiful woman who wanted to give herself just to God and she had beautiful eyes. Some king wanted to marry her and have her. She ripped out her eyes right there, and ... "Leave me alone." To me that whole story is about the strength of independence, because when she was there there wasn't much a woman could do. She could become a nun or she could get married and spit out children. So I think of St. Lucy as a lesbian. I think she's a woman who wants to be in charge of her life. And I admire that. I think that's really great, plus the story is so good. It's about .... It's not something I can do myself, I don't think. I'm not that strong. St. Theresa, she's a big one. There are two Therasas, you know, the Agony and the Ecstasy.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You like the one in Ecstasy, right?

JEROME CAJA: I like them both, well I like them both. I really love the one who's depicted in the Agony and Ecstasy I just think she's really sick. But she was a brilliant woman. She had a visual or physical experience where a shaft of light like a sword entered her body, and it was so painful that felt so good. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I can see how you could like that.

JEROME CAJA: That's my state of mind. Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why do you say in your view St. Lucy is a lesbian and then you explain that went by her last name. She's a woman who could take charge of her life. Do you have to be a lesbian to take charge of your life?

JEROME CAJA: No, you don't. You could be straight, yeah. I just think that because she didn't want to have anything to do with men.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I guess you could say that about all nuns, because they renounce---

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Maybe.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I'm sure there's quite a few lesbian nuns. Just like there are a lot of gay clergy.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you see the world pretty much in terms of these kinds of dualities?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And that people's stories are primarily about their sexuality, their gender---

JEROME CAJA: There are all kinds of stories, you know; there are all kinds of stories.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But for you, do you feel that this is the most interesting, most important?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. Well, it's one of the things that I find fascinating. As I said before, the church has in a way, probably has some of the best art. Plus, just being raised with strict Catholic mores. I went to Catholic private schools. I think there are good things and bad things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In some of your imagery, that seems to be anti-clerical and I guess the Church is what it appears to be. In other words, a way of getting back at the Church.

JEROME CAJA: No. I just think that my experience with the church is what it is. I have no desire to have ... or anything like that. I personally don't like the hierarchy of the church because there is so much hypocrisy there, but I have no need to go after them. I mean, I don't go into that shit. I don't practice their rituals; it's just something that was part of my life.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: It seems to be something you know so much about that you're able to use it almost like a metaphor for other things.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I think a lot of things like stigmata; I have a lot of things with stigmata. I think the idea of people having stigmata is fascinating. It's really fascinating.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Another question that involves ..., which is a ... thing, which is a subtrend thing about ... In some of your work at least, there is certainly in the Charlie work the portraits of Charlie, there's a very strong line of mysticism, it seems to me, which of course, you don't have to go too far from that because it's right back around to the Catholic Church, which is laden.

JEROME CAJA: Well, I love lots of religions. I'm fascinated by it. I'm fascinated by it. It's a very interesting part of humanity.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What are the parts of religions that are really interesting to you? You mentioned the stories and saints, but what about the ideas, about the spiritual and the other side?

JEROME CAJA: I think it's pretty interesting to contemplate after death life. I think it's interesting to contemplate virtue. Religion has all kinds of things in it. There have some great virtues in living, ways of living that are wonderful. I really love a lot of Hindu things. They have some fabulous stories. I think any religion, the stories that are associated with certain religions are fascinating, 'cause it talks about life on all kinds of levels. I guess that's where I'm most philosophical, that kind of thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you see your work expressing that in any specific ways? Philosophical things? Religion, also ethics?

JEROME CAJA: Well, the ethical part and the virtue, that's just living. To me, virtues are qualities and so is life. That's about living and it just so happens that it's also part of religion. In my work, I think it's more of an appropriation of some stories that I have heard, that happen to come from religion.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK. So you wouldn't say that there were ethical components in the work itself?

JEROME CAJA: Well, honesty, that's certainly ethical. I really believe in truth. So is the fact that every religion a source of violence, hatred and murder. Just look at the Middle East. The Jews hate the Arabs, the Catholics hate the Jews and the Arabs, [laughs] they're Muslims, you know. Everyone conflicts. Look at Bosnia, Christians against Muslims. I think that's ironic, the fact that they try and teach virtue and it's one of the biggest causes of war and murder and hatred. It's so weird.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Does some of your work deal with those themes?

JEROME CAJA: Maybe, and again it could be something that would be subconscious, not a conscious thing. I think a lot of my work isn't really a conscious thing. The conscious things of my work would be like the colors. I love colors. The subject matter or the story is more. It comes out. I'm there just thinking. I just do something and so the content is from all kinds, as I said, comes from the subconscious. It includes all kinds of things and one of those things is because of my interest is religious things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I want to try to continue a little bit about what's behind these works. It's never easy to do, to try different ways to look at them. And Anna, you can help with this as well if some questions come to mind, because obviously there's no right answer to this. But it's a way of trying to provoke it a little bit and see what might come up. I guess I should ask about a very special category in your work. These are little tiny, tiny

paintings, icons in your life.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Actually they're bottle caps. Tiny paintings on them that are done with fingernail polish, that you have thousands of bottles. In any rate, they are quite remarkable. This is very unusual in terms of material, in terms of format and skill.

JEROME CAJA: In a way it really isn't.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It isn't? Well, tell me about it.

JEROME CAJA: When you look at, I mean, historically there have always been tiny brooches with paintings and tiny things. It's miniatures. India is noted for. What I like about a lot of the Indian work is the miniature paintings. I think it's a pretty long tradition to have small things that have stories in them. Miniature is a tradition.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's absolutely true. In portraits and so forth, it's typical.

JEROME CAJA: Uh huh. I love icons, I love, you know, it's the same. It's a tradition.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So this perhaps a conscious effort on your part to participate in that tradition?

JEROME CAJA: It's just that tradition fits me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the material, the technical thing?

JEROME CAJA: I just love nail polish; it's a beautiful paint. Gorgeous paint, gorgeous paint.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When did you first get the notion, instead of putting it on your toenails and fingernails or you'd stick on your ...

JEROME CAJA: No, I'd never put it on my body.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: You never have, have you?

JEROME CAJA: No.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's even more interesting, really. When did you have this, "Ah, Eureka, I can use nail polish on---"

JEROME CAJA: Cleveland State. I used it on ceramics.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see.

JEROME CAJA: You know, color burns out and you've already fired the piece seven times. One more firing will destroy the piece. You use nail polish. It works perfect, because it looks like a glaze.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Many of these works are very lush, very rich, very coloristic, and look in many cases as if they are cast in layers rather than ....

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I like layers. Layering you can get. It's good for building color. Technical thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, right, right.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I was thinking earlier about an instructor at Cleveland State who kept saying "thinner, thinner and thinner."

JEROME CAJA: Well, part of my esthetic is fragility. I've always been a very fragile person in certain respects. 'Cause I'm small and little. So fragility is part my personality and I'm fascinated by fragility. I think it's a beautiful thing.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And also by fragile things that can actually hurt you, you know. You made sets of sadomasochistic dinnerware that was really fragile, really sharp, really thin and I had a coffee cup that could cut your lips off.

JEROME CAJA: [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh man, did you ...?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I used it for years; I knew where to put my mouth. It was frightening.

JEROME CAJA: [coughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This is fabulous. I want to know about this. What are you trying to do? Giving her such a cup.

JEROME CAJA: You know, such dichotomy. Something frail, but can kill you.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: But can really hurt you.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, now tell me, describe this cup.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I still have it at home. Like I said, it's thin and it had a pattern pressed into it.

JEROME CAJA: I made whole dinner sets.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Yeah, and on the edge, the lip was the just the clay and was basically bent outward and torn, so it had just jagged edges. After he went to graduate school, I would see slides of his work and ceramics became the big thing for the most part, although some the things I see here, I haven't seen before, but they just turned into a flat wall, like these images, right?

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: They look more and more like drawings, and he started coloring them more and more like you were doing his drawings.

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And eventually you weren't doing ceramics at all and you started doing the drawings and the drawings became thicker with the nail polish.

JEROME CAJA: Yes, with the aspect of layering.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Some of your drawings look like your ceramics. You couldn't touch them or have them pretty much ... you might have a hard time. Oh, you could see they were great ...

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you agree with Anna's report there?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK.

JEROME CAJA: Of course, I don't think the paintings were so fragile, but some of them are. There's a whole, entire--- I love to play and experiment. I took paint remover and put it on a couple paintings and let it dry, then paint on top of that. So I have some things, that every time you touch it, it just falls apart. A lot of that, too, is life. Life is fragile. People are in a sense fragile.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now, this is what I was going to ask, is there an emotional connection to this or a psychological as well as the obvious?

JEROME CAJA: Life is fragile, fragility is all around. People all have a fragility. It's easy to hurt someone.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is this where your own experience, frequently, have you found in general, and many people use this same kind of fragility?

JEROME CAJA: I think because I feel fragile myself, and that in my work it's the natural thing to come out.

[SESSION 2]

[END TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SESSION 2  
TAPE 2, SIDE B

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Jerome, September 29, 1995. This is tape 2, side B. What about humor in your work? That's an important element?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I think laughter is one of my most favorite things. I love to hear it. I love to do it myself. I just think it's a fabulous thing, but also it takes the hardness off, you know, that makes it bounce easier. It's easier to talk about things or to think about things when there's funniness, a sense of humor. I love that. I really I like that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you see, by any chance, I don't know if you go to the movies, Pulp Fiction?

JEROME CAJA: No. I'm not much of a movie goer, I must say. I think it's a fabulous medium, but I have a pretty short attention span to sit and do something.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The reason I mention it is that there are some terrific scenes. Have you seen it?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Yes, several times. You'd just love it, Jerome.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Terrific scenes and in some cases they would be almost unbearably, unbearably violent and yet the film maker, director, writer, Tarantino, knows how to use humor. I thought of that when describing your interests as a--- It takes you almost there and then sort of brings you back and it has this. It's funny.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Uh huh.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, it's relief.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, it's relief. And so it occurs to me. Too bad you haven't seen the film, it occurs to me. That there is this same strategy involved in each of your works.

JEROME CAJA: I think that anyone who loves humor is going to be part-- It's they're making something. If they're an artist, it's going to be a part of that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about speaking of things that are humorous? One of the aspects of your life and career that may be a little unusual in certain circles is your involvement in the drag culture in San Francisco. There's no question that there's a direct connection to your work, your images. In fact, do you feel that is part of your work?

JEROME CAJA: Definitely, definitely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Performance, conceptual performance aspect?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, definitely. The thing I love most about drag is, I don't mean all drag, and being a drag queen you meet all kinds of drag queens. And this city has so many talented drag queens, really talented in other ways, but even in the drag way. So that's the world I live in, you know, that's my world.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: For those of us who, the many who will read this interview, for the uninitiated, could you describe what this is? The drag culture, describe it. What's involved? What are the differences, different types of drag events? How does that world operate?

JEROME CAJA: It's extremely diverse. It's just as diverse, as say, homosexuals. Homosexuals tend to be ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal. Drag queens can be sick to brilliant. I find it all fascinating, myself. I find it all fascinating. There's a group called the Empresses and these are like big truck drivers who once a year have a big event. These big guys in drag. It's fabulous. The imagery, well, drag queens are like clowns, really, because they are something in disguise. Plus, because I think, I'm such an effeminate male that it's-- I think I started drag because it's like Halloween and I've always loved to be dressed up. There's certain things I like. My drag queenism is noted for it's lingerie. I love lingerie. I think it's beautiful. It's the most beautiful thing and not something most people show or do. In the heterosexual, it is very private. It's between the woman and the man. But for me, and I think for some drag queens that are, of course, in the closet. You don't see them ever, but some drag queens are very public. And me as a drag queen, I wear the things that I find beautiful.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Is that really very .... I'd like to challenge that.

JEROME CAJA: What?

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I know you find things beautiful. It's kind of misleading, because you don't necessarily try to go for the conventional, glamorous, beautiful woman.

JEROME CAJA: No, no.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: If anything, it's the opposite.

JEROME CAJA: I love the grotesque. In my sense of beauty, it's grotesque.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You're aesthetic then, this grotesque?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, I definitely have a grotesque.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: It's strange.

JEROME CAJA: But I'm also fascinated by some of the other drag queens, because there are drag queens in every kind of area. There are drag queens that are performers, so I love good performers.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mean singers and strippers.

JEROME CAJA: Like Patsy Cline. Arturo. He's fabulous.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever have, sorry to interrupt you, but it sounds to me as though there is some tribal or family aspect of this. A lot of the drag queens know one another and certain events they would attend and get up for.

JEROME CAJA: It's cliquish.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is that the nature of the group?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, I think the drag queens I know, I know because they were wild performers. And I'm always a wild performer, so, of course, those are the drag queens I know best. Other drag queens I know only because I've been privileged not to see that world.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When did you start doing this?

JEROME CAJA: I started, I did some drag in Cleveland, but it was very minimal. I didn't like wearing make-up. I know the value of make-up so I wore and used it more and more because you can do so many things. In Cleveland I didn't like it too much. But I loved dresses, you know, begin with Ginger's things.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Uh huh. The first drag Jerome did was, in public, was at a punk rock club. It was a benefit for a ... magazine. It was a banquet that had five or ten punk bands playing, and Jerome was hired as the go-go dancer. [laughs] He wore five wigs on his head. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: All at once?

JEROME CAJA: Well, actually, I think, my first drag was in the Florida and Cleveland Show.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Oh, the art opening.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, and they were having a beauty pageant and we had to make a bathing suit, too. So that was probably one of my first public drags I did. But it's one of those things that develops. I had a roommate who was a drag queen and she is the one that introduced make-up to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: ....

JEROME CAJA: 'Cause she's a really cute boy, but she knows how to put on the make-up so she looks like a woman. So then I picked up make-up and it's a progression. You get deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper. [laughs]

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I think the drag allows Jerome to be more of an extrovert than if he goes out straight.

JEROME CAJA: Well, being a drag queen is a very interesting thing. When I'm in drag, no one follows me. [laughs] A lot of people are so freaked, it's like shocking. When people are shocked, there's not going to be any violence. There's not going to be anything to happen, because people are just shocked.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Whereas when you're walking around as a ..... with long blond hair ---

JEROME CAJA: Then they will riddle... Yeah. But I like both. I like to be one of those things. When I do drag, I get a ton of attention. People really do love drag queens, all kinds of people do. They're fascinated, so I get a lot of attention.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I also think it's interesting dichotomy in Jerome, that you like to be so extroverted out there, but you're very careful who you let into your house and who you tell what parts of your life to.

JEROME CAJA: Yes.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And that part stays really private.

JEROME CAJA: I'm a very private person, but I have a need to be social and as a drag queen, which most of the people in this town know me. I could be at this public thing, but no one really knew I was there. But it became a problem when people started associating the fact that I was an artist, because my private world then disappeared.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Which is pretty recent? Relatively speaking.

JEROME CAJA: I would say within the past probably five years. Because I as a drag queen, it's a whole other world. As a painter it's very private, something you do alone. You don't have a social thing. And so my painting, I mean, I say it's a thing I enjoy, I'm not a really serious drag queen. Drag queens are very much wanting to pass. I'm like hermaphroditic, my body is my body. I don't talk. I never cared if people, you know, that wasn't important to me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Describe a typical evening in the drag life. What is the nature of the socializing? How would it go, an evening, setting out into the world to do?

JEROME CAJA: Well, it depends on what I'm .... I was go-go dancing and stuff. That's fun. Could you ask me the question again?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think Jerome's getting tired.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Just describe how---

JEROME CAJA: No, I just forgot.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: --- how you get ready and then go out and and go do what.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A typical evening.

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I don't know if there would be exactly a typical, like you go to the street fairs. I used to go to those dressed up or the parades, the Gay Day Parades. I'd get dressed up. I used to work as a go-go dancer.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where was that?

JEROME CAJA: Different places I did it. Michael Blue, he's a DJ and he staffed clubs and they had a club called Chaos. My favorite one was Club Uranus. Because this place was so good.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You were a go-go dancer there?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. Actually I was a trouble maker.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what do you mean?

JEROME CAJA: When I'm in drag, I'm a trouble maker.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So what do you mean?

JEROME CAJA: I terrorize people. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How do you terrorize people?

JEROME CAJA: Just physically or mentally, you know, physically.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: So you would do sex, dancing on the bar.

JEROME CAJA: I would dance on the bar. Usually though, I didn't dance; I was wrestling with someone. [laughs] One thing is really cute, all the handsome men, they want the attention, so they try to get involved and it's fine with me. I would love to wrestle. I always loved wrestling and I think I did more wrestling than dancing. [laughs] I don't think I can dance. I don't have any sense of music or talent, but I can flail.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: And you can flirt.

JEROME CAJA: I can flirt and being on a go-go platform is the perfect height, because you can interact with the people around it. I never liked being on a stage because it's too removed. When I'm in drag I want to interact. I



want to, you know, when I was a go-go dancer, what you do is go up and dance for so long and then take a break, and you come back. Everyone is, it was always traditional that I would be the last one because---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Save the best for last.

JEROME CAJA: ---well, because I had a tendency to destroy things. [laughs] They made like cages and things and I'd always destroy them.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Then you'd do bad things that you weren't suppose to do.

JEROME CAJA: Yes. [laughs]

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Sexual things and stuff like that and show off. [laughs]

JEROME CAJA: Yes, it's great to have sex in public.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it's was part of your routine?

JEROME CAJA: I don't know if I could really say I had a routine. I just did what I want. I think the thing is, the reason I worked with them, because Michael loved the fact of causing trouble. He loved what I did and I'm just a little trouble maker. [laughs] I've actually been kicked out of places because I cause so much trouble when I'm in drag. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How frequently would you do this? How much of a ...

JEROME CAJA: Every Sunday.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Every Sunday? So that kind of routine then ---

JEROME CAJA: Yeah, you get regular people, regular people and you always get new people. So there's always these regular people who follow you and love you and worship you, and also there's this new influx. The new people are sometimes shocked, sometimes they're just amazed.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: They used Jerome's image a lot, too. Like there would be people who would be advertising these events, like those postcards.

JEROME CAJA: I'm a model. I understand the camera.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Very well.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I love photography.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You must have learned that from Anna.

JEROME CAJA: Well, that's one of the reasons I like Anna. She uses beautiful photography. She has a great eye, a great eye.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Would you describe yourself to some degree as an exhibitionist?

JEROME CAJA: Oh yes, definitely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: OK. What's the spill over if any then from the drag life and performances and your art?

JEROME CAJA: Well.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Any overlap?

JEROME CAJA: I think the overlap is just when I do that, those experiences then are a part of me, and my mind sort of goes into the painting.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Then they become practically the subjects in some instances?

JEROME CAJA: Yes, but I think that painting is a very personal, introverted, you know, it's very much completely alone, there's nothing around me, there's no distraction. It's very, in a sense it's introverted, but it's extroverted. In a sense it's very personal, but I know eventually it becomes public.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

JEROME CAJA: But you know, when I was painting after school, after I got done with school, it was just a very personal, private thing. I have never been big on showy.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You have had some shows though?

JEROME CAJA: Oh, I've been in tons of shows because people ask me. I have never asked to be in a show or to be anywhere. I've never sought that out. You know how some artists have resumés and they want to show. I have never felt that was something that important, but other people have felt it important. Like the first show I had after I was out of school, this was for ... and ... this woman had heard about my work. Grass roots or word of mouth is the absolute strongest thing. People see things and they tell their friends and they tell their friends, and they tell their friends. So, since I know other artists and they love what I do, they then tell other people. So from that show I think I got what's important in the art world is reviews, what's written about you. In fact, in the art world, it's the most important thing, it's what's written. It's what people say about your art. To me, of course, the art is what's most important.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, it should be.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I mean art is what I love.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: ... how you say your favorite reviews are the ones where they really hate your work and some of the descriptions. [laughs]

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I've never had a bad review. I've never had a bad review. But that's something that just perpetuates the art work and then after that. It's actually the writers, the writers are what have perpetuated me and other people.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did it come about that you were included in that "Bad Girls" exhibition they had at UCLA

JEROME CAJA: The one who was curating it knew about my work. The thing is lots of people know everything about me, but I don't know people. I don't know who people are, so people they chose, that was Marcia---

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Tanner

JEROME CAJA: Tanner and there was also, I think there were two Marcias.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yeah, Tucker in New York.

JEROME CAJA: And the one here had heard about me and knew about my work, knew what I did. It was such a good show, actually, and she wanted to include me in the show. So she came by and that was just fine. What my tendency is to say, "Well, OK, whatever, yes." I have a hard time saying no to anything. If someone wants to see my work or use it or show it, fine, sure. But she picked most of the things for that show. The thing is when people do that though, I always fight. I always love pressure. There's always going to be some little conflict. Because there are some things I just love and I think they're appropriate for certain shows, but the curator, Marcia said, "This is my show, I want to feel that I'm putting this show together." But she was really a nice lady, you know. She came a couple of times and looked at things, and she picked out things that she wanted to put in the show.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now, did you feel that it was a good fit, that your work fit well into these women's art?

JEROME CAJA: I don't think I have ever really fit into any show that I have been in.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it didn't matter that it was about a bunch of women? It could have been a bunch of anybody and your work?

JEROME CAJA: Yeah. I don't think, I personally don't think, that I have ever been in a show that was meant where I would fit into.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Group shows?

JEROME CAJA: Well, with that show in Boston about drag, so I would have thought that they loved my work, but they were very rude and bad. They were pretty stupid.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: Didn't they pick something that didn't go.

JEROME CAJA: They picked something that had nothing to do with drag, except the materials. I thought how weird. But the shows that I have been in, you know, I've been in lots of great shows, and I guess the only reason, like there was a show called "Facing the Finish," at the museum here [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] and

then it went down to Santa Barbara [Contemporary Arts Forum] and Pasadena [Art Center College of Design]. I guess I was a painter. I had no idea why they picked me, but they came to my ..., I got a call from someone from the museum who said they wanted to come by and look at my things. I said, "Sure, come by." It's not something I personally pursued, but it just so happened they loved, for some reason, they loved my work and wanted it in the show. It's true.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you know, thanks to Anna certainly to no small degree, and I really mean that, your papers, your documents are all going to be preserved at the Smithsonian. In other words, your story and this interview as part of it becomes part of a great research collection that's pretty establishment. Now my question was--

JEROME CAJA: Well, I have no problems with establishment.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: --- and I think that's great, but it makes me wonder what you see happening with the works. What would be your preference.

JEROME CAJA: My ideal is to have good things that I value seen by as many people as possible. I love selling work to collectors. I think people who collect art ---, I know that this collection will be seen by a lot of people. I just think it's fabulous that things that I love are seen by lots of people; everyone can also enjoy it. I think it's a good thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you see the works? I'll take it one step further, that they end up eventually in public collections, in museums.

JEROME CAJA: Oh yeah. They already are.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Uh huh.

JEROME CAJA: I love that. I just think that's fabulous, because I know then in the future people will laugh and be -  
--

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Be happy.

JEROME CAJA: --- be happy. Laughter's my favorite thing, humor. I think I have a black sense of humor. I love the fact that people in the future will be able to enjoy that, and do that and I like history and I love the idea of being part of history. That's great.

ANNA VAN DER MEULEN: I don't think there is anything anti-establishment about Jerome's work. He's just very pro-individual.

JEROME CAJA: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right.

[END INTERVIEW]

[END SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

Last updated... July 22, 2002