



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-
23**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Gronk on January 20 & 23, 1997. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Jeffrey Rangel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

G: Gronk

JR: Jeffrey Rangel

[Session 1]

JR: Okay, this is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, with Gronk. Today is January 20, 1997, at the artist's studio in downtown Los Angeles. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel and we're ready to get started.

G: Okay, good.

JR: Welcome.

G: Thank you.

JR: Like I said, normally we like to start out with any recollections about family and kind of where you grew up, where your family was from, things of that nature.

G: Okay. My parents were both born here in Los Angeles, and my grandparents came from Mexico. I grew up, basically, with a single parent, my mother. I grew up in East Los Angeles. Early on—at five years old—I can remember that the things that I did best was to make things. And those were the most exciting times, I believe—when somebody gave me a pencil and a sheet of paper—was to create a world for myself, basically. It sort of made everything fall to the wayside. The environment where I was growing up, the poverty—all of that just sort of fell to the wayside, and I was able to create these worlds and enter into it. And I think that sort of isolated me a lot from other kids in the neighborhood, even isolated me while I was going to school. And my earliest recollections of entering school was the times when it was art time, and they had easels and they had paint and they had brushes.

And I remember that they used to have a competition every single year at the school, and the best drawings were usually picked and they would give awards to the students who did the best artwork. The school I went to was this school called Rowan Avenue Street School, and I was never picked for any of those awards—or even to be included in those exhibitions of art. And I always wondered why. [laughs] What is it about my stuff that is just not quite right?

And early on I was just fascinated by television. Because TV was sort of my babysitter. Growing up with a single parent, the TV set was on constantly. I was bombarded with cartoons on Saturdays, and also the rest of the week I was watching things early in the morning. And I think a lot of my early sensibilities sprang from the sense of a TV monitor in close proximity to me. Now, in the household where I grew up, it sort of had a very conservative atmosphere, a small house in this neighborhood—Gage Avenue was the street that I grew up on—relatively small house.

But the thing I remember the most about the living room was the day that what was brought into it was a boomerang coffee table. Now, for me that was "Space age has just entered into my living room!" In the fifties, you know, that is the time of kind of space-age sensibility. I remember sitting on top of it and I would be watching on television *War of the Worlds* or *Devil Girl from Mars*. But in *War of the Worlds*, in particular, the shape of the flying saucer in that movie was also the shape of the boomerang coffee table. And I would sit on top of the coffee table and just pretend that that was my flying saucer or my spaceship.

I think I've been intrigued from my earliest recollections with the sense of TV, and I can see it as something that directed me in my direction as an artist, even later on in life looking back now and see[ing] what a big influence TV or even film have had on my early beginnings. Just thinking about the fact that I could make something. When I saw something as silly or stupid as a film like *Devil Girl from Mars*, inside my head clicked the fact that, "Somebody actually *made* this. That's what I want to do. I want to *make* things." There's nothing else really that important to me at this point in my life—five, six years old. It's to make things. It finally clicked in my head that somebody had to put a costume on that person. Somebody had to make those people do those certain things that they were doing. I want to do those kinds of things. But it was easy for me to see that, "Well, I don't have access to Hollywood, so I can't be like, at five years old, making movies, but perhaps I can create those images on a sheet of paper." I could create that ship floating in the ocean with a boomerang coffee table floating above it—shooting down rays and destroying the whole sheet of paper—by creating this image of this *War of the Worlds* kind of sensibility early on.

JR: Was this something that your mother encouraged you to do?

G: Actually, no. I had an uncle and he, allegedly—it's like I never really found out the truth about this—was going to work for Walt Disney in the forties, but the war interrupted his career. He went into the army. But he was always somebody that was around that drew, and he would do drawings and stuff. And I always thought that was the coolest thing, that there's someone that knows how to draw cartoons. I didn't know how to draw quite like him. It was like he was good at what he did. What I was doing was like really very primitive. So I would always be so envious of the way he could draw actual cartoon kind of imagery. So I think that had an influence on me.

My mother sort of, I think, saw it as an activity that occupied my time—that kept me away from outside influences, basically. So I think for her it was good that I had concentrated on something other than hanging out on the streets or anything along those lines, that I could occupy my time by getting a sheet of paper and just spending the whole day drawing.

JR: What about friends or brothers and sisters?

G: Well, my father populated other places, and I have brothers and sisters who I run into and they say they're my brother or sister. And I say, "Oh, really?" [laughter]

JR: I have cousins like that.

G: But I think friends that were in the neighborhood and people that I met when I was going to school always called me an artist, for one thing. It was because I was constantly drawing. So I was always referred to that idea. It's like being called that already: "You're an artist."

JR: It's like your [calling]. [laughter]

G: "You're an artist, this is what you do." I didn't have any ideas as to, "Well, how does an artist

make a living?" Or, "How does an artist become an artist? Or become someone that people see their work?" I had no notion of that. I knew that when people saw what I did, [they—Ed.] would not necessarily say, "Oh, that's good." They would always say, "Oh, that's interesting." [laughs] So I think even that kind of a response was, I think, calling attention to myself, basically, by showing, "This is what I could do." And I thought I could do it better than the person next to me or the other kid. The other kids had, I guess, a more . . . like, they would do a circle that was green and then the red dots and that was the tree. And two sticks for a trunk, and that was brown. And for me it was always so simple, and I would look at that and say, "Well, he's doing it, he's doing it, she's doing it." It's like, "I don't want mine to be like that. So maybe I'll do a triangle tree or maybe I'll do an imaginary tree." And I think it was early becoming aware that I had an imagination. I think that was an important thing, that I was able to play with things.

Early on I was an avid reader, and I think that's one of the saving graces for me as a kid as well. Books. . . . I could hardly wait when I was learning how to read the Dick and Jane books. "I can hardly wait till I grasp this and I can go into a library and I can read the big books that the adults carry with them." They could go out and they would check out a stack of thick books and it had all these words in it. And I'm struggling to learn how to read these Dick and Jane books. I can hardly wait till I'm able to grasp the larger subjects. So I had an impatience, I guess, as a kid. I wanted to know things, because I probably felt at the time that if you're an adult you know everything—not realizing that when you do become an adult you still don't know a lot. But as I kid I think I was excited about going into the library, reading things and the things that. . . . You know, one thing led into another. Another book led into this other fairy tale or this story, and it became more [involving, evolving], and it's like, "Wow, dinosaurs!" It's just like another direction. It's like, "Oh, yeah, I got to learn about all these dinosaurs. They look so cool." It was learning about ships. It was learning about everything, like the world was just opening up and expanding for me. And that thrill and excitement just. . . . I became the avid reader. When you sat around in a circle and the teacher would point to the different kids, and some would have reading problems or they would read real slow, I could hardly wait till they pointed to me and said, "Okay, your turn." And then read, you know, like theatrical with feeling and emotions. [laughter] All that I could muster up at six or seven years old into these simple little stories of Dick and Jane. [speaks melodramatically:] "Yes, they're going to the grandmother's house. They've got cupcakes. These cupcakes look good. I can taste them."

So it was all of that enthusiasm of just beginning to learn about things. I think the world just opened up and kept on opening up for me. I wanted to do as much stuff when I was a kid just growing up—painting, drawing, whatever material was around. Like paintbrushes were non-existent for me at an early age. Only in the school kind of situation. And then the only thing was the Peechie folders, which I used to cover from front to back, all over. It was the most elaborate scrawls on Peechie folders and inside of books—in classes I was a lot of the times not listening but actually drawing—and on borders of papers that I would have for the math there would always be little drawings and doodles that would litter all over the pages. So I think from a very early age I was always creating and having fun, I guess, with making things.

JR: Already I've heard a couple of the major themes in your work—the sense of fun or sense of humor, some the performance aspects, and the imagination, the creativity—of the very earliest memories of yourself as a child. I think that's pretty interesting. So when we talk a little bit later on about some of the specific bodies of work, it's going to be interesting to hear how that comes out.

G: I think film was another thing and TV.

JR: Pop culture.

G: Yeah, that also had an impact. And I realized later on when I was doing my work that I was cropping my imagery as if it was on the screen. But not on the screen of the movie screen, but cropping it as you take the film and put it on a TV and things get cropped in a different way. Like heads don't quite fit into the format of the TV, and sort of like you see half the face talking sometimes because it doesn't quite all fit onto the TV screen. So in a sense I was making sort of cinematic and TV kind of choices in my painting, and that they were as if they were camera angles. And so they had crane shots, close-up, and different kind of angle-type shots. So if you look at my work and someone's eyeballs are cut off but the nose and maybe the big red lips are in there, well, you look at a film like *War of the Worlds* and when the woman screams it's Technicolor and big red lips. So from the earliest sources you have something called *No Nose*, which is like a cinematic close-up of someone's face. So the recurring [sic] things go all the way back to the past.

And I [tended, tend] to do that because a lot of my work tends to have a biographical or a source that goes back to history for me, in some way or another. And so I tend to use, perhaps, the shape of that boomerang coffee table or the *War of the Worlds* shape. But it's floating through a landscape of more recent kind of work that I'm doing. And it's just a sense of the familiar for me being tossed into what I'm doing now in the present. So it's pulling something from the past and placing it into the present, but it has a biographical source to it whether it's just a shape but, you know, you don't read it as a coffee table or the spaceship from *The War of the Worlds*.

JR: Right.

G: So I think early on there was all of these things that cropped into my work.

By the time I entered into junior high school, I gravitated to a teacher—her name was Miss LaDuke—and she, for me, was my first encounter with what I thought was a beatnik. She wore a black turtleneck sweater, a black skirt, black stockings. She had hair that was really long and she had these sort of African beads around her neck and she had odd bracelets and stuff and she wore flat shoes. And everybody else wore pumps and had like the teacher kind of outfit on, the simple dress. And here was this woman that looked a little bit different than the rest and more casual. She was my ceramic teacher, and one thing she asked me was to spend time with her to talk after class or during lunch if I wanted to. It was interesting for me because it was like I was always intrigued by adults. I mean, as a kid it was like, "Yeah! This is life. You know, this woman who looks like a beatnik, and we're talking, we're having adult conversation." You know, it was sort of like where I wanted to be as a kid. And of course I was like [makes a babbling sound] stupid as everybody else around me. But as a young person then she asked me, "Okay, your ceramic sculptures that you're making, why are you doing what you're doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm making these African masks, and what I'm doing is, I'm burying them in East L.A. in different locations." And she goes, "Hmm, why are you burying these African masks throughout East L.A.?" "Well, in the future, maybe in 500 years from now there's going to be an archaeologist who will discover these African masks all over East L.A. and will wonder, "How the hell did they get there? So that's what I'm doing." And she said to me, "Look, you are going to take an awful lot of shit from a lot of people all your life. Don't listen to them. Just do what you want to do." And I think that really left an impression on me. It was like, "Well, what I'm doing is okay." And it was like, "I'm having fun. I'm doing these things and burying these African masks. . . ." Well, I thought they would look like African masks. They were elongated-type mask shapes and had these patterns painted on them.

JR: Does that mean you weren't getting that kind of encouragement many other places?

G: I think it was like hearing it from this adult who was in a sense an oddball herself—in a way—because she didn't quite fit into the school structure of things and how other people looked at that

particular moment of time in your life. And it was like somebody who just looked like she dressed comfortably and simply, and it was like everybody else was all dolled up with their hair stacked on their heads, spray—you know, hair spray—and just done to the nines. And here was somebody that didn't fit that mode at all, and saw something in my work that, if I thought at the time was kind of silly, she said it was okay to be that way. So I think for me that was an important . . . and plus the fact she was an artist who was saying this to me. It wasn't like a parent saying this. It wasn't like the kids that I hung out with saying this. It's like, "Don't take anything from anybody. Just do what you want to do." But here was somebody who was an actual person that I believed to be an artist was telling me this.

And it was, I think, a very encouraging thing for me. Despite the fact that this was Stevenson Junior High School in East LA, and I think even at that time I felt sort of oddball in a way because I wasn't into sports, I wasn't into hanging out with the rest of the kids. I would walk around with a book that was on the New York bestseller list. It was like I thought that was going to be important for me to like . . . if I'm going to learn it's like I have to see the ten most read books in the United States. And it's like I have to know what other people are reading. So I would be walking around with this books and stuff that I'd be reading, and they would always say, "Why are you reading that? It's not part of the curriculum for getting out of school or anything." But everything else seemed kind of boring, in a way, for me. It was like teen-romance and Clearasil and pimples, and just like, "Come on, let's go further than that." [laughs]

JR: Let's hurry up and get through that, huh?

G: Yes. I didn't want to hear teen problems for the next seven years or so.

JR: But at the same time you really cued into things that were happening in popular culture, things that might be focused at youth, when you were in junior high. So that's kind of feeding your imagination as well as these books on the bestseller list or books that you were just grabbing out of the library.

G: What happened, I think, for me was the expansion of the world in a way because of film. It was learning about things that other people were making and doing. I think at that point in time also [I] was learning that beyond the world I lived in there was this other world that existed as well. It was somebody in France doing something. There was somebody in Russia doing something. There was like some people all over the world that were making things—and not necessarily something that was like a painting that hung on a wall. There was somebody else that was making film that looked different than a Hollywood movie. I became intrigued by, like, "I don't understand it. I have to go back and see it again. Come on with me! Let's go see it again." And my friends and people that I knew it was like, "That's got subtitles. What do you want to see that for?"

JR: [laughs]

G: "I have to. Because it's this movie, and it's like these people are doing things in it and they're from Sweden, and this man's name is [Ingmar—Ed.] Bergman, and I don't understand what's going on." "Well, then why do you want to see it again if you don't understand it?" "Because I've gotta find out." It's like, "Why don't I understand these images? Why don't I understand the situations of these people and what they're doing?" So, again, it was like wanting to know what was out there. Why [Federico—Ed.] Fellini was doing something, why Bergman was doing something. And it was like, "These are about lesbians. What's a lesbian, you know?" [laughter] "That's about two women who love each other." "Oh, that's what that movie's about." [laughter]

JR: Oh, I get it now.

G: "Oh, that's like the librarian." [laughter] And they were like, "Who?" And I, like, "Margaret, the one who has the library on Gage Avenue where I grew up." "What about her?" "Well, she's like this. . . . Well, she looks like. . . . She's big. She looks like a man. She's got short-cropped hair, she wears Pendletons, she's got her hair slicked back, and she's always wearing pants and men's shoes. And all of our parents told us that, "Well you know, kids, she can't afford women's dresses; that's why she dresses like a man." And we all, "Oh, yeah, sure." And so we sort of like put one and one together and came up with five. So it was like here was a woman, her name was Margaret, she was the librarian, she was single, she lived at home with her mother, and she was always tough. She just looked like this tough guy behind the counter there. [Deepens his tone of voice:] "What are you doing over in that section? The kids section is over there." "Yeah, but I. . . ." "No, no, no. What you have to do is learn how to read in a direction. You don't just go into the big kids' books and start anywhere. You have to go to the classics first and then you build it up." So it was like this woman who was real aggressive and strong. And I thought, "Wow, she's so cool. I think I saw a movie about her." [laughter]

So it was all of these kinds of things early on that set off, I think, the input . . . just like constant curiosity about what I didn't understand. To me it was important to, like, "It's got to make sense. Somebody did it for some reason. But it looks so beautiful. Why did they do it? Why did he do that?" It was always sort of like taking things apart, basically in a way, and trying to understand it. And not having the capacity to fully understand it because there was empty spaces. It's like, "I want to see the adult movies."

JR: Where would you going to see these movies?

G: I would have to catch a couple of buses to go to Santa Monica, because that's where they usually played. Or sometimes even in downtown LA. I remember ditching high school and going to the Los Angeles Theatre to see a movie called *Peeping Tom*. And it was by the same man—later on I found out—that did *Black Narcissus*, did a lot of different films, *The Red Shoes*, *Tales of Hoffman*. He did this movie, but it was like, "Wow, this is an adult movie!" And, you know, I go in there and of course there's all these elderly men with their overcoats looking at this movie and I remember buying a chocolate cake and going into the theater and just sitting there. It's like, "Okay, this is an adult movie. I got by. Like I'm in here so I guess they'll take anybody to come into this movie house." And I still can remember the title of the movie and I've seen it later on and it's an interesting film. But it was those kinds of things that took me out of my environment. I wasn't a person that went to museums or galleries.

JR: I was just going to ask you that.

G: I didn't know they exist[ed]. . . . Well, I knew that they existed. I knew that as a kid you go on a field trip, you go to a museum. You walk with a bunch of people and they show you paintings and stuff, and you would see the Picassos, you would see the different timeframes of art. And I think at that age I was more intrigued by the different cultures—like art from India, art from China, art from different countries and stuff—as opposed to looking at a Picasso or a Matisse and saying, "Ooh, wow, this is so cool!" That didn't come till later—like, I think, at probably end of high school when I became more fascinated by painters and other artists. But in the earlier stages it was more gravitating to different cultures that made art.

And I think what happened was in that library that Margaret was in it was like, "Okay, there's the art history book." You know, it's like, "This is what the Greeks did, this is what the Romans did, this is

what. . . ." You know,

all of this. So it was like going back and looking at what other people had done, and in some way I felt myself limited because, "Okay, I can draw, I can paint. But it doesn't quite look like what I see that has been in the past. Now, why am I doing what I'm doing?" It's beginning to question, "What is it that I do? Why do I do it this way?"

JR: How old were you when you were asking yourself these questions?

G: Those are like the end of junior high school into high school. In high school, again it was taking and gravitating to the art classes. "I want to be a part of the art class." It's like, "I don't care about these other studies. I just want to do art and make things." Unfortunately, in high school I ran up against Mr. Ramirez, who was the local high school teacher, and we just did not hit it off.

JR: Art teacher?

G: Art teacher. And we had major run-ins and stuff. I was sort of like the rotten apple in his view, and I would talk back. And I was doing things that he just didn't feel was the way I should learn art. And it was like, you know, "Draw your hand." And I [would say—Ed.], "Draw my hand?!" [laughter]

JR: In high school, they're having me do this?

G: "I'm gonna draw my hand. . . ."

[Break in taping]

JR: Okay, we're back. This is tape 1, side B, interviewing with Gronk in his studio on January 20, 1997. And I was just commenting about how amazed I am about your self-consciousness, really, at such an early age. And one of the things that I notice going sort of through some of the profile material is that at fourteen years old you're writing plays already. Which to me. . . . I mean, I can kind of understand the response of maybe some of your peers. Like, "Wow, man, what are you doing with that top ten best-seller book right now? Don't you want to go do these other things?" But if you wanted to comment on that, I think. . . .

G: Well, I was saying that I felt so small in comparison to what was taking place all over the world. I mean, so almost insignificant that I was relying just on a sheet of paper and a pencil or a tool of some sort to make something. And here other people had access to film and actors and they can create a world also, and their world was unique and different and excitingly visual for me. And I think that's probably another key element is that I've always tended to have a visual sensibility that was imaginative in some way. And I guess, again, it comes from early . . . coming from an environment that was . . . you know, we weren't wealthy, we weren't rich. But in a sense, in comparison to other people around me, sometimes I was better off than other kids that I knew. An example was that every Christmas you would collect canned goods and then we would deliver them to different families that couldn't afford a Christmas dinner and stuff. And end up knocking on the doors of these people—because they would give us a list of who was in need—and then the kid that I sat next to in school was the kid that answered the door. And like, "Wow, I didn't know you were poor." And "poor" meant "poor of the poorest." And I felt like, boy, I thought I had it easy and stuff in comparison to a lot of other people around me. I think a lot of other people gravitated to gangs or to other sources for that reinforcement or validation. And for me it was listening to Margaret, the librarian, or listening to LaDuke, who was the art teacher. It was sort of like, "I've got something that I can do and that I can share, that other people seem to like and look at." So at a very early age it

was, like, "Look at what I could do." And I guess it was just . . . you know, there was nothing else. Physically, I was just a skinny, stupid-looking kid, just like nothing that anybody was going to get excited about. But I did have talent. I did have something that I could pick up and share. And it wasn't like, "No, I couldn't hit the home run. No, I couldn't catch the ball with a glove. No, I couldn't swim the Channel. No, I couldn't, you know, like do any of those kinds of things, but look at how good I can make these things," and have other people look at them and enter into something that I've created.

JR: Right.

G: And so I think from early on it was like that curiosity of seeing what other people can do and make. And when I say it's like film was an important thing, because it was the most accessible kind of thing. It was going to the movies on Saturday and Sunday. And like just watching a movie from the time you entered till like, "I'm going to see it three or four times." And it's like watching things and just being transported somewhere else or another time frame or another place. And I think all of that influenced me when I started to do even the performance pieces. It was going back after seeing a horror movie. "Okay, let's get the neighborhood to restage that movie. I saw this wonderful movie the other day," and explaining it to all the kids. "Okay, you're going to be the heroine, you're going to be the monster. And, of course, you're going to fall down and he's gonna pick you up and carry you off." And it would be like staging this in the front yards of all the neighbors' houses. And we would take over the neighborhood, run down the streets like wild kids, and create this monster movie that we would even add the music to. [sounds a verbal drumroll] You know, like all these sources. So, early on I had that sense of. . . . I mean, I didn't know it was performance art or happenings or anything, because you're just a kid growing up. And so to me it was just like this was play, but this was like I can direct this and stage these things in the neighborhood. And as I got older it's like, well, that sense of play, I think, is something that I've utilized. Now meeting other people who had similar experiences or similar kinds of sensibility I tended to gravitate to. After high school it was hanging out at East L.A. College, and one of the things was was like, "Wow, people drink coffee, they smoke cigarettes; they're adults." "These are like all the foreign films I've ever seen in my life."

JR: [laughs]

G: "It's like the smoke coming out of the people's faces. Wow, these are the big kids. They've got adult problems. Ooh, I wonder if it's going to be like Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon in *The Apartment*?" It's like "Things like that going to happen to us now?" So it was like all of those kinds of things that I think I was intrigued by growing up. I ended up hanging out there, taking a class in . . . I believe, like art survey class. Thomas Silleman was the instructor. And, again, it was art about architecture. It was about magazines, it was about film, thank God. It was about like a whole survey of what people had made and stuff. And here it is, okay, it's like making connections. It's like, "Oh, that's that whole school of *abstract* people. Oh, here's this other school. Wow, what happened before them? Oh, it's like this whole school of surrealism. Oh, New York is the center after the War. It's like all the Europeans ended up here." It's like all of sudden things started to make sense. It's like there was a clarity, sort of a cloud lift. It's like, "Oh, the *dadas*." It's like, "Hmm, those constructivists. *That's* what I'm doing. I'm painting and doing things that are like on the streets in Russia. They used to paint these trains and the trains used to go into the provinces and let people experience art by painting on the sides of the trains. That's so exciting! That's like things I would like to do." So it was like all of sudden putting things together. Like looking, "Oh, here's this *Art in America*. Oh, this is my new hangout. This is the library in here that has all these movie reviews, *Art in America*, all these art type of publications. "Boy, I'm going to have to. . . ." It's like, "How far back does it go? Okay, now I'm going to have to start reading from the first publications all the way to 1966 or so." And so, again,

it's like the library became the place that was the hangout for me. And taking in a lot of the information about other people that were making things. And then the thrill for me was, "There are people out there that are even stranger than I am. Oh, that is so wonderful." It was like. . . . [laughter]

JR: Yeah, what was strange about some people at that time. So this would be about the mid-sixties that you would be hanging out?

G: Yeah. It was about '66, around that timeframe.

JR: What kind of stuff were people into at East L.A. College that made them strange in '66?

G: Actually, probably it was much later than that. About '67, '68, around that timeframe. And there were people who are doing things like happenings and they did it in the fifties. And then there's like, "Oh, that whole beat era. I wonder if my junior high school teacher was a beatnik! She used to look just it!" [laughter]

JR: That's it!

G: "She used to just look like that. And she used to mention some name that I just never like realized. Oh, yeah, *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac, that was a footnote!" [laughter] "Now I get it." So it was like piecing things together that were just thrown out and then now realizing. You know, you break out of puberty, and it's like, "Oh, yeah," a whole 'nother world has opened up for you. And so it's like a lot of things that. . . .

Like the kids that I hung out with in high school. There was a thing that took place at that time. It was the dropping of the dress code. Where you could sort of like. . . . Like the codes were sort of dropping. It's like before, the girls could not wear jeans, they had to wear dresses. But now it's like the dress code has relaxed. You can wear a T-shirt and blue jeans, and that's it, you know, like and tennis shoes. And you can look, like, long hair, do whatever you wanted to do with yourself. And so things like that were falling to the wayside. So there was a lot of options now to sort of like, "Let's see how far you can push this—the buttons on this." And since I was intrigued by theater also, I think in a sense my outfits are going to be very theatrical and maybe sometimes even exaggerated in a way. And the rule is, "If you can walk, wear it."

JR: [laughs]

G: There are no rules here. [laughs] So I think early on, when I was going to high school, there was a table that only these guys used to sit at. And it was the queer table. Now everybody used to make fun of these guys, and they had to sort of like leave school because they were sort of identified as being gay in high school.

JR: They had to leave school, literally?

G: Yeah, because at that time that was not really acceptable, and so they had to not stay in school. Or else they had to go to continuation school. . . .

JR: Right.

G: . . . which was to continue it, but they were ostracized outside of a bigger population of the school.

JR: I see.

G: And for me that was like, "God, this is so weird, because it's like . . . you know, look at these foreign films and look at how these people look. It's like, who should care about these things?" And so it's like I used to hang out with them. They were always identified as artists, also. And I thought, "Well, there's nothing really deprimental to anybody. These are friends. These are people I know, and that I hang out with." And to me it was like they were funny and witty, and yet I never felt like really a part of that. And I think what it was was that it just seemed so odd because I didn't have their same kind of language and the same kind of notions about things. And they were always talking about guys for some reason. Like, "How would you talk about guys when you're a guy?" [laughter] I mean, you know the physicality of it. It's all the same, isn't it? [laughter] "Oh, Gronk, yeah, yeah. Grow up."

JR: [laughs]

G: So I think I was sort of lumped into that group, but I was saved from it all in a way, because I could make art that the toughest cholo would like. So in a sense I was protected by the gang guys that were in the neighborhood or the school. It was like, "Yeah, Gronk's strange *but* he can draw." [laughs]

JR: That's interesting that they really respected that.

G: And I tried to figure that out later on, how they protected me in a way even though I would sit with the gay guys and hang out with them and everybody like tell jokes and have fun and stuff, and yet I was not considered gay, in a way. They said, "Well, he may be, but he really can draw. Did you see the tattoo he did on Joe?" [laughter] "He can draw." And what I think it was, was at that time they kind of felt that I was going to be able to leave that neighborhood, that school, that environment, and they never will. They would have to stay within their neighborhood where their gang was. They couldn't venture past a certain area. So their life is going to be limited. And if they protected me in some way me leaving, they left, too, because they had that sense of protection. So in a sense I think it was very helpful that I wasn't threatened or punched-out or anything along those lines. And so I think was a thing that allowed me to maneuver within that arena.

And in the art kind of beginnings for me and realizing that I want to do things, but I'm going to have get people that are like-minded or that actually I can say, "Can we do this piece called 'Cockroaches Have No Friends' "? And like I'm going to take over this park and say it's a children's puppet show, and you're going to go dressed like this woman, and you're going to get this guy and he's a high school guy and he's wearing a poncho and he's going to have these raw eggs in a Coke bottle underneath him, and you pull and you squeeze the eggs and crush 'em, and then you lick it and then you get the bottle and you throw it at the audience."

JR: [laughs]

G: And he would say, "Okay." And everybody else, "Okay." And I would do and stage these things in a park, and then a couple of years went by, but one of the people I had asked to be in that piece was someone named Patssi Valdez. And I had heard about her. She had an exotic look to her, sort of like a Sophia Loren kind of quality to her at the time, but in high school. And she had a boyfriend and his name was Willie Herrón. And her best friend was Sylvia Delgado, whose boyfriend was Harry Gamboa [Jr.—Ed.]. So we sort of like . . . I did the piece *Cockroaches Have No Friends*. Patssi was in it. Her sister was in it—Karen—as well. And she said, "Well, my boyfriend's like really upset that I'm doing this thing, but that's why I'm going to do it because I'm getting him upset." "Who is your boyfriend?" "It's that quiet one over there." And here was this guy with long hair and wearing like a Sgt. Pepper outfit. [laughs] And I said, "Oh, he looks like Rod Stewart." [laughter]

JR: "Oh God, he's going to want to hear that. [laughter]

G: And then Sylvia, her best friend, came to the performance—and Harry. And so they saw this production of *Cockroaches Have No Friends*, and they were like, "What the hell is that?!" There were like all these kids running around on that stage, somebody banging a drum and somebody getting a coke bottle and crushing eggs underneath somebody's serape and all this activity going on on this stage. And then somebody got these fried eggs and threw it on somebody's back and it burned the kid. Just like all of these activities going on on the stage. And then the show ended and, all of a sudden, it's like, "I think we're going to take this on the road. We're going to do it at a couple of other places." And then I got asked to do it at an East L.A. College art class and it turned out a disaster. The lead person got drunk and was just like foul-mouthed and fell and everything just collapsed. And I'm like, "Oh man, should I do this again?" And the rest of the people that were around were sort of like. . . . You know, everybody was taking acid and drugs and reds or r.d.s., downers and uppers, and so it was like all this activity of the drug culture, in a way, surfacing. I'm like, "Oh, my God, I can't really work with these people. But maybe something else will come along."

And then one day I get a phone call from Harry. "I'm putting together a magazine. It's called *Regeneración*. And I'm asking Patssi and Willie to work with me on this publication. And Willie right now is doing a mural in City Terrace. Do you want to go take a look?" And I said, "Sure." So we went into this alley, and he was doing *The Wall That Cracked Open*. So I went and saw it, and at that time I had been asked by the Chicano Studies at Cal State L.A. to do a mural in the Chicano department there. And I ran home to find, "What the hell is a mural?"

JR: [laughs]

G: And then ran back, "Oh yeah, I can do it. Yeah, it's easy. Just a wall, right? I can paint something on it. Okay." I did this piece there, and it was like—I don't know—just a concoction of all kinds of stuff, and they just like, "What the hell is this?" And it was [a] very grotesque kind of looking mural. I don't know if any photographs of it exist any more, but I did the piece and went to go see Willie's piece in [say], "Oh, that's so refined, that kind of work there. It looks cool, though." And Harry introduced me to Willie, and we talked and one thing led into another. It's like, "Well, let's go to Willie's garage and we can do our drawings there." Harry would give us illustration boards that. . . . It would all be laid out. The articles would be already written. All we had to do was the illustrations for them. But we couldn't afford to shrink or blow up, so we had to do it to the particular square that was there. And we would do it in ink and that would be the drawing that we would do for that publication.

So we would go into Willie's garage and sometimes Patssi's mother's garage. They both grew up with single parents as well. Willie was raised by his mother and Patssi was raised by her mother. And so they had the garages and so we would go into the garage and draw and talk and time would just fall to the wayside. Again, it was just like, "We've got a lot of things in common. We're sort of, all four of us, sort of outcasts in a way. We look slightly different than a lot of people out there. The drawings and stuff that we're doing is a lot different than what we saw [in—Ed.] other peoples' work and what they were doing. The magazine—*Regeneración*—was for me, I guess, early stages of—this is probably about '72—early stages of my journals, in a way. It was just pen and ink. And it was beginning to get a style, as I would later call it. But it was the beginnings of a way that I was drawing at the time. And when we finished the first publication, we spent so much time with one another drawing that we said, "Well, there's a lot of other possibilities for us to do. I mean, look at the way we look. Our look is part of who we are, in a way. And it is something about us that Harry would document a lot of our activity, and we would look at the slides and say, "Gee, that looks like a movie." Or, "We sort of look like characters. I mean, like very young . . . that we can make a lot of

different imagery, just ourselves, utilizing just us."

And I think that was the very beginnings of ASCO's development and figuring things out as to what we were going to do. Harry and I tended to gravitate to one another, because I think what happened is that we became sort of the theoreticians of ASCO, in a way. We started hanging out with each other, and I think after a while it was like, "Gee, I think we should probably call ourselves something." And either Harry or Willie were the ones that came up with the name ASCO. And they said, "Yeah, it's nausea." And it's like, "Yeah, that's what we're doing. We're doing nausea."

JR: Let me ask you. This is when you guys were first getting together. It's the late sixties, early seventies?

G: Early seventies.

JR: Early seventies?

G: Yeah.

JR: When did you do the mural at Cal State L.A.?

G: About '69.

JR: About '69?

G: Yeah.

JR: So there's a lot of political activity taking place in Los Angeles, on the east side in particular. Yet you guys are meeting in the garage and sort of hashing things out together. Was there any particular response that you guys had, individually or collectively, to the politics that were taking place?

G: I think the person that, for me, that had a very political edge to him was Harry Gamboa, because he was the leader of the walk-outs at Garfield High School.

JR: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

G: And so I think he had a more thought-out political agenda to his sensibility early on. And for me I don't think what I was doing fitted into that kind of sensibility. It's like *Cockroaches Have No Friends*, and having somebody with in a serape and a Coke bottle and raw eggs, you know, just wasn't a part of it.

JR: Right.

G: I think during the course of time, being with these other people and, I guess, sensing that some of what we were doing was reflective of that time frame. Now in that time frame still the Vietnam War was going on. So what happened was, once you got out of high school, a lot of people we knew were of draft age, which is eighteen years and older. And what happened was—in proportion to the rest of the population; that was a big push, that whole group of people—Willie and I found ourselves in that position as well. For me, I could have just said I was gay, and that would have been it. But I thought, "Boy, this is going to be something that in some way. . . . Perhaps to make things, for myself, a little bit more difficult, I said, "Well, if they take me in, they're going to have to throw me out. Because I can't conform to this sensibility." And that's exactly what happened. I was taken in

and then I was thrown out because it was. . . . I was there for maybe about two weeks. I got a haircut and that was. . . . I came back with a new hairdo, and everybody said, "Oh that's good, because it's going come in fashion. Everybody's going to get their hair cut short." And I said, "Oh, I'm glad I went in then." [laughter]

But the serious side of it was that a lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying, and we were seeing a whole generation come back that weren't alive anymore. And in a sense that gave us nausea—or "nauseous." And that is ASCO, in a way. It was like, "God, our generation is getting wiped out. This is a horrible situation." I think for myself after two weeks, they gave me a train ticket. I caught a bus ride back to L.A. and I was out. And I just felt like, "Boy, that was an interesting experience." I didn't have to do anything. I was sort of separated and talked to and counseled. And they were saying, "Yeah, you're a nonconformist."

JR: You're not army material. [laughter]

G: "You just don't fit in." You know, it's like what could they do if you don't listen to them or do what they want you to do? To me it was like I was. . . .

JR: The military has a whole structure built on. . . .

G: If you believe it, though. [laughter]

JR: Well sure, but, I mean, it's meant to impose structure on people who otherwise wouldn't listen.

G: And they force you to conform, in a way.

JR: Right.

G: And they put peer pressure on the other people to make you conform. But it wasn't working. It wasn't working.

JR: It just didn't work, huh. So you were at boot camp?

G: Yeah.

JR: Where was this?

G: Fort Ord, which is up north in northern California. It was a two-week trip. That's all I remember is like, okay. . . . And one of the things, I got counseling from a lawyer, and he said, "It's either this or jail because they've singled you out as somebody they're going to make an example of. And so it's either you're going go to jail or you're going to go into the army. But if you go into the army you'll only spend two weeks; if you go to jail you'll spend a much longer time. So that we advise you to go in

because they'll kick you out but they can't kick you out of jail. So you go in."

JR: They sent you a lawyer before you went into boot camp?

G: Yeah. [laughter] Does this blinking mean something?

JR: It means we're almost there, yeah. Why don't we stop and then I'll get another tape.

G: Okay.

[Break in taping]

JR: Okay, this is tape two, side A, continuing on January 20th, an interview with Gronk in his studio in Los Angeles. We left off on the last tape talking about your boot camp, [which was short-lived. Boot camp experience.

G: My experience in boot camp. Yeah, I left, I guess, a schizophrenic. [laughter] I got back to Los Angeles with a new haircut, and everybody was asking, "Well, how did you do it?" I said, "Well, my lawyer said if I go to jail I could spend a long time there. If I go in, the only thing they can possibly do to me if I don't conform to them is to throw me out. So that's what I opted for, was to get thrown out." And then Willie was going through this similar kind of situation also. And I forget how he resolved his, but we were all sort of like gonna write things and stuff to prevent him from going in. I forget, though, how he ended up. But he didn't go in.

JR: Did Harry have to face that?

G: No, Harry I think was in. . . . I think they had a lotto at that time. I think he was in a kind of far-off kind of situation so he didn't have to. And I believe also that he was going to university or college. Seems like there was a deferment.

JR: Okay. He had a deferment and then. . . .

G: He had a deferment.

JR: So when the Moratorium rolled around in 1970 did you have any particular response to that, seeing as how you had. . . .

G: Well, I participated in it, and I was at the park when the unrest took place and the tear gas came and the police marched in. And I think at that time for me I was shaken by the fact of being tear-gassed. And a lot of kids and people running and things happening. I think for me that was, again, another realization of a situation that I was in. In the neighborhood I was in, the people that were being affected by this were people of color. All of those kinds of things were fitting into place. We talked about it afterwards, and Willie and I did a painting together called the *Black and White Mural*. And it was sort of a newsreel of that particular moment in time and it was black and white imagery, one of it which was the police marching on Whittier Boulevard. It was people being tear-gassed. It was a jail. It was like different images. Sort of a document of what that neighborhood experienced in Estrada Courts—part of East L.A. So I think a lot of things propelled our work in a way as well.

JR: And as far as murals go, that one, in terms of, I guess, style, was and still stands out as a very unique mural in Estrada Courts, or in terms of Chicano murals in general. It's interesting that you guys chose a different sort of way of depicting that event rather than . . . a different narrative style.

G: Right.

JR: Different images.

G: I think for myself and in doing work with Willie that was one of our first kind of collaborations together. We had done other things, collaborating in a painterly fashion where he would start at one end and I would start at the other end and then we would join it in the middle. And it wasn't like saying, "Gee, I think that needs a little bit of blue or green." It was like, "He knows how to handle paint. He knows what to do. Let him do it." It was that element of trust in a collaboration in a way. It was, in a sense, like playing music in a band in a way. You rely on your other musicians and you feel

comfortable and confident that they will hold up their end. And paintingly Willie and I worked well together. Patssi was doing her own paintings on her own—and drawings—and Harry was doing mostly photography and wasn't really a painter. But Willie and I had that painterly kind of sensibility. And I think how we worked on that piece was to select visual imagery that came from that particular time in 1970, and to utilize even our own imagery of ourselves and we placed it inside the piece as well in certain images. But, again, it's, for me, cinematic in a way, because it has a documentary kind of style to it.

JR: Very.

G: And even for me, growing up in the sixties and this piece being done in the seventies, there's a movie called *Battle of Algiers*, which is a black-and-white movie, and, you know, I had no access to Hollywood or to do a *Battle of Algiers*, but perhaps I can utilize that kind of information and place it into this piece. And my earliest take on things did not have Sacred Hearts. That's Willie's image in the piece. Anything religious I did not include—and consciously so—in my work. I felt, "Nietzsche settled that for everyone a long time ago. Let's move on." He, like Wagner and the rest, "Let's defy the gods," you know? "It's over with, we've already settled that. Spengler already said that—the decline of Western civilization. It doesn't exist anymore for me. I don't need that imagery in my work or to dwell on it so it's not going to be a part of my language." So I didn't do Sacred Hearts or necessarily "mi familia" kind of imagery. It was like I didn't come from that kind of sensibility either. It was a broken home.

JR: Which is so prominent at the time, this sort of new indigenous spirituality.

G: Right.

JR: So it was a real conscious effort on your part?

G: Yeah. For me, it was, "I don't do Virgins of Guadalupe. I don't do corn goddesses. I can only do what I'm about, and I'm an urban Chicano living in a city. I can't impose upon my work other things. I can be influenced by a war that's taking place, that's killing off people. I can look at the world and say, 'Yeah, yuk, it's disgusting at times as well. And how being tear-gassed in your own country.' " All of those kinds of different things that took place, I think had an impact. And it was like reading Sartre and Camus and all those kinds of things early on in my early development as a person, and seeing, "Yeah, it is pretty disgusting out there. Yeah, we do live in an absurd kind of world and things like this happen." And so I think those were concerns for me in my work early on. It was even like. . . . You look at the early stuff and there is an attraction to the grotesque, in a way. There's a lot of imagery of grotesque kind of situations in the pictorial pieces. And I think for the the *Black and White Mural* I was attempting more to give it a cinematic, documentary kind of thing—almost like a time capsule for that neighborhood. Like, this is what was experienced here at a particular moment in time. I intentionally wanted black and white as opposed to color. I felt that, to me, it was—well, documentaries are in black and white—usually—at that time. And that this was like a way to give some intensity to the piece. And it was interesting because it was fun working on the piece. It was like, "This is turning out pretty good. I like the scale. I'm up here on a scaffold, and it's like this grid that I'm not really used to working in but now we're deviating from that grid, and Willie's working on his own and I'm working on my own." And then working on that whenever we had time to do it. And then doing the other things, which were like nighttime activities and tagging or going into the streets and doing different kinds of graffiti and stuff like that with political slogans. All kinds of different things that we sort of like did in the middle of the night.

JR: This was you and Willie? Or is this all ASCO?

G: This was all ASCO. Yeah, it was all of us working on stuff like that. It was kind of sad because Patssi didn't participate initially on a lot of that activity. And one was because her boyfriend was Willie, and Willie was very protective: "No, Patssi, you can't run fast enough. If we have to run, you're probably going to trip and fall and they'll catch you." So I think she had to deal with stuff like that. She had this macho guy who was like. . . . A lot of people never even realized Patssi was doing work at the time. One day I was at her house, and she goes, "You know, I have my closet filled with some paintings. Would you like to see them?" "You paint, too?" [laughs] "Yeah, let's see what you do." And she brought out these things and I go, "Wow! These are cool." She goes, "Well, you know, I really don't show this stuff." And I think part of the problem was that there was Willie who was an excellent painter, there was me who could paint, and [she—Ed.] was sort of inhibited about bringing things out. Until she developed her own way of doing things—and I think then she sort of took off in her own direction of making things. But early on I think she was inhibited to share a lot of the stuff, because she had two cohorts who were also painters and were producing an interesting body of work. And Harry was clever with words and writing, and we would. . . . I think Harry and I gravitated to one another because we have like a black sense of humor to things, and we were able to laugh at a lot of different situations. And a lot of the times everybody took things so seriously that they weren't able to laugh at things or make ridicule or use wit in any way. And our whole forte was to be able to talk, to use wit and to use those kind of tactics in our work. So I think we sort of on a daily basis were constantly on the phone talking, "I've got this idea, blah, blah blah." "Oh, yeah, that sounds exciting. Let's do it!" So it was having a support group and sort of like people interesting enough to work together and collaborate.

It was unlike another group called Los Four, which had sort of like, "Oh, we have this Marxist agenda here." And like, "Let's vote as to how we are going to go about retaining what the streets have into our artwork. We're going to take the graffiti, and now we're going to put it on a piece of canvas." And it was like, "Who votes yes and who votes no on that idea?" And for us it was a lot looser. It was like we didn't have that kind of like Marxist agenda or sensibility. And it was more spontaneous. And instead of having to take from the streets and put it into our work, we were *in* the streets doing our work. So it was a completely separate group. We once went to Los Four to show what we were doing, and we showed them all these slides of our work. And it was Frank [Romero—Ed.] and it was Carlos [Almaraz—Ed.] and Gilbert [Luján—Ed.], and they looked at our stuff and were like, "This is what *we're* doing." And it was a lot different, their sensibility. It was like a younger generation to them doing something, and I don't think they really gravitated to it. They couldn't quite figure it. "They're not even going to the universities, they're not going to college, they're not. . . . Look at their stuff. It's just like . . . you know, like what is it? Oh, they'll die off in a couple of years, they'll disintegrate and burn up." And I think, pretty much across the boards, a lot of other Chicano groups perhaps thought the same way as well. We were just a rumor to a lot of people for the longest time, and sort of thought of as drug addicts, perverts. All kinds of names were hurled at us by other Chicano artists. And I think that sort of not being a part of it—the Chicano art scene in general—isolated us from that. But we were not accepted by the mainstream art gallery kind of westside thinking of art either. So we were sort of on our own to develop our own way. We weren't thinking, "We're going to end up in museums and galleries and stuff." Just to do the work was important. I think for Los Four it was like, "Art sells. You can get into museums. I want to be a part of the mainstream of the art arena."

JR: How was that jibe with the more Marxist ideology?

G: I think they compromised an awful lot in order to see it through, but not necessarily in successful ways. I mean, you look at Gilbert Luján and [Beto—Ed.] de la Rocha's work, and they're not mainstream, a lot of ways, in museums and galleries. And it's occasional shows here and there, hit

and miss. But I think Carlos Almaraz is a great painter. I mean, I think his work is stunning, especially the early stuff as opposed to the later stuff. But I think he was a very good painter and a terrific artist.

JR: You know what I find interesting is despite these differences there were moments that either you showed. . . . ASCO would show with Los Four, like at the Point Gallery in Santa Monica, or, if I'm not mistaken, you guys did work together on *Con Safos*?

G: Actually, *Con Safos* was a magazine that Gilbert Luján had come up with and, again, I was a rumor on the streets. One day I'm walking down First Street, and Gilbert Luján approached me. And he was, I think, going to school at the time—college—and I was just like this young kid walking down the street and everybody would go like, "That's Gronk. He's a like a [punk] artist."

JR: There he goes! [laughs]

G: And so he came up to me and asked me to do a drawing for *Con Safos* magazine, and I just thought, you know, like, "Here." And it was a very simple pen-and-ink drawing, and he utilized it in the magazine. But it was not something that I collaborated, really; it was just being asked to be in. I was more like, I guess, enamored by what was going on with these other people that I was doing work with. I always thought them very old-fashioned, in a way. You know, their sense of, you know, "Sage has to be in everything." It's like all of that kind of stuff. Just like, "What is this?" And the work, like, "Oh, they're painting on tortillas. Great. Clever." [laughter] "He's got a low-rider? Oh, cool." And like, "Oh, Frank Romero can do big butts? Oh, great!" [more laughter] "I wonder if that's his wife." And it was like, "If he can paint so good, why does he do that?" [laughs] We always used to make fun of them, in a way. And it was just sort of like, because we always thought them so stodgy. We couldn't hang out with them, basically, because they were like a different world to us in a way. Our sensibility was in a different generation, basically. They were already like married, they were having kids, they were wanting to go to New York and do their thing there. And us, we were just like, "Everything's brand new. We can do anything we want!" And they were like, "Chicano art is this."

JR: So there's no sense like you're kind of picking up a torch or anything like that? It's like a whole different race, man, we're just. . . .

G: Oh, no. No. What it was was that we were producing work at the same time. I mean, it wasn't as if they were doing it before us.

JR: Right.

G: But our work, we knew, was a lot different than what they were up to. It was interesting, I think, that there was other groups that were doing things, and we would hear about these conferences, these Chicano art conferences, but we were never invited to any of those things to participate. It was Malaquias Montoya in Sacramento, José Montoya in Sacramento, the Royal Chicano Air Force, CACA [C ____ A ____ C ____ A ____—Ed.], San Diego. It's like all these different organizations had their own little thing going, and we didn't feel a part of a lot of that, because the work had a different look to it, in a way. And we were using ourselves in these pictures and photographs, and we would mail them off to people: "This is what we're doing." It was like sending things off in the mail. And they were getting these things, announcements to stuff, and we were never really truly, I think, accepted by them—initially. And I think, like I said, in a sense they felt we would just burn out and disappear. But we ended up out-producing them and every other kin that we had at the time and continually doing work. And so I think what happens, too, is they had their own sensibility. We had no by-laws. It's like, "Oh, this is ASCO's way of doing stuff." We eventually started to add more

people to come into the group so that we can develop more things and do other things with other people. So it kept on growing as people heard about us, and I don't believe it was till the early eighties, late seventies, that we were asked to go to a conference. And we said, "Yes." And it was Willie and Harry and myself. And Harry made one remark and it just [upriled] everybody at the conference. And then there were other people who supported us, and so there was this big battle as to like, "What is Chicano art?" And Harry had just said we would be doing art even if there was no Chicano movement. And it was just like, "What?! How dare you? You would never get anywhere unless there was that." And his idea was that no matter what, we would still be producing. We would still be inclined to do our artwork no matter what. That was our goal or that was what we wanted to do with ourselves was to create.

JR: Two things. One, you mentioned mail art, so that reminded me to ask you about Jerry Drevla. And the other thing is, if you don't feel necessarily that your sensibility—well, obviously, your sensibilities with ASCO were much different than sort of more traditional, more recognizable Chicano art—were there other groups or other artists, other movements happening at the time to whom you felt sort of affinities with?

G: At that time?

JR: Yeah. In L.A. Anywhere, for that matter?

G: Well, like I said, earlier on I felt an affinity to the Russian constructivists.

JR: Yeah, I remember that.

G: I mean, I felt an affinity to the dadas or the German expressionists, who were also social critics of their particular moment in time and observers of what was taking place within the culture. To me, those were like. . . . Looking at Max Beckman and saying, "I like his work." I mean, what he did, what he sort of left behind, and those imagery [*sic*] of George Gross depicting the rise of the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s and twenties. I mean, those were intriguing kinds of aspects, that perhaps I pulled from that as well, incorporated that kind of sensibility into my own work. So I think art history had an impact on my work early on. Also, it's like looking at Siquieros' pieces and Diego Rivera's and Orozco and finding myself intrigued by more so maybe Orozco than Diego or Siquieros. And sort of like looking at certain things that he was doing that like, "That has an impact, and it's really very graphic," or "I'm intrigued by that." I think more people had an affinity to, perhaps, Siquieros' work. And early on it was reading the fabulous life of Diego Rivera and saying, "Hey, who's this woman he married? She sounds cool! She sounds better than him."

JR: [laughs] Right.

G: And it was just like, "She's only in a couple of chapters. Why isn't there anything written about this woman?" It's like, "I don't see her in any publications or magazines." And the earliest tip of the hat to her came, I believe, in about 1974 when Harry was doing the *Regeneración* magazine, and I put a stamp that said, "[A, A.] Frieda Kahlo." And that was in the magazine. And I don't think there was too many people that were familiar with her work at that particular moment in time or that were using that reference to her. But she, to me, was the more intriguing. I read this big, thick book all about Diego Rivera, and the most interesting character is his wife. And he only wrote a small thing about her. And I'm thinking, "God, there must be more to her." And it became just like, again, for me like curious. "Who is she? What does she do? Why are they talking about her?" All of those things were very intriguing for me.

JR: It's kind of interesting—if I can interrupt here a second—that Chicano artists and Chicana feminists would really sort of invoke her life and her experience as being sort of like a precursor to the work that they were doing, yet it's invoked in a very, quote-unquote, "Chicano art" sensibility, once again. I wonder how that sat with you.

G: Well, for me it was more the character and the person and an attraction to her as a person initially. And it wasn't to imitate her style or to evoke, "Well, I'm going to do two portraits. It's going to be like "Dos Friedas" or something along those lines." That was a simple stamp that said Frieda Kahlo. Then in 1978 I do another reference to Frieda Kahlo, and I do it but a man is playing Frieda. And it's this guy named Teddy Sandoval, who was another artist. And so, "Well, I'm going to do the disco version of Frieda Kahlo, and. . . ."

JR: She's perfect. She's got the style, right. [laughter]

G: "But, Teddy, you're going to play her in the photographs." And so here is Teddy with his eyebrows pushed together, and I make him go through several images for photographs and utilize several of the photographs for a show called *The No Movie*, which was at LACE--Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions [see Gronk explanation on next tape side—Ed.] in 1978.

But early on, also, in '74 I went to a lecture at Otis Art Institute, and there was this guy that was there and he was wearing a black leather jacket and he was sitting down and sort of like pounding on the table. And then there was this person who was from New York showing *The New Media* videotape. And he was explaining, "Yes, this is my videotape and it's going to be . . . you know, it's this and it's that." And Jerry's heckling him, "Ah, come on, show us photographs of your girlfriend. You know you want to. Come on." And I'm like, "Who is this guy?" And as soon as it was over, he came up to me. And I think one of the reasons is I was the only brown person at that lecture and the person was this man who had this magazine. His name was Willoughby Sharp. He had a publication called *Avalanche* magazine from New York, and it was the hip underground kind of magazine—or zine—at the time. And he [Dreva—Ed.] asked me, "Who are you?" And I said, "Gronk." And he goes, "I'm Jerry." And I said, "Oh." And he asked, "What do you do?" And I said, "Oh, I send things in the mail." And I had just sent out this whole. . . . Like I sent Magu [Gilbert Luján—Ed.]. . . . I sent several people pieces, and I would tell them to do something with it. And Magu sent me back a pie, and he had burnt the piece and put it inside the baked pie and sent me back the piece. And so a lot of different people sent back things to me, as I would initiate the thing and then say, "Do something with this piece. Tear it up, destroy it, kill it. It's ugly and it wants to die." That was the title of the piece: *This Piece Is Ugly and Wants To Die. Please Destroy It*. And so people cut it up, chopped it up, tore it up, did different things to this piece that I'd made. And so I said, "Well, I send things in the mail." And he goes, "Well, so do I." And he said, "I have a group," and I said, "So do I. Mine's ASCO." And he goes, "Mine's Les Petit Bon Bons." And he says, "We're a conceptual rock 'n roll group. We've never performed anywhere, but we're in to all these magazines and publications. We were in *People* magazine and they photographed us in front of Rodney's Disco, and we've announced that we're going to be in all these different cities, but we've never picked up a guitar or played a musical note ever."

JR: That's like a rock 'n roll swindle.

G: [laughs]

JR: Malcolm McLaren even thought of it.

G: His friends were like Patty Smith and Lou Reed and all of like New York underground, and Andy Warhol, and The Factory and stuff, and he was like a part of that whole scene. And he was this person that did all of that work.

JR: Let me take a break here so we can switch the tape over.

[Break in taping]

JR: Okay, this is tape 2, side B, January 20th, with Gronk. Okay, I'm sorry.

G: So Jerry and I met—Jerry Dreva—and he was going to be here in Los Angeles for a length of time and so we. . . . Well, actually, what happened was I gave him my address, and Jerry was . . . well, he was an intriguing guy. He's still an intriguing guy. He's still in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And when we met I had written down my address on a paper and gave it to him, and about a week later I was back at Otis and I was inside the same lobby of where that lecture took place and he was there also. And he goes, "Oh, I'm so glad I ran into you. Your number. . . ." And I said, "Yeah?" He goes, "Well, something happened to it, and I couldn't figure out the lettering because the ink just smeared." I said, "It smeared?" He said, "Yeah, I masturbated on it." [laughter] And I said, "Oh really?" And I thought, "Boy, this is like somebody I've never really encountered before." And he was, "Do you want to go out? Do you want to do something?" And I'm like, "Okay." And so he would show me another side to things. It was art gallery situations and stuff. And he was like this talker and this . . . you know, like, inside of situations and stuff and he would just take control over a situation. So I was like in the background to him, which was good for me because I would just like be in this other world of lifestyle and stuff. And like, "Well, this is kind of interesting. I never knew that all of this really existed before and this is very interesting."

JR: What is this? Where are you guys going and checking out?

G: We'd go into this place called Butch Gardens, which was a gay club. And we were going to other kinds of clubs that he would show me, because he knew the ins and outs of rock scenes and stuff like that that was taking place. It was like people that were into rock, people that were doing music, and like the characters that were from The Factory and all that sort of stuff. So he was always immersed in that. So he sort of showed me into that kind of an arena. And I was always somebody that felt awkward about it because it was like there was nobody, usually, brown in those kinds of places and activities. It was like usually I was the only one that was there, and it was like, "This is nice to look at, but I really like the fact that I'm buffered by him." It's just like he was in control of this kind of scene and stuff. And as time went on we kept on seeing each other and stuff and going out and doing things.

And then about a year later he's going to go on a tour with the Bons Bons. They're going to New York, and they're traveling on this major tour, and he's going to end up back in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And then he started sending me things of different things that he was doing. And he had a stamp, and his stamp was called "Art Gangster." And he would go around stamping these things. And then he would support different things that were happening in the art arena. The person that spray-canned *Güernica*, he's like all in support of that. The person who smashed the *Pieta*, he's in support of that. It's like, "Yeah, art should be dismantled and torn down and from the ashes something new will rise," you know. So he had these very radical opinions about things, and I liked that. So we corresponded for almost six years on a daily basis, practically—just back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. And the accumulation of what we had was—in 1978—called the Dreva-Gronk show, which opened up LACE. It was the second show LACE was doing at its new location in downtown Los Angeles. And this was in 1978. We made buttons that said

"Dreva-Gronk, 1968-1978." And it was an accumulation of what we had been doing biographically, but also our correspondence. And so we had two big rooms filled with images plus giant notebooks that had plastic, and we would put in our letters, our correspondence, our notes. And so we just had this big accumulation of different things on tables that were in this room. And for the opening night we had four punk rock bands play for the night. And it was subtitled "Dreva-Gronk: Art Meets Punk." And what happened on the opening night was that everything got trashed. People were like ripping things off, tearing things up, the books were shredded, thrown out the window, people were stealing things, putting them in their pockets. The bands were playing wild. The police came. They stopped the disturbance—as they called it—and got LACE put on the map. [laughter] And other people thought, "It looks like a punk band in a gallery. Ah, it's just a passing fancy," and stuff.

And Jerry left back to Milwaukee after he arrived for the opening. Maybe he stayed here a week. And then we stopped our correspondence. We did our show. From there I sort of moved back into doing the painting and the drawing. And all the while, during the time of our correspondence, I was still with ASCO, still working through a lot of other projects that we were doing, and Jerry was always fascinated about ASCO. It's like, "Yeah, Harry and Willie and Patssi—they look so glamorous. They're like stars," you know. And so he was always such a big supporter, enthusiastic about ASCO activities. So I still have a lot of correspondence, a lot of different things that survived that evening of the show, the Dreva-Gronk show.

JR: What was your response to seeing everything ripped off the walls in the mayhem and all that?

G: We knew we were taking that chance because of what it meant—Art Meets Punk—something is going to take place and if it's going to be trashed, it's going to be trashed, and we're willing to deal with it. I think for me initially it was seeing an end to something for me, in a way. It was like the period or the exclamation point to something—a story that was taken or a sentence that was being made for me. And I just like . . . I knew that this was like the end of something. Because it ended so dramatically in a way. And I thought, "God, this is such a relief. It's over," in a way. It's sort of like a lot of things that I did and was concentrating on, it's like the end of this. And now something new is going to happen. And, again, it was like. . . '78, then I was still with LACE, '79.

And then I left, and '80, '81, '82, and then 1983 I get an NEA Fellowship from the National Endowment, and it's a fellowship in performance/conceptual work. And I was so surprised because it was, I think, my second application for an NEA, and both of them had been not in painting but performance/conceptual work. And so I was really surprised that I did get one. I got one of the top fellowships. And I think that really allowed me the opportunity to concentrate on my work as far as painting. I didn't have to worry about supplies, I didn't have to worry about material, and I could just do as much as I wanted to. And just like, "Wow!" It was like for me, it seems now I look at that particular moment and feel that it really allowed me to develop, to really push my work in a way, and to like. . . . It wasn't like something, not like, "Gee, I'm going to buy a car, I'm going to take a trip, I'm going. . . ." It was like, "Wow! This is so much money to make art! I can buy film. I can buy a camera. I can buy all this material that I wanted to work with," finally was allowed to happen.

That's '83. Now, '85 comes along and I'm at MOCA, and so it was like one thing, and then the next thing is a big show. They're picking nine artists and this is going to be summer of '85, MOCA. They picked Jill Gingrich, Bill Viola, Mary Course, Gita [Conte, Conté]. Several, maybe about nine artists in the exhibition. And it's all these artists that are surfacing, and Willie and I were picked. And we could either do like a collaboration together or separate works, and we chose to do separate pieces. And I wanted to do something the size of a football field. I wanted to do something 300 feet by 30 feet high. And they said, "Fine. We've got Frank Gearhy's Temporary Contemporary. What does it take to do what you do?" And I said, "A lot of doughnuts and lot of coffee."

JR: [laughs]

G: And they said, "Okay, fine. Where do you want your doughnuts from?" And stupid me said, "Winchells," when I could have had any doughnuts delivered to me. And they just kept on coming in, and I did this piece. What happened afterwards is the dealers started coming to me as opposed to me going to them to show them my work. And I finally ended up with the dealer that I'm still with today, so a lot of the momentum happened after the Dreva-Gronk show—the NEA fellowship, MOCA—and the work, I think from that time-frame just evolved. In '84, I believe, I did *Cabin Fever* and a lot of those large paintings—figurative kind of, almost very pop kind of figure kind of painting. And so a lot of those things I think were important steps in my career.

And all the while, still in the eighties, was still hanging out with Harry, primarily, because Willie had gotten married and was having a family, Patssi was going back to school. So it was like Harry and I sort of orchestrating ASCO, and utilizing someone like Marisela Norte, Sean Carillo, Daniel Villareal, Armando Norte, Consuelo Flores, and getting a lot of different people to come in and interact with us and to present new pieces like staged kind of plays. Harry started to write plays. In '85 he wrote a play called *Jetter's Jinx*, and it was done at the L.A. Theatre Center. It was the same year I was at MOCA. I was also directing the play and starring in it, and then having a show at MOCA at the same time.

JR: Wow.

G: And I don't think anybody in the world can say that. [laughter]

JR: Can we backtrack for a second?

G: Sure.

JR: I wanted to ask you about LACE and its beginnings. It seems to have been a really important institution in L.A., while it got its beginning right there with your show. Can you tell me a little bit how began and who was there and what was going on?

G: LACE was initially started as a CETA project, and it was the city funding artists for the first time to produce artwork. Initially, it was to bring art to a community that they felt lacked in its art. And so they picked the city of El Monte to start it off in. But the city of El Monte's fathers didn't want us, because who were hired were performance artists, conceptual artists, video artists and they just didn't know how to deal with the kinds of work we were doing. And so we were asked, like, "We don't want this. Art is usually in the malls, and it's like somebody who puts an easel and sells their paintings." And that's not what we were doing, so we had to find a new location to house ourselves in because we had this program and it was funded, so the next location was in downtown Los Angeles. We found a studio space. Actually, it was an empty space above a wedding shop, and they would have like the wedding dresses. And one of the people—her name was Marilyn [Campanian]—came up with the name LACE, because we all were asked to come up with names for the place, and since we were above a bridal shop, she said, "What about LACE—Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions?" And so that became the name of the place, and it had a bureaucratic name so that people in the future could apply for grants. It's like, "Oh, LACE—Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions." There was another place called LAICA [Los Angeles Institute for Contemporary Art—Ed.], which was also here in Los Angeles but that didn't last very long. And LACE had perhaps maybe twelve people who were the early people who started it. Harry Gamboa was also hired. Willie Herrón was also hired to work at it. And it was sort of divided up into different camps of thinking or wanting to do work. Here was this guy named Roberto Gil de Montes, a couple

of other Chicanos who were also aboard LACE. And then here was this other camp which was like Cal Arts. And it was another grouping of people. And over the years it shifted into like more Cal Arts kinds of sensibility, and the Chicanos sort of were pushed out of the whole area of LACE—or left—because it just was going more in that direction. They had the swing vote, so they can, "We want Mike Kelly." [both laugh]

JR: What is the Cal Arts sensibility?

G: Well, it was more like the John Baldessari kind of school of art. It had its sensibility to . . . as opposed to it being a little bit more open to community kinds of situations.

JR: I see.

G: Or community artists, or people trying to make a difference in a real situation as opposed to a manufactured one like a gallery kind of situation.

JR: I see. It's kind of interesting since you would think with a CETA grant it might, necessarily, be more community-based.

G: Um-hmm. Well, initially that was the idea. And it shifted and made its move into that arena. I left as soon as I felt that it was like, "This is beyond helping any more. It's just like I need to move on." I think Harry stayed on just slightly longer and Willie also, and then we left it. Once it sort of established itself, it's like no more community kind of stuff. It's going to be strictly like anybody coming out of Cal Arts or the universities that the art is going to gravitate to. And so we all left it.

But in the early stages of it we did the Dreva-Gronk show and Harry and I did the "No Movie" exhibition show. And so we did do a few things. We had a mural conference there as well. And then we went on to continue to do more of the ASCO kinds of activity. But it had its moment in time, and I think I was with it perhaps about three years. And it was from the inception of it being in El Monte and then going on to downtown LA. And it went through many transformations as who was the head of it and finally it was like Cal Arts was. . . . You know, like the head of it was the person that was going to Cal Arts or just got out of Cal Arts, and we were like, "Oh, well, that's it. It's like we can no longer. . . . I can no longer work in this kind of a situation ."

JR: Was it a multi-media sort of venue that would encourage all that kind of stuff? Or was it more paint and visual arts?

G: No, I thought of it as. . . . The term for that time was "alternative space." And that's exactly how I thought of it—as a place where you tried things out, as opposed to it being necessarily something that is painterly in fashion. The No Movie show, I added my piece where these three big red banners that hung from the ceiling down to the floor and went onto the floor and there were these mirrors that were placed on the floor and these plaster cobra snakes looking as if they're just about to attack one another and piles of loaves of bread. And that was my piece for the No Movie show.

[Phone rings; interruption in taping]

JR: Okay, we just took a brief interlude.

G: I like that word. "Interlude."

JR: "Interlude." Yes, because now you don't know what we did. [laughter]

G: That makes it even more exciting. [laughs]

JR: But what we thought we would do at this point is go back and talk a little bit more about the performance work that you did with ASCO. And you can start pretty much wherever you like.

G: When I first met with Harry, Willie, and Patssi—which make up ASCO. The initial group as opposed to in the late seventies and early eighties when we incorporated a lot of other people to work with—the initial group, I think Harry and I were more intrigued by the performance aspect of ASCO. Willie primarily was concentrating on his mural painting and doing murals and creating work along those lines. Patssi was either being. . . . Her focus was more in the photographic and transformation of different characters for film—or for photographs, actually. And also doing spray can painting and doing different types of work. So their focus had been in that kind of mode, whereas Harry and I, I think, were more intrigued by the aspect that we can possibly do different kinds of performance pieces.

And one of the things that we devised in the early seventies was what we called the No Movie. And the No Movie was a concept that we came up with—making movies without the use of celluloid. And the idea was to reject the reel—r-e-e-l—by projecting the real—r-e-a-l. And we did an interview initially sort of stating what the No Movie was. And it was sort of creating an image that looked as if there was a preceding image and an image that went after it, almost like a still that was taken from a film or a concept of a film. And we would imitate, in some ways, different films that we would see in movie houses, but also create our own body of film or cinema. And what we thought initially was that we had seen a lot of different filmmakers doing films—especially like our fellow Chicano filmmakers, and we always thought it was an imitation of what already existed as filmmaking. We wanted to do an alternative cinema and, coming out of no access, really, to Hollywood, the only way we could do that was to utilize ourselves and create many different characters for a camera. And we would think up a title. For instance, *A La Mode*. And it would be an image of Patssi sitting on a table but underneath her—which wasn't visible—was a piece of pie. So in a sense, she became a scoop of ice cream sitting on a piece of pie. Hence, the title *A La Mode*. So it was ideas like that that we were playing with initially with the No Movie. There were times when we did pieces that were staged in front of people. And then there were the earlier pieces which we would do on the streets. One of the early examples was called *Stations of the Cross*, and that was with Willie and Harry. And it what it was was a large cross was made by Willie and he carried it through the street almost like a Christ-like figure. Harry went almost like a Catholic schoolboy who was an usher in the church, and I played this character I called Pontius Pilate, which is this guy that I devised wearing this sort of burgundy robe and a bowler hat. And we paraded through Whittier Boulevard with the cross, and the end of the procession was an induction center for the Marines, and we put the cross up against the building and threw all of our objects that we carried with us, sort of blockading the entrance of the induction center so that no more Chicanos could be inducted that day at least. And so that was our first piece that was recorded. There was a super-eight of it and also photo documentation.

Then the following year we did what we called the *Walking Mural*, which was. . . . Willie devised this piece that was like a large wall with his head sticking through it. Patssi was the Virgin of Guadalupe, but done up in this see-through outfit. And I was a Christmas tree. And we walked down the city street again, the same street that we had done the procession the year before. And Harry documented this particular piece in photographs.

And so we did these kinds of activities during the course of the seventies, our earliest pieces. One was a dinner party on a traffic island, traffic going in both directions, and we set up a dinner table and ate a meal. And then a thing that I was interested in is the temporal nature of things, so I wanted to do what I called the *Instant Mural*, which was to tape Patssi and this other person—Herb

Sandoval—to a wall on a city street. And I think one of the important things about our activities was the idea that we didn't ask for permission to do any of the work. It was just immediately to go into the street and to initiate these events and activities that we did—or performance pieces. I don't think we really called them performance pieces at the time we were doing this, and this was in the early seventies. It was an activity that we did or an action that we did but we didn't use those art terms to describe what it was that we were doing. As things evolved, Harry started to write more of a performance kind of piece, and a lot of the times the pieces were intended to be done in front of an audience. And at this time we were being asked to do something maybe at the University of Santa Cruz. Rene Yañez from San Francisco invited ASCO. One of the first people to invite us out of Los Angeles into another city was Rene, who invited us to go to the Galería de la Raza to do one of our pieces. And he was excited because in San Francisco there was nobody really doing things like the No Movies or the processions or the performance kind of aspect of work that we were doing. And all of the stuff was heavily being documented by Harry, who had the camera, so he was the one who was documenting the different types of work that we were doing early on.

JR: So what kind of receptions or reactions were you getting on Whittier Boulevard or when you went up to the Galería in San Francisco?

G: Some of the early reactions were people screaming and yelling at us and wondering what the hell we were doing. And other times it was just people curious as to what we were doing, and we would explain, "This is a procession." Or, "I'm taping somebody to a wall, making a mural but it's not going to use paint. I'm going to use tape and somebody's going to photograph it." So it was explaining early on, I think, the process. And I can see that those were like the early stages of what I eventually went into when I was doing the large-scale on-site installation pieces when I paint directly onto the walls. Because I'm actually painting but I'm also engaging the viewer and talking during the course of the time that I'm actually doing the work. So I think the early performance pieces actually influenced me in the direction that I would later take in the larger on-site pieces when I started doing those pieces.

JR: So the way that. . . .

G: Okay.

JR: Let's take a break here, because we're almost on the end of the tape.

G: Okay.

[Break in taping]

JR: Let's see, we're back again with Gronk on January 20, 1997, in his studio. This is tape number 3, side A. You were explaining to me a little bit about ASCO and how the performative [*sic*] pieces later figured into your installation and museum work a bit later on. But I wanted to ask you a bit about the way that members of ASCO collaborated, what particular expertise or interest each one of you brought to the group and how that worked into a final product.

G: With ASCO—and I think with each person in it—the collaboration was different. With Willie and myself working on a piece or painting. . . . I believe in 1980 we did a piece for the Folk and Craft Art Museum, and it was called Murals of Aztlán, was the title of the exhibition. And Willie started at one end. I started at the other end. We met in the middle. The piece—after the show was over he got his section, I got my section. And to me, painting with Willie was like playing music, in a way, but using a brush instead of a musical instrument to do it with.

JR: How's that?

G: In that we didn't have to question one another's role. We allowed each other a lot of freedom to work out the piece. It was having that element of trust but also knowing full well that what he did he did competently. And he would not come in and say, "Gronk, I think you need to do this." It was just being allowed the freedom to do imagery that you wanted to do, and to almost, in a sense, play jazz, because there was a sense of improvisation in working with him. A lot of the times there was no set drawing or no set plan as to how this piece was going to end up. It was, in a sense, improvised, and allowing that freedom to allow things to happen. Of course, there were times when you would step back and you would take in the full picture of the piece and see how it was working, and maybe you would sort of with just a sense of balance or how things can connect in some way, making decisions or intellectual decisions about the piece. But we both worked completely different, and our imagery was different. Willie had a really stylized kind of sensibility to his work and a refinement. Mine was a lot more rougher with a more quirky kind of quality to it. He added a lot of things about family and about religion in his work, and that was minus in my imagery. He would have a pattern, but his pattern would probably be shapes, lines. Mine would maybe be hammers and sickles. And so we were coming from two different things or sensibilities. I would do a pattern, and it would be the hammers and sickles on this particular piece. And we called the piece *Illegal Landscape*, was the title of the piece. What I wanted to do was create a pattern of hammers and sickles, but it was to present hammers and sickles as just as a sense of design in a way, because that's what it initially was made for. Agriculture and industry. And it was like that whole idea of a pattern and a design and not so much, "Well, it means Communism," or something along those lines. It was more like in a sense of it being design for me. So a lot of the times our conversation was not conversation that was verbal. It was more visual.

JR: Is that something that was there from beginning?

G: I think intuitively, yes, because we were very visual, and we didn't speak the same kind of language as I speak with Harry Gamboa, more about ideas about ASCO or more like the conceptual component of the No Movies or along those lines. It was a different kind of relationship with each other. He I think also was coming from a musical background. His early ideas were also from music. So I think we sort of fit together and complemented one another. And sometimes we actually didn't. I mean, the work was so different, and I think at times that it was kind of jarring and people could easily recognize, "Uh, this is Gronk's work, and this is Willie's." Willie's is a lot more refined and flowing and stuff, and mine was sort of more aggressive and, I guess in a way, brutal kind of image. But I think for us it worked well, and we enjoyed the effect or the piece once it was finished and completed.

With Patssi it had a different kind of intuitive thing. To me, Patssi was somebody that had a sense of glamour coming out of East L.A. But it was also a glamour that was thrift store kind of glamour to it—that there was beauty that was found in things that were just our surroundings, and taking them to a sense of like beauty or glamour. I was attracted to that, because even later on in the choice of using a character like Tormenta. . . . Well, that is early Patssi, that is like Sylvia, that is Marisela Norte. That's a lot of the women that I knew at an early time and they had this . . . coming out of East L.A., but there was a sense of glamour to them. There wasn't just the hard-core worker or somebody. It was something of elegance and beauty that also came out of our environment as well. And I wanted to tap into that, so like Patssi and I would devise different photo shoots, or I would ask her to be in a photo shoot with me, or we would collaborate on things along those lines. So it was a different kind of working structure than it was with Willie.

And then with Harry it was, I think, more verbal and idea-oriented. The excitement was Harry

coming up with ideas—or I'll come up with an idea—and trying to see it through as a finished piece. And so I think it was more challenging in a more conceptual kind of arena for us to develop a No Movie and the ideas of like, "Let's develop it and see it where it goes or what it leads to"—and actually for nights on end just talking about a concept or a idea that we wanted to perhaps develop. And in his imagery, since he based himself very in an urban kind of setting, a lot of his written pieces had a dark edge to them, and I gravitated to that because I loved the imagery—the verbal imagery—of his written text. And when we started to develop it even further, he would write pieces and I would perform some of the pieces live on a stage. Or else there was a time when we were traveling to different cities and we did a piece that he wrote, a piece that Marisela wrote, and I did a play with Consuelo Norte and, at another place, with Kate [Vosof]. And another time with a guy named Adam Leventhal, and it was a two character play called *Strip Tease*, that was written by a Polish playwright. I liked the fact that this play was about these two big huge hands that pointed—like pointing fingers—that would come into this room and demand that these people give up their clothing. And so we had to keep constantly relinquishing our clothing—in the process, our dignity. And in Poland's case, it was Russia coming in and the Left and Right arguing and not doing anything about the situation so that finally they get crushed by it. Well, here it's sort of in the same situation of other forces coming in, and you keep on relinquishing until your Left and Right fight over, "What'll we do about this problem?", never settling anything, and the problem finally crushing you. I liked that idea, so I did that play several different places that I took it to. We staged it in different kinds of venues and situations, finally sort of just lambasting even the play. We did it with three people, and instead of them being in a room they were in a lifeboat, and instead of it being two hands it was two big sharks. So I did that at this place called Gallery Ocaso—and I believe that was in 1984—where it was staged once again and we wrote a whole new character into the scenario.

So our pieces sort of evolved and changed over the years, and the collaborations continued with *Jetter Jinx*, which we did at the L.A. Theatre Center. And Harry wrote *Jetter Jinx* for me and Herb Sandoval, and it's a two-character play. And that play—at the time when we did it—we didn't want to mention the word "AIDS" in the play, and it's only called some disease, or a virus of sorts. But what happens in the play is that this man, whose name is Jetter, gives a party, and—one of the worst things that can happen when somebody gives a party—nobody shows up. And finally somebody does, and his name is [No Pal]—or Nopal, and he comes with a gun that is given to him to give to the person called Jetter, and it's to blow his brains out because he had maliciously spread this disease among all his friends, knowing that he had it. And what he does is sing a swan song and then blows his brains out. And all the balloons come down and the place turns funeral green in a way. Daniel Martinez, I believe, did the lighting, and this man named Curtis Gutiérrez did the set, and I think Diane Gamboa also worked on the set, and Herb Sandoval and I were the two people in it. I played Jetter.

And the thing about Jetter is that it's a term that came out of East L.A. in the sixties. It was sort of like what the Mods were in England. But in East L.A. there was a term that most people think, "Oh yeah, East L.A. and pachuco, cholo." But there was another subgroup, and it was the fast-talking sort of like party-going animal, and they were called "jettters." And a jetter was the one who knew where all the happenings were, all the parties, all the clubs, all the dope, all the. . . . You know, just like everything. It was like he had to be at the forefront of all of that activity. So Harry—remembering that term—called the play *Jetter Jinx*, and Jetter became the name of this aging jetter who still wanted to continue to party even though your lifestyle really has to change or else you're going to die. So I think with Harry it was like writing it so that we could do this piece, and it was sort of this free-flowing language. It was just very exciting to work in a situation with all these people involved in it.

JR: You did this at the LATC?

G: LA. Theatre Center. We performed it several times there, and then a couple of other times I performed it. Not in the same kind of capacity because at LA. Theatre Center we had the lighting, and it was a theatre kind of situation. Then I staged it in other places, and with less tech to the performance of the piece.

JR: Can you say a little bit about the difference between doing something like *Stations of the Cross*, which seems to be much more open-ended versus doing something . . . you know, the evolution of doing something that's more of a production like *Jetter Jinx* at the LATC?

G: Yeah. In the performance pieces early on on the streets, it was using a hit-and-run kind of tactic. It was to do things in a spontaneous way. But also it was done to do it very quickly, because a lot of the things we were doing was against the law on the streets. So it had those tactics of still doing it very, very quickly and then getting away from there because we would probably get stopped by the police or things would happen to us if we did something. And in the performance pieces that later sort of. . . . We started staging things not necessarily in a theatre-type setting, but perhaps at Self Help Graphics. They would have an auditorium. Or in this place called the Hispanic Urban Center. And it would be this old almost church-looking kind of room, and we would have an area that would be the stage, which would be sort of like the altar in a way, and we would perform our pieces in these different kinds of settings with very relatively low tech. There was nothing elaborate about these kinds of pieces that we were doing. And then the evolution from that into like, "Oh, now it's inside of an environment where people are actually having to sit down and watch, and there's a thing about memorizing a text, and it's all the cues and stuff—where early on it was in the streets and whatever the environment was to alter a situation or the environment outside of an indoor kind of setting. And so there was a shift, a gradual shift where. . . .

JR: Was that because your aesthetics were moving in that direction or was it because you had access to use certain resources that would allow you to stage something like that?

G: I think both. I think for Harry and myself, it was to see or to do something that was set in front of people. Now, earlier I had talked about *Cockroaches Have No Friends*, which was done at a park, and the people sat on the lawn and watched onstage to see this performance piece take place. And I hadn't done anything like that since then until we started working in the seventies with ASCO to do these performance pieces and then into the eighties at these different locations. And I think what we needed to do was in a venue. What we did was our own publicity for those shows to bring people in to see what we were doing, and it was to send out the announcements or the flyers to this particular performance that we were going to do. And so people actually . . . okay, it starts at a certain time. It will end at a certain time or around a certain time. And we will have like maybe several different pieces take place in front of an audience. And I believe we sort of. . . . Harry was working in text, so it was, I think, a change in that now it's, "I have to memorize that text. It's going to take a little bit longer to do these pieces." So they were beginning [to get—Ed.] a little more structure to the pieces. It wasn't so open-ended as it was initially. And there is going to be a group of people out in front of you and there is this memorized text. So I think the text is the thing that really shifted it in another direction. Before, in the *Walking Mural* or in the *Stations of the Cross* or in the *Dinner Party* on a traffic island, there was really no words. We weren't talking to an audience. Unless we were explaining what we were doing. But it was not a written text. And the written text, I think, is what made it go into a different kind of environmental situation.

JR: Unless you're tagging a building and creating your texts.

G: Creating the tags on a wall like, "Yankees deported. Europe sinks"—which is one of Harry's pieces that he wrote. It was like an answer to the murals that were being put up for the Olympics that were held here, and there was like several Olympic murals, but ASCO decided to do their own and Harry stopped in the middle night and Marisela and Diane Gamboa and myself were coming from Hollywood after going out to a club or something, and Harry saw a wall and goes, "Oh, I think I'll do my Olympic mural." We pull off the freeway. He goes, "Do you have a spray can?" "Yeah, yeah, we got spray cans in the back in the glove compartment, blah, blah, blah." So we brought up the spray can, and he wrote—sort of like as a newspaper headline—"Yankees deported. Europe sinks." And the police actually caught us on that piece but let Marisela, Diane, and me go and kept Harry, because they said they had seen him. Actually, the rule of the street for us was to immediately throw whatever we have out of sight or out of our way. We had our hands filled with spray can paint. [laughter]

JR: "I didn't do anything, officer." [laughter]

G: Keep your hands in your pocket.

JR: Right, right. I was also referring to the *Pie in Deface*.

G: Oh, yeah. The *Pie in Deface* was done at the L.A. County Museum, and that was after Harry had gone there to check out the museum, and he was told by a museum director there that, "Well, Chicanos they don't make art. They're usually in gangs." So—in gang fashion—we went to the L.A. County Museum—Harry, Willie, and myself—and we spray-canned our names on all the entrances and exits to the L.A. County Museum, claiming the entire museum as ours and all the contents within, sort of like an artist signing his name to an art object. And Patssi showed up the next day to take photographs in front of it as sort of her signature to our signature. And so that was the project *Pie in Deface*.

JR: Nothing ever came back to you on that? I was always sort of curious about that.

G: No, nothing. I mean, they never. . . . I think they just thought it was hoodlums that were out there doing that, and nobody ever said anything. Harry took photographs and recorded the visuals. But, no, we were never questioned about that action at all. I don't think they really realized who we were at the time. It's like they were not familiar with who we were or what we were doing. That was 1972, so I don't think they were familiar with what we were, or what our activities were. And I think for me, I guess, the interesting thing is to twenty years later to be on the inside of the L.A. County Museum and doing a piece, sort of a reference to it, called *Project Pie in Deface*, with using actually a defacement of a clay facial mask that's slapped onto a wall that I paint. It's sort of defacing on the inside of the museum, and I doubt very much if they understood or got it—or want to get it or understand it. So that came when I did my survey show there twenty years later.

JR: One other ASCO piece that I wanted to ask you about was the *Day of the Dead*. Self Help was really active—or has been, still is—really active in putting on Day of the Dead celebrations and ceremonies and things like that. And wasn't there an ASCO performance connected to that? Or a number of them, for that matter?

G: We initially were asked to come in to do a piece. We went to a meeting at Self-Help Graphics, and they were talking about Mexico's Day of the Dead and how they did this kind of skull heads, and they'd showed a movie about the Day of the Dead, and we sat through it. I mean, we were like nice people. So we sat through it but we sort of rolled our eyes like, "Are we gonna repeat that?" Just like, "That's fine for somewhere else, but that's *not for us*. Day of the Dead can mean a lot of

different of things, and it doesn't necessarily mean paper cutouts, skull heads. We can invent it, what it means to us." And so, of course, Self-Help Graphics did a procession in a cemetery. We showed up in a truck, and it was a big envelope. Inside the envelope—which is a big sheet of white paper, basically—I painted a stamp and then addressed it to Evergreen Cemetery. Inside, as I tore open the envelope in front of everybody, was a bolt of lightning, which was Harry; the universe, which was Patssi; a tri-plane, which was Willie; and a tank, which was Herb Sandoval. So here was the universe, a tank, a bolt of lightning, and a tri-plane, and that was delivered sort of to the cemetery. So we did that piece. That was our piece and, of course, again, you know, like, "That's not Day of the Dead." But what we were attempting to do was invent our own version of the Day of the Dead in a way. And so that was an early piece.

We did another one where we strolled down a city street a float that Willie and I made. And it was cardboard on a [scaffolding] unit, and two people could ride inside of it like a parade float going down a city street. So we created that for another Day of the Dead. So there was a lot of different things that we did, giving sort of like, I think, new imagery for that. And again, later on it sort of wore off on us. It was like, "Let's go on our own again. They're doing the Day of the Dead and it's the same thing. It's like the altars and all of those kinds of things." And it's fine. I mean, I think there's room for everybody to do things. But for us I think it was important to stretch the bounds of those notions and possibilities. And I think to experiment, for me, was an important thing, and I think it still is, to attempt to do things that I'm not quite sure of and to have fun along the way, as well. Because I think, again, like, an integral part in the work is that it's coming from a sense of humor in a lot of ways. Or to be able to laugh I think is a very important thing, and I think satire and humor is a pivotal element in the work. If you go into seeing the work that I've done, and you're trying to get the edge or the angst or the ax I'm trying to grind in some way or another, you tend to miss the point because, for me, a lot of it stems from a sense of humor in a lot of respects. I like the term "wit," and I want my work to have that sense of humor behind it in a way or a . . . I tell people it's like sometimes when I talk about my work, it's giving the punchline before I've told the joke. So sometimes it's kind of difficult, because it's like there's subtleties and there's things involved in the work that I'm playing with. I read off titles like *Josephine Boneapart*. Don't take it too seriously. It's a joke. I mean, it's a bad pun. I like that, you know. That was a series that I was doing called Bone of Contention so everything had some kind of bone element to it. So, you know, I feel strongly about the fact that it's coming from a sense of humor in a way, too, as well.

JR: So, let's see, you mentioned the Bone of Contention series. Is there a moment that you can identify when you started moving more in . . . concentrating on the painting versus the collaborative work with ASCO? How did that sort of come about?

G: The painting element was always there. Like going back to the *Black and White Mural*, the mural at the Chicano Studies. The pieces that I was doing in the performance pieces had an element of painting with it, as well. I would create sets or environments to perform inside of or alongside of. So the painting was always there in a way throughout the work. I think a moment of change came after '78, after the Dreva-Gronk show and moving into the eighties. I think that was a shift for me in reconsidering painting and focusing solidly into that arena. It was at a time also where painting was being questioned. It's like, "Oh, it's answered all the questions it's going to answer, and now it's just decorative. It goes up on somebody's wall and painting is dead." You know, all of those kinds of terms were being tossed around. And I just thought, "Well, I don't think so. I think there's an awful lot of possibilities, even to add an element of performance to the notion of painting." And so

I felt like, "If I can develop that idea, perhaps I can play with painting in a way, in my own way." So by 1980 I think that was a shift and a change for me. And the focus was to concentrate more on the paintings. And, like I said, in 1983 getting an NEA Fellowship allowed me time to actually do that, as

to focus again into the paintings.

JR: Let's take a break and we'll flip over the tape here.

[Break in taping]

JR: Okay, this is tape three, side B, on January 20th, and I'm interviewing Gronk. We just left off at 1980 and you were talking about really sort of focusing back in on painting. One of the things, actually, I wanted to ask you about is the way that the performative quality has. . . . You've maintained that, even though you've sought out a direction more towards painting per se.

G: I thought of painting throughout the seventies as being something that I was always doing, an activity that was always present. In the following decade, in the eighties, it was, I think, a major decision in some ways to focus in on that a lot more. I started to keep a journal in 1978, which are my notebooks. And my notebooks . . . I compile a lot of drawings and it's almost like automatic writing. There's almost close to three hundred volumes of these little black books, but I just started in 1978 not knowing that they would accumulate into that amount of journals. But early on it was just like jotting down bits and fragments, bits and pieces, starting in '78. [In] '79 I started . . . like now there's twelve or fourteen or fifteen, twenty. And 1980 comes along and I'm still . . . I have like maybe thirty journals of drawings. And they became sort of like a diary of activities about people around me or situations, and sometimes it was creating a secret language in a way in the journals.

And in 1980 I was looking at some of my notations, and in one of the notations or one of the notebooks was a woman who had her back to the viewer. And I thought, "This is an interesting character. It has like a high sense of drama. It is very theatrical. Now, I want to maybe pursue this, and what is painting as theatre? Maybe this is a character, like someone picking an ensemble of characters and placing them in several different paintings." So I think a lot of things were just beginning to brew in my vocabulary of painting. And then I thought, "Well, perhaps this character is like a letter in an alphabet—maybe my letter A. You have to assemble several letters to form a word. Which means several paintings. You have to assemble several more to form the sentence. You have to form several more beyond that to form the narrative. So in actuality one painting is just a letter in an alphabet that others have to come along and add to that initial letter.

And I gave the name of the person that had her back to the viewer Tormenta. Again, almost theatrical, melodramatic. It was like thinking about opera. It was thinking about myth entering into the dimensions of my painting. It was trying to devise—again—scenarios. It was also thinking cinematically. I explained earlier about the cropping as if a lot of the paintings were going to take on a very cinematic sensibility to them as far as camera angles, or that looks like where a crane shot will come in and zoom in. So even the terminology of my painting was taken from film, in a lot of ways. So it still had an essence of theatricality to it.

Tormenta ended up developing into a series, and in the early eighties it was formulating ideas about, "I need a subject matter to begin my vocabulary and to develop it into a larger body of work." And I tend to think of myself, now, I say, as an archaeologist. An archaeologist would find a chip of pottery and base what a whole society was all about by a small fragment. Well, I find that I've always gone out and found fragments to base my body of work on. And at times it's sometimes a throw-away line from a film. It's an overheard conversation. It's a sign that is a shadow on a wall that perhaps I'll pluck two words and then base a body of work on that. But in the early eighties—not knowing all of this then—it was beginning to develop my language as a painter, and focusing in on something that I gravitated to which was the character of Tormenta. And I placed her initially on a lifeboat, and then I thought of the fact that, "Why am I doing this?" It's like, "Okay, Alfred Hitchcock

did a movie with Tallulah Bankhead called *Lifeboat*. Now that can't be it entirely. That's not it at all." And then it was like my fascination with—I spoke about this earlier out of when we were at a blackout—about my attraction to disasters. And as a kid growing up, again, cinema was always like that escape. I was intrigued by the Titanic and I . . .

JR: Which was also a movie. Oh no, that's the *Poseidon*. [laughs]

G: Yeah. Well, they also made a movie of the Titanic, which was called *Titanic* and also *A Night to Remember*. But there was a fascination for me in a way about that subject—the Titanic. Because again it's 1912; it's the turn of the century; it's the beginning of modernism in art. But also it was a change in a lot of different things. It was like from a Victorian era into a modern era. And I think one of the things that sort of excited me about the Titanic, and I think has gone on—and even previously like *Instant Mural*—was the sense of temporalness, that this is something that man had made. Well, I'm an artist and I make things. It's almost like Frankenstein creating a monster. I'm intrigued by those kinds of things, that man makes these things and they kill him or they come crashing down all around him. And does an artist have a responsibility to society once he's created his monster? Like Frankenstein his art objects? And it's like all of those issues started interplaying with what I was doing, thinking that, "Okay, this is the biggest thing that man had ever made up to that moment in time that moved. Really interesting. All of the wealth was placed aboard this ship, and it's moving across, and, by chance, in the middle of the night it bumps into this iceberg and comes crashing down. And I thought like, "This is like the state of the union in a way, especially in the 1980s with the Republican party at head of state. And it's this party with all these fancy people drinking and having a good time and the ship is collapsing but yet they're going to bear and grin it as the whole ship of state and the banks come crumbling down and everything starts to come crumbling down." And I thought, "Well, I can tell this narrative of the Titanic, but I can see it from a lot of possibilities. I can see it from the point of view of the iceberg. Okay, great story. The iceberg had a bum rap in history. It was the true existential hero behind the whole incident. It broke from a land mass, it drifted, it bumped into something in the middle of the night and then it melted and became part of the whole ocean." So I just liked that fact, that tale. And I felt like, "This is so existential." [laughter] "He's an existential hero, that iceberg."

And so it was intriguing for me to develop a body of work, and I didn't know how long I would continue to do that. But from the early eighties to about 1986 I did my Titanic series. I created *Cabin Fever*, I created a lot of things with tilts to it, as if the ship is going down. I did a show at the Gallery Ocaso, which was this temporary gallery that was run by Manazar Gamboa. And I did the inside of the Titanic collapsing inside of the gallery. I staged a performance piece. That's when I did *Striptease on a Lifeboat*, and had the sharks floating around it inside of the middle of the gallery. And so all of those things were staged live and the sense of something at a tilt and going down. The sound of an ocean liner was going through the gallery as viewers came into the gallery. So it was using a sense of performance and utilizing different kinds of sources—sound and a sense of portholes on the wall. So it was utilizing a lot of different pieces that was developing my scenario of the Titanic series. And MOCA, the piece that I did there was, again, from the Titanic series. And in it I had Tormenta in a lifeboat, which came from one of the journal drawings, and she's right beside a life-preserver and she's waving off in the distance and it's this ship that came to save the people who were in the Titanic.

And then I did live performances at MOCA, one of which was called *Morning Becomes Electricity*. And it was sort of a pun on *Morning Becomes Electra* by Eugene O'Neill, but it was about this woman. . . . When I was doing the pieces the Titanic was actually found. It was the year that the Titanic was found when I did the show at MOCA. So when I was working on the performance piece I added another performance into it, which was this woman who was found inside of the Titanic, still

alive, because she had gone into the big ice chest that was there, and so she had all this food for eighty-five years or however long it was down below. And she comes to the top and we have a conversation with her. So she was one of the characters in the performance called *Morning Becomes Electricity*. And she talks about the fact that she was running out . . . she was down to her last Dom Perignon, so she's very grateful that they came and saved her.

JR: [laughs]

G: And what I did was tell the story of Tormenta, who. . . . People were asking about the fact that she was saved and she had all these bottles of Dom Perignon in her lifeboat and she was the only one in the lifeboat. One of the things that I did in that performance piece was the issue about the artist and his responsibility to society at large once he creates something. What I did was create sort of a mock courtroom situation where I had to defend myself as an artist who makes all these creatures or things or paintings. And some of them have come back to haunt me by accusing me of creating something ugly and they really wanted to die. They didn't want to exist. They didn't want to hang in somebody's house. I painted them with a crooked nose and eyes that don't match and how would I like it if I were to have spend the rest of my time looking like that? What happens was that different people carried the object onto the witness stand and they would plead to the court to condemn me. And the prosecutors actually condemned me to paint ethnic murals in economically deprived neighborhoods for the rest of my life, because that was my place. Not in the avant-garde or anywhere else, but that's your role. So that was *Morning Becomes Electricity*, which added an element of performance to the over-all larger picture of a piece that was the size of a football field.

JR: Who else was involved in that piece?

G: Marisela Norte played Tormenta, actually, in that piece. Fayet Hauser was the woman who was trapped in the ice chest of a Titanic—actually, the refrigerator. And Tomato du Plenty, Ruben Zamorra. ["Tomato du Plenty" is the name of a character played by Zamorra—Ed.] Jim Bucola co-wrote the piece. And we performed it for, I believe, three performances in front of the large-scale piece that was like sort of my backdrop for the play and the courtroom situation.

That was all in 1985. So by '86 I had moved on to another series, when I overheard two Catholic schoolgirls talking about men on a bus and they were about seven and eight years old. And the seven year old said to the eight year old, "Men—they're not worth it." I thought, "She's right. And she's only seven years old, and she goes to Catholic school." [laughter] And I said, "You know, that bone of contention starts at a very early age. I'm going to start doing these pieces that have these bones dangling between people and sort of this tension—it's like we "bury the bone," you know, "bad to the bone." All of these kinds of bone notations. *Josephine Boneapart*, *Bonita in Pink*—another film reference. So it was like devising all these pieces around the bone. Bury the bone.

I worked through that series very quickly, and then the Hotel series began. And to me it's sort of like the companion to the Titanic series, because hotel is, again, something luxurious at times, and you never really own it, you just pass through it. Again, something very temporal. You check in; you check out. It's sort of like life in a way: You check in; you check out. So I did a series based on some of my experiences and I thought of myself, "Gee, I think I'm a method painter in a way, because I have to immerse myself in a situation before I even start to do my body of work." And one of the things . . . the first show was called the Grand Hotel. References were made to room 326 in the show. Well, I lived in the Grand Hotel for two years, and the Grand Hotel is on Spring Street. My room number was 326. So there was a lot of things that I pulled from that experience, put it into the work. But it was also this big, romantic notion of a grand hotel, which no longer really exists anymore, because it also came crashing down as well. And now they're just franchises and stuff

along those lines. But I started to research grand hotels and hotels in general, and then I started to do my own hotel system. I did a show in Paris called *Hotel Tormenta*. I did a show in Chicago called *Zombie Hotel*, a *Grand Hotel* in San Francisco. So that each different city that I went to I opened up sort of like a different kind of hotel, and the initial *Grand Hotel* was for me to be a bellhop, and on opening night I went to the opening, stood in the middle of the gallery, and above me was. . . . I made a cardboard chandelier, sort of a poor man's version of a chandelier, and it was just made out of cardboard boxes that I hand-painted in black and white that hung above me. And I liked the fact that where I live—again, biographical sources influencing the work—is that I live in an area where people actually live in cardboard "hotels" in a way. They cover themselves and put themselves into these cardboard houses, and it's littered throughout the streets in my neighborhood. So it was to create a chandelier above me, me dressed as a bellhop, and the request for people was to bring luggage. So by the end of the evening there was a pile of luggage in the middle of the gallery, the chandelier from the top, and I'm wearing the bellhop outfit. And then the series of pieces for the *Grand Hotel*. The front desk became the concierge so there was a bell that rang as people came into the gallery. And that became another element of the performance aspect of the piece.

So each site was slightly different. I would create something for each site of the hotel series. And I went on to do the *Hotel Senator*, which was close to the last in the Hotel series. I believe I did another hotel, and I forget the title of it, at the Laguna Beach Museum. But the *Hotel Senator* was a building again close to my neighborhood or my archaeological dig—or site as I called it—Los Angeles, and across the street from where I live presently. Outside of this building is the Hotel Senator. Now the Hotel Senator is an ugly. . . . Well, it was. It's no longer that. It's not even beautiful. But it's this building that housed a house of prostitution and drugs. I like the fact that it was called "Senator."

JR: [laughs]

G: Hotel Senator, and it was like this house of prostitution. It had the ugliest-looking sign leaning up against this building announcing what that place was. And I thought, "This is like so ugly. It's like that sign is just like a beat-up looking piece of wood." And I asked one of my neighbors, Steve La Ponsie, to go up on top of the building to yell to me, "Go!" when he sees nobody around, so that I can run across the street and steal the sign. So I ran across the street when he said, "Go," brought the sign back up into my studio, and, again, being that archaeologist who finds the chip, "This is my fragment. Now what does this beat-up sign mean to me?" Well, it's really decrepit. It's like the veneer of a door is the door's skin. It's taking the whole thing apart and trying to piece it back together again, and taking a little fragment and basing my scenario of this next body of work that I'm going to create from this particular sign. And I thought it was done so crudely that I said, "Well, I really don't paint that well with my left hand. I'm really right-handed. So I'm going to create this body of work with my left hand and not use my right hand." So the work was even more chaotic, in a way, painterly-wise. I did the series and I thought, "Well, a prostitute is usually associated with this particular place. But I don't want to do the conventional woman standing under a street lamp selling herself in this particular piece. I want it to be told from the point of view of vessels, because a woman is referred to as a vessel because she carries life. And I thought, "I sort of want to do it with a Styrofoam cup, because a Styrofoam cup is something that you utilize once and once you've used it it's damaged goods and you throw away." Which is sort of what is inhabiting this particular place is society's throwaway. So it was like taking the Styrofoam cup and it become[s] an important element—or a cocktail glass, a martini glass. But a lot of the vessels were drained and sort of empty and ugly looking in a way.

So that was the Hotel Senator series. One of the last acts was to place that particular sign in front of my gallery, so that for me in a sense the gallery becomes a house of prostitution—which

happens to artists along the way as well. So there was that performance/conceptual element to the painting.

The next thing was—and I'm going through the eighties—is the next series which was called Fascinating Slippers, and I'm still working through that. I haven't really gone through it all. And I started that in the nineties, actually—the Fascinating Slippers series. And that came about from another fragment—two words written on this wall. But, actually, what it was was the initial sign that was on the wall were these letters. Once the people moved out of the building they removed these [sic] lettering, and what happened was that all this smog, grime, and dirt had filtered behind, from time filtered behind these letters, and what was left was a shadow. So now this shadow said, "Fascinating slippers." I'm walking down the street—again, another fragment—I look up, see those two words, and I get to the coffee shop that I go to. I sat down and I thought, "What the hell is a fascinating slipper?" And it's like slipper in Spanish . . . "Oh, 'pantunflas.' That's an intriguing name for something so simple as a slipper. Pantunflas." And I said, "Well, that's kind of catchy. Maybe as the archaeologist, pantunflas is sort of like Cantínflas in a way." [Cantínflas is a famous Mexican comedian (Chaplinesque), who passed away in 1992—Ed.] So it was like mixing kinds of language and play on things. Maybe that's now my next series. And what is this sign? Again, something temporal. That shadow is not going to last. With time it'll wash away. So it's going to be there for a short moment. So, again, another thing that has a temporal lifespan to it. It's something I've been dealing with. It's the initial thing that we're not here forever, we don't last forever, has been a motivating thing in the work—that we have to, for me, seek the divine in the daily because that's the most important thing is where we're at at any particular moment.

And so Fascinating Slippers became a new series for me. I initially did it for a show at the San Jose Museum, then a show for Dan Saxon Gallery. And what I did with Fascinating Slippers—since it initially was a sign that called out to people—I started to look at signs that litter all of Los Angeles and noticing that sometimes liquor stores had a circle with an arrow through it, which directed people into the liquor store. Or shapes that protrude from buildings were from a time-frame like the 1930s and twenties, and it had a very art deco kind of shape to it and it protruded off of a building. But now time has changed, another culture has perhaps come along and left its mark on top of what was left by the former culture, because perhaps a Korean family now owns that store. So you see plump Korean lettering on a sign that it was not even designed for, but one culture left its mark, another culture comes along and utilizes what the former culture left behind and places its mark on top of it.

So I was intrigued by the many different layers, as an archaeologist digging through and sifting through a burial ground will see the many different layers and many different cultures leave behind to the present culture. So for me it was again looking at signs and the signs became like, "Well, 'signs.' What is a sign? 'Sign' could be a sign of warning or something taking place within our city." During the time that I was doing it the civil unrest broke out. I thought, "This is an interesting timeframe for me because I'm trying to link or connect or map out my city." And what is happening is that the city explodes because cultures are intermixing with one another, not quite understanding sometimes that different cultures—maybe the Black and Koreans—don't understand one another. People accuse, "Oh, those south central people or people from Central America were robbing stores and looting and stuff. 'It's them, over there,' " not realizing that we're all sort of to blame for something that takes place like that. It's like not just an isolated grouping of people, but this whole city is kind of linked, and I would like to do my signs that litter throughout Los Angeles and sort of like make my own markings onto these particular pieces that I was going to devise for my Fascinating Slippers series. And also to continuously title them—*First Street, Second Street, Third Street, Fourth Street*—and work my way from where the initial verdict for Rodney King coming out on

First Street, Parker Center. I live on Seventh Street. So it's like from First people came to Second, to third, to fourth, and came through the streets of my own neighborhood. But also wanting to link my neighborhood also to South Central Los Angeles and further into another area of town that we sort of disregard as being poverty and all that sort of

stuff. So what I did was I named and titled a lot of the different pieces that I was developing for the Fascinating Slippers based on each one of those streets. And that to me was like again another device for a body of work, was the Fascinating Slippers show.

JR: [both laugh] Hey, we're blinking again, so let me stop here for a second. I have some more questions to ask you if you're still there.

G: Yeah.

JR: Let me change the tape.

[Break in taping]

JR: Okay, this is tape four, side A, continuing the interview with Gronk on January 20, 1997, and in the break, while we were switching tapes, I was asking if you start a series or a body of work with a particular theme in mind and say, "I'm going to create a body of work about temporality or about vessels," and you were exploring that.

G: In the initial stages of when I'm developing a series, before the series begins, the research begins for me. So I'm not going to do a body of work and go into it cold, without a lot of information to back up what I'm doing. So there is a sense of improvisation, but there is also a lot of material. If I'm going to do the series with the vessels, representing a hotel, a house of prostitution, well, it's making that connection about what a vessel is. It's sort of like taking the vessel apart and thinking like the many uses that I can devise for it. It's sort of like in the process it's discovering more, learning more about the word "vessel." It's like, again, doing Fascinating Slippers and thinking, "Okay, now break it apart. What is it in Spanish? 'Pantunflas.' 'Pantunflas' sounds like 'Cantínflas,'" if you can stretch it further enough. So it's like in the process of doing it's uncovering things. It's devising that I'm going to do a series on the shape of signs. Now those shaped canvasses have to be done before I actually start the work . . .

JR: Right.

G: . . . so I'm actually designing them and saying, "This is what I need to make my . . . how my signs are going to be made. The canvas is going to be stretched on the stretcher bars, but the stretcher bars are going to be a little bit wider, and so it has a sculptural element to it. When it's placed onto a wall, it's going to be hung a little higher because usually people have to look up to a sign. So a lot of those kind of issues are developed in the process of doing it. So it's like I'm thinking about it and breaking things down. So there is a lot of thought that's going on in the process of actually doing. But the time of history, it's easier to look at and see all of these kinds of things that took place in order to develop the body of work.

During the course of the eighties into the nineties, I've only mentioned four series because that's all I've done. I've done Titanic, Bone of Contention, Hotel, and Fascinating Slippers. So that's only four variations of developing themes for me in the past sixteen years, seventeen years. So that's pretty much what the painting has evolved from, because sometimes a series will last. . . . The Titanic series maybe seven years of devising it and turning out. And then I figure that I've gone as far as I

can take this particular theme and I feel, "It's complete. End. Period. Exclamation point. Now, hop onto the next."

Fascinating Slippers, I'm not quite sure right now whether it's ended or I've shifted into something else. I did a show in Madison, Wisconsin, and it was called *Iron Weave*. That was the large on-site installation piece that I did there. And what has happened is, now people ask not for a diagram or a pre-sketch, because I don't give pre-sketches, because I want that sense of improvisation to happen during the course of the time of my visit to a particular museum or site that I'm going to be at. In the case of Madison, Wisconsin, they called up and asked, "Do you have a title for the show?" I saw two words again as I left my building and walked down the street, and the two words were "Iron Weave." And the continuation was, "Panty Hose."

JR: [laughs]

G: And I thought, "Isn't that interesting? "Iron Weave Panty Hose." That is like a protection shield of some sort from people who come in the street and stab you with a knife perhaps. I mean, it's like this protection." So when I talked to them at the museum I said the title is *Iron Weave*, because I'm going to weave a landscape across the walls of the museum. And that particular show, since it came from a sign again, I place it into the Fascinating Slippers series. So I think still the process of what I'm doing is still carrying on the Fascinating Slippers beginning; that whole series is still continuing. So that's. . . .

JR: Yeah. I'm hearing something actually come together now that you're talking about the four bodies of work. You started out talking about developing Tormenta as kind of a letter in your alphabet of iconography, and putting the paintings together to tell a story, a narrative. Can we think, (a), is that alphabet complete? Do you feel like through these four bodies of work now that you've got the letters through which you're going to tell the story? And what is the story that you're telling through these bodies of work?

G: I think what I'm attempting to do. . . . And I tell people I don't have the answers to the world's problems nor do I try to solve it through my work. I'm just an observer and I'm sort of taking in, and what I put down are my observations of things around me. I'm also uncovering things about myself during the course of this and sharing those insights with other people as well. And perhaps from that sharing to learn something, perhaps, from my observations. Not bludgeoning the viewer with my politics nor with my asking for converts. It's just, I think, purely to share these observations and things perhaps that are unique enough in some way or another that people can get a sense. . . . Because for me the important thing is the viewer. I mean, the person who comes to see the piece. I'm not painting just primarily for myself. But for me it's important to communicate ideas.

JR: So it's a dialogue.

G: And the dialogues. All of those kinds of things I think I'm possibly trying to communicate. As far as like my having my full alphabet, I think that what has happened. . . . If Tormenta is like letter A while her sister Isella Boat is B, the Titanic can be from the point of view of the iceberg; maybe that's C. It's like the alphabet has come together as far as I know it, but that doesn't mean I can't invent new letters for my alphabet and perhaps replace other letters and add new letters to it. So I think it can alter and change in the course of time, as well.

I have my own rituals, which are my daily activities. One is to drink a cup of coffee. And I can see that, you know, like a reoccurring [*sic*] image is a vessel that holds liquid which gives life to a person. So in a sense those are like very important. In ancient cultures it was people sat around and told

stories about society or their culture and passed around a vessel and drank from it and wondered about the stars and wondered about God and wondered about different things. Well, to me those rituals are still here except we just take them for granted.

JR: Sure.

G: And to me they're still very important, they're still very exciting—to have some sense of storytelling in my work. I know that's an old-fashioned notion. But yet there is a desire to communicate, not necessarily just the idea, but also a notion of storytelling. Hopefully, people that view the work are going to also bring in their own interpretation to the piece, because we all come from different backgrounds, we're all going to look at something and place our own experiences into a work of art. And that to me, that's what art is, is that you do place your own temperament, your own sensibility, your own ideas of who you are into a work. And I like the aspect of communicator and of sharing ideas, and that's basically what I do through the paintings. And to create, again, that language hopefully to allow other people to enter into the world that for me is exciting. [laughs]

JR: Gronk's world! Who do you see yourself communicating with?

G: I think that the experience that I've had so far has been a wide variety, from elementary school to senior citizen. And not just issues about art, in a sense. My work is not just for—I hope—not just for an elite group of people who get the joke about art being about art. But [if—Ed.] someone from Madison, Wisconsin, who's a farmer can be touched by something that I do, I think I'm doing an okay job of communicating. And an example is the fact that when I was in Madison, Wisconsin, they asked me to go on the radio at five o'clock in the morning. And I wondered about that, because I'm like, "Who the hell listens to the radio at five o'clock in the morning?" And they go, "Gronk, the farmers are up at that time and they're going into the fields and stuff so they listen to the radio." And sure enough, the farmers would come in in the afternoon once the chores were done, and they'd come in and like, "Well, I brought my wife and I brought my family because I wanted them to see what a Gronk looked like. Now, you were on the radio earlier today, and you were talking about them earthquakes in Los Angeles. Well, we don't have earthquakes; we have tornadoes." And this farmer actually was talking about these tornadoes, and I got a lot of other input from a group of students who talked about tornadoes. And when I was talking to a group of students, actually—they were bussed in to the museum—and I was talking about Los Angeles and the earthquakes that I experienced here and which caused this sensation to the landscape that I live in, and I was explaining to them, all of sudden there was a look of recognition on the face, and I couldn't. . . . Like, "Why are they identifying with me? Here I am talking about earthquakes. They don't have earthquakes here in Madison, Wisconsin." And I asked them that very question, and they said, "Well you know, Gronk, we have tornadoes and what you explained to us . . . we have to go underground inside of the cellar and we hear the crashing, and the sky turns green." Just like this whole explanation and I was like my mouth agog by their tale of woe. And I'm going, "We're both affected by landscapes." It's like something like there's a connection here. All of a sudden, in my work appeared a whole row of tornadoes going across a landscape called *Iron Weave*—that landscape I was weaving in Wisconsin—and it wouldn't have happened unless that interaction between the people and myself during the course of the process of actually doing it. So to me it's like they helped the piece develop in a different direction that I was never thinking of going in. And it was all of sudden, it was by chance, it was a connection that took place, and I like the fact that I was allowing them to have an influence on the direction of the work as well.

So, in a sense, it's communicating with a variety of people. Or whether it's an elementary school kid who. . . . Once I did a show at the L.A. County Museum and these kids went to the show. It was a group of elementary school kids, and the principal called me up and asked me if I would talk to them

in their school, and I went. The thing about the experience of going into their hallway and seeing like all these Tormentas that the kids had done. I'm looking at these paintings, and they're all of this woman with her back to the viewer. And then I looked at the principal, and she's sitting at her desk and right behind her is a kid painting of Tormenta, as well. And she like big smile and stuff, "Yeah. Oh the kids did all these Tormentas."

JR: [laughs]

G: And I was like, "Why did they gravitate towards this woman who had her back to the viewer?" I never thought that a kid could be touched by that. And then, the biggest place that these kids could gather was in their library, and so they all sat on the rug. It was their first visit to a museum, was the L.A. County Museum. Their first experience was choosing me as their favorite artist because I had this painting called *No Nose and Tormenta*. And their curiosity was, "Why didn't this woman have a nose? What does she look like in the front?" So it was like all these different things that they were curious about. And there was a little easel for me to paint on, and I started to do Tormenta for them. And I all of sudden started hearing sounds because my back was to them and I thought, "Oh my God, their attention span is gone." But one kid just jumped up in the middle of the room and he screamed, "Tormenta! She's here! At our school!" It was as if the real one had now appeared because I was doing her, and so they were very, very excited and I was just fascinated by the fact that they could relate to something. They were asking, "Well, why do you do Tormenta?" And I said, "Well, you know, I grew up with a single parent. Perhaps Tormenta is my single parent who sort of held the household together when I was growing up, very strong. Someone who dominated her environment not was like something passive to her environment but held fast and strong and kept the household together. So maybe that's part of why I decided. . . ." They related to that.

So it was communicating to somebody in elementary school. It's communicating to somebody who's a farmer in Wisconsin. So I think it's like a lot of different. . . . And the university students who sort of, you know, "Come on, prove yourself." [laughter] So I think it's a lot of variety of different people. I think, again, it's placing it there for people to either take in or disregard, whatever their choice is.

JR: How about the communication? We've talked about the four bodies of work and we haven't gotten to the work that you've been doing most recently with Tormenta Cantata, and I'm wondering maybe about new configurations of collaboration, different types of collaboration. Maybe ideas are . . . that you'd like to communicate through that, that piece or that series?

G: Well, another recent—recent being the past couple of years—has been living in this building on Spring Street. There is a person here who is a composer, and his name is Joseph Julian González, and he does for a living like film score. He's conducted orchestras. He's written music. And one evening we were sitting in my courtyard, and we were talking about other collaborations that other artists have done in the past—like Merce Cunningham and John Cage, Satie/Cocteau/Picasso. A lot of different people have collaborated in the past, and we thought perhaps we could do something together as a collaboration. Harry and I had a break in time where we did not really talk with one another for about seven years, and it was right after 1987 and we just went our own separate ways. And I've sort of craved that intellectual stimulation with another person—or another person that was creative. It didn't exist for that time-frame. I was doing my paintings and I was doing a lot of work on my own. And when Joseph moved into the building, to me it was like, "Oh, here's somebody I can talk with and participate with, and he's very clever, very knowledgeable about his arena that he's in, which is music." And we sat around and talked about these other collaborations that other artists had done, and we said, "Let's actually sit down and go through some of the work" that I've done, and listened to a lot of his music, and we started going through a lot of my imagery,

and the thing that he gravitated also to was Tormenta. He looked at it and said, "This is like opera. This has a very musical. . . . It's like "soprano" written all over her." [laughter] And he goes, "I've been intrigued by writing a string quartet." And we talked about it, and he goes, "What if I did something like. . . . Actually, the first title of the piece was *St. Rose of Lima*, because I had done a piece and utilized Tormenta for St. Rose of Lima. Now, St. Rose of Lima is the first saint of the New World. She's from Lima, Peru. And I was intrigued by her story, because she was this woman who didn't want to marry. She lived in the backyard of her parents' house. She slept on this wood slab—that was her bed. She actually defaced her face with the thorns of a rose stem because she didn't want to take her vanity too seriously and take away from her belief in God. And she heard voices. So I thought, "schizophrenia." She had to be—you know, like just this kook. [laughter] But an intriguing story, an intriguing tale and I liked that sort of that absurd kind of notion to it, just like a tale of woe in a way. She died at a very early age, and she prayed so hard that the Spanish would not come to her village and they passed it up and they went and pillaged everywhere else. So she became a saint. And just like an intriguing story. And since Tormenta to me is sort of like an icon of sorts—or a myth as well in a way, creating this myth around a particular character—I thought, "Okay, I'm going to do St. Rose of Lima. It's going to be Tormenta, though, and she's going to be spreading open these curtains, and by the tension that's placed on these curtains you'll get the idea what she's viewing—perhaps what she's viewing is not too nice—and protecting her is this angel. It is a blue angel. Film. It is also an angel that is in a boxing position. And what happens to a lot of people of color is the way to achieve success outside of your environment sometimes is to take in this sport of boxing. Usually, in East L.A., there is a name for a young boy sometimes. It is a "angel" or "angel." [Second time uses Spanish pronunciation—Ed.] So it's like all of those kinds of notes were placed into it, but also the boxer, to me, is what happens to a person of color within the art arena. Because when a person of color is involved in a show sometimes, there is only one. You have to do battle with the other one in order to achieve success because there can't be two of you. So Betye Saar, [Alison] Saar, have to struggle it out together. Frank Romero, Gronk, "Okay, whose gonna box each other out?" So it's like those kinds of, I think, things happen within the art arena. It's still a battle or a struggle sometimes. So I put in this boxing angel in the piece.

Now, Joseph gravitated to that particular piece and I said, "You know, it might be interesting to do something about St. Rose of Lima." So we started, again, researching and trying to incorporate something of St. Rose. But then another shift in idea came out. One day we were like researching, and I remembered an Alfred Hitchcock movie, which is called *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and I showed Joseph the movie. One of Joseph's heroes is this composer—his name is Bernard Herman—who did a lot of Alfred Hitchcock films. So in the movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Bernard Herman is the central figure in the last scene—the big climactic scene practically—of the movie, which takes place in Albert Hall and Doris Day is about to see an assassination, and she's not quite sure whether she's going to scream and allow the person who's about to be assassinated know that he's going to be assassinated by screaming, because her young son has been kidnapped by the people who are doing the assassination and they had threatened her. "If you say this to anybody, we're going to kill your son." So she's [in a—Ed.] dilemma—an existential dilemma [laughter]—whether to scream or not to scream. And during the course of this, Bernard Herman is conducting this big orchestra, and it's called *Storm Cantata*. Now in Spanish "tormenta" means "storm." So Joseph wrote *Tormenta Cantata*, which was a play on the *Storm Cantata*, and utilized a little bit of . . . a fragment of that idea from the *Storm Cantata*. And what happens is that that was taken in. There was a couple of other. . . . There was *The Last Year at Marienbad* that we watched as well. And that was for the soprano; it's like we gave her that as her research. There's a tango number in this movie called "Pride of the Yankees," and so we showed the soprano. "It's like you have to communicate a lot with just your back, because Tormenta doesn't face the audience. You're going to sing with your back to the audience. So he wrote the piece for a soprano who

doesn't face the audience. He wrote it for a string quartet, which. . . . We asked the Kronos String Quartet if they wanted to do it, and they said, "Yes," which means we didn't have to work our way down from the top group in the world and whittle our way down to East L.A. College's string quartet. So we asked them and they said yes, and they were excited about doing it because they had never heard of anybody doing this before or since.

What it is is that it was also written for an amplified brush. So it's string quartet, soprano, and amplified brush. Which meant Joseph had to watch me paint in his studio to get a sense of the tempo that I move in and also how much area I can cover in an amount of time. And what we did was do a couple of rehearsal pieces. We actually worked here in my studio and went up to his studio. And we put a microphone to the brush to hear it as a percussion instrument going "ch-ch-ch-ch" as I painted. Now also he wanted it in a sense that it was more integral into the score so that the musicians were following the tempo of the brush. So in a sense the brush became the conductor baton as well, to keep the tempo of the piece going. So I had to relearn how to paint with a brush that was going to keep a tempo. So he suggested I work to a metronome, which is "tick-

tick-tick" to keep the tempo of the piece. And he would put it at a certain register and he says, "Okay, practice this at least an hour every day to keep the tempo going of the piece."

So it was rethinking a lot of things but, again, bringing that element of performance, bringing still a direction for my work and creating the *Tormenta Cantata*, which is done in the middle of a stage. There's a wall that's twelve feet by eight feet, the soprano to one side, the string quartet to the other side. And the brushwork on the piece is written into the score, because there are certain elements in the pictorial piece that is actually lines on the wall that are in the written score. An example is I do four paper airplanes. Now, a paper airplane is ten lines, some of them long, some of them short. Well, that is written as the score so that musicians know I'm doing one line down, another one back, a short line, another short line, a long line, and I'm creating this paper airplane so they're following that movement as a score. But also they know that as a brush runs out of paint, I have to dunk my brush, so a notation on the score is a square with a line through it, which means I'm going to dunk my brush. So we came up with a new symbol for music, because now it's like "line with square" means "brush gets dunked." So all of that was rehearsed and we played that whole piece at UCLA at Schoenberg Auditorium for its first world premier. And then we've done it three times in San Francisco and another time in Villa Montalvo. So now I have three walls that are eight feet by twelve feet, and the accumulation of all of this now is going to go to a show at the San Jose Museum in '98, which is going to be sort of like the whole process and the evolution of this particular body of work.

JR: Wow. Okay, it's time to flip the tape again.

G: [chuckles]

[Break in taping]

G: They're going to be so proud of you.

JR: [snorts] "Proud of you," whew! Impressed with you.

G: [laughs]

JR: Okay, this is tape four, side B, continuing the interview with Gronk on January 20, 1997, and we have the . . . was it a circle or a box with a slash or line through it that is now a dunk?

G: I'm dunking the brush in the *Tormenta Cantata*, the *Tormenta Cantata* piece that I collaborated with Joseph on. When we initially did it at the Schoenberg Auditorium at UCLA, we weren't quite sure if it was going to go over. It was a nice concept, a nice idea. Here we had the Kronos String Quartet performing the piece, the soprano doing the singing, the music also, and. . . .

JR: How did you. . . I'm sorry to interrupt. But how often did you get a chance to rehearse with the Kronos Quartet, and the whole operation?

G: We flew up to San Francisco to do our initial meeting and a rehearsal piece with them, to sort of fill them in on who Tormenta was, also how the music was going to be done. They are used to doing contemporary music by modern composers, so if they see lines and stuff and you tell them what it is, they get the idea, whereas other musicians might scratch their head and like, "No, no, it has to be notes," and stuff. For them, they've played a lot of contemporary American music—and music from elsewhere as well—but a lot has been contemporary composers. So when we went up to San Francisco to talk about the piece and we played it for the first time, what I did was have a sheet of paper that was just taped to a wall, and we said, "This is how it works. There is three movements to the piece," and we went through it and we thought, "Okay, it's like different levels of sound. The paintbrush is going to get taken out of the piece. The brushstrokes are going to go louder on the piece. So it's going to go in and out of the composition, so there are moments in time when the sound is cut off from the brush so you don't hear it as too loud as a distraction where you're hearing the music go on. So the sound levels can be altered and changed during the course of the performance of the piece. But also there were going to be lighting cues, and that was going to be written into the score as well, so that a light hit a certain portion of the wall, or else the lighting level went up or went down according to the score. And so we talked all of this out. Then when they came to Los Angeles to come to UCLA we did a couple of rehearsals there as well. And we rehearsed the piece [separately—Ed.]. We could work on our own, and the soprano could do her piece, they could rehearse their piece, and I could rehearse the piece separately, as well. Joseph had me listen to a tape so that I knew the three different movements—when they begin, when they ended. So that I was able to like, "Okay, they do a certain musical number. Once that ends that means I go to one side of the wall. I make four lines, which is an indicator to them to come into the next movement. So all of those things were plotted out beforehand.

And what happened was that we did the piece, the number, at the auditorium, and it was very successful which was so surprising to us in a way. It's like it was a standing ovation for the piece, and the people just went wild in the audience. We were sort of dumbfounded because we felt like we weren't sure if it was going to work, or whether it was full of shit, or just like is it going to pan out in any way that we had thought? And it went far beyond our wildest imagination could imagine for the piece. We thought, "There's something to this and we can maybe even refine it, do it differently." The Kronos String Quartet were just blown away by the response to the piece. They just thought like, "We've never gotten a response like this, you know, in a long, long time. Let's do it again." And like, "Yeah, let's do it again!" And they're asking, "Do you want to go on tour?" [laughter] "I don't know. I've got a lot of other things already set up." And they were so much fun to work with. I mean, they were just as excitable about things as we were, so it was again. . . . For me, I never dreamt that I would end up on a stage with a soprano and a string quartet and they would be performing this thing based on this myth that I created, which was the Tormenta character. And here we were performing this piece and it went over very well.

And then Joseph and I thought, "Well, let's not stop this collaboration. This went over well." So we devised another piece. I was curating a show at the Armand Hammer Museum, and I wanted to do something with Marisela Norte, who is a writer, and Joseph again—perhaps bringing in a written text. And so I approached Marisela. I said, "I'd like to collaborate in some way." But it was always

kind of difficult to get Marisela to attend rehearsals or anything along those lines, so we decided to use one of her poems that she wrote called "Babysitter Girl." And we were doing a thing again for the Day of the Dead, but I wanted to alter the notion of "altar." An altar for me could be a table and four chairs, because that's a ritual as well in a way. So we devised this piece, which is the four chairs and the table. Each chair has a speaker in it. It's activated by the sitter, and you become, as you activate it, either first violin, second violin, cello, and viola. So again it was the Kronos String Quartet. And out of each one of the speakers came that particular instrument, floating over the person's head. And so if you have four sitters you hear the whole piece. If you have just one sitter, you only hear one instrument. But in the middle of the table is also a speaker inside the table, which is a constant drumbeat, which is the most ancient musical instrument. And so you have this ancient, primitive instrument—the drum—but also this classical string quartet. The four colors of the different . . . are actually Aztec colors—it's blue, black, red, and white, and they are east, west, south, and north, which is the four directions—hence the title of the piece, *Four Directions*. What he composed for the music was a [diras ear-ee-aye (possibly *Dies irae*?)—Ed.], which is a mass for the dead, and so hence the Day of the Dead but utilizing a different format for it and utilizing a poem that was about a babysitter who was killed during the time she was babysitting and her name ended up on page 9, "Dead Before Her Time," is how Marisela wrote the poem. So it was utilizing that poem, Joseph doing the music, and me designing the table and chairs for the piece. And that was placed at the Armand Hammer Museum in a show that I curated there. That was another follow-up to the *Tormenta Cantata*. We still are in the hopes of working on some more collaborations continuing this line of work that we've been devising, I guess, for the past year now.

JR: And the paintings that you've done are now part of the show at Cal State L.A.

G: The *Tormenta Cantata* pieces—the three walls that I created for the three different cities that we've done the piece in—are now taken off of the roll-on casters, which was the wall initially that was in the middle of the stage of the theatre where we performed, three different theatre sites. Now they were removed and placed on the wall of the gallery, so three of the pieces now are at Cal State L.A. in the show that I called *Tormenta Cantata*—because it has the videotape running so people can actually see one of the live performances, but also the three walls that were done during the course of the . . . for the exhibition.

That piece that we did, I think, excited both Joseph and I to continue our collaborations and to expand on a lot of these ideas, and to integrate the collaboration, not just like an artist doing his thing and the composer doing his thing, but more of a joint kind of collaboration where each was dependent on the other to do this particular piece. I don't know what's in store but we've been talking like operetta, we've been talking a street opera, so in a sense it's like going back to, I guess, my roots of things—the performance kind of stuff—but now it's again live on stage, doing an on-site piece. The on-site pieces that I've done in different museums since about 1984 when I did the Gallery Ocaso when I did the Titanic piece, which was sort of my last show before I went into MOCA and did the football field-size painting. . . . I started to do several other on-site pieces in different cities and each one the museum was different or the environment of where I was going to do within the configuration of walls were different. Sometimes it was just maybe one wall. At the National Museum of American Art where I did my last piece that I did on site actually it was a small on-site piece. I forget the size of it. Maybe twenty feet by maybe nine feet or so, and it was in the lobby of the museum. And I also had a piece called *St. Rose of Lima*, which is there, so those were the two pieces that I did for the Kaleidoscope show that was there.

But each site is completely different. Each situation and setup is different. I said earlier about the fact that I don't do a pre-sketch or drawing to what it is that I'm going to do. They have to trust me as far as what it's going to be. I've had different experiences with people coming through.

Sometimes, you know, you're in a site and the person that comes into the gallery is really obnoxious and like, "Oh, well you know, I wouldn't ever have that hanging on my walls," or this and that. And they say it to the top of your voices so that you can hear them as you're working. So sometimes you get that, other times it's, "Ah, my kid could do that." Like they think they're being very clever. You know, like, "Can't they think of something a little bit more imaginative than that old line?" [laughs]

So each site is different, and the process evolved as I started to do the pieces. When I did a piece at MOCA, viewers could actually see me do the piece but only from an angle. It was sort of like the rest of the show is being installed with all the other artists in the exhibition. So audiences . . . groups of people weren't allowed actually to go inside to watch, but there was a door opening that they could see me actually inside there painting. And they would call to me, or they would ask questions, or yell like, "What are you doing?" and stuff. And I thought, "This is very intriguing. It's like wouldn't it be interesting if groups of people could actually come in and watch this whole process of someone doing something?" And while I was working on that I would sense that there's really a need for people to ask a person who calls himself an artist questions. They never get to see him actually work, nor do they know the materials an artist uses sometimes. It's like people go into a museum and they see paintings, but they never see it with the person actually working on the piece, and I thought, "This is intriguing, because I can actually talk to people as they come into this site." And the question usually is, "Well, don't you lose focus?" "Like sure I do. It's like if I'm talking to you, I'm going to lose focus and it's a stop and go, stop and go, stop and go, and I'm going to be painting but I'm going to be talking to you, and to me talking to you is like thinking aloud. I'm just hearing my thoughts, talking to you. And it's no more, no less when a phone rings and I go to answer it and I'm in my studio and I'm working. Yeah, it's a distraction but I'm not going to let it be that it's going to be so distracting that I can't produce what I'm going to do. Because I want you to see what it is that I'm doing. I want people to actually hear the voice of an artist talk about what he's doing. And, yeah, sometimes I don't know sometimes the direction it's going into, but I want you to hear that doubt. I want you to hear like, 'I'm not quite sure.' Because sometimes I don't have the answers to everything while I'm doing it. It's like it's being made up as it's going along, but I want you to know that, too. I want you to hear a human voice say, 'I don't know,' and be honest about saying that to you. But I want you to know that it's a human being who's working. This is a job. It's not something where I'm coming in here from nine to five. It doesn't end there. It's full-time. An artist is always constantly is thinking about the process of what he's doing throughout, and when you leave I'm still going to be here inside this museum working. And when you come back the next day—if you do—I'm going to be in here and I'm going to be working because what it is is work. It's to cover a wall that's so huge is a lot of work. Going up and down ladders is exhausting. There's a physicality to painting that's exhausting. There's a lot of exhilaration for me as a person who likes movement. It's like dance in a way. All of those elements are important. It's like I'm hopping up and down, going up and down ladders, moving around and carrying a brush with me, but I want you to see my brush. It cost 99 cents. It was from a hardware store. The hardware store is in your neighborhood. If you notice my paint, it's house paint. It's black house paint from your local hardware store. These are the materials. See this bucket? It's just water. The brush goes in there, you can clean it, dunk it into the next color. See? There's no big mystery. And I'm making something in front of you."

So it allows people to see a process but also it doesn't alienate them from that process, and I think for me that was an important thing to bring to people in a way. Because what I heard throughout the eighties, in a sense—or actually the nineties—was, "Oh, artists. They're on the fringe of society. They don't reflect what society is all about. Let's take away the NEA." And that was the politicians. So I thought it was important especially if you could talk to maybe make an effort to do that to people and not just isolate yourself from the community at large. And I think it's very important for

an artist if he has the ability to do that, to stand up and take a stand in some way or another and not just get railroaded over by politicians and people wanting to dismantle everything. And say, "No, we're human beings as well and we're not just that stereotyped view of somebody living in a garret with an ear chopped off, you know. That's the romantic notion of the artist in a lot of ways. But that we're people that are a part of society, in a way." Even though we may be seen as outsider or someone who is creative and so he puts his head in an oven and kills himself. Those, to me sometimes, are my heroes so I can't say that I disapprove of that. Or sometimes it's those heroin addicts that are, "Well, yeah, that person was on heroin but, boy, did he create a great body of work." Or, "Yeah, they took drugs, and they like had opium, but look at what they produced." So I still have that sense of—you know, like an artist is sometimes—these people that have these things about them that perhaps society at large sees as something very negative. Sometimes to me that is the case. But for myself I would like to be able to address a lot of different things and be put on the spot of being attacked maybe in some way. But actually like being there to talk about my work *as best as I can*.

Like I say, sometimes I don't know, but I love being in that position as an artist. It's a great position to be in—of not being quite sure about everything—because then it's uncovering, it's discovery, it's exploration. For me, exploration is one of the reasons why I do what I do and make my art. It's to explore possibilities or go in directions that I've never fathomed before, like playing with a string quartet and a soprano and painting at the same time—and feeling some kind of fulfillment from doing that or having that experience. And perhaps from that learn something and take it into more of my work, because it's constantly for me to think of ideas and to learn from the experience or to challenge myself. I don't feel myself in competition with other artists. The only competition, I say, is myself—to be better than I was yesterday. That's who I want to be better than, not other artists or fellow people that I collaborate with.

JR: And it seems like the thing that makes those moments of speaking to people while you're painting, but also trying to sort of improve upon yesterday's work all the time, is the sense of humor. You know, to be able to laugh about or kind of joke about not knowing what's coming next or where it is I think is what helps make it accessible to people. I imagine it's something that museum officials must be really pleased about—to sort of break down that notion that an artist is an untouchable kind of ogre who's wrapped up in his or her creative process, and you don't want to touch them at that point, where it sort of breaks down that wall between.

G: I think I have that in my private life. [laughs] As opposed to my public life.

JR: Well, you know, it's interesting, though, because in some ways the way that you talk about engaging the public in, say, a museum installation piece is a much different side than the observer who is peeling back layers of a city, or thinking of yourself as an archaeologist who's always kind of trying to communicate something by observing, which connotes a distance, a detachment.

G: Right. I think when I create in a public atmosphere, where the situation is out in public, is different than how I work in my studio. When I work in my studio it's in the privacy of my own space, and so there's a different sensibility that's going down into the work, which is stripping the layers and taking things apart in a more meticulous kind of way. When I'm in the public kind of situation, it is for a short amount of time, on-site, inside of a museum situation or a gallery-type situation, and sharing things with people. It's like that performance aspect of something. It's like being on stage. So when the person sees the piece that I do, it's part of an on-going performance that's taking place in full view of the viewer. When I'm working in my studio, I don't have all the cameras—although people are suspicious of the fact that perhaps the only way I will paint is with the camera crew right behind me and a group of people watching. But in my studio it is a slower more perhaps meticulous kind of

way. The large on-scale pieces have a more sense of urgency to them in a way, because they're done so quickly and they're covering a large amount of space. And yet I think for myself those to me are like the important pieces in a way. The pieces in my studio I tend to look at them as the fragmentations that lead up to larger on-site pieces. I think other people probably disagree with that, that the more focused pieces in-studio are more engaging and perhaps more revealing in a way. I feel my journals and my notebooks to be the most revealing of me, which are more diary-like and more intimate. Whereas the large scale you get like Cinemascope, big Technicolor, or black and white, or, you know, a big production, but I think sometimes solutions for me are with a simplicity of one single line on a sheet of paper. And just the simplicity of that can speak volumes.

And I enjoy drawing. I think that's like the daily thing. For me I think it's something that has been an integral part since the very beginning, when I started to draw on a piece of paper. I still on a daily basis—usually it's a daily basis—at least do a couple of drawings every single day, and sometimes they're in the journal, sometimes they're just notes to remember something from.

The accumulation to me of the journals is almost biographical in a lot of ways, but also when I create prints and I'm in the city of Madison, Wisconsin, to create a body of print work, it again becomes a collaboration between the master printers and myself. You create an atmosphere within that studio situation. You take charge and you like, "This is what I want." And you work together to produce these pieces. And I never thought of myself, I guess, as a printmaker, but once I'm tossed into that arena it's like, "Okay, now I'm a printmaker and I'm going to develop this body of work of prints and what's the record of monoprints?" And it's like, "Oh, 45." "Okay, let's do 60. Let's go." It's like one right after another. And it's with that same enthusiasm as I approach the large-scale pieces. I like to work in a momentum and produce and produce and produce and then to stop and to look at what I've done and try to figure it out and see like, "Well, that's kind of good. That's not too good." And then sort of leave it. What I tend not to do is marry the objects that I make. I do a piece and I don't grow attached to it, or it's like "I can't leave that." It's like, "No, nobody should own this. Only I." To me, it's like there's more—and there will always, hopefully, be more. And to me it's like the next, and the next, and the next is the most exciting, as opposed to saying, "This is the epitome of who I am and what I want to say." It's like I don't have those kinds of attachments to the work. The process is, I guess, the most important aspect of what it is that I do.

JR: That's what I was going to ask you about—the process versus the product—because these on-site pieces eventually get white-washed, so it's left with the audience in a much different way than some of your studio work could be.

G: The on-site pieces, when people ask, "Well, once you're gone do they lose their impact?" hopefully not so. I think it is a fragment that's been left behind and you've left something of yourself in the piece, and hopefully that's communicated to the viewer when they come in to see an on-site piece. But there are many ideas that were played out in the course of time that I was there and hopefully that energy or that enthusiasm or that sensibility has worked its way and spun its tail around whatever site that I'm working at. Some I think have been more successful than others. I don't quite think that the National Museum of American Art really got what I did when I went there, because, you know, I had this wall and it was like they couldn't do it directly onto the wall, and the size got shrunk down to a small size, and I felt like, "This is like doing an easel painting in my studio and I'm just sort of on display here painting. But I'm going to make the most of it. It's like I'll do what was done." Actually, the show opened before I even started my piece, so all I had for the opening was one piece—the *Saint Rose of Lima*—and I didn't start work until a couple of days before I was going to leave on the piece. So I only had a few days to actually work on the on-site piece. And so I thought, "It's like they really didn't get it that I should have went and worked for maybe two weeks and then up to the opening, so that I could have had a piece that was a major piece," and what

they got was a relatively small piece. And so I think for me it was kind of a letdown, after doing like sizes of football fields.

JR: Yeah. Monumental ones.

G: Big, huge pieces and then you go to Washington D.C. and they give you a small little format to do something, but. . . .

JR: I wonder what that means. [laughter] Okay, I think we're coming to the. . . .

[Session 2]

G: Okay. [laughs]

JR: We'll have to pick up on that!

This is an interview with Gronk for the Archives of American Art on January 23, 1997. We're in Gronk's studio in downtown Los Angeles and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. Okay, after our last session, basically what we want to do here is pick up on some topics that either maybe we just touched on really briefly in the first set of interviews or things that we saw that were not addressed at all. I guess one of the things that I wanted to ask you about was—there's a few things—but let's start out with your reflections on Los Angeles as a place that you've chosen to make your home, as a place that sort of feeds your imagery, and maybe a site that you consider yourself an observer of—an archaeologist of, you've mentioned before. So maybe you can begin by commenting on that.

G: Okay. I was born here in Los Angeles, so I think part of my attraction to being here in Los Angeles is the fact that I've lived here most of my life. And I think the different changes and transformations that have taken place is an attraction for me to be here. I think of myself, like I said in the past, as an artist/archaeologist, because I think of especially downtown Los Angeles at this point in time as my archaeological dig or site. And I utilize it as such—or I name it as such—because I've done things like map out my city by utilizing the bits and pieces and fragmentations of that city, bringing those fragments back into my studio and utilizing that as a starting point to my body of works that I've been producing. Some of the fragmentations, I think, are important for me because, like an archaeologist finding a chip of pottery and basing what a society is all about by one little fragment, I go about it in pretty much the same fashion. What I find, I guess, an attraction to is the, I guess, scratching beneath the first few layers of a culture, and especially in Los Angeles where we have many cultures interacting with one another and former cultures that have packed up and moved away and another culture coming in and leaving their marks.

What I do as a painter, what I do as a person who does visual pieces on walls or on canvas or on different materials is to mark or to even layer paint on a surface—or to make a scratch mark of some sort. But it's always like these markings that I'm intrigued by. And when I talk about different cultures sort of having an impact on one another, I think that's another one of the attractions of being here in Los Angeles is that there is a big diversity of cultures—as opposed to being, for instance, in New York where it's primarily European culture—it's Italians. . . . Well, it's a lot of different cultures basically from a lot of European countries. But here we have the Pacific Rim, which I think has a big influence on Los Angeles as well. You have all of Central America, you have Mexico, you have the Philippines, you have China, you have Japan, which has a big impact on a major, big city like Los Angeles. And I think when I see things like words merging together—like teriyaki-burrito, Casa Oriental—it's seeing the cultures intermixing with one another, but it's also seeing what an impact a former culture that was dominant here in the twenties and thirties, a culture that left

behind its architecture and its shaped signs that were taken from a very art deco kind of time frame of producing these buildings and signs that protrude off of buildings, and then seeing another culture coming in and utilizing what the former culture used. Say, for instance, a Korean family now owning a store that was once this very art deco kind of store that was something completely different and utilized for something completely different before. But now the Korean family puts their plump lettering on top of this art deco sign, which doesn't necessarily conform, but yet there's still utilization of something that the former culture left behind, and now this other culture utilizing that and placing its markings on top of it. I don't read Korean, but yet I can see the beauty behind it. It's like an abstract kind of imagery to me. And then seeing the shape of that particular sign. All of those things I'm intrigued by, I guess, in my work. I find that also not only the diversity but sometimes how that diversity does not get along with each other, how there can be a time where a whole city burns up because there are confusion about different cultures learning about one another. It's like the beginnings of a period of adjustment for a lot of people of being in close proximity to one another, and then racial or different kinds of issues come about and all of a sudden the city burns down.

So I think for me as an artist and an observer of things those kinds of things intrigue me. It's like from the ashes, perhaps, something can rise from it, like a phoenix of some sort. And I'm intrigued by all those kinds of different things. It's like living in Pompeii and the volcano explodes and then we see what that culture left behind in its ashes, in a way. So for me it's always referencing historical kinds of notions of things, finding things in shadows that are written on the wall, lettering that was left by a group of people or business person that owned a building and the words "Fascinating Slippers" left behind, which was a shadow, but then thinking about Hiroshima and the shadows that were written across the walls of people who were there at that moment in time and all that was left was a mark. And again I become fascinated again because I spoke about how, for me, it is marking that I do on a canvas or on a surface.

And so I think it's very important for me at this moment in time. Yes, I would probably like to have a place that was a getaway to like just see sky and stars and stuff that I can go to, and I always envision myself in a stream-lined trailer—one of those silver bullet type of trailers and in the middle of nowhere like Arizona or New Mexico and just have a trailer and a little beach chair to sit out in the desert and just look at the stars, and, of course, have a lot of videos and books to read. And I can just see myself away from it all. And then come back again because I have to replugin and charge up. Every time I leave the city I feel that I have to catch up again, there's something I missed while I was gone that has happened. So I think for me it's still very important. I've chosen to live sort of in the heart of a city, which is for me downtown Los Angeles. I call it a heart, because all the buslines which are these veins and arteries are connected to here, because you can catch a bus here and end up in any part of the rest of the city. So it converges here.

I think the history for it as well is a part of it. I used to come here as a kid and ditch school sometimes and walk through the streets of downtown Los Angeles or go to the movie houses in downtown Los Angeles. So it was always a place where I gravitated to.

And I think that now when I show someone where I live it's usually to take them, maybe, just for a walk around the block and see so much. No matter where you look or within the periphery of your vision there is an activity taking place, and I like the fact that I can also become—in a sense—somehow invisible, too. I can maneuver in the different areas. For instance, living on Spring Street, it's one block away from Broadway. Broadway I call a Third World nation just by itself, that one street. You walk one block further down and you see the jewelry mart. I call that the Persian Gulf. And then we move another few blocks down, and it's corporate America. And so within just a few-block range there's a big diversity of activities and people that congregate.

And when I talk about archaeological signposts for me, Hill Street is one block away from Broadway. Hill Street used to have a Warner Brothers theatre. Now what protrudes off of that building is the marquee that is still left behind. Warner Brothers had a logo, which is the Warner Brothers Shield is their logo. That's still there but since it's the Jewelry Mart, now another culture utilizes that and placed a big diamond in the middle of the Warner Brothers logo. So again there's that one layer of culture that was left behind, and then another one comes in and puts its image on top of it. So those shapes and signposts for me are part of the visual activity that I intake in order to do my work.

JR: Do you think that's something particular to downtown, because I think of Los Angeles as a place of—in some ways—in which the influence of Hollywood is ever-pervasive, and in some ways that, I think, contributes to a lack of memory. And then California in and of itself is geographically in very volatile space, so that, because of earthquakes or whatever, some of the buildings or some of the layers of culture can be leveled or in some ways wiped away. Do you find downtown is one of the few places that you can scratch at those layers?

G: Actually, no. I think I utilize the whole entire city, but my focus point is within the neighborhood of where I'm at at that particular moment in time. And I'm someone who doesn't drive, so a lot of my activity stays within a confined area in a way. I don't usually go off to other areas a lot of the times, unless I'm with somebody or I take a bus and I'm out there. So I tend to utilize my neighborhood to tell the observation of a larger picture of things. I think that's why I say I gravitate to being here. There is a seedy side to it that is an attraction to me, as well. Not the seedy side of Hollywood necessarily or Santa Monica. There's another side to it that is prevalent here that I think for myself as an observer I tend to gravitate to—well, I guess because I'm intrigued by it. There's a high density of poverty that's here, and it's visible. It's not invisible. It's not hidden away. It's very blatant. It's there. And for myself I think I'm also intrigued by that in a voyeuristic kind of way, I guess. And part of that, I believe for myself, ends up in the work somehow. All of those bits and pieces and fragments that I utilize, I break things down and utilize it and put it into the work.

What I think also has an impact is that. . . . That sense of things not lasting I'm intrigued by, because a building can be built and then thirty years later something else will be there in its place. It sort of like either collapses or falls apart or the people move out of that area and move further west. Well, usually not east but usually continually west. And what happens is that that sense of memory is not prevalent in a way throughout this area. It's the memory of, "Oh, I remember that there used to be a building there, now it's a parking lot." So it's been sort of like leveled in way. And I think that's why I'm attracted to living in a space that was even formerly a bank in the 1920s, the turn of the century, this area was called the Wall Street of the West. But now it's basically right a block away from Skid Row.

So to me it's, again, like choosing to immerse myself in an atmosphere and learning about a city and its transformations and changes, and also the fact that I can maneuver myself in the many different areas. I say Third World nation for one block, Persian Gulf the next, corporate America the following block. But also from here to the L.A. Opera is just a few blocks, and the Museum of Contemporary Art. You pass through these many different layers of people, and then all of a sudden you're in another circle, so all of a sudden you're in the Founders' Circle watching an opera at night, and then in the morning you're at Clifton's Cafeteria, where mostly people on fixed incomes are having their lunch. So it's like you can cross over and participate in the many different transformations that are here and that are quite visible.

And so to me all those kinds of things I believe are an attraction for me to be in this particular place at this moment. And who's to say? I mean, it's maybe . . . I feel I've completed this time of being here

at this moment, and maybe, like I said, you know, a trailer park and extraterrestrials will be my next adventure. [laughter]

JR: Who knows? We'll certainly you're moving in that direction by heading out to the Midwest in Madison.

G: In a sense, when I say names like Madison, El Paso, Washington, those were maybe fifteen years ago just words that I would say, never thinking that I would ever have the word Wisconsin coming out of mouth and then it actually being a place that people actually lived. It was always like looking at the map on election night and seeing, "Oh, there's Wisconsin, there's Chicago," and these were just words, "Oh there's New York over there, there's. . . ." And I'd go, "Who's going to win that particular state?" Or when you saw the Miss America Beauty Pageant there was always like a Miss Wisconsin or a Miss Louisiana, but I never thought, "Well, I guess she represents everything that is from that place there." And it was always, you know, like not participating in it by actually being there and seeing it first hand, so they were always just words to me, in a way. Then actually going there and finding different things about people in a way—and I think, perhaps, even being a person of color you sort of like are perceived in a different way. Even here in Los Angeles, that can happen, but I believe more so when you venture out into middle America in a way, where perhaps the stare is a little longer as to adjustment when somebody sees you. It's like, "What are you?" Or [sniffs] "He's a human but he's. . . ." You know, like, "Boy, does he have tan." [laughter]

JR: "Where did that come from?"

G: And the stare is perhaps just a little bit longer, as a jarring kind of note that there's a little bit difference in the person. So you notice maybe that. And then I never thought that, initially, when I went to Madison, Wisconsin, that I would have such a relationship with that place. Initially, it was to do prints at this place called Tandem Press. I was invited to come to do prints there. They usually invite maybe six artists every year to do print work, and they facilitate everything for you there while you're there. And initially it was an interesting time, I guess, for them and myself, because we had to begin our relationship in a way. Now I've gone there so many times. But, initially, I was picked up at the airport. We were taken to the print lab and shown the place. And the first time I arrived there they had just finished this person's work. Her name is Ruth Weisberg, who is the chairman of the art department—*chairwoman* of the art department of U.S.C. They had just finished her printing, and I was the next person to come in and utilize the space. So they still had some of her stuff—her colors that she used, and there was like notations here and there, you know, "Ruth's work." And when I arrived to meet the printers everybody was still talking about Ruth, "Ruth this, Ruth that. Oh, those are Ruth's colors, we've got to put those away. Oh, Ruth wants these on file." And all of a sudden I said, "I'm going to have to do something." So I stood up on a table and I yelled at the top of my voice: "I don't want that name Ruth mentioned again while I'm here!" And everybody stopped. And this was on our first initial meeting. And, "No, Gronk, nobody will mention her name again." And I said, "Show me her work. I want to see what this person has done before me." And so they took me into a room where they had all the pieces stored and stuff, and I went through the files and I looked at her work. And I said, "Oh, it's okay. You can mention her name." And I was only joking, it was like just having fun. And about a year later Ruth found out about what I had said. I met her outside of MOCA one day, and she was coming out and she was being introduced to me by a critic. They said, "Gronk, this is Ruth Weisberg. Ruth, this is Gronk." And Ruth, like her eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Oh, I've heard about you. You're a bad boy. You scared everybody at Tandem Press."

But it sort of was like that was my initiation into the place. It loosened them up, they got a sense of my personality, that I'm really like not a big threat or anything like that. I like to have fun while I work and joke around and stuff and, "Come on, let's get to work and have fun."

But Paula Pachenko, whose husband is Russell Pachenko. . . . He's the director of the museum there in Madison, Wisconsin. It's called the Ovium Museum. One evening Paula says, "My husband and I, we're going to have cocktails and we'd like to have dinner with you." So I said, "Fine. Let's have dinner and cocktails." Russell had heard that I like martinis, so he was very excited because he liked martinis and now he could have somebody to sit with and have a martini with. And martinis are one of my favorite drinks—it's a reoccurring [sic] image in my work, as well. But we met and chatted and talked, and I had a video of one of my on-site pieces that I had done, one called *Fascinating Slippers*, which was at the San Jose Museum, and it was a half-hour documentary by Juan Garza. He went home and he saw it early in the morning, called up my hotel, and asked if I would like to do a walk-through through the museum. Now when a museum director or somebody from the museum usually says "walk-through," that means they want to show off something, and usually it's like their purchase or something along those lines. So I figured, "Oh, I'm in town; he wants to show me their latest acquisition or the space." So I went and he took me up to the third floor, and it was the contemporary art section. I looked at it and I said, "Oh yeah, it's an interesting collection." And he goes, "No, no, Gronk. What about the walls? If you could come back in a year or so and we can like organize a show for you here the way you did it in that documentary." And I said, "Oh, I'd love to. This is such great big space."

And so then we developed that relationship with the museum, and then I went back again to do the on-site piece, and then to do more prints. So I've been constantly for the last four years now, I guess, going back and forth to Madison, Wisconsin—which, again, was just two words to me before—and developing a relationship with those people that take me in and do a lot of different things with artistic kind of ventures.

JR: And you made the documentary in your time there.

G: And we made. . . . What happened was. . . . I think Madison, Wisconsin, and the Ovium Museum has one of the best educational departments in a museum in the United States, and their outreach was exceptional to a lot of different people. They know a lot of the constituents of their city and of Wisconsin, and they had like a big diversity of people come to the museum, some of them for the first time into that museum while my show was taking place. So they really worked and did their job, and they got the PBS to come in and do a documentary, and ending up doing almost thirty hours of documenting the whole process, from the time I arrived to the time I left. To even the time when the wall gets completely painted over and whitewashed. So they did a very good all-around package of this particular show. And it's like one of the places that I feel has really utilized the artist in a way, as opposed to other places that I've gone where they can't figure out exactly, "What is it that you do?" Or like, "Can we have a sketch?" No sketch was asked by the museum director. It was, again, that sense of trust and allowing me to do whatever it is that I wanted to do on their walls. That to me was one of . . . I guess, the most exciting. . . . MOCA was another exciting place that I did an on-site piece, and the San Jose Museum was another place, but I think the Ovium by far had the biggest impact on me.

JR: One of the things, having seen the documentary, that I was really impressed by were the different types of people who would be coming through and watching you do your work. Everyone from it looked like from elementary school children, to people who looked like they knew their way around the museum, to having you dialogue one-on-one with museum officials, or sort of catching your observations at Fiesta Gronk or something like that. I wonder if you might comment on how it was to interact with those different constituencies once we get to the other side of the tape.

G: Okay.

[Break in taping]

JR: This is tape one, side B, of the interview with Gronk on January 23, 1997, in his studio. I think that's all we need to know. Okay. So what about interacting with the different groups of people at the Ovium Museum?

G: I think what happens in a situation of doing an on-site piece there, is that you have a diversity of people coming in—some who are familiar with a lot of contemporary art, others who are not; others who are coming in for the first time, like elementary school kids. So each time you explain the piece to a new group it's devising a new way sometimes of saying what it is that you're doing. I call it, for myself, "thinking aloud"—talking to people as they come in and interacting with them in that kind of a situation. And the interesting thing I guess for me is that when you're speaking to a group of people that perhaps know nothing about your work or who you are or your background, and it's the first kind of meeting of doing something. . . . When people go to a museum or a gallery kind of situation, they usually expect the work to be done and it hanging on the wall and the artist generally not there. In this case it's the person . . . the artist is there and is actually in the process of making something, and the process is also the fact that perhaps someone or something may trigger a direction in the piece that you never thought would end up on your wall. At times it can be disturbing in a way, and I think for myself as I'm doing these pieces, that's like carrying another voice in your head that you didn't know existed in a way, and all of a sudden it's surfacing on the wall, and having to deal with that kind of situation. [telephone rings]

JR: Telephone. We're going to take a break

[Interruption in taping]

JR: Okay, we're back. The phone call's over.

G: Okay, so sometimes the dynamics between certain groups of people having an impact on the direction of the work. The elementary school kids, for instance, speaking with them: all of a sudden perhaps a kid can come into a situation and say, "Hey, you don't got the sun in there," and so I'll do like a big circle. And in one case the kid said, "Yeah, but you don't got the power," which meant the lines that go across from the outside of the circle. And I said, "Wow! Power from the sun. That's pretty good." So there's situations where things like that would happen and even a kid coming in and say, "Well, I'd like to see a power ranger." And I will say, "I don't do Power Rangers, really. I'll do Bart Simpson's top of his hair, which are these spikes, and the rest of him is out of the picture below it because you can't really see him." So it gives them sort of an abstract notion, in a way, of seeing just the shape of something but giving them something familiar to connect with. Or Barney's nose, as opposed to the entire body, and it's just like a big C across the canvas. So it's talking to them in a different way. And perhaps like with someone who's a farmer from Madison, Wisconsin, for instance, our relationship was talking about landscapes and how a landscape can have an impact on the lives of people.

So it's sort of connecting with people on different levels and making a sense of what's familiar to them, maybe connecting to them with what is familiar with me in my language of dealing with imagery or letters in the alphabet that I'm dealing with. And also, I think, an important thing—and perhaps a refreshing thing for people—is that I don't like to address a group of people that maybe are not initiated into the art world and know art terms or about art. It's trying to explain to them in a way that people can understand it in some way, or break it down in a way, so that they can look at things. And perhaps not just even my work but take a look at other people's work as well and see something in it. Sometimes people have barriers that they don't want to look, and you can't change

37 years in someone's life and say, "This is what I do and this is what my work is about," and make it penetrate at all, because they've already like, you know, they have their notions about things. And then you have somebody who's a senior citizen and say, "Well, the work is awfully dark." Or another person saying they really enjoy the piece and they see sort of maybe a landscape taking shape or they can relate to it in maybe fragments or bits and pieces. All of that I want the viewer to participate, in a way, and maybe relate to it in a variety of ways. And even to the point of, perhaps, it's something that someone does not want to engage in, and that's their right as well. It's like, you know, they come in and take a look and spin around and walk off in a huff.

But also, you know, like for me I don't think I create in a vacuum in any way. I create to have people look at something. So that's like it's an important thing that the object is out there, and not just the object but myself as well, as a person who makes these large-scale types of pieces. So I think there's a lot of dynamics that go on when I'm creating an on-site installation piece and the variety of people—people from different cultures, different sensibilities. Sometimes. . . . A part of the idea of me being in a museum-type situation, as, like I say, when I live here in Los Angeles at being an archaeologist or trying to understand—or even an anthropologist—trying to understand that local environment of where it is that I'm at at a particular moment in time. And when it is going to a different city and doing my work there, I tend to gravitate and find that I continue my same rituals that I have here there. I do go off sometimes and go to a coffee shop, sit down, jot down notes on a napkin or in my journals, and utilize that information, and maybe pushpin it to the wall of that museum so it's a reference point for me, or it's a notation for me to take the work in a certain direction. Or maybe just an idea that I was working through. But it's an accumulation of a lot of different ideas by drawing and making those marks and utilizing that information and taking it into the work.

But also it's utilizing what that community has, that perhaps maybe they don't realize is very important, in a way. It's seeing that a hardware store can supply the paint that does this big piece of art, and that the brushes are things that people can buy at their local hardware store—utilizing a lot of what is around. My cups that I mix my work in are usually styrofoam cups, and you can get those at Thrifty's. Or just telling people that these are the supplies that make this, and it's all familiar kind of material, and this is how I mix it. It's that demystification for a lot of people, because a lot of people don't know how a painting starts or begins, or, "Where do you start when you come into a room that's the size of a football field? Do you start in the middle? Do you start on the side? Is it from left to right?" Those are all kinds of different things that people ask about when you're engaged in doing a work in front of people. Or, "Is your sense of focus disturbed by all the people that come in?" and I have to say, "Yes, of course it is." I'm constantly bombarded by questions and it's stop and go and stop and go. So it is not entirely like how I work in my studio. Like that phone call was a perfect example of how something can throw you and all of a sudden you're in a different world—the real world perhaps.

JR: Right.

G: And then brought back into your own that you're creating. I so it's like, I think, again, the big diversity of people and explaining the work to them for me is an important aspect of those on-site installation pieces.

JR: It seems like, just having listened, though, it's a pretty consistent thread from the performance pieces of ASCO where, if people ask, you'll explain sort of what's going on, or just having observed having a class from Cal State up here in your studio space, or making your space available to high school students, or explaining to people at a museum while you're doing an on-site piece just kind of what it is that an artist does. You know, in some ways you kind of assert your role more—more

recognizably, maybe, more dramatically, maybe more concretely—assert your role as an artist in society so that people recognize, you know, "Artists do this stuff. We work on a daily basis." I wonder if that's something conscientiously that you do, or if it's just your need to interact with people?

G: Well, I think it's more of a conscious act of that. I feel that, especially in these times, that the art has sort of been—the past fifty, sixty years or so—has sometimes been so cold and aloof and away from a lot of groups of people. And I think especially for somebody of color, somebody like a person that came from a working-class situation. To me Chicano art, one of the important things about it is that it was a whole group of people coming out of a working-class situation, blue-collar kind of working class. Art before that was mostly the leisure class produced our art, our books, our novels, the pictorial works. It was a leisure class that was producing that. Now there's a whole other thing of a working-class group of people, and now more people of color actually working and doing their work. And I think, for me, that's one of our jobs is education—to share with other people and bring in a whole group that sort of was just dismissed by other generations of artists, in a way.

JR: So there's a responsibility component.

G: I think that's part of my own choice there. I can say though, too, that there are a lot of other artists and art that I'm attracted to that, you know, the person that chose to do it was a complete outsider and was a drug addict or an opium smoker or just like the worst kind of element in a way, I guess, in terms of living a life in that fashion but I don't see anything wrong with—that that was that particular person's choice. I love what I read or I love what they did and their work still holds up. And it's like we all have our problems, we all have our own agenda in life and things that we want to do. But I think it's important for myself to, hopefully, communicate to a broad range of people and not just an academic kind of arena, and engage people into the work on many fronts, on many levels. It's been a choice, I guess, for such a long time that it's just second nature in my work to, perhaps, explain utilizing words about what it is that I do. And sometimes it's very difficult to do that. But I think, for me, all those challenges are exciting, because again I'm learning something new and perhaps that will add to the work itself as well. Sometimes I have to explain to the viewer, too, "I'm not quite sure. I don't know."

All of those kinds of things are part of a process of actually uncovering. It's like experimenting with a new material or a scientific experiment. You're not quite sure where it will lead to. Hopefully, it's for something that you enjoy or that's intriguing, and all of those kinds of things are important for myself as a person who has chosen to make things, and have the audience be people who come from different backgrounds, different levels of society. And I think it's important that I continue in that way with my work at this moment in time.

JR: Let me switch gears for a second and ask you about a particular show—that being the CARA [Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation—Ed.] exhibit. I think it started in 1990 . . .

G: Right.

JR: . . . at was it Houston or the Wight Art Gallery at UCLA started that?

G: UCLA, yeah. The Houston show was the Hispanic Art in the United States show.

JR: Okay.

G: The CARA show was at UCLA where it started. Initially, I was not going to be in that show. One

of the reasons that I had for not wanting to be in the show was that I was in the show called Hispanic Art in the United States, and it was sort of lambasted [*sic*] by a lot of the different scholars—educators, writers, critical—because of the curatorial. When they attacked the curatorial they went at great lengths to discuss that as opposed to the artists in the exhibition. And now they were putting on their own show. And I thought, "Well, if that's what took place with that particular show, I'm going to say no to being in that exhibition." And then the fact that it is multi-curatorial in that, and the people that were picked as the curatorial kind of component to the show I was not enamored by their work. So I was saying at the very beginning, "I don't want to be involved in the show." Shifra Goldman came to ask me to be in the show. She wanted me to show. Rene Yañez from San Francisco came and asked if I wanted to show. Holly [Barnett-Sánchez—Ed.] and Marcos [Sánchez Tranquilino—Ed.], who were also on the curatorial, came and had a meeting with me to be in the show. Because if I was missing from the show, there was going to be a gap there, especially with ASCO, and they felt that it was an important part of that whole movement. I explained my reasoning. I said, "You know the last time, what happened when I was in that show, most of the people that are on this curatorial committee just downed that show, but really did a slap in the face to all the participants because they didn't discuss the work at all, and they just complained about the fact about the curatorial and the term "Hispanic" in the show." I believe also because Octavio Paz did the essay for the exhibition. So it had a lot of strikes against it, in a way. But, nevertheless, it really, I think, did a lot of damage, and I really think the damage was not to the curatorial but to the artists involved in the show.

So after talking with everybody and then talking with Patssi, Willie—at the time I wasn't talking with Harry—but talking with them and thinking, "Well, I'll reconsider my contribution to the show." And they came to ask what I was going to have for the show. I gave them a few slides, I believe, and my suggestions for what I wanted to be represented in the show. Now Judy Baca was one of the people in the show. She would not have an instant mural in the exhibition. One of the reasons for her was, perhaps, because I was taping a woman to the wall—Patssi Valdez—and she thought that that was like really not a good thing for an image to be in the exhibition. Although, I had taped a man to the wall as well, which was Herb [Sandoval—Ed.]—and Patssi—because oppression affects both sexes, and that's what the idea was, that oppression doesn't know sexuality. It oppresses *everybody*. So those were my choices as to what I wanted into the show. What they eventually chose to be in, and which I thought really didn't represent me, was a small canvas painting, almost a portrait of sorts. And when I thought like out of the things that I suggested—sort of the stuff I was doing at the time frame, which were like the ASCO pieces and the ephemeral kind of stuff—they chose to represent me by this small painting, which is not really sort of like a signature piece at all of mine. And that was kind of disappointing in the selection committee. And then with the ASCO contribution to it, we sort of designed a piece that was going to travel but it also was in a way gentrified. Ours was to bury our past. The idea was that we were going to have a video monitor sort of like stuck in earth, sort of being buried, and the imagery in it was going to be of us from who we were in the past, so that we can like bury the past and go on to the next. And they couldn't accommodate us with the dirt, it was like transporting it from place to place. It would be an issue of sanitation, or different countries or different cities would not take the dirt and stuff. So all of a sudden it was . . . And then [what—Ed.] we also had buried was the *Black and White Mural*, which was a backdrop. And again it was like, "Okay, we've dealt with that—again an image from the past." There was a constant videotape of me interviewing myself and it was a parody of interviews [laughter] and how lines of questioning occur in an interview.

JR: So what we have here is an extension, right.

G: And so what happened was it was never really quite to our. . . . I guess we were not too excited

about it. What I was excited about it was, I guess, their catalog and the document of that particular show—and that it did reach an awful lot of people and educate a lot of people in a lot of ways about a movement or a . . . For me, it's like I think of it more as a school of art, because all the artists sort of know one another or interact with one another in some way or another, just like all other schools—like the Italian school of art or the German expressionist school of art. It's like all these different schools. Well, to me that's what a lot of Chicano art is to me, it's a school of art. So that was my experience with the CARA show. It was, I think, good in the fact that a lot of people went to this, they saw a lot of work by perhaps a lot of people that they were not familiar with, so as an educational tool I think it's a valid, good show historically. Good show. But I had my differences as far as my participation, I guess, in the exhibition.

JR: I noticed at the same time—and I don't know if it was in response or sort of to be in dialogue with the CARA show—but the Daniel Saxon Gallery did a show *Divergence*, something about Latino divergence and parallel. Was that kind of engaging the CARA show at the same time?

G: Actually, it came, I guess, pretty much at the same time, and what it had, I believe, though, was Latin American and Mexican artists with Chicano artists. So it was to show the differences, perhaps, in the sensibility of the work and to see a difference in the ideas, I guess, that were brought forth in the work. There was a noticeable, perhaps more philosophical, kind of decision-making in the Latin American art. Their issues were along those lines as opposed to overt kind of political kind of work. I think what happened here was that we noticed that there was a reoccurring [*sic*] kind of political kind of work that was done by the Chicanos that were in the exhibition. If you can find some kind of link in that to like Patssi's and my work. I believe we were both in that exhibition. And that show traveled. I think it went to the El Paso Museum, and then it went to the Kimberly Gallery in Washington D.C. I believe John Valadez was also in that exhibition. I think what it showed was that there was similarities but also, again, like I said, Chicano art comes from a middle-class or blue-collar sensibility, a working-class kind of group of people that did work. And it also came out of civil rights, so a lot of issues that were dealt with were about those kinds of issues in the work as well.

JR: That idea actually reminds me of another question I wanted to ask you in terms of maybe the critic or the scholar's role of thinking about Chicano art and actually writing about Chicano art. It's been said that to do that effectively, Chicano art needs to sort of develop its own vocabulary, its own criteria for analyzing the work, contextualizing the work. I wonder if you had any thoughts about that in particular, about the way that Chicano art in general has been received.

G: I think right now is the moment in time where a lot of the understanding of that is taking place, because there's a more scholarly kind of look into it. There are a lot of younger people sort of doing the research and putting

pieces together and understanding it a little bit clearer. As opposed to, I think, a lot of people who were the actual participants in it. Now it's being observed and sort of taken apart and put back together by the scholars. And I think that's the vital thing about it at this particular moment in time, that it is another generation that is looking at what was produced, and seeing it in hindsight, but also seeing it objectively, in a way. And looking at it and seeing things about it, and meeting, I guess, the different people that were involved at that particular moment in time. So I think the scholarly research is very important right now. For myself, my observations is that it's coming from a younger generation, like in their thirties and twenties and stuff. So I think, you know, all of that is really, to me, exciting and vital and very important.

I think what happened when the actual work was being done that there was such a sense of urgency to doing things, and most of what was written about it was not coming from our own group

of culture or our own people. It was mostly scholars who were observing and looking at the activity, and maybe sometimes not having a connection with it. Because at the time minimal art was at the forefront. Here are all these figurative kind of works that are being done by a whole group of people, and not trained in a university kind of situation. It was like again that sense of urgency, where somebody would go put up a mural but never had a college education or came out of academia or an art department. It was of groups of people getting together because there was a sense of urgency to do this kind of work. And I think those are kinds of important things, that it was coming out of poverty as well. It was from a group of people who didn't have money or couldn't afford to go the university routes, or perhaps just went and decided to take a chance and do the work itself.

JR: Okay, let me switch tapes.

[Break in taping]

JR: This is tape two, side A, interview with Gronk on January 23rd in his studio. I think we're coming to a point where I'd just like to just sort of give you the mike and let you either ask questions or reflect about the process or maybe add anything that you think that we may have missed.

G: Well, let me check my notes. [sound of paper crunching (crunched up whatever was at hand)—**JR**)] [laughs] Well, I just can't find anything that I can add to all of this here . . .

JR: [laughs]

G: . . . except what we didn't talk about was Daniel Saxon and that whole thing, and the diaries that I keep, and my sets.

JR: Oh yeah!

G: [laughs]

JR: Yeah. Oh, yeah! Okay, let's go.

G: If I didn't have my notes this would have been lost forever. [laughs]

JR: Actually, can we start with the Daniel Saxon and the way that you kind of were presented with this opportunity?

G: In 1985 I did a show at MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and nine artists were picked for that particular exhibition. Nine? I believe it was nine, could be more or less. And Daniel Saxon had gone to see the show along with his partner at the time, Candice Lee, and they called me up and asked me if I would meet with them for lunch and I said yes. We met, we talked. Daniel Saxon took me to the gallery, they showed me this empty space that I think used to sell cars or something and they were converting it into a gallery space. And he asked if I would consider being the first show for their exhibition. And I said, "Yes, I would be interested." And we talked about different issues about like whether he was going to edit the show or whether I would just have freedom to do whatever I wanted to do. I had just done a piece that was the size of a football field, and they asked if I had an idea for what I wanted to do, and I said, "Well, this will probably be the final kind of cap to the Titanic series, in a way." So I did a show there, and it was very successful. It was perhaps a show that sold out.

He was surprised by the fact that he didn't really have to do any publicity or really get an awful lot of people to come in to see the exhibition. What he thought of was that, since I had shown at MOCA

and now I have him to represent me, that Los Angeles was sort of not necessary for me to show for a while but that I could do shows in different cities, and Seattle was set up. I had a show at the San Diego Museum. Mary Jane Jacobs had just gone to Chicago and she told the collectors there that I should talk at their yearly slide presentation of a new artist, so I did the talk and had a show also in a gallery there. The Houston Museum Show, the Hispanic Art in the United States. Washington, D.C. A show in New York. So in a sense, he plotted out a lot of different things, different gallery shows, and then a show that went to Paris, Lyon, Barcelona, Sweden, Germany I believe, and then to England. So with that it was to do a body of work for each of these particular sites or places.

And so it was like year after year was producing and producing and producing. And that was a strategy that he had—to just throw me into that arena of the art world. But three years ago I decided to cut a lot of that out, a lot of my commercial gallery shows out, and one of it was because it was really draining in a way to just produce for a particular show and not really having the time to understand my work or understand what I did before. And I think that's kind of necessary. I always think that you have to come to terms and make a closure almost of what it is that you're doing so that you can go on to the next body of work. And I could never do that, because it was just one show after another. So I cut all the commercial gallery shows, focused primarily on the museums and the university kind of gallery situations, which is outside of the commercial gallery situation, and I didn't have to produce these bodies of work for each particular site.

And what happened was. . . . Other things came along as well, which were my set designs, and also more interest in doing the performance kind of work, and setting those kinds of things up again that were not necessarily kinds of work that were going to be in a commercial-gallery setting. There was still a craving, I guess, for people that wanted to see the paintings, and now I was doing things that they could only see at that particular city, or else it was like a live work in front of an audience. So things shifted, perhaps about three years ago, in the work. I tended to go with things that were not necessarily a part of the mainstream of art, fine-art arena.

And even the project with Disney was to be a visual consultant on the new *Fantasia*, part three, and it was. . . . [shuffles paper] Part of my notes. [laughter]. The fun thing I think for me was that every day I would go there Disney would send a limousine to pick me up. And I live sort of like on Skid Row, so everybody thought I was a drug lord of some sort coming out of the building. The limousine driver would open up the door and hand me the *Hollywood Reporter*. But what I did there was to. . . . The opening segment in *Fantasia*, part two, is Beethoven's *Fifth [Symphony—Ed.]*, so I just came up with. . . . They were intrigued by my color sensibility, and so that, I believe, is coming out this year sometime. I think it is. Unless it's delayed. But that was an interesting experience because I was doing more organic kind of shapes, and that's what was going on in my work as well.

And then, since I had done a lot of set design—I've done about thirteen plays, fourteen plays, and an opera—someone from Hollywood, Greg Nava. . . . [aside to **JR:**] You can have like all this list of names, all the checkmarks. He invited me to do the work on a production of his, but I turned it down and I can't explain really why. [laughs] I guess I can. I've said so much. [laughter] Well, there's like. . . . I saw *Mi Familia*, and I'll just say that when I saw that I thought I should change his name to Greg Woods, because what I just saw was *Plan 9* from East L.A. And I thought it was awful. I laughed through most of it, and then I just thought, "Well, I don't think we have the same kind of sensibility so. . . ." I see *Selena* more as *Satiricon*—Fellini's *Satiricon*—than anything, and I don't think that's the same kind of sensibility that he has. So I didn't work on that particular project.

But there's another person that teaches at UCLA, his name is Al González, who's in the film department, and he has a screenplay called *Fausto's Road*, and he wants me to do production design on that particular film, and we're still in talks about doing it so maybe down the line, perhaps,

that movie.

But it has to be a project that I feel that the people that are working on it are in synch, and I think that's always important in a collaboration kind of effort, is that you can speak the same language even if it's not a language at all, but you can create and be creative with the people you work with.

So the sets have been kind of an integral part in my life. I actually worked with a group called Culture Clash, and I did their first play called *The Mission*, and I designed it twice, once for a small theatre and then for a larger house, and expanded on the set. Then I did *Bowl of Beings*, which PBS did in their Great Performance series. And then I did a piece called *Carpa Clash*, which they did at the Mark Taper Forum.

So those were, right there, four set designs. *The Mission* twice, *Bowl of Beings*, and *Carpa Clash*. And each one, the script . . . I would just receive an outline, basically, because I really didn't enjoy too much reading their scripts, so I would just get an outline and figure out what the set would be like and then come up with ideas that the director would allow me to come up with and utilize and do. I think I've gone through that group and need to move on to other things, because it can be exhausting doing the sets. You usually are working for several months, not only just designing it but being in the theatre sitting down right next to the director and taking notes and watching all the different transformations of technical parts of the set. So you sort of like are nonstop. There's nothing else that you can possibly do, so it's two months sometimes of just full concentration on working in that arena.

So that gets me out of the fine-art arena and I kind of enjoy that, because it's a different atmosphere, a different kind of way of dealing with a group of people—and from that, taking some of that information and putting it into my own work as well. Taking some symbols or some ideas that I may have learned from the theatre and utilizing them in my paintings, which in a lot of ways have a very theatrical kind of quality to them as well. So I believe the sets and other kinds of projects that I've worked on have had an impact on the direction of my work. So I think in the future I can continue to do that, and perhaps with an opera that I would like to do with Joseph González, who's a composer. Our plans down the line are actually to maybe stage some type of opera. He's in the midst of looking for somebody to do the libretto.

JR: Would that be something related to the *Tormenta Cantata*? Or a different project?

G: Actually, it'll be a different project, but we see all of the pieces that we've done musically as a continuation—a continuation of our relationship as far as composer and artist working together. So I think we sort of begun this project not being quite sure if it would work and finding that we do have similarities and that our work can feed off of one another and that we can collaborate. So we get excited every time we start to talk about maybe perhaps doing something collaborative again. So perhaps the street opera, perhaps something else. It's wide open for us to explore those possibilities.

So those are a like lot of my interest at this moment in time, I guess—to continue the collaborative kind of works.

Roberto [Oregel—Ed.], who is a second-grade teacher that lives across the hallway from me, was asking me if I would be interested in working on a children's book, and I thought, "Yeah, I've never done that before. That would be an interesting project to do. So we're sort of right now in the process of looking at kid's books and seeing what other people have done as far as children's books.

And so there's like a lot of times where I'm intrigued by a lot of other people, that perhaps we can do something together—whether it's something like that children's book or perhaps the opera. So those are the kinds of things I guess I'm involved with now, and at the end of the year of last year I sort of was putting my list together of things that I wanted to concentrate more on for this year, and it was mostly the collaborative kind of efforts, and perhaps to produce at least one body of work of paintings. As opposed to when I was frantically working and trying to turn out maybe five or six bodies of work in one year, this would allow me some time there to just focus on a lot of other projects.

JR: If I can go back for a moment about. . . .

G: Is it on my checklist? [laughs]

JR: Well, it's related to the checklist. About maybe some of the decision-making processes that are involved in sort of committing to doing five major bodies of work during the course of a year. What it means for you as an individual to sort of, like I say, commit to doing that kind of work—versus where you are now, you know? Are they related? Does one make the latter possible in certain ways?

G: I have a tendency to work very quickly when I'm engaged in a project, especially if it's on my own. If things fall into place where the research is done beforehand and I am attacking a wall and it only takes two weeks to do it in. . . . You're completely drained, of course, by the end of it and perhaps you have to take a break to recoup from the experience. But when you do it repeatedly, one right after the other, after another, and then you travel and you're constantly on the go, that can be draining in a lot of different ways. I feel there are times when I need that kind of exhilaration, because a lot of my work tends to have a very physical kind of quality to it. There's a physicality in it that I enjoy seeing surface in the work. So there are times when I choose things, to do a project, and when I was doing like one show after another show, and sometimes the work would just go. It was like I wouldn't see it anymore once it left my studio, and the only connection I had to it was perhaps like a slide. And when you have a slide to look at something and say like, "Well, what does that have in relationship to the other words that I have just created—or the other letters in the alphabet?" So in a sense sometimes it was not having it, in a way, where I lived with the piece for a while and understood it. It was immediately go on to the next, go on to the next. Now I think I would prefer to focus and understand it a little bit more or live with it and internalize it and have more time with it.

When I'm doing those large-scale pieces, I can take it in and understand this creative landscape that I made, and sometimes for me there is more time spent in looking than actual doing. To me it's like sometimes I'm looking at a piece. I can spend hours just staring at something and internalizing it and taking it in—that information—and perhaps utilize something that I did at a particular moment later on. It'll trigger a response from the hand and say, "Oh yeah, I'm familiar with the way this shape can work into another shape," or "This line can just flow in an arc and then something else will come from it." Just all of those kinds of things. It's like an interior dialogue that's going on and decision-making that's going on in the process of making.

But a lot of the times I tell people that for me the major time is spent in looking. It's looking at and taking in that information that you learn. So I think it's sometimes important to have the work here so I can really understand it in some way and then make those connections to continue the work. When you travel around from site to site to site to city to city to city, it all becomes one place in a way, and you come back exhausted, and no time for recouping or understanding. So I think those breaks for me is like now at this particular moment in time, I say I treasure these moments because they *are* reflective moments. It's time when I can just have a cup of coffee and think about these issues, you know, as opposed to, "Where's the next plane?" It's like these words in the background,

"Please hold on to your luggage. Don't let anybody take your luggage." And you're drinking that cup of coffee and you're running to catch the next commuter flight to the next place, and then the other flight to the next place. And it's all just very draining in a way. So these moments and these times is like saying, "Let's talk about what we want to do, Joseph"—or Roberto, or whoever it is that I'm going to work with. I get maybe a couple of phone calls and a lot of the times it's requests for different things but. . . .

JR: Like interviews?

G: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah, like these interviews. But sometimes I think they're good for me as well, because I unravel in a way. I explained to you how sometimes I may tend to reveal too much, and I come away from it sounding stupid. It's sort of like, internally, it's like, "Oh God, I revealed a little too much." And those kinds of things I think are issues like, you know, I tend to deal with. We talked earlier, too, about how I'm a very private or personal . . . kind of detached, in a way, from "the art guy, Gronk," and when I am in my own environment, like here, this is a more relaxed situation, as opposed to giving sound bites to somebody who walked into the museum with a microphone in front of you. "Okay, showtime. Go on." Here it's a different kind of atmosphere. This is like. . . . Even I felt like, "Well, what difference will it make during daytime and nighttime?" "Oh, nighttime, the more introspective. Maybe I'm more revealing than I am now. Maybe there's going to be a different dynamics, but it has to be like a comfortable setting so that flow of thought just comes out." So I think you can use this same kind of psychology for your others and see what happens. [laughter]

JR: Yeah, schedule them at night.

G: But I think most of them are probably day people, so they probably are on fire during the daytime so it depends on the person.

JR: Yeah. Well, okay, I think, unless there's anything you want to add, we might be able to. . . .

G: Let's go through my notes again. [laughs]

JR: Leave those notes alone [laughter] There were just messages. [referring to my own set of notes—JR] [more laughter] Oh, man.

G: No, I guess, you know, we. . . . [sniffing **G:**] I hate to go. Endings are so. . . .

JR: Well, I'll tell you what, maybe we should come back in another ten years and see again.

G: [laughs] We'll see what happens.

JR: Check back in.

G: Oh yes. Well, that'll be interesting.

JR: Okay, well. . . .

G: Thanks, whoever's listening to all this at this particular moment in time. Well, I hope you had a fun time, because I know I had. And I'm sure the pleasure was all mine.

[End of interview]

