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Oral history interview with Elsa Flores, 1997
Feb. 18-Apr. 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Elsa Flores on February 18 and April 2, 10, & 30, 1997. The interview took place in Casa Buena Vista, Pasadena, California, and was conducted by Jeffrey Rangel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Session 1

Interview with Elsa Flores
Conducted by Jeffrey Angel
At Casa Buena Vista, California
1997 February 18

Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview for the Archives of American Art with Elsa Flores. Today is February 18. We're in South Pasadena at Casa Buena Vista, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And I think that's all we need to begin.

ELSA FLORES: The date? Did you say what date?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, today's February 18, 1997. And let me just say, like I was telling you before, that these interviews tend to be biographical in nature, so a good place to start is where and when you were born and who your parents are and things of that nature.

ELSA FLORES: Great. Okee-dokee. I was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, June the 5th, 1955, on a full moon, which is a good thing. And my mom's name was Maria Flores-[Valenzuela]. Her maiden name was Valenzuela. And she was from [Sinaloa]. She grew up in a little ranch town, a little village called San [Javier]. And Sinaloa is very tropical, so she grew up in mango groves and I think her parents owned a small ranch. Her mom had five kids, and my mom was somewhere in the middle, but her mom was the town school teacher and principal. Very sort of upper middle class. They had a ranch. Her dad had died when the kids were all very young. He was a revolutionary. I'm not sure if he was a Zapatista or one of the other guys.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So he died in the war?

ELSA FLORES: No, he didn't die in the war. He died shortly after of pneumonia. So her mom was left to raise all these children on her own. Mom had two brothers-[Rodolfo] Valenzuela and Raul Valenzuela-and two sisters-Julia and [Celia]. Oh no, three sisters. Betina. So there were six of them. And Betina and Celia are still living. Celia lives in Mexico City and Betina lives still in Sinaloa. Now they sort of. . . . The family migrated out of the little town into Culiacan, which is the major city in Sinaloa.

On my dad's side. . . . And I'll explain a little bit more about my mom's history. She had a real interesting history. On my dad's side, his name was Ricardo Carcur Flores. C-a-r-c-u-r. And actually Flores was not his real name, because he. . . . Somehow to cross the border, I guess Flores was easier to write down than Carcur. I don't know what the story was, but he took on the name Flores when he crossed the border. And he was born and raised in Chile, although he was full-blooded Arab. Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: His parents. . . . I guess a lot of Arabs migrated to the Americas. A lot in South America, a lot of horse-trading. And I guess there was always trouble in the Middle East, so they hit Chile and landed there. I didn't know anything about his family. A little bit later, now, only a few years later, I found out just a little bit about him. All I knew was that his parents were diabetic. So I have to watch that. [laughter] That's all I knew. So I never had the desire to go look them up or anything, but both my mom and dad are now dead.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did your dad get to Mexico then? Or to Sinaloa?

ELSA FLORES: I don't know. Somehow. . . . No, they didn't meet in Sinaloa.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, okay.

ELSA FLORES: They met here in L.A.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, okay.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's another chapter.

ELSA FLORES: Another chapter. So he had come from. . . . I guess he migrated across the border, and he had bad stuff on his mind. He was a gambler, right? So he just was looking for someplace to gamble. But-to make some money in between all the gambling-he was a house-painter. So I remember as a kid like putting my-you know how kids put their head through their parents legs?-I just remember looking down at his paint-splattered shoes. I think that's one of the reasons painting attracted me so much.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. Just like those paint-splattered shoes.

ELSA FLORES: I'm real messy. Just like I've splattered. . . . Every day I splatter everything.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow, yeah. That's kind of like your style, too, huh?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, totally. Okay, so we wind up in Las Vegas. No wonder because he's a gambler, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Gambling, right.

ELSA FLORES: I'll tell you a little bit about the past history. Like my brothers and sisters. I was a middle child. I have a younger sister, an older brother, and an older sister-an older half-sister, really, from my mom's first marriage. I just recently, like this Thanksgiving, found out from my godparents, who were old buds of my mom and dad when we were young, that my mom and dad were never

really married. And I suspected that all along because my mom was always like, when I'd fill out the papers, I'd go, "Well, Mom should I put divorced, or separated, or what?" And she like would kind of not answer me. So I always suspected they were never really married, and because of all of this secrecy and the name changes and all that stuff, it was all too wacky. Which didn't bother me, just made me a quirkier character. So in Vegas, okay, gamble city. My dad was hitting the tables. I don't know what he was gambling on. We were living in these little bungalow housing units located across the street from the old Sands Hotel. That's when Vegas was still pretty. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: So this is the late fifties?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, mid-fifties. And during the nuclear testing, too. But luckily we were upwind not downwind. . . . Wait. We were away from . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, out of the path.

ELSA FLORES: . . . out of the path. But still it was kind of scary. My mom did die of cancer. But then she worked in the radiation ward at a hospital, too, so who knows?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Jeez.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it could be anything.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Putting yourself at high risk there.

ELSA FLORES: Um-hmm. Okay, so we're in Vegas, and we only stayed there like a year, so I don't really remember Vegas. And by this time. . . . Let's see, my brother was only eighteen months older than I was. So it was my little brother, newborn me, and my older sister who's. . . . How old is Margaret? My brother Leo, who's real name is Elias Flores. And my older sister was Margaret LaCar, from the first marriage. I like that name, LaCar. L-a-C-a-r. And she later married a Davidson and I just couldn't believe she would want to let go of that beautiful LaCar name.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is that a French name? LaCar?

ELSA FLORES: Well, her dad is Filipino.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: So I don't know if it's. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow, you got all sorts of blood . . .

ELSA FLORES: All kinds of stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . flowing through here.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So my older sister Margaret, let's see, how old is she now? She graduated in 1964 from high school, so she's somewhere in her fifties.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What's the math?

ELSA FLORES: I don't know. I'm now going to be forty-two in June. And so we left Vegas after a year, and I think from Vegas we migrated here to L.A. And we lived mostly around the Echo Park, Chinatown, El Sereno area throughout my childhood. I think my mom says originally we landed-oh,

yeah, I have pictures of it-we lived, again, in these little courtyard housing thingies which were very popular back in the fifties, right next to the old Candela's [de las] Guitar, off of Sunset Boulevard. We lived there for a little bit.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Why L.A.? Do you know why they decided on L.A.?

ELSA FLORES: Maybe Santa Anita horse track. [laughter] Oh, I think maybe I know why. My mom. . . . Okay, let me start with my sister's story. When my mom. . . . Let me start with my mom's story. That'll get us back to Chinatown. Okay? Remind me of Chinatown.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. Let me jot that down.

ELSA FLORES: Because I'll ramble. My mom was real [brusca]. She was like a ranchera, but she was real macha and kind of wanted to leave the ranch. There was nothing there for her. She was stunningly beautiful, and all these men wanted her and men propositioning her, wanting to make her a movie star, all this stuff. She was just so independent she just wanted to get out of the small town and leave. Of course, her mother would never let her do that, right? And her brothers were very protective. And she would tell me all these great stories of living on the ranch as a kid, and she would go with her brothers to do the cattle runs and all that stuff because she just liked doing that stuff. She was just a real ranchera. She's a ranchera. There was, I think, one man that she once told me that she did like, and that they all wanted to marry her, but she wasn't allowed to be with him for some reason. So I guess there was really nothing for her there. The only escape was either to marry one of the rancharo guys from the village or to split. So she decided to take off. So she took off with a cousin without telling anyone. She just got on a train or a bus or whatever, headed for the border. They knew they had some family in Mexicali, I think, one of the border towns, and half of the family, my grandma's side of the family and my grandmother. . . . Her name was. . . . What was her real name? We called her "Mama Chica." What was her real name? Something [de Lugo]. Oh, my God, I'll have to look that up.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's all right.

ELSA FLORES: Anyway, my grandma's side, of course, she was very respectable, the school teacher, you know? Very upstanding citizen. And that was like opium country, because it was tropical. A lot of heroin was coming out of that area. So a lot of the men that married my aunts, a couple of them were involved in the [goma] trade. They called it "goma" because it was still kind of gum at that point. It hadn't been processed. And my mom would tell me stories of when she was a kid she would go into the opium fields and cut the poppy bulbs and drip the opium into this tin can, and the opium growers would give her five cents to fill up a whole can of opium-until her mom found out and then she was in big trouble.

JEFFREY RANGEL: God!

ELSA FLORES: So she was always sort of like very . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: A [spacey] child. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: . . . very nontraditional Mexican woman, right? Yeah, she was a thrill-seeker, I think. So when she decided to finally leave the ranch. . . . I would need to talk to one of my aunts that are still living to get more details, because I never really fully got the details of the full story. But my mom left, and she left with a cousin. They wound up in Mexicali. That was the bad side of the family-the drug dealers and all that stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There's always a bad side of the family. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And so these cousins saw my mom-beautiful, stunning woman-and wanted to prostitute her.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, no.

ELSA FLORES: And they said, "We'll get you across the border, but you have to go with these men." And my mom said, "Uh-uh, I'm not doing that," right? So she skipped town on the cousins, and they said, "Okay, okay. Well, then the only other way you're going to get out of here is if you take some drugs across the border for us." So they strapped all this heroin around her body with Saran Wrap or something, and they put her on a train, her and her cousin. And they told her, "Once you cross the border, before you get to the station on the other side you gotta jump off the train." And so she did it. She jumped off the train carrying all this strapped heroin to her and finally escaped. You know, like, "I'm out'a here, I'm not gonna mess with that family at all."

JEFFREY RANGEL: What did she do with the heroin?

ELSA FLORES: I guess she gave it to the contact, whoever was going to meet her on the other end or something. It's wild!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow! That is wild.

ELSA FLORES: Very. It was like, "Whoa, Mom." So she was very adventurous. And then she wound up. . . . Did she have the baby at. . . . No. She wound up. . . . Because she was in that border area. [Brawley], I think it was in Brawley where she landed. This Filipino man fell totally in love with her and convinced her-he was well off; he owned a ranch-and convinced her that she should marry him. And so she felt like, "Well, maybe this is a good thing." So she married him. She says she never really loved him, but she married him. They had my sister, Margaret. But her husband was super jealous because she was so gorgeous, and he was possessive and when they would go downtown to go shopping he'd make her lay down in the front seat of the car so no men would look at her. And he'd chase her with machetes, saying that she was flirting with the ranch hands and stuff like that. She finally couldn't take it and she split. She took Margaret and they went back to Mexico. So my sister Margaret spent a few years in Mexico as a child. Then they returned. . . .]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sinaloa?

ELSA FLORES: Sinaloa, yeah-[in, and] Culiacan at this point. Then they returned. She and Margaret left Mexico again, and I think they returned with my Aunt Julia, and they landed with probably some distant relations here in L.A. And my mom looked for work. She was very skilled with her hands-she was very artistic-and she became. . . . Well, she worked at lots of different things. She did cannery work, she did all kinds of factory-type work, and then she finally did something that I think she really enjoyed. She was working for a ceramics factory. So she'd do those black leopards-those TV lamps and stuff-and swans and Egyptian masks, and she was really skilled so the owner loved her detail work, because she was very good. So she loved that. I forget. I think it was called California . . . Cal Max or something. It was on San Fernando Road, the factory. She really enjoyed that job. And she was having a really nice life in L.A. She was living in Chinatown with Margaret. She said she'd work, she'd get paid well, and then they'd go from movie to movie on the weekends. They'd just hit matinees, and then they'd go all day long watching movies, and she was like fancy-free and feeling good. She had her daughter. And finally, she said, my dad spotted her and wouldn't leave her alone. He became obsessed with her and followed her everywhere and insisted that she be with him. She

says she never loved him but she finally gave in because he wore her down. I said, "Now come on, Mom . . ."

JEFFREY RANGEL: God, that's the second time.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, totally compromising herself. It's funny, because in some ways she makes herself to sound like the victim, but in the other ways she was so independent.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So I'm not sure where the truth lies-probably somewhere in between.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It usually does.

ELSA FLORES: And I'd say, "Well, Mom, you had three kids with him. You didn't love him at all?" She goes, "No, I never loved him." "Well, how could you have three kids?" And she'd go, "Oh well, we'd just have to have sex once and I'd get pregnant instantly." And like, "Oh, yeah, so you only had sex three times?" [laughter] So that was her story. She was a real tough woman. She showed very little emotion. She wasn't very demonstrative. She wasn't huggy, feely, touchy. Real tough, but then I think life beat her up a bit, because she popped three kids-my brother, then me immediately, and then my sister came. . . . How old is my sister? My little sister Olga [Messarra-Ed.] came seven years later, I think. Let me see how old she would be. Yeah, seven years later. And so here was my mom with three little kids and my older sister who's really kind of helping out because she's older now and she had all this responsibility of taking care of the little ones. And with this gambling dad who had come in and like become obsessed. It was a disease, and he took any little money. He'd go and he'd say, "I'm going to win. I'm going to make big time. We're gonna make a lot of money." He'd beg, borrow, steal, go play the horses-whatever-lose all the money. The family would be without any milk money. You know, all that stuff. My mom, at this point, I think it wore her down physically and mentally . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: No doubt.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and so she had three nervous breakdowns. She just couldn't take it. He'd come and he'd take everything and the kids were destitute. And she said that he'd do anything for his friends. When he did win at the races he'd party down with his friends, and the family came last. So he was totally like. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Tough guy to be married to.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And she couldn't get rid of him. She would kick him out and they'd have big fights and he kept coming back. He was just relentless. He kept coming back.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What about you? How was your connection to him?

ELSA FLORES: To him?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um-hmm.

ELSA FLORES: Well, you know, it's funny because out of all my siblings that he was our dad-my little sister and my older brother-I'm the only one who really like didn't have a big problem with him, as far as like. . . . I felt love from him. I felt that when I was a little kid that he gave me a lot of strokes, that he held me and he called me his pretty little girl and his sweetheart. I felt like I was fathered in those

formative first five years. Even though they were tumultuous, I felt his love. And he was fucked up. He had problems, but those were adult problems and, as a kid, I got what I needed from him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

ELSA FLORES: So I never felt. . . . Later I was brainwashed by my mom, because he was "the bad guy." But I would always say, "Well, you know. . . ." I'd talk to my sister and brother. "Well, you know, your dad was this" and "Dad this," and they'd go, "He's not our dad." "He's your dad; he's not my dad."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So they have major resentment they've never resolved.

ELSA FLORES: So this dad was like, again, wouldn't leave her side, kept coming back, she kept kicking him out. And at one point. . . . This went for years. She'd kick him out, and then he'd come back. She'd kick him out and come back. But finally she had a major physical. . . . You know, the physical breakdown kept her from working, so she had to go on welfare. And he'd come and he'd take the welfare money, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Jeez!

ELSA FLORES: Terrible. So we were below poverty, we were all anemic, we had like no food, no furniture, holes in the walls. Really like slum, you know. But we still were-without the dad in the picture-a pretty happy, contented family, despite all the suffering. That's why I always say, "Well, you know, I've been poor before, and you can survive, you can be pretty happy being poor." I wouldn't want to be poor again, but I know that I wouldn't perish. I wouldn't jump out a window if I lost everything. Because you can have a happy life. It was hard. I'm sure it was much harder as a parent to not be able to provide for your kids. That's why she was freaking out. So she had to go on welfare for several years because it messed up her back and all this stuff and her nerves.

And at one point. . . . And then he'd come and he'd kidnap us because he'd want to see us. So he'd pick us up from school or on our way to school and he'd take us to Lincoln Park and he'd hang out there during the day with us. He'd buy beer and he'd hang out there. I remember tasting beer. I guess he let us taste the beer. I remember one time we were in a store-I must have been four or five-and I remember he had me take something, shoplift something. I don't know what it was, but that's what I remember. And so by the time he finally got us back home, my mom was again having a nervous breakdown. She thought he'd take us forever. This was only my brother and I, because my little sister was too young. I think she was still in my mom's arms. So she was a nervous wreck. She was totally over-protective. She was always looking out the window, like, "Is that him? Is that the old man?" She'd call him "the old man." "Is that the old man?" Like super . . . just like over-protective of us because she thought he was going to steal us.

And at one point. . . . I was older by this time, it was probably junior high, and we had moved from the Chinatown house to a house in El Sereno [and, on] [Van Horne] Avenue, and then from there we moved over to Monterey Road, which was still in El Sereno, and that's where I started kindergarten at Huntington Drive School. I think I was only there for kindergarten, and then we moved to our final house, which my brother still lives in. It's still in El Sereno, on [Badeaux] Avenue. Then I went to Farmdale Elementary School. And then right next to Farmdale was Wilson High School which transitioned into a new high school up on the hill, and then the old high school became the junior high. I think I was in junior high at this point where he kept coming back, trying to get into the house. And I remember when I was even younger, when we were at the Monterey Road house, I'd have nightmares. I'd wake up screaming because. . . . Well, one reason was because I had a heart murmur

so I'd have these hallucinations at night.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Seriously?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And Children's Hospital when I was a kid they'd check me out and stuff. And I think I still have it but it doesn't affect me. So I'd have these hallucinations. You know, I'd wake up in the middle of the night, and at one point there was bubbles in my sister's crib, coming out, and I could hear a pr-r-r-r-r . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES; . . . and then they were coming out of my pillow and I was like. . . . I would sleep with my older sister because when I'd be afraid. . . . And she had really prickly, stubbly legs. She was Filipino and she had a coarser type of hair. So it was like she was always scratchy. So there's these bubbles coming up. "Margaret, the bubbles. Look at the bubbles." And my sister was terrified. And she was older; she was in high school. She didn't want to open her eyes, because she was afraid of what she might see. So I was like, "The bubbles. . . ." She goes, "Go to sleep, go to sleep." And I looked over at Olga's crib and there was bubbles covering the crib.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, no.

ELSA FLORES: And then I looked up at the window and then my mom. . . . There's a picture of her opening the window from the outside of the house, looking at me, and I screamed like bloody murder. And then I wound up in my mom's bed, and then my dad was there. So she'd let him in and they'd wind up in bed again. And then I did this other thing when I was in bed with both of them and I stuck my hand underneath the headboard and then I saw my hand and I scared myself and I screamed. So all kinds of weird hallucinations. One other vivid hallucination was, I woke up and I'd look-there's this dilapidated dresser drawer in between two of our beds-and I'd look up and there was this werewolf opening a safe.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, Lord.

ELSA FLORES: And then I screamed, too. So I was always waking up. And then during the time when he was always coming in and going and breaking in, and my godfather once beat him up and threw him down the stairs to get him out and leave us alone, so at night I'd wake up and I'd hear noises and thinking-you know, there's a lot of trees surrounding this house-and thinking he was breaking into the windows to get into the house. So I was terrified.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pretty busy childhood, pretty busy house.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah! Real, real. And, you know, we're all anemic, and so all of this stuff. It was very dysfunctional. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yet you remember being happy.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I remember having some good times. Like Christmas there was . . . no big presents, but it was a very loving occasion. We fed each other and shared whatever we could.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The important stuff.

ELSA FLORES: And my godmother and godfather, who were always there for us, they were. . . . She was [Chilena]-still; she's still alive; they both are-from Chile and he was a Spaniard. He had an

amazing life. His name's Alejo, her name is Irene Pérez. Alejo Pérez, or Alec Pérez. And Alejo was like an anarchist in Spain. You know, it was an incredible life-you know, thrown in concentration camps, escaped, very charismatic, spoke French. He was actually from the Canary Islands. And I'm sending him there. It's like his death wish. He wants to go before he dies. He's really old and sick, so I'm going to send him there at the end of this month.

JEFFREY RANGEL: A colorful family.

ELSA FLORES: He had twenty-two kids.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Get outa here!

ELSA FLORES: Yeah! Eight are still alive. They're all in their eighties. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [gestures incredulity-Ed.]

ELSA FLORES: I know! [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: This keeps getting better.

ELSA FLORES: I know, it's sort of amazing. Okay, so my dad would break in and all this craziness, and-back to my junior high year-my mom was always trying to get. . . . She had social workers working with her because they liked her. They saw she was a sincere woman, that she just had some bad luck and she wasn't leaching off the system; she just really needed the aid. And it was humiliating. I had to translate all the time, and, you know, they treated you like shit at the offices.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: But there was a couple of social workers that were really, really caring. Although I was a little upset later in my militant days because I found out that this one social worker's husband was one of the guys that went to kill Che Guevara.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Get outa here!

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so I was like. . . . [makes angry grunting sound] So I was really upset about that. So, anyway, at junior high, my mom was . . . they said, "Next time you see him, you call immigration"-because he didn't have his papers-"and they'll deport him." So she did that a couple times, but it was hard for them to catch him because by the time they'd get there, he was gone. And she was always looking out the window. So, anyway, this one time he came to the door-I was in junior high; my little sister was in elementary school-he came to the door, and my mom always had rifles around, right? She was a ranchera, so she always had a rifle. She never shot them, but they were there. And she finally stood up with a rifle at the door, and he was right at the door, and she's like, "You better get out of here because "Te voya matar" [I'm going to kill you]. So he was trembling, I remember. He was shaking. At this point, I had already kind of turned against him, because he was the old man, he was causing so much trouble and, you know. I loved him as a . . . You know, my inner child loved him, but he caused too much trouble. He was a bad guy. So he was trembling and he turned around really frightened that she was going to shoot him. And he got in his car and he drove up. . . . Where we lived on Badeaux, we were sort of in the valley. There was all these big, beautiful hills surrounding us. And he drove up to the top of the hill to spy on us, to look down at the house, and apparently his car stalled, so she was able to call immigration. They came and they took him away.

He quickly came back, because then. . . . After the gun incident he didn't approach the house

anymore, but he would drive by us on our walks to school, just to look at us. And at that point we'd just run, because we were traumatized too much. So we'd run away from him. And one of the times he drove by me he had a couple of other kids in the car. Like little kids. So he'd already started a whole other family happening, and then I just found out from my godfather at Thanksgiving that he did have a complete other family-wife and children-in Chile, which he had left when he came to the United States.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: So he was a player, and he was bad news, bad news. I didn't know any of the history, except I did find an old letter that a brother of his had sent him. I think it was in like Beirut, somewhere in Lebanon, that the brother was doing political work or something. Probably my dad was atheist, so he had no agenda except his own.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. So did you inherit certain qualities of his? Or not that you know of? [chuckles]

ELSA FLORES: Not the gambling part. Well, it was so funny because as kids we'd go to the racetrack with him, right? I have tons of old photos of us at the racetrack. And then me and my brother would pass the time on the floor picking up old stubs. You know, racing tickets?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Looking for winners?

ELSA FLORES: No, just collecting them-you know, as kids would just collect the colorful ones or whatever. We didn't even know about numbers or winners. And so, later in life, we all said, "Let's go to the racetrack!" You know, we're like, "You kidding?" So we all went, all the brothers and sisters. We had a picnic in the infield, and then we reenacted it. We took pictures of us on the floor picking up tickets.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Although they're all computerized now; they're not the same type of tickets. So my dad finally left us alone, and after my dad my mom went . . . she didn't have any other male relationships. She just like, "I'm sick of men. I don't want any more in my life. They've ruined my life. I don't want any of that."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Understandably.

ELSA FLORES: I totally understood, too. But after a while it was like, "Mom, make yourself happy or something." She totally dedicated her life to her kids. Like, we were it. I understand that totally, but there were some incidents I saw, like a milkman kissing her and stuff like that. My godfather tried to kiss her one time, and she slapped him. I remember that; she slapped him in the kitchen. Because she was still gorgeous as an older woman. And so the dad left the scene. He probably started harassing his new family, right? But my mom would always look for him, like, "Is that the old man?" We'd be in the market, "Look, is that the old man?" And she was kind of obsessed. So it was almost like a love-hate-like she couldn't live with him, but she was also kind of devoted to him because she never took on another man for years and years and years. Until her death she hadn't had a . . .

Session 1, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . interviewing Elsa Flores on February 18th in her house. And, let's see. Where

did. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Mr. Cactus. [Mr. Cactus was an old, bald white man who had a cactus garden. He wanted to marry my mom and she thought about it so he could provide for us, but we vetoed it.- ELSA FLORES]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Mr. Cactus, right.

ELSA FLORES: So my mom never took on any lovers or boyfriends that I knew of, and I don't think she would have had any time to, because she was just at home with the kids. Very strict disciplinarian. Like we couldn't go out to parties, couldn't go to slumber parties, couldn't do anything. My brother did, because he was the boy. That was a big issue that I dealt with later, right? He got to do whatever he wanted. But she was still very, you know, "Do it here at home. You party here; you don't go out." So she had a tight rein on us. And it actually made us, you know, upstanding citizens. We turned out to be good kids . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pretty decent kids, huh?

ELSA FLORES: . . . and we stayed out of trouble, although we did get into our share of trouble. But we would have probably gotten into big trouble if she hadn't been so strict.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Like what sorts of things were out there for you to get in trouble?

ELSA FLORES: Oh, drugs . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The same? Just the same?

ELSA FLORES: . . . and stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The usual.

ELSA FLORES: But we didn't do gang stuff because it wasn't big time in El Sereno, although it was starting. My brother was in a car club, so he had the low-rider and all that stuff. But, yeah, if she hadn't been strict we probably would have. . . . He could have gotten into gang stuff, but he didn't. I still experimented a lot with drugs.

JEFFREY RANGEL: At home?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. [laughter] See, at one point when she got rid of the old man and she got physically and spiritually stronger, she wanted to improve her life. She didn't want to be on welfare-you know, her whole life was aimed at taking care of her kids-so they got into this training program. She became a nurse's assistant, and then she got a job at City of Hope in [Duarte] and commuted. Did the graveyard shift for fifteen, twenty years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, there you go.

ELSA FLORES: So she was out of the house during our teen years. She'd leave like one or two o'clock-three o'clock, maybe-and work till eleven and get in at midnight. And so we had all that time to experiment and get crazy. So, yeah, you know, it was the hippie time for me. It was the seventies-the fabulous seventies. And I was very political in high school. I had always been political. It was strange, because I was always very shy and introverted-and now reclusive-but yet. . . . It's the Gemini in me. The other side is that I'm very outgoing and political and social. I prefer being left

alone. I prefer being reclusive, because I like to be alone. That's why I can be in my studio for hours, and don't want to be around people. But I have the skills to be also very social. So in elementary school I was always class president or office monitor. You know, very active-very, very active. And a good student. I was always very smart. I was talented. I showed talent in art.

It was hard, though, in elementary school, because we only got to do art on Fridays, and it was always kind of the same thing-watercolors. It was like, "Okay, okay, here's the landscape, here's the horizon, here's the sunset." It was always the same thing. It was not very creative. But I enjoyed it. I just couldn't wait for Fridays, right. And at home we didn't have art materials. We had no money. We didn't have books. All we had was like. . . . My older sister finally started. . . . Graduated from high school. She was a very good student. Didn't go to college because she couldn't afford it. Got into the workplace and started working for . . . it was then Security First National Bank which is now Security Pacific. Started making some money. Bought our first car. How did I get onto that story? Oh, so that's when we finally got our first TV, because my sister was bringing in some salary. And my mom, was she doing the nurse thing by then? Maybe she hadn't been doing the nurse thing by then. That came later in her life, I think. So, okay, art was really dismal at Farmdale Elementary School. But I had a good time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Whenever it came around on Fridays, huh?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it was always on. . . . We were also very physical, almost tomboyish. I would say I was at a point where I was always trying to keep up with my older brother because we were so close in age. And as little kids we were very much . . . almost like twins. People always thought we were always twins. And he was very rambunctious. He was just like always in trouble, always in trouble. And I admired him and wanted to play the boy games. And I would keep up with him, and I was very competitive, I was very good, and at some point he got bigger than I did-you know, when those growth hormones happen-and I couldn't pin him down any more, because we'd wrestle all the time. And during his high school, of course, it was like, "Get outa here. You're my little sister. You can't hang with me." And I was so hurt and I was so crushed. I didn't forgive him for years after that, because I felt shut out, and I wanted to be part of the backyard garage band . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Totally.

ELSA FLORES: . . . that he had, and I was just like at the backdoor screen just with this longing to be in the band. [giggles]

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of music were they doing?

ELSA FLORES: You know, ["In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida," "In-a-gadda-da-vida"] [originally by Iron Butterfly-Ed.], "Gloria." Just all of that stuff. They were called The Unknown Descendants, and they were. [laughter] And I was a better musician. I was more talented than he was.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that's something I wanted to ask you about, how you got. . . .

ELSA FLORES: . . . into music?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, into music.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, we'll do that when . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: In time.

ELSA FLORES: . . . we get into the college years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. Is that where that happened?

ELSA FLORES: No, it started in high school. So, okay, in elementary school, very social, very political. Went to junior high. Something happened in my sixth-grade year. We were making these boats for the regatta. They had this city-wide L.A. City School District regatta, so you'd make these wooden boats and you were going to this regatta. It was our sixth-grade class. They took [us] to sail our boats to see if anyone could win a prize. I forget where it was-some lake. And I was always kind of like teacher's pet kind of thing. And Mrs. [Mellanich] was my sixth grade teacher, and somehow I was accused of doing something to someone's boat or stealing something from someone at the regatta. And I didn't do it. So I got really pissed off that I was like "labeled" at that moment, and so I kind of turned bad in the seventh grade. . . . No, actually, in the seventh grade I hooked up with another goody-two-shoe friend. Her name was Claudia García. She came from City Terrace. I had just met her; she was a new friend. We were great friends, like it was the best friend I had ever had-my own friend, you know-in the seventh grade. And in the eighth grade my old school friends from elementary school, who were turning bad, they were getting . . . trying to be hip and stuff. I kind of felt pressured that I needed to go with the bad girls.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh.

ELSA FLORES: And I kept going back to that sixth-grade incident when I was labeled, and like, "Yeah, well, maybe I should be bad. If they think I'm bad, I'm going to be bad." And so I abandoned this dear friend that I had found, and I like just dumped her with no explanation.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's sad.

ELSA FLORES: It was sad. And at my high school reunion, I went up to her. Because this lasted all through high school, where I'd like, one time. . . . We'd just kind of look at each other and like. . . . [imitates looking sidelong-Ed.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: I went up to her, I said, "Claudia, I have to tell you something. I feel so bad, because I've thought of you so much through the years. One of the worst things was losing your friendship, because you were such a good friend, and I just have so many regrets and I hope you can forgive me." And so I felt this release that I was able to offer her my apology.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: She didn't know what to do with it. She was kind of like, you know. . . . So I gave her my number, "Call me if you want to." Of course, she hasn't called me. So then I went with the bad girls. They were all smoking and partying and having boyfriends and stuff. Of course, I couldn't have a boyfriend. I did, but I was very shy with the boys.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How come you couldn't have a boyfriend?

ELSA FLORES: Because I was too shy. But my mom wouldn't even. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: She wouldn't go with it, huh?

ELSA FLORES: It would have to be hush-hush. But I was just very shy. I had a lot of crushes on lots and lots of boys, but I was just very shy and awkward when it came to personal relationships. Probably because of my mom/dad thing, you know?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It's like, "What is a relationship, love-hate?" [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: I can imagine.

ELSA FLORES: And it's so interesting, because in my relationships that I have had, I look for pleasurable ones. I'm not into S&M. I'm not into pain and love-hate stuff. I really want a nurturing, loving relationship.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Good, smooth, creative.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah! It's like I'm not looking for pain. I'm looking for pleasure.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I hear that! [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Totally into pleasure. And I don't know where that came from with my background. I've always been very pleasure-oriented. I've always felt like I deserve the best of things in life. So I've always gone for the best and usually gotten a lot of it. And never going for the bad stuff. And I've had my dark moments-you know, where I was depressed and all that stuff-but I always felt I deserved more. I always felt I deserved the best, and I deserved good things. It blows me away because my background was so tumultuous . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and how can a person survive that and be optimistic, you know?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It's like some kind of spirit that rises in you . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Definitely.

ELSA FLORES: . . . from the ashes or something. So junior high, rowdy girls, started smoking and doing drugs and all that stuff. It was the seventies. We're all experimenting with stuff-LSD, whites. I didn't do reds because my fear was to be embarrassed in public. People were dropping left and right on my junior high campus, because they were all doing reds. And they would just drop and look stupid and fall and be stumbling, and I didn't want to be that. So I didn't ever do that. A lot of marijuana. And later I found out that. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: [sound of door closing] Oh, my daughter's home. Later I found out that my Dad was a big pothead. He wasn't a drinker. His biggest disease was gambling, but that he was a big pothead. I go, "Well, that makes sense," because for me it's my drug of choice. I'm not a drinker. I went through alcoholism in high school, but I'm not a drinker. And it's probably the comforting . . . just the smell of him and the smell of the . . . it was probably very comforting for me. So it was attractive to me. And I fear the same thing. . . . Well, I shouldn't fear it, because I don't think it's that bad. I think it's also a cultural ritual element for me. But for her-my daughter Maya [Almaraz-Ed.]-she'll probably find the same thing when she smells it around her friends. It'll probably bring up all these warm memories, because me and her daddy used to smoke around her when she was an infant all the time. When she became older, we stopped, because she was more aware. But she could probably

still smell it on us.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It'll be interesting to see what happens.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Well, hopefully it would only be something like that. But now it's really dangerous because it's so high potency. It's been so . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's not the same.

ELSA FLORES: . . . what do they call it when they breed it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Breed it, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: That you can actually die from an o.d. of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Get outa here.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, my neighborhood kids were telling me, "Oh, there's this stuff called "Chronic" and there's this stuff called "Suicide."" And there's a news report that you can o.d. now on this stuff, it's so potent.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow. Sounds like a myth that they may be feeding kids to scare them away, but . . .

ELSA FLORES: Maybe, maybe.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . you don't want to find out.

ELSA FLORES: Huh-uh. So junior high, okay, I went through all of that experimentation, I dumped my poor little Claudia friend, and then she got a boyfriend that same year and I was really jealous because they were always hanging on each other during all the breaks. They were always making out and stuff. And so she did better by my departure, and here I thought I was leaving her for something better. And I was with this group of girls that were real snobby. I wasn't really "in" with the core, until I became acknowledged artistically in high school, then I had some celebrity that they kind of let me in, only because I served them well as being that. But I was never really part of the corps. Plus I couldn't go out to the parties with them so I wasn't like that. But I wanted to be one of them. We called ourselves the Rat Pack, and all kinds of trouble and stories. This is the same corps of girls that I went to Hawaii with the first time around.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

ELSA FLORES: So went through junior high and wasn't too political at that point. Until high school-tenth grade. There was a friend, Arturo Chávez, he was beautiful. He looked like Jesus. He had this beautiful face. I was totally in love with him. He was my brother's friend; they were in the same grade. They were a grade above mine. And Arturo was very political. He was doing chicanismo stuff and working with a group called The Committee to Free Los Tres.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Uh huh, I know Arturo.

ELSA FLORES: Do you know Arturo?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I know his brother, too.

ELSA FLORES: You're kidding! Who? Which one? Carlos?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Ernesto.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, Ernesto. I don't know Ernesto too much. I knew Carlos.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He said to say "Hi," by the way.

ELSA FLORES: Really? Ernesto did? Or who?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Arturo.

ELSA FLORES: Arturo!? Oh God! Don't tell him how much in love I was with him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughing] It's on tape! [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: Well, I'm sure he knew. He had to know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He's going to be flattered now. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: He had to know. I was so in love with Arturo. I was totally into it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: I was like, "Oh, yeah, I want to do it. I want to do the politics." He was trying to recruit my brother into his political group. It was like, "Come to our group, come to our meetings. It's Los Tres and it's a community and it's chicanismo and all that stuff." And during the moratoriums in the seventies. . . . I was still too young so I wasn't allowed to go to all the big rallies. And my brother could have. And I think Arturo might have taken him to one or another. But the Los Tres thing. . . . Los Tres were three guys from the projects-I forget which projects-and apparently they were railroaded by the FBI Drug Enforcement guys, because Los Tres were trying to stop drugs in the projects.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And the political line that. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Didn't they shoot an undercover cop or something?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, they shot an undercover cop. And so the cops were saying that Los Tres were actually drug dealers, and they were saying, "No, we're trying to get drugs off of our streets and away from our kids."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: I don't know what the truth was, because there was a lot of real territorial old-gang stuff that all the guys from Los Tres-like the major players from Los Tres like the Rodríguez family and all those guys-there was still a lot of barrio attitude and almost kind of gang-oriented. They were always fighting with La Raza Unida party because Raoul Ruiz was . . . they called him "The Big Head" because of his big head. Raoul Ruiz was like from another gang from their past and they hated each other. And at some point, there was gunfire and like, oh, stupid stuff, I found out later, but I was so into Arturo and discovering my own chicanismo stuff and wanting to go to the rallies but I couldn't. Finally when I became of age I was allowed to go to the Los Tres meetings because they were being done. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: "Of age" meaning, what, sixteen, eighteen?

ELSA FLORES: Probably eleventh, twelfth grade, around there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: And so I followed Arturo, and we went over to the meeting and I got totally into it. At this point I had developed a style artistically-in eleventh, twelfth grade-because I finally got a decent art teacher in high school, and she really developed me quickly. You know, once I got skills and proper training I just took off.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What high school was this?

ELSA FLORES: Wilson.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wilson?

ELSA FLORES: Um hmm. In L.A. So I became this little art star at the high school. I was surprising myself at all this intricate talent that I didn't know that I possessed.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What kind of stuff were you doing?

ELSA FLORES: Just like very realistic pencil drawings or ink, like rapidograph, like little. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pointillism?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, pointillism stuff, very realistic, and my teacher was trying to guide me into going into medical illustration-as a job for an artist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] It's always got to be a career, right? You're not in shop.

ELSA FLORES: I know. And I had no idea what artists' lives were like. I'd never studied the life of artists. I wasn't into books. We didn't have books. We weren't raised that way, and I didn't go to the library looking to study artists' lives-unlike Carlos, who knew all about. . . . He had studied so many artists. So I didn't know what it was to be an artist. So I was just kind of being guided by, "Okay, well, I guess I need to get a job doing this. So yeah, well, maybe I'll be a . . ." you know, whatever she wanted me to be. And my mom was very supportive at this point when she noticed that I did have some talent. She was very proud because she knew she had artistic talent but she was never able to develop it. So she was. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [By making] a lamp in ceramics and stuff?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And even in elementary school projects when I needed a drawing she'd help me, and she was really good. I remember once she helped me draw a kangaroo and I was amazed that she could do this great kangaroo. So she was very supportive of my art, along with my cousin Micki [Valenzuela-Ed.], who's married to my half-cousin Paul Valenzuela-Grandpa Mauro's half-brother's kids or something like that. Anyway, Micki married Paul Valenzuela. Micki was Chinese, and she teaches photography. She taught at East L.A. College for years, and I think she's at a different school now. Her real name's [Mei Li] Valenzuela. So Micki was like the art person in our family, and so when she noticed that I talent she bought me a set of paints and really was trying to mentor me. She asked my mom if it was okay, would my mom support this, and my mom said, "Yeah, go ahead and do it." And so Micki was really a very big influence on my development in the early years.

And then I got this great Miss Gaitzch. She was a German and she r-r-r-rolled her R's. She'd say, "Elsa Flor-r-r-es."

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: She was incredible. She was a really good teacher, very dedicated. Everyone would make fun of her. Most of the kids in class weren't that serious about art, but a few were. Willie Herrón went to my high school, too. Back then he was ASCO. So Miss Gaitzch was just like [makes sound like a rocket taking off-Ed.]. I skyrocketed with her. And at some point. . . . Oh, yeah, okay, so during that whole major intense stuff I was still doing a lot of drinking and drugging and stuff like that. Mostly I was very unhappy socially, because I just felt real awkward, and if it wasn't for my art and dope I probably . . . who knows, you know, teen-age suicide, just like. . . . I'm glad I had that. It really saved me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That outlet, huh?

ELSA FLORES: Because I'd be up late, just really intense with all these thoughts and emotions, not knowing what to do with them, and I'd just paint and draw into the wee hours. My mom would say, "Go to sleep, go to sleep, turn off the light." You know, these morbid images of death and decay, these old men turning into skeletons . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] God.

ELSA FLORES: . . . naked men hanging on ropes and strings. It was all this weird stuff and people, would look at my art and they'd go, "Oh my God, this is scary."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sounds like some of Willie's stuff.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. It was really scary. But for me it was like this was what kept me going, kept me sane, I think. The teen years are always so difficult anyway.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you hooking up with other artists at this point?

ELSA FLORES: Just artists at school, other artists at school. I admired Willie. He was older than I was, and I would just like, "Wow!" He was amazing back then. I mean, he was star quality. He was too good for the art schools. The art schools said, "You don't need to go art school."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Seriously?

ELSA FLORES: I think he applied to Arts Center [College of Design-Ed.], and they said, "You're too good. You don't need to go here. Just go out and do it."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did he just learn through self-training, or he was just kind of gifted?

ELSA FLORES: Well, no Miss Gaitzch also helped him because she was his teacher, but, yeah, he had this amazing talent. And so at this point I was already very political. I had gotten into the whole Los Tres thing, was doing grassroots work, doing all their political posters for them, going to Mexico on these. . . . Oh, that was later, after high school. But in high school I was very political, started the [Mecha] group at Wilson High School, was the president, very political, like "Raza," and trying to fight for certain rights at the school, so the principal hated us, and all that stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Like what?

ELSA FLORES: Oh, stupid things.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Chicano studies classes?

ELSA FLORES: No, not even. . . . Stupid things. I mean, like we wanted the fist for our high school emblem.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs hard]

ELSA FLORES: [laughs] Really, really stupid. There wasn't a lot of political stuff. The only political stuff in high school was that I was trying to recruit other kids to come and help with the Los Tres thing, and also getting kids aware of the opportunities to get into schools, to colleges-like the EOP programs. So I was recruiting a lot of kids-my peers-to get into schools, and a lot of them did, because most of us weren't aware that we were able to get into school without having a high SAT score, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right, right. Were you aware of all the art happenings that were taking place alongside of the movement?

ELSA FLORES: Just the ASCO stuff, because I was aware . . . because Willie was at my school. One summer I took a filmmaking class and I really loved it. They had this special arts workshop, sort of city-wide, that was based at my school this one summer, so I took a filmmaking class and it was really great. I made this short film all about hair. I used a Crosby, Stills, and Nash song. [sings:] "Almost cut my hair. Happened just the other day. . . ."

JEFFREY RANGEL: "Keep your freak flag flying." [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: So then I followed . . . during the one scene I would shoot. . . . You know, it was the seventies. Everyone had long hair. It was great. I shot my little sister. She had real long hair. I took her to the beach, and she was like flying around with her hair. Willie Herrón had that David Bowie look, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Willie always wanted to be David Bowie. So I followed him around with my camera on campus. I got some nice film clips of him in my film. And I showed it for the student body and it was a big hit. And so that was the end of my film career, because I went back. . . . It was over and then I did. . . . Oh, I did a couple summers. Miss Gaitzch helped me get into a summer camp. It was Idylwild School of Music and the Arts.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I saw some of that in your papers.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it was in USC's high school-camp kind of thing. It was mostly rich kids from Beverly Hills, because it was very expensive. I was on scholarship, and I was one of maybe two or three Chicanos up there and I felt really isolated. I'd never been around white kids before, right? So I felt really weird, and they were all rich-you know, Beverly Hills High School and all that stuff. And so I was just in my weird surrealist, gory . . . not gory, but a morbid kind of art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I saw some images that made it into the yearbooks or whatever.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, the Isomata ones

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, those were kind of subdued.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Pitchers and vases and stuff like that.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, God, yeah. I have to give some of the real old stuff so that you can [connect, kind of]. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You can flesh that out.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And so that was my exposure. The second summer up at Idlewild. . . . The first summer I spent, during the eleventh grade, I spent only three weeks there. Maybe it was tenth grade. Eleventh grade I spent six weeks up there, and at this point there was this federally funded program that brought in like sixty black kids from the south side of Chicago. Real ghetto kids but super talented, like dancers and singers; it was like all kinds of stuff. And I connected with them. I'd go, "Yeah! These are my people." They were poor. You know, you kind of relate to each other. So I hung out with them. It was great. I made some really deep friendships. We've grown apart since. We didn't keep in touch after several years, but it was really nice. It was like I felt connected again to the working class.

So still doing my political work with Los Tres. And then Los Tres kind of came to a head, where it just sort of went on forever and ever and ever, and they finally went to jail, and they were trying to do appeals and all that stuff, and that's where all that weirdness started happening between political groups. And once I saw that-which is something I notice a lot in doing work in the community-was that all the Chicano groups would fight against each other so they wouldn't get anything done. They'd spend all their energy against each other.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Despite the rhetoric of collectivity and Raza and all that.

ELSA FLORES: Oh yeah, that's all rhetoric. That was like the euphoria of, you know, you're first starting and you're idealistic. "Yeah, we're going to make change!" And some things, you know, when you gather tens of thousands of people together, that's a real happening. That really shows a lot of force and took a lot of organizing, but when it got down to real political power it fell apart. And it's still happening. I see that. We don't have a lot of political power. There aren't enough politicians out there that are doing real good. We don't support our candidates, and all that stuff. So I was very disillusioned. You know, here I was, very idealistic, thinking I could change the world.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Like the Brown Berets or [Casa] never appealed to you.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I was working with Casa.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Committee to Free Los Tres eventually became Casa.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, the Rodríguez family who kind of. . . . Yeah, was the Los Tres committee were also affiliated with Casa, which was really more like Bert Corona, was kind of the leader of Casa. So we were doing some work with [Casa], but that was way out in the Pico district, and it was kind of too far for me. So I'd do some work with them.

But mostly after I sort of broke off from that intense. . . . The thing that turned me off to the Los Tres committee was they started working with political prisoners in Mexico, trying to free them, you know, and it became this base for political prisoners. Angela Davis called on the phone once. "Is Antonio there?"

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And then the guys from the committee were notoriously macho, and they were always on the make for any woman with them, right? So that turned me off, too, because I had all that whole macho stuff from my brother that totally turned me off. I just hated that whole macho, like isolating the men from the girls and then just using the women. And there were a lot of political . . . new Chicano art groups out there. There was Mechicano [Art-Ed.] Center and all this stuff, and I went to check them out. But the same thing. I went up to Mechicano once when they were, I think, on Whittier Boulevard, and all these guys! It was like a boys' club. I walked in there and they were upstairs doing cocaine or something, and walked up there, and they were just on the make for any chick that walked in the door.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've heard that before.

ELSA FLORES: And I'm like, "I hate this. I hate this." And, you know, trying to do any art work with them, it was like the boys' club. I have a lot more else to say about that later, especially my relationship with Carlos. But the boys' club totally turned me off. It reminded me of my brother's little clique, how he like shunned me because I was a girl, and I mean I couldn't play with the band, and then I couldn't play art because unless you're doing some of these guys, you know, you're just considered, you know, a girl and not very serious. So that turned me off, so that made me become sort of more of an individual artist and not a group-oriented artist as far as fine arts go.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There were no other women to hook up with?

ELSA FLORES: No, not really.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No other women artists to hook up with?

ELSA FLORES: A few. There was like Judithe Hernández, who was part of Los Four briefly. But again, she also got the short end of the stick, because she was very talented but she was "the girl." And later Barbara Carrasco talked to her a bit and kind of supported each other. And much later, like Diane Gamboa, supported her because. . . . Harry Gamboa [Jr.-Ed.] was part of the ASCO group, and during high school I was so into like the whole ASCO thing and wanting to be part of an arts group, and I would follow Willie on their things, their ASCO parades, down Whittier Boulevard, all that stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, their walking murals and stuff, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And I'd pictures of them and stuff, and Harry was like this very romantic-looking, like huge head of hair, all curly, and I thought he was cute, and I wanted to be with them, but it was quite obvious that. . . . [both giggle] It was quite obvious that it was a boys' club, that Patssi [Valdez-Ed.] was in there, but she was like "the model," the fashion model. Now she's like on her own, and she's really like into her own thing, and I'm so glad, because she finally found herself. But back then she was just like the glamour statement of the group. I went to one of their meetings or something, and it was very obvious that's what she was, and that turned me off. But still I wanted to be, and as always there was no ins and there was no outs. This is it, you know. They're very elitist and sort of snobby, and like, "No, you can't join us." Later on, they had a few different groups of people joining, and then they eventually just all kind of split up and stuff, and some of them don't talk to each other anymore. You probably know more of that than I do.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, there are stories that we're getting on tape.

ELSA FLORES: I bet. [laughs] Oh, I don't know the insides because, again, whenever I felt those doors closing, the sexism stuff, and the elitism, that's when I would just turn off. "This is not for me. I'm not going to waste my time."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Hmm, that's interesting, because in her interview with the Archives, Judy Baca makes similar sorts of comments.

ELSA FLORES: Hmm!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Not specifically targeting any particular group or anything like that, but you get the sense that she's heading over towards Venice, too, to work with some women's groups over there, and started SPARC, and becomes active in. . . .

Session 1, Tape 2, Side A

ELSA FLORES: Is that the new tape or the old tape?

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is a new one. This is tape two, side A, an interview with Elsa Flores for the Archives of American Art. Today is February 18th, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And let's see, can you remember what we were talking about?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, we were talking about. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You're good at that.

ELSA FLORES: The thing that turned me off to the down-home politics of the Los Tres committee [Committee to Free Los Tres (aks El Comité)-Ed.] was they started doing political prisoner things in Mexico.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: So I was all into it, and at this point I was already starting to do my music-and I'll talk about that later-and because I was a musician I had started doing some teatro work-you know, theatre groups. There were a lot of Chicano theatre groups then. I think Teatro Urbano was the one that I was working with, out of Plaza de la Raza. They invited me to go with them to a big teatro conference in Mexico City. So I went and we were there for a month or something. Some of my political homies from Los Tres were there, so we were supposed to do this stuff and go to the prisons and visit a couple of these political prisoners. And one of the guys, who was imported into the Los Tres committee from Mexico-his nickname was El Leon] [_____-Ed.]; he was some big heavy-duty leftist from Mexico-he had us walking all through the streets of Mexico City following him and he had me carry his suitcase and stuff. He was a target; people hated him over there. That's why he left. And not knowing-I was still very naive-thinking, "Yeah, here we are doing some real work. We're doing real political work here. We're gonna save these people from this persecution." And so at some point, I don't know what happened, but I looked into his briefcase and there was a gun in there. And I said, "That's really fucked up. I could be in some Mexican prison because this guy's making me carry his gun all through the streets of Mexico City." So I just totally said, "That's it. Too many bridges have been burned here. Bad taste. You know, politics is not the answer for me."

And, again, at that point I started already diving into music, and the music stemmed from always having some rinky-dinky guitar laying around, and I'd just pick it up and sound out songs and stuff.

Just finger things, never knew chords originally. And then my brother started. . . . He played bass with his band so I really wanted to get good, and so I'd play with his bass, and I kept playing and playing and playing and finally was learning some chords and writing songs and doing that whole seventies love-song movement, hippie stuff, you know, real like sort of folksinger.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] I can picture it.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, bell bottoms, smoking joints, strumming my guitar, taking my guitar to school.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Doing that Joan Baez thing.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell. Oh, it so funny though. I ran for girls' vice president of my senior class and. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Girls' vice president? They had a girls and a boys?

ELSA FLORES: We had a girls' and a boys' vice president. And so for my campaign posters-now, of course, I can draw my own-so I had this character. . . . I'd do these little political comic strips. They were funny. They were anti-drug ones-you know, as a stoner, anti-drug ones.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And it was this guy named Stoney L., and he'd like. . . . [imitates mumbling voice] It was this whole political thing, and I'd put out these newspapers and stuff. And my campaign posters featured this guy, Stoney L. Big old slob, big slob, all like [untranscribable sound], reeking. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Kind of like the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers.

ELSA FLORES: And he'd often be in a trash can, just all stoned out. So it said, "Be cool, vote for Elsa." [laughs] It was my campaign, what you call it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: A very principled campaign-running on the issues, right?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, and I won on that platform, so it showed you where my high school was at. So how'd I get to that point? Oh, music. So I was playing, doing a lot of folk-singing and a lot of love-ins and trippy down and stuff like that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's amazing, it's all self-taught though.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, all self-taught, never learned to read music. And I was getting good. I was writing some really good songs, and I saw maybe I could have a future in this and I really enjoyed music.

And so, what happened? I was at that point out of. . . . I was going to Cal State L.A. out of high school, and the art department was dismal. It was like the worst art department, I think, of any university probably, and it was such a turn-off for me that I started veering towards the photography department, which wasn't even part of the art department. It was called industrial arts. So I spent more time doing photography than making art-you know, plastic arts. So I became a really good photographer. I loved photography, had a really good eye, and started exhibiting my photographs all around. At that time you couldn't make a living. No one would buy photographs back then. So it was just kind of like a form of expression. And I had great success with it. I showed internationally with my photography. And at the same time. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: How and where?

ELSA FLORES: How and where?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Well, there was a show in New York City called En Foco. It was a Latino photography show. And there was another Latino photography show in Munich, I think. I forget what it's called. It's on my resume somewhere. And just all over the country and [in, the] town and stuff. And getting really good response from the work. And I enjoyed it. Oh, the best part of it was following different people around, because that's all my photography was just-again-very autobiographical-whoever was around me, my family, put them in these situations, these real kind of interesting perspectives and lighting.

And I started working at Plaza de la Raza while I was still in college, and I was working with Louie Pérez and David Hidalgo of Los Lobos, and Carlos [Almaraz-Ed.], and all these artists. And we put on these extravaganza cultural reviews for the kids. We'd teach them the history of art and music-a history of Mexico through music, art, etc. And so we were all in these funky costumes we'd design, and I had these great photographs of all of this, like backstage of that wonderful stuff. And then also at that point I was following Los Lobos. Years later, I was following Los Lobos with their new push into a new career for them-you know, mainstream stuff-shooting them at gigs and doing all this underworld-back-scene, hard-rock-club-kind-of-looking photographs. Really trippy. Followed them over to the Olympic Auditorium. They did this set before Johnny . . . Rotten was his name? Johnny Rotten?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. From The Sex Pistols?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, yeah. He was performing there, so they were the opening act. In between. The Kipper Kids were out there. Do you know the Kipper Kids?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Huh uh.

ELSA FLORES: Harry Kipper is now married to Bette Midler. But Harry Kipper and. . . The other guy is also named Harry Kipper. That's not their real names. I think Bette's husband is Martin von something, Hassen-something [Martin von Hasselberg-Ed.]. Anyway, the Kipper Kids would dress up like wrestlers in g-strings, and they'd throw food at each other and throw it at the audiences. Wild, wild stuff. And there's a whole movement of Chicano musical groups: The Plugz, Tito Larriva. Photographed him. Had some great shots of him and his group. Did some interviews with him. I was doing some writing for La Opinion [newspaper-Ed.] of cultural events and things and then. . . Okay, so I became very involved in photography at Cal State. And music. I was still continuing my music and my song-writing. And then I got involved with. . . Oh, was it Los Tres? Was Smiley working for Los Tres? My first boyfriend was . . . his name was Smiley-Ismael Parra. And Smiley . . . I don't know what ever happened to him. I think he got his doctorate in some kind of Chicano studies. I don't know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I wish they could see that little wry smile on your face right now. [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: Well, it was a big heartbreak. He dumped me bad, and he married this Italian girl like the following year. I was so heartbroken. But later, I don't know, I heard he had a nervous breakdown or something. He divorced this woman a year after he married her. Did you go to Long Beach, did you say? No, you didn't mention Long Beach. Anyway, somehow I got involved with Smiley. I think it was politically. Maybe he was doing something for. . . No, I know Smiley was very into. . . Maybe

Casa; maybe that's where I met him. I don't think it was Los Tres. His parents were leftists from way back. We were doing a lot of study groups in Marxist philosophy and dialectical materialism and all that stuff. And Carlos did, too. I had met him back during that period. So we're all very much into that whole left-wing thing. And then, because I was interested in music, I started. . . . And in Los Tres there were a couple of musicians that were really good. One was Chuy Pérez, who had a beautiful voice, and he encouraged me to play along with him and stuff. And so I started playing these rallies and gigs with a couple of people and we'd call ourselves different names. And then Smiley somehow got in the picture and then we started becoming an item. He was my first real boyfriend. Oh, he was at Cal State L.A., that's right. And then we joined the mariachi at Cal State, called Calistatlán. [Don Chuy] was the leader. He was a great old master from Jalisco, and we had this really great group. Even young kids from Garfield High. It was Don Chuy's high school group. He brought them in to play with the college group. So we were called Calistatlán, and we did gigs, we'd do weddings, we made money, had fun. I was playing the. . . . What's the name of the little guitar? The vihuela.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The vihuela?

ELSA FLORES: Real fast. Real fast vihuela. And Smiley was playing violin. His brother was also on violin. His brother is named [Weeders] [_____-Ed.]. What's his real name? Ernesto [Parra-Ed.] was the doctor. Ernesto and . . . God, what was his name? Anyway, I forgot. "Weeders," we called him, was his nickname. So I really got into music then. César Torres, who was also one of the mariachi members, played guitar next to me, later became a member of the political music groups that I was in. And Tomás De la Osa was one of our lead singers. We had a female and a male. One was Rosa-don't know her last name [Granada-Ed.]-and Tomás De la Osa, who later became my roommate. We shared a house in Highland Park. He was from Costa Rica. A real womanizer, he had all these girlfriends.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: He was great fun, he was great fun. Big deep voice. So Tomás was a trip. We had a good time. So Smiley. . . . This whole little core group. We pulled out of there-Rosa, the lead singer, César [Rojas (Los Lobos)-Ed.], the guitar player, myself, and Smiley-and we started doing these little political leftist, nueva trova-style music. One of our groups was called ["Aqui y Alla"], or something like that. "Aqui y Alla." I had written a couple of-I thought-very good political songs. One was called. . . [sings:] "Somos [Revolucionarios], Latinos Americanos; Somos uno porque America, es una tambien." [both laugh] And it would go on and on.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think I've heard that.

ELSA FLORES: Did you? So, you know, and a couple other things, and it was great! I loved performing, because we were in front of this huge audience, masses of thousands of people at political rallies, and we're singing this real inspirational song like [singing], "Solidarity forever." And everyone would be singing it, and I would be able to be a public figure but still kind of hide behind my guitar because I was still kind of shy. So I was in both places at one time. Same with the camera when I was doing photography.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: I was behind the camera, so I was still just sort of watching-I was like a, what do you call it, a spectator, observer-but I was still part of the activity. So it was the same thing. It's not the same thing with visual arts, because you're very isolated. You're not "in public."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Unless you do murals or do installation pieces or something.

ELSA FLORES: Right. And still it's a very limited audience. Especially installation. If you're doing a museum thing, it's the museum audience, that's it. But out there, you're with the masses of people, and even with photography, you're in like hard rock dives or the Olympic Auditorium or whatever, New York City.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Olympic, I remember that place.°.°.

ELSA FLORES: It was wild! The Kipper Kids were spitting at the audience.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: It was awful. And then the audience was wild, because it was Johnny Rotten's audience, right? They started spitting at Los Lobos, and Los Lobos are getting pissed off, right, and so they started spitting back. [laughter] It was funny. It was a great time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I can't believe that Los Lobos actually opened up for Public Image, was it?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, Public Image. Because that's when they were just making their break into the rock clubs, like Whiskey A-Go-Go. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That must have been '80, '81.

ELSA FLORES: They played with The Blasters; that was their first real rock'n roll gig.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I remember that. That whole LA. renaissance in rock music.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. The Brat was happening; they were a Chicano group.

JEFFREY RANGEL: X was big-time.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, X.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I remember The Brat.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, and Tito Larriva-The Plugz-sort of came in and kind of, I think, served as a role model for Los Lobos, that they could do something outside of their little familiar sort of style of music and their kind of community base. They wanted to expand. They were actually at a point. . . . Louie [Perez-Ed.], Dave Hidalgo, and I were working . . . we were the music component-[and] César-from our old mariachi. And Plaza la Raza was four of us. César Torres has died since. He died of lymphoma, I think, a few years ago. But Louie, Dave, César, and I were the music component at Plaza la Raza. Carlos was part of the painting component. And we had a ball! We did sound effects for all the plays, and we did everything from Richie Valens to pre-Columbian stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: It was just great fun. And so Louie and Dave. . . . Oh, at one point Louie, Dave, and myself. . . . Louie's very, very much the creative artist. Dave is just a musical genius. But Louie is the creative force behind Louie and Dave.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The two together.

ELSA FLORES: Both of them. They're amazing, those two guys. The other guys just, you know, they've been there forever, they're like family, they're support. But the real creative genius is Dave Hidalgo and Perez, definitely. So Louie is Mr. Brain, right? Like heady, conceptual. Totally . . . always the frustrated artist. He was very talented artistically, but music was his main thing. I was always supporting his art, because I think he needed to continue doing it, and he was supporting my music, he thought I should continue doing it. And so we had a real sweet relationship, real supportive. He was married and he had a kid, so it was platonic, you know, but we were very close. Louie wanted to do something gallery-wise, because Los Lobos were kind of becoming stale after ten years of being together. It was kind of the same thing, nothing new. Louie kind of wanted to branch out, because he had all this creative energy, and Louie had ideas for these performance-art pieces, in which he starred in and I got to document, because I was a photographer, right? So I got great shots of Louie's act, which was. . . . He was called "Screwy Louie."

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: "Let's Put an End to this Nightmare." And so, as a result, we created this musical group called The Knuckleheads, and it was Louie, Dave, and myself. And we would just do this spontaneous music on instruments we'd never played before, just, you know, went downtown and walked through the Third Street tunnel, or, you know, just doing these crazy things. So that was a real cute thing, and from that I saw. . . . At that point, I was writing these kind of punk-type songs, reggae-type songs, and some of them I said, "Hey, man, some of these could be hits." I think, you know, I could probably have a career in this, with these musical geniuses, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And I had to kind of make a decision. I mean, Los Lobos-I don't think they would ever have broken up-but they were at a point where they were all kind of dissatisfied. They weren't making that much money. Like Conrad [Lozano-Ed.] was working in an asbestos factory; it was really depressing. And their career was kind of like not going anywhere, right, just kind of stayed the same. So Louie. . . . What time is it? I'm sorry.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Two twenty.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. You have an appointment at three. Can you drop me off somewhere at like 2:45?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. So Louie. . . . So it was almost at a point where it might have been a good time for them to break off and do some other type of music, and I had to think, "Well, do I want that for my life? Do I want to be a performing artist?" I mean, I loved performing, it was probably a bigger rush than anything I ever get in art, in art-making. But I didn't like the lifestyle. I'd have to go on tour, I'd have to lose a lot of weight, I'd have to go from hotel room to hotel room to hotel room. And I didn't think I wanted to do that. And at that point Carlos kind of came into my life, and it sort of defined what I really wanted in life. So at that point Louie and Dave started a new push in their career, and it entailed giving them a new image and joining the club circuit, the mainstreet rock 'n roll, rockabilly, world-music-beat stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And they had great success. They did it. And I did one of their first photo sessions. I

tried to give them a new look. So we did it up in our house in Highland Park, and so I shot them all greased-out like rockabilly kind of guys, and Louis was doing this stuff with spray paint. So it was really interesting how they were consciously changing their whole persona, their public persona.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you actually contributing to that transformation?

ELSA FLORES: To the look? Yeah, I think so. And just being supportive of them. Louie was very much in awe of Carlos. He would like totally clam up around him. He'd get so nervous, because I guess he was a big hero for him. And Carlos at that point-I guess we were together-and Louie just like was so intimidated around him he couldn't relax, but Carlos was always offering them a lot of advice, and they were so glad to get it because they admired this man so much. So that was very important for them, I think, getting his support.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: Even though, I think I supported them more, but of course I'm not acknowledged. It's never like, "Thanks to Elsa," it was always, "Thank you to Carlos." But that's typical. I mean, I'm used to that, I'm used to that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There we go again, right?

ELSA FLORES: So then they took off. They did their music thing, and they're doing swell. And Louie still wants to make visual art, and I think he will, but he and Dave will have a long career as songwriters, even if the band doesn't stay together forever.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I mean, their music has just gone in some pretty creative directions in the last few years.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And they had a lot of personal hardship. I mean, they're all family-oriented, but they had struggles. It was hard being on the road, being away from your family, and you [can] get into a lot of toxic stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm sure.

ELSA FLORES: That's not a very happy life, I don't think.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So the music thing was. . . . I kind of, after I had my baby, I stopped playing because every time I'd grab the guitar, she'd like want to take it away or play with it, so I kind of just put it down. But during the Cal State period of mariachi I was in several other folk groups, like regional groups. I was in a jarocho group, like Veracruz music. I played the harp. And I was in a Huasteco group playing la Huapañguera, like real guapangos. And then we did these groups of sort of South American Peruvian kind of music, flutes and drums and guitar and stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Amazing! All of this without training.

ELSA FLORES: No training. No, no training at all. It all just sort of came natural.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you go from music to photography, film-making, and painting.

ELSA FLORES: And painting. And I do a lot of writing, too. But the photography led me back to my

first love, which was painting. And it happened because I couldn't sell a black-and-white photograph. I was at Art Center at this point and feeling very isolated again, [_____ -Ed.] Art Center, because I came from Cal State which was all like Chicano power to Art Center-elitist art, white, school. Hardly any kids of color there. It was very difficult. During lunch I'd sort of like sneak off into a little darkroom and take naps. I was really depressed. I think my boyfriend had dumped me at that point, too. I think Smiley broke up with me, so I was really depressed. And didn't connect with anyone. Got some great training, because it's like they drill you. You have to learn how to really draw and paint at that school, which is something you don't do at some of the other Hanna-Barbera schools of art, you know? So I got even better training than ever. And so I would go into my drawer of photographs. . . . I probably was with Carlos at this point, because there were a lot of pictures of him. I did a lot of nudes of him. So I'd pull. . . . I didn't like throwing away my old junk photos that weren't good quality. So I'd always throw them in a drawer. So I'd pull out my old drawer of junkers and started applying paint to it, but like in a very thick style, like very impasto, where you'd obliterate part of the image and other images would come up. And I was one of the first to do that. Now like everyone's painting on photographs. But what I did notice is as soon as I started applying color to my black-and-white photographs, they became. . . . Number one, they became unique. They were one of a kind, so it was not an edition.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And color-people loved it. So I started selling these things. Easily. I was selling these photographs.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where were you selling them out of?

ELSA FLORES: I'd do little art sales and stuff, little gallery shows. But the actual applying of paint turned me on so much that I went straight back to canvas just to paint. And then at that time I was around Carlos so much that you had to paint when you were around this man. Painting was like. . . . A sign of a good painter is that it makes you want to paint. You're around this man and there's nothing else you'd want to do.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You just want to paint, huh?

ELSA FLORES: You just want to paint. And it was always my first love, so it was like a really good transition. But now I'm feeling the urge again to get back into music. I've been singing a lot and dancing a lot by myself lately, just like in deserted spots, like on beaches or on mountain tops or something. And I've been pulling out my guitar and just setting it there to see if I'll pick it up and playing my ukelele and stuff like that. So I'm kind of missing the music thing, and I think I might be getting back to it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, that's great.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. I was like a major shoplifter at a certain point-I think it was like older grades high school through like twenty years old or something-and I was good, I was a really good shoplifter. [laughs] It was like I got my first Nikon camera . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: No way!

ELSA FLORES: . . . I go like car stereos, like this stuff. And I felt like politically it was correct because I felt, "This is expropriation."

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is the man, huh?

ELSA FLORES: "I'm not stealing from the people, I'm stealing from the corporate pigs."

JEFFREY RANGEL: The capitalist system.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So I felt like this was okay to do. And I was really good and everyone got really good Christmas presents for years, and I wrote this really great song called, "I Was a Teenage Shoplifter." Which could have been a hit. It was like totally appropriate to the style of music then. It was like sort of ska, kind of rasta punkish kind of stuff. It was a really good song. I'll play it for you one day.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'd love to hear it.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so. . . . What time is it? I think we should probably. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it's 2:30. This is probably a good place to stop, so that next time we come back we can take off or. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, that was fun, talking about that stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, okay.

[Session 1, Tape 2, Side B, is blank]

Session 2

Interview with Elsa Flores
Conducted by Jeffrey Angel
At Casa Buena Vista, California
1997 April 2

Tape 1, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is an interview with Elsa Flores for the Archives of American Art on April 2, 1997, at the artist's house in South Pasadena, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And I think today, like you said, we're going to start back. We've had a little bit of time since our last session, so there were some parts that you wanted to include that you didn't talk about.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, there's things that. . . . My memory was jogged from our last session, and I kept thinking of stories, childhood stories, that I forgot to mention. If I start talking about something I already talked about, just let me know because. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right. Well, this could be interesting. Let's see if you tell it differently.

ELSA FLORES: [laughs] Well, let's see. Mostly we talked about my mom and my dad's history, I think. Right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: I found something out that was very interesting from my godfather. Did I talk about my godfather?

JEFFREY RANGEL: You mentioned him.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, the anarchist from Spain?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, okay. So I'm sending him to the Canary Islands as his death-wish thing. And so in the car on the way to the airport I was asking him questions. I always ask him questions about the father, because they were friends. And so I said, "You know, I know that my Dad's name wasn't really Flores. It was Carcur, C-a-r-c-u-r. How'd he get that name? I mean, how'd he get Flores?" He said, "Ricardo wasn't his real name either." And I go, "Really?" I mean, I didn't know that. I go, "What was his real name?" His real name was Elias Carcur. And my brother was named Elias-I guess after him. I go, "How did he get Ricardo Flores?" And he said, "Well, he somehow got ahold of someone's Social Security card, and he started using that name so he can work." And I said, "Whoa!" So I went and I told my brothers and sister and, of course, they don't want to hear any Dad stories because they don't acknowledge him as "Dad." So I always trip out on those kinds of stories. So, anyway, when I was talking about him I started thinking about him more and thinking about what he did as a living to try to make money so he can go gamble, right? He painted houses. Did I tell you that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't remember.

ELSA FLORES: Maybe or maybe not. He painted houses. And one of my earliest childhood memories was putting my head my head through his legs like little kids do. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Did I say that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I said this. And looking at his splattered paint shoes, painted shoes. And that was, I think, probably very, what you call it, powerful for me, visually, as a child. And then I was thinking about all the torture that he put my Mom through. Again, I'm not sure if I talked about this. When he'd come and go to the house and break in and break out and kidnap us.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I remember you saying one time you found him in bed with her. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I found him in bed. Well, as a child.-I was born with a heart murmur-and so as a child I think they'd. . . . My mom would take me to Childrens' Hospital, and they'd do all these tests and apparently it's fine. It's probably still with me but it didn't affect my health. But they were doing all these tests because at one point I was hallucinating as a child. And I think that had to do with a lot of things. I think there was a lot of stress involved in my life-style as a child because of this tumultuous relationship that my parents had. I'd wake up screaming, and I'd have these. . . . One hallucination in particular was real funny. I have an older sister Margaret LaCar, who had a different dad, and we lived in this run-down little shack there. We're very, very poor. No furniture. We had a couple of broken beds and this dresser drawer in between it. And my sister had a little crib. So I was sleeping with my sister Margaret because I'd always be afraid at night. And she was Filipino. See, she had very coarse hair, so whenever she shaved her legs they were always like sandpaper when I'd rub up against her. And so one night I woke up and I would hear this like purring coming out of my pillow, like p-r-r-r-r.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And I kept slapping my pillow like that, and bubbles were coming out of my pillow.

"Margaret, Margaret"-I was trying to wake her up-"look, the bubbles. Margaret, the bubbles." Margaret was terrified. She didn't want to open her eyes. And I was going, "Look, the bubbles." And then Margaret said, "Go to sleep, go to sleep. There's no bubbles." And, sure enough, the whole room was full with bubbles. And I looked over to my sister Olga's crib and it was covered in bubbles. And I'm like, "Oh, my God!" And then, I guess I usually ended these episodes by screaming and they would all disappear, so I think maybe that's what happened. And then . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did it have any meaning for you?

ELSA FLORES: I don't know what the bubbles. . . . Probably just being inundated with stuff in my life. And then another hallucination, I woke up. . . . We had these old drawers between our beds, and there was like a wolfman at the drawers and the drawers had become a safe, like this big safe. And he was trying to open the safe and he looked at me and I, of course, screamed again and it all disappeared. And then, I think during the same hallucination, I looked up at one of the bedroom windows-which were always scary. The windows were terrifying to me as a kid at night because there was a lot of trees and they'd bash up against and I'd think they were robbers or my Dad trying to break in. And so I looked up at one of the windows, and it was my Mom on the outside of the window opening the curtain like really scary and looking at me. And I screamed again. [laughs] I think those are the most vivid hallucinations. I probably had others.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you ever paint about them?

ELSA FLORES: No, I never have. But I'm sure it had to do with all that stuff-plus because my Dad would take all the money and we wouldn't have food to feed to the children. We were all very anemic as kids.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I remember you saying that.

ELSA FLORES: So we'd have to walk over to General Hospital like every week to get blood tests and, sure enough, we'd be anemic. So we were all. . . . There's probably a whole bunch of conditions that caused that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Anemia stems from malnourishment?

ELSA FLORES: Well, yeah, you're not getting iron so you're not getting enough vitamins in your system. My mom would . . . sometimes she'd have a quarter and buy us a hot dog at the hospital that we would share. But she wouldn't eat, and one occasion she actually fainted at the hospital because she was so malnourished. So she went through a lot. And it made me think back about the line of women that I came from. Is this an old story that I'm telling you?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, no.

ELSA FLORES: And thinking back of my grandmother, whose husband-my grandfather Mauro Valenzuela. . . . I think he was either a Zapatista or a Pancho Villista. After the war, he came home and they had five kids. He died of pneumonia. So here she was, this young woman with five kids she had to raise all by herself, and she had to become a strong woman. She was actually pretty strong. She was pretty much well off. They owned a ranch in San Javier, which is in Sinaloa, and she taught. She was the teacher at the village. And I think I told you about the opium.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So I was thinking back about the history of women in my family. Okay, my mom had

her mom who was a very strong role model as a survivor, having to raise kids on her own and getting through. My Mom, I think influenced by this, became very independent and left the ranch by herself and came over here and had kids and found herself as a single mother having to raise her family and sort of rise from the ashes. Did I talk about her nervous breakdowns?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And for me she was a very important role model because she wasn't your typical passive Mexican woman who, you know, sort of just bowed down to her husbands or any other men. So my role model as a Latina was that you can be strong and independent and hold your own and all that stuff. But the thing that tripped me out the most was that here I am finding myself carrying on the tradition of my family. It's like, "Oh my God! Now I'm a solitary woman raising a family, dealing with all the responsibilities, and all that stuff." It's like karmic, you know. It's in the bloodline or something. So I'm thinking of what Maya's experience is going to be. Because she's an only child. She's, like I said, very deep, very mysterious, like an old soul, so she's. . . . There's lots going on in her mind always. And I hope it's a positive thing. Even though it was very painful experiences, a lot of them, [it] created me for who I am. It also was good because it taught me a certain amount of humility that I thank God that I have. So I never get full of myself because I've had my experience of being below poverty level and realizing that you find the best in life-at any level. Some of my happiest times were some of those times. At Christmas when we had no presents we had the best time. You know, we shared love and we shared food and it was great. So it was a good experience, knowing that. And, in a sense, Maya doesn't have that. She's always been. . . . Well, we were very poor when she was born but most of her older years she's been very comfortable. She's had almost anything she's wanted. I mean, not spoiled, but she has had a comfortable life. And my fear is she doesn't appreciate what she has because she's never been without. But that's her experience; that's her life experience. The good thing is that I hope that I would be a positive Latina female role model for her because she sees that I did pick myself up and kept on going and went on with life. And that's what I saw and that's what my Mom saw.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

ELSA FLORES: So it's in the bloodline.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It seems like she has inherited some of that independence, anyways . . .

ELSA FLORES: You think so?

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . in terms of just wanting to go away to boarding school.

ELSA FLORES: Right, that's true. That's very true.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Maybe, though, she was raised under different circumstances in terms of material things . . .

ELSA FLORES: Right, that's so true.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . [and that] spirit is passed down in a different way.

ELSA FLORES: Because again, like I said, if I had been a kid with a different experiential background I would have loved to have gone to a boarding school like that. I mean, the little girl inside me thinks, "No way, I'd never go to boarding school and leave my family. It's too scary." But now that I see the possibilities in different people's lives, I'm thinking, "That would have been so awesome to go to a

great school like that."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And I saw that when I was in my junior and senior year when I went up to [Isomon] at the art school in Idylwild. All these rich kids and I couldn't relate. I was this barrio kid, and I was like so out of it and there were all these kids from Beverly Hills High. But it was an awesome experience, because I was given the opportunity to partake in something that for them was like normal. It was like given to them constantly. So it's interesting thinking about one's experiences and how that affects what you become as an adult. I was also thinking a lot about real young memories like once my Mom kicked my. . . . When she kicked him out finally for the last time at gun point. . . . You know, by that time we were pretty well formed; we were junior high and stuff. And I was always very Gemini-like. I was very in touch with my opposite sides, like the yin and yang. On the one hand, I was a very good student. All through elementary school I was always a real good student, a real sort of goody-goody, and always held important positions like office monitor and class president and stuff like that. Office monitor was the best, though, because you got to leave class to go get a message at the office.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So in a sense, as shy as I think I am, and introspective as I can be and introverted, I have the other side where I'm also very political and very social. But so I vacillate between both of them. I was always very physical. My brother was only a little over a year older than I was, so we were almost like twins so we'd hang out a lot together. And he was real *atravieso* [daring, outgoing-Ed.]; he was just like a maniac. So I'd always try to keep up with him. Very physical, we'd wrestle, we'd do all these boy things. We'd ride our bikes all over El Sereno, where I grew up. And stay out way late and then come in when it was dinnertime. So my childhood was really nice that way, that I was able to explore not just the girlie thing. I never really was into the girlie thing. I did have one doll that the welfare people gave me. It was a broken Chatty Kathy.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And it was like I was so thrilled because I had this beautiful new doll and that she was like the hot item of the year. Even though she didn't speak, I had a Chatty Kathy. But I was more interested in riding my bike and riding skates and stuff, and always involved in the after-school playground programs at school. Always winning ribbons for skating and caroms and championships like that. And I think I told you about my sixth-grade experience at the regatta when I was accused of something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And that's when I kind of turned. No, actually, I didn't turn until I was like eighth grade, and I wanted. . . . I think I told you I hung out with my rowdy girlfriends . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . never fully accepted and always wanted to until high school and I became this little art star.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Did I talk about M.E.Ch.A. [Movimiento Estudiantíl Chicanos de Aztlán-Ed.] in high

school?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think you were telling us about some of the things that M.E.Ch.A. wanted to have happen, like you wanted to have the. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Oh, the fist. Okay, so I talked about that. Again, that's part of the whole political side of me. Even though it was like in high school it was like the early seventies, and I wanted so bad to be a hippie and I couldn't because I still had to be at home, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh yeah. But you were saying you managed to get your licks in anyway because your Mom worked at night.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I [lived it out]. And she pretty much allowed our self-expression which was kind of a cool thing for a mom-I guess because she realized that she did it herself, she left Mexico and pursued a different life. As long as we weren't going hurt ourselves or anyone else, she allowed us to express ourselves. And I do the same with Maya. If she wants to color her hair, then fine. "Color your hair, you know. I think it'd look cool." I don't know if she likes it. I think she'd like a more conservative Mom.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. She doesn't like the fact that her friends think I'm cool. [laughs] So. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, but if it were the other way around she'd _____.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, I know, probably. So the M.E.Ch.A. thing, I was like big political person, but I talked to a few friends lately, and I realize that. . . . I didn't know I had actually influenced a few people. Because the EOP program at that time-it was an Educational Opportunity Program-they were recruiting Chicanos for school-Cal State L.A., in this case. And I was getting all my friends to go and apply, and most people didn't even think that they were going to be going to college. So a few of them actually did. And one girlfriend actually thanked me just recently, and I didn't realize I had. . . . I forgot that I had actually done that, influenced people that way. So I felt that was a really nice thing that had happened and that you have the power to influence people that way. Another thing I was thinking about childhood was that. . . . You know, I just applied for this El Sereno Recreational Center commission, which I just found out today that I was awarded. But in my proposal it was. . . . And normally I wouldn't even go for this commission, because it's so little money and there's so much work in public art-I mean, so much work entailed in producing a work of public art-that it's usually not worth it for these small budgets. But I wanted to do it because El Sereno was like "the Plunge." It was where I used to go swimming. And I used to go ride my bike and I'd jump the fence and jump and sneak a dip and all. It was great. A lot of really beautiful early childhood memories started coming up with the writing of this proposal. And one of the things that I realized, and what I told the panel two days when I was interviewed, was that, for me, living in El Sereno, which is just over the hill here. . . . You know, I've never left a five-mile radius of El Sereno. I've always lived within the five miles, so I'm very territorial that way. And I've lived there every since I was one year old. I think we only spent a year of my life in Vegas after I was born. Then we came here. But the biggest influence for me was the landscape, and I remember at Farmdale Elementary School-which was at the foot of this rec center that I'm going to be working on-we only had art on Fridays, and it was only watercolors. They'd give us this little tray of watercolors, and that was art. And so I just couldn't wait for Friday, you know, I'd get to do art. And I never had art materials at home; we never had books at home. We were still very poor. My Mom started re-educating herself to get a nursing position, a nurses' aide position. But we still didn't have any educational materials or artistic

things at home. So I was so stoked when Fridays came about, so I could do my watercolor. And it always was the same image for me. It was always like these washes of sky and then these hills, these rolling hills. And my house was situated in a valley surrounded by these huge foothills, real beautiful big foothills, and this El Sereno rec center sits right at the base of the largest hill in El Sereno, with those things for the airplanes. . . . What do you call the signal? Those little red lights?

JEFFREY RANGEL: The towers.

ELSA FLORES: The towers?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And so I was talking to them about that, and talking about how I used to sit and watch the seasons change. And that, for me, was very beautiful, because the hills would turn green in the springtime and then yellow with mustard flower, and then they'd start drying out and they'd get brown like big old mountain lions and stuff. And then they'd burn up. In the summertime they'd all light up on fire and I was always real protective of the rec center because it was vulnerable. It could have burned up, and, you know, that was an important place for a kid.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So I was like, you know, just kind of explaining to them how that environment influenced my love of landscape, and how landscape has always been an element of my work. It shows up always in some way. And water. I mean, my love of water was going to the pool all summer long. "The Plunge". I don't know why we called it "the Plunge", but it was like the plunge. I asked my brothers and sisters, I go, "Did we just make that name up or did everyone call it "the Plunge"?" And they go, "No, we were. . . ." And then I asked some other girlfriends who lived in El Sereno but somewhere, "Oh, yeah! It was "the Plunge"." So it's an old name, I think. El Sereno used to be a white community of farmers. I don't know if farmers, but some kind of small little town, and so it sounds like an old kind of name.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The Plunge.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, the Plunge. So now we're going to have a new rec center. So I went up there the day before my interview and I took Maya, and I gave her a little tour. I said, "See, Maya, this is where I used to come and swim and all this. I used to watch the baseball games and we used to have carnivals. We'd climb this hill up here and bring our blankets on Fourth of July and watch the fireworks show. That huge hill up there, we would hike it sometimes. It'd be a big deal, you know, take a hike up that giant hill." And then I drove her on my route, the way I used to have to walk to high school.

Well, first we went to El Sereno Junior High. . . . No, when I went to junior High from Farmdale, it was Wilson High School, junior and senior high. So it was a big combined school. And then they built the new high school on an adjacent hill, and it was in that transition where I was at the high school when it was junior-senior, but I think I had just entered. And that was when the first walk-outs happened. And all I remember was like I was kind of staying in the background, not knowing what was going on, right? And I just remember this crowd of people trying to get out of the fencing . . . out of the gates, trying to like walk out. And then the principal: Someone threw an egg, and I just remember that big old egg on his bald head.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It must have connected.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. [laughs] I said, "Wow, this is kind of cool image-wise." And then later I became very rowdy and political myself. So I missed that whole thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was it the event that impressed you?

ELSA FLORES: It was the start, because that's when everyone started talking about Chicano power and cultural awareness and stuff. So it was a start. And with my revolutionary roots, dating back to my grandpa, I was really aware of revolution, and my Mom always supported the struggle of the working person, even though she was probably more middle class in her upbringing. But her dad was definitely a revolutionist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So in a way it was kind of your birthright to. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I think so. To carry on the family tradition. And so that was an interesting image, the first walk-outs and how I missed that wave just by a few years because I was too young. And then later in high school, I took up the cause and it was already well on its way, you know, it was already into it. Cesar Chávez was a big deal already, and we did a little protest at the local market on his behalf because they were selling grapes or something like that. And then that's when I got involved with Los Tres, which I had talked about.

So what other childhood things was I thinking about? Just those images of landscape and how that was real powerful.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's interesting, because in his interview Frank Romero was saying the same thing.

ELSA FLORES: About landscape?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, about it how it's been a process of discovery for him. He consistently paints round sort of landscapes, because when he was growing up that's a lot of what he saw, the rolling hills.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, because he grew up in East L.A., which is the same kind of landscape.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. And I find that kind of interesting, because now I think when most people think about Los Angeles they think of a very urban cityscape.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And some of the things that maybe Carlos had painted-buildings, lights, trees, that kind of . . . whatever-a lot of activity going on. But very rarely do you associate it with that kind of rolling hill, more pastoral landscape.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, right. Well, I think because he grew up. . . . Most of his childhood was in Mexico City, like urban, even back then it was like city. And then they moved to Chicago, which was city. Then they moved to L.A., but they didn't move to East L.A. They moved to somewhere like in. . . . Where was it? Somewhere like the Watts area, or somewhere in the sort of Central L.A. area, where again it was flat. You'd look up towards the mountains and the hills. Not until his later adult life did he move like into Echo Park, which had some foothills. And then later he moved to Highland Park with a girlfriend, where it was hills. And then when he moved in with me in my Highland Park house-which was only like a block away from his old girlfriend-we had this incredible view, so we would landscape paint and we'd take Robert Gil de Montes and Daniel Brice out. We'd go to Mount Washington and the hilltop and paint landscapes, or we'd go to Elysian Park and paint landscapes.

But his would always include a city on it. He liked buildings. That was his experience and his attraction. And for me I preferred just the rolling hills. And so I thought, "Wow, that's an interesting thing that I've never thought about."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that is.

ELSA FLORES: And, let's see, what other childhood thing came to mind? Oh, I don't know if I told you this. Did I tell you about my father's death? See, you would have remembered.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I don't think so.

ELSA FLORES: This is pretty revealing. Well, I don't know if it's revealing. It's just a pretty gnarly story. My Mom got sick. We weren't really. . . . She always supported me as an artist. My cousin [Micki] Valenzuela was the first one to give me an art set, and my Mom saw that I had talent and Micki kind of encouraged me, and my Mom encouraged me as well. Did I tell you that I went to school with Willie Herrón? And I did a film where he was in it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think you did, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So the art thing. How did the art thing relate to my Dad's death? It doesn't. Anyway, this is a story about my dad. My mom and my dad had this love/hate relationship. And she said he wasn't a bad guy. He didn't drink. He smoked dope, and that was his only vice. But the gambling was his big vice. So when she couldn't live with him anymore and eventually just got rid of him, and he would always show up every once in a while and try to look at us, and we, like I said, were brainwashed against him at this point and would run away from him, so we didn't want to have anything to do with him. And then she stopped seeing him for a while. And every once in a while she'd think she'd see him in the market and it wouldn't be-or it might have been him, I don't know. But then when she became sick. . . . She had lymphoma, cancer of the lymph system. And she had it for probably about a year and a half, maybe two years. Never telling us it was terminal. She was always telling us it was curable. But apparently it had changed form for some reason. But even towards the end of her life she would. . . . At one point, I remember, she thought she saw him somewhere. So she was always on the lookout for him and she hadn't taken any men after him. She was-I thought-still devoted to him in some strange, dysfunctional way. And so my godfather and godmother told us at one point-I think a few months before my Mom's death-that my Dad had been murdered seven years prior and that they found him in his East L.A. apartment decapitated. So it was definitely a crime of vengeance.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How did that happen?

ELSA FLORES: Well, he was gambling, it sounds like to me, sounds like some Mafia thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You never got all the details around it?

ELSA FLORES: No, just that they decapitated him. It's like, eeuw. [untranscribable sound signifying being grossed out-Ed.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And I painted it. I painted this head, like surging off of this person's body. I was doing heads at the time. I was doing these like mutant heads and it was like, "Oh, my God!" But the interesting thing is like shortly after that my Mom chose to die. I mean, she could have fought it longer, but it was almost like she was going to join him in death. So it was like the ultimate reunion.

It's like, "Wow, amazing."

JEFFREY RANGEL: That is a strange love story. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: [laughing] I know, it really is. So he got it in the end; it caught up to him somehow. One theory is that he won a lot of money, and someone killed him, but I'm sure he owed a lot of money, for that kind of murder, that kind of death. Pretty bad.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He got in deep for that.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, very deep. [laughter] So that was a trip. So he had been dead already for seven years, and my Mom kept thinking she was seeing him, so it was interesting how she . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow, she may have.

ELSA FLORES: . . . just sort of checked out after that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Maybe she was.

ELSA FLORES: Maybe she did.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You never know.

ELSA FLORES: I know, I know. Yesterday, the night before, I guess, April Fool's, I kept feeling like three times. . . . Three separate times I felt someone pull me. At one point I was standing here on the deck, late at night-it was already past midnight, April Fool's-someone pulled me. I'm like, "What? Is the cat hanging on me or what happened."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Whoa!

ELSA FLORES: It was like, "What is this?"

Session 2, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . with Elsa Flores on April 2.

ELSA FLORES: That's right. I was telling the story about . . . on April Fool's night when I felt. . . . The first incident was on this deck and someone pulled me and I looked back and thought, "Was that the cat hanging on my sweatshirt?" There was nothing there; it was just something tugged on me. And then the second time I was in the house somewhere and someone pushed me-like not hard but just like I felt this force that was not my own. And then the third time, I was lying in bed April Fool's night, and something pushed up against me. And I was like, "Whoa!" I started getting a little frightened because I'd never had this type of experience. And I know other people have had these types of things and so I was like tripping out. Like, "What's going on here?"

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's never happened to you before?

ELSA FLORES: Never. Never. John Valadez tells a story: When he and Robert Gil de Montes were in Germany for the Demon des Anges show, they were sharing a room and he felt a real strong presence there. Probably during Nazi times. Like real fascist kind of oppressive kind of energies. And John was held down at one point. He couldn't move, he couldn't talk, he just felt this pressure of being held down. So this thing happened to me and I started getting scared and then I said, "No, I'm

not gonna be afraid." And then I kind of laughed because I thought it was either Carlos being a trickster-'cause he was always a trickster; it's April Fools-or it's something else. I don't know, some phenomenon. So I let it go and I went to sleep. Why did I start that story? We were talking about my Dad's . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: . . . having his head chopped off. Oooh! Yeah, because it's April 2. Yeah, that's it. So any more childhood memories I could think of?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I know last time. . . . When I was listening to the interviews again, I was really struck by the way that you jumped from medium to medium . . .

ELSA FLORES: Oh, right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . and the way that you were kind of self-taught

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . in most of the things that you picked up and seemed to have success at whatever it was you picked up.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, yeah, I was real blessed that way.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm wondering if you have any more comments about that.

ELSA FLORES: Well, I don't know. I really felt like I was just born with this gift. Today I was thinking about it when I was in the car that I've been writing a lot, and a good friend of mine who's a writer-I've written her a couple of letters-and she said, "You know, you're a good writer." And I said, "Oh, yeah, I think maybe I am a good writer." And in the past I've thought I was a good writer. I've written songs and different. . . . And I thought, "I think I'm a quick study. And I think that comes just from being born with . . . intelligent or, you know, bright. Because I was always a real quick study-in anything. Like when I was around Dave and Louie of Los Lobos and they showed me some licks on a guitar, I'd pick it up like that. And Louie was astounded that I could pick up these guitar parts so quickly.

But as a young child, like I said, we didn't have any materials so I was pretty much. . . . My creative life really involved play, and that's why me and my brother were so close, because there was a lot of play and play-acting and all that stuff. And I have one picture of myself on the floor of the house where I had those hallucinations, which was on Monterey Road in El Sereno, and I was sitting with my little sister on this barren living room floor, no furniture, and I was coloring in a coloring book. And I remember I used to love coloring in coloring books, and I was very neat with my coloring which is interesting because now I'm so messy. And, actually, I went from a real. . . . I was educated to be. . . . Well, not educated. I think my teacher in high school, when I finally showed some talent in one of the first art classes I got to take-because in junior high I wasn't allowed to take art classes, so in high school I had to wait-I finally got some art teaching. And she was a really good teacher-Miss Gaitzch. She was German. She used to roll her r's: "Elsa Flor-r-r-es." [then rolls L-Ed.] Wait a minute. She wouldn't do that. Well, other names, like

R-r-r-obert, she'd always roll her r's. Jeff R-r-r-angel. And so Miss Gaitzch brought all this . . . this stuff was just there waiting and she just kind of tapped into it, and I developed quickly like in every media that I got to. And at one point I astounded myself because with a little bit of training and instruction I was doing these very realistic images, like tight, tight. And then she started guiding me,

"Well, you should be a medical illustrator," because, you know, I can do that kind of stuff. And I said, "Oh-h-h, is that what artists do? Okay, I can do that." But before that, like I said, very little art training except for watercolors on Fridays at Farmdale and coloring books. But mostly play, and I think it's important for children to play. I think you learn a lot of skills that way. But my head was probably always working in some creative way. I think I had the ability to see things because I always had . . . later I discovered I had a very good eye, especially in photography. And so I was thinking about how that's conveyed in childhood experience. And maybe it's not; maybe it comes up when you do get involved in a medium like photography or painting. But I have to believe there's got to be . . . it had to come out somehow in childhood. I don't know. I don't know how. I also had a real technical mind because. . . . Even today like I do electrical wiring. Figure out a VCR, figure out something without reading the manual. I mean, I can't read the manual and figure it out. I have to like hands-on stuff. And as a kid I was a good carom player and pool player, so technically I had precision.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You could see the table?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I could see the table and I could see what would work, and if I banked off of that wall, you know, what would happen. So I was really good that way and I was also a good athlete. So, I don't know, it's a gift!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just had the raw talent, huh?

ELSA FLORES: Just the raw talent, just this gift. The music thing happened, again, because my brother had this backyard band, and I wasn't allowed to play anymore with him, so I really felt jilted. There was always a guitar laying around-some old beat-up guitar-so I started picking it up and figuring out songs-and never chords until much later-but I was figuring out lead . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: To play songs by the notes.

ELSA FLORES: . . . by the note. And then later friends of his who would sit with me and wouldn't shun me like he would, they would teach me certain chords. And then picked it up quickly. I very much admired Janis Joplin, just for her power. Her voice was awesome in a way but it was also a little harsh. It wasn't a beautiful voice, but it was major power. And the power came from her ability to reach inside of herself and draw such raw emotion and put it out there. And so she was one of my . . . I was the biggest fan of hers, and I'd always try to copy her voice. My Mom would say, "Oh, quit trying to sound like her. Try to sound like yourself." And Jimi Hendrix was also a big influence. I loved Jimi, and I loved a lot of those bands in those times. So the music thing happened that way and so I would just. . . .

I was alone a lot-I wasn't allowed to go out-so I'd have to entertain myself so the guitar thing is what did it, and then later in high school the art thing. I'd stay up very late into the night drawing and stuff. My Mom would get mad at me like, "Get to bed. Turn off the light." But I would start writing songs at the point when I learned chords, and when I went up to the art camp I was surrounded with kids of all disciplines, from acting to music to painting and. . . . Let's see, did I tell you David Amico was my teacher?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm not sure.

ELSA FLORES: The painter? I think I might have said that. He was my teacher.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I knew that, although I don't know where I picked that up from.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, maybe I said it. But, you know, I noticed that he paid more attention to the male students. It was like this guy thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: See, this is something that keeps on coming up in the interview is _____ . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. I know, you told me that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . strong female role models and feeling somewhat marginalized, either at home by your brother . . .

ELSA FLORES: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . .or in art circles that you were beginning to enter into.

ELSA FLORES: Exactly, yeah. So David would always pay more attention to the guy artists. It was like a club. But in that experience I was able to play my music for kids from a cross-section of society and get their feedback. Because I would usually just play to myself or to friends on the porch stoop, and not really knowing if this was any. . . . I kind of did know. I did know that I had talent. I did know that some of it was good. And I knew that if I had chosen I could have gone in that direction, or I could have gone into film-making or I could have gone into. . . . So I was playing with these different disciplines.

The writing-later writing for La Opinión and stuff like that-but the writing was more head-oriented. I liked the physical, hands-on kind of discipline. And the music I love. . . . Actually, some of my greatest joys. . . . I think my highest high was performing music. And I was thinking about that again, because on Kauai when I was there last I'd sang a lot. Someone just told me, when you pray through song, they say it reaches God more. And I go, "Really?!" [laughter] Because I was just singing all these blues and gospel songs on these beautiful mountain tops, and it was like prayer. It really was like prayer. And I was thinking, "God, maybe I should be a blues singer." Again, I was reading the life of Janis Joplin. And I'm like, "Nah, I'm too old for a blues singer. I couldn't be headliner, anyway. Oh, maybe I could write songs." But I was thinking back, thinking for me the big highlight was being a performer. Because the shy side of me was able to be onstage and project some feeling, some. . . . You pull stuff out of yourself and you put it out there and it's immediately recognized and it's immediately given out. Whereas when you paint you're alone in your studio, and even though you pull the same stuff out of yourself, you put it on canvas, but no one's there to see it until maybe the piece is exhibited. And then maybe it's so disturbing that I would paint over it anyway. So it wouldn't be experienced except for myself. And Janis talked about that in her biography. She started as a painter. She thought she was pretty good until she saw this guy's work, and she said, "Huh, I'm not that good." But it led her to what she was meant to do, discovering her talent as a musician. But she was talking about the same process, and I had finished writing about that. She was talking about the process of the difference between being a painter and being a musician. A musician-again, like she says-your audience is immediate and it's a very social act, where as a painter you have to go inside yourself and you become intro and very private and it's very solitary. So she kind of enjoyed both aspects, but the social aspect won over. And I could see why, because you receive a lot of public adulation . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and the energy. You just feed off of it and the applause and all that stuff. And I could have gotten into that, I think. But, again, I chose . . . I didn't like that life-style. I liked being left alone, I liked. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That Gemini in you. [chuckles]

ELSA FLORES: The Gemini. I liked it but I also wanted to be alone in my studio. I didn't want to be hotel room to hotel room, day-to-day, different city. It's a hard life-style, and I choose pleasure and comfort. [laughs] Although it would have been exciting for when you've got all that youthful energy. That would have been really cool. So the music thing. . . .

The film-making was interesting. I could have really gotten into that. And I applied to be an apprentice for this one position at one of the big studios where like two thousand people applied. And had I gotten it I may have been in the film thing, but it wasn't my destiny.

So, let's see, the photography aspect happened when. . . . I discovered in my classes in high school with Miss Gaitzch that I was a good draftsman. Great pen and ink, great pencil. So my draftsmanship was excellent, but when I finally took her painting class, I was like, "I love this! This is great! You can spread material and play with color, and things didn't have to take hours and hours to do this perfect illustration. Because I kind of liked the fact that you can relax more with it, and your body was more involved because I liked being physical.

JEFFREY RANGEL: A little more expressive.

ELSA FLORES: So you can actually. . . . You know, action, move. Actually, I wished I'd lived during the action-painter period, because that would have been right up my alley. So I was really loving the painting thing, and Miss Gaitzch said, "Oh, we discovered a new talent. You know how to paint." So I really fell in love with painting at that point and I pursued it. I did a lot of surrealistic kind of weirdness-you know, like faces in trees and things like that. Very strange. Odd colors, really kind of morbid-ish, muddied kind of colors. And then I became political and I started doing real revolutionary-type Zapata images and Che Guevara and farmworkers struggling. Very propagandistic kind of thing but that was what was happening during that time. A lot of artists went into that. Then. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you think. . . . I'm sorry to interrupt.

ELSA FLORES: Go ahead.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you think that's an expression of your consciousness at the time, or is it somewhere that you're kind of shaping your consciousness in the process of painting art?

ELSA FLORES: I have a feeling it has to do with collective unconscious. That it's just in the air. You're like tapping into it, it's energy. But also I think it's a little bit of both. I think it's that you're developing your consciousness as an idealistic, political thinker, and you want to express it through whatever media you're comfortable in, and put out a message. For me it was about helping the cause. I wanted to be involved, and I had a talent so I wanted to use that talent to further the cause, because I really believed in it back then. And I would do comic strips in high school and pass them out about anti-drug themes and things like that, although I was selling joints for a dollar in the hallway. [laughter] So that's my Gemini side again.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughing] I love that.

ELSA FLORES: So I have like, yeah, both sides. Youthful folly. So then the mural movement started happening. I didn't get to do too many murals. There was one political artist I hooked up with. I

forget his name. He was a really good cartoonist so I helped him do one mural in my hometown, in El Sereno. I think it might still be there. But, I don't know, I didn't like being on the streets painting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [Why not]?

ELSA FLORES: Because people come up to you and bug you. You know, I wanted. . . . Or sometimes. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Interrupt your solitude?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, that thing. I'd rather be alone.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was there a performative quality to it, though, that you could enjoy? You know, I mean, similar to music?

ELSA FLORES: No. Because I was always a little paranoid. Because I'm from the barrio, so I was streetwise, right? So some guy starts walking up to you and you're in an alley painting, you don't know what the scene is. And you could get a feel for it, but it kind of put me in a vulnerable position, and I was pretty much careful about that probably because my Mom was so protective of us and was hiding us from the old man. So I was always a little paranoid about strangers in dark places, even though I think I could have handled it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Were you painting alone most often, or were you painting. . . .

ELSA FLORES: No, at that time, no, there was a group of people. So, actually, it was okay. But it was just. . . . Maybe for me it didn't turn me on because it wasn't my image, it wasn't my design. I was just kind of helping him do his mural. I don't know, it just didn't grab me. The mural thing just didn't.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The physicality of it didn't grab you?

ELSA FLORES: No, because your surface was brick sometimes. It was really hard to paint on it and all that stuff. The weather conditions and all that stuff. Nah, it just didn't do it for me. Maybe if it had been different, if I had worked with a great muralist that I had been inspired [by-Ed.], it might have turned me on. But it just didn't. And a lot of my work at the time, and still is, was more personal, and the political work I did was more, again, done alone, late at night, doing this political propaganda that I would take to the political headquarters and give it to them and they'd make posters. So it was like that type of thing, where I'd still get to do it on my own terms and still do something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. And they wouldn't be telling you what kind of images they wanted you to do for that?

ELSA FLORES: No, usually they liked it. Yeah, yeah, no art directors, thank God. And then, like I said, when I met Carlos it was when I was working with Los Tres and he and Los Four wanted to do a mural dedicated to Los Tres. It was on Brooklyn and Soto on one of the walls there. So he came in, and since I was the resident artist they hooked me up with him to talk about it. So I went over to his house in East . . . was it Whittier? No, it was still kind of East L.A., Montebello. Maybe it was Montebello. Borderlinish. And all I remember is going to his mom's kitchen and I remember his mom's kitchen was yellow. And we talked, and they went ahead and did a mural. I think Judithe Hernandez was working with them at that point. They did a mural that was all like graffiti and it said, "Para Los Tres," and big hearts and all spray-paint stuff.

But going back to the other disciplines of the music thing. . . . So, okay, then I jumped to photography. I went from my love of painting. . . . When did the photography happen? That's more

like eighties. I went to Art Center-out of Cal State L.A.-went to Art Center [College of Design-Ed.]. Felt very isolated but got incredible training. So my draftsmanship increased. Interesting I don't use it, because I could. I have access to really tight renderings, but I choose not to use it. So Art Center was a great education, but again socially I felt very out of place. Then I was a musician at that time. When I left Cal State, I was with the Mariachi-the Calistatlán-so I still did a lot of gigs. And was I working at Plaza at that point? I don't think so, because Art Center was a full-time gig. I think after I left Art Center I got the job at Plaza de la Raza.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I think that's the way you told me.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, and I also taught for a short time at El Sereno Junior High School. I went back there as a T.A. out of Cal State, and then they gave me my own classroom to teach guitar and we did some performances. I remember we sang "My Sweet Lord." [laughter] We're all strumming away. [sings:] "My sweet Lord." And we did "La Bamba."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, that's too funny.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it was funny. And the kids thought I was so cool that I walked in there once and someone had lit up a joint in my classroom. I was pissed off. And I like, "You guys, you know, I'm cool but you crossed the line here. You can't do this. You'll get me fired. What are you doing?" And so they straightened out after that. So there was a danger in being cool.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So I was still doing the music, still gigging, making some money.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Should have made them hand it over.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. [laughs] "Just leave it on my desk. I'll dispose of it."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And so the music was happening. Art Center was over. I didn't get to finish because my scholarship ran out. I was bummed-didn't realize that was going to happen-and entered the art world as an illustrator, because that was my major, and hated it, hated it, hated it. Because the art directors changed everything you did. So it was like, "I hate this." At that point, I started working at Plaza, continued the music. Had lots of fun of with Louie and Dave, putting on productions. Carlos was working there, giving me goo-goo eyes, and I was ignoring him. [laughs] Just had a ball for years there. And my friend Victor Durazo, who was a dancer-he was teaching Ballet Folklorico there-he and I decided to share the first studio I had on Spring Street. So he, I, and another guy. . . . Victor was very gay but beautiful-like gorgeous, gorgeous man. We all shared then. That's how the whole Carlos history happened.

But somehow I let. . . . When did I let go of music? Oh, one thing happened. When I had the big house in Highland Park, I had several roommates there. It was a great house. And at one point Los [Folkloristas]. . . . I was still doing a lot of cultural things, political music-nueva canción, that kind of stuff-so I was in the circuit. So at one point Los Folkloristas, who were this musical group from Mexico City. . . . They did every kind of music from nueva canción to the most primitive indigenous music from rural Mexico and South America. They were incredible musicians. One guy was an actual concert guitarist. Incredible, incredible. And they had done several concerts in L.A., and I was a big fan and they needed a place to stay so they stayed at my house in Highland Park and I was like in my glory. I think that might have been my calling, because I was so high. My roommate at that time

said, "I've never seen you like this. You're another person. You're totally alive." I even lost weight. I lost ten pounds in that week that they stayed there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow!

ELSA FLORES: Because I was so into just being there and playing with all the instruments and going to their concerts and photographing them and doing sound checks and all that stuff. It was great. That was a big influence, and I fantasized about being in a group like that. And then the Louie-Dave thing. We were doing little separate gigs, and then they kind of went off to do their Los Lobos come-back thing. So I kind of lost the music connection as far as getting together with groups, because my initial groups. . . . I was in many groups with my first boyfriend, and then when we broke up why I was out of the group, right? [laughs] Oh, that's where it comes up again. I don't know if I told you this. This boyfriend, Smiley, who I'd met at Cal State. . . . No, I'd met him. . . . He was very political, too. I think I met him when I was working for Los Tres. He was working for, I think, [CASA], doing immigration work. And, again, like I said, I was such a quick study that I could pick up almost any instrument and sound decent on it. I never really was an expert in any instrument, but picked up the harp-I still have it-and did Veracruz work, and that's like that's real technical stuff. And Tim Harding, who was the big ethnomusicologist at Cal State L.A., he invited me into some of his groups and he would tutor me in some of the licks on the harp. And it was great; I loved doing that. Well, anyway, as I became a stronger musician and started composing songs and real sort of complicated compositions where they changed key and tempo and all this stuff, like real complicated, and at first some of the members of the group were like, "Why do you do that? Why do you have so many changes?" I said, "Well, it makes it more interesting." You know, it's like instead of the same tune, the same key, it's more dynamic. It sort of takes you on a journey. And later one of those same guys who used to criticize me went to college to study music, and he said, "You know what? You had it all along. That's exactly what I'm learning right now. It was there." And so that kind of validated me. But at one point, since I was getting good and Smiley was always the leader of the bands, he felt real threatened.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

ELSA FLORES: And that's when it kind of fell apart because I think he couldn't handle the talent that I was showing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And then, of course, it didn't come off that way. It came off more like a personal thing, like he just wanted to see other people-which he was, anyway, seeing other people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Dog.

ELSA FLORES: I know, dog. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Get it all out. It's on tape.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, I've got lots to get out. So this dog, Smiley, basically dumped me, and I got booted out of all these great groups that I was enjoying. I was enjoying composing songs and having them played in front of a crowd. So I kind of burned out the music thing. And in the late seventies, early eighties, I really became involved with photography. And how did that happen? I always liked photography, but. . . . Oh, oh, I was at Cal State. Was I back at Cal State? No, it started at Cal State that. . . . Oh, when I hated the art department and I went into the photo department.

And it started to. . . . Oh, yeah, I was at Plaza at this point. Since I wasn't in musical groups any more, and once in a while I played with Louie and Dave with, you know, these artsy gigs, and Louie and I were doing a lot of creative work, just concept stuff, and we did a couple of gallery things but we would talk always on the phone. He would invite me to go follow their gigs so I'd still be involved in the music thing. And my whole thing is I just don't want to be there and like hang out, so I'm going to take my camera and make some art. So it was great. I'd be backstage at all these great gigs and get some really interesting photos. The punk scene was happening, so I got all these great images. And then my friend Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.], I started hanging out with him a lot, and he'd always have these great theme parties up in his house in El Sereno, on Carter Drive. You know, like prom night. Everyone was always in costume. It was a very mixed crowd, mostly gay, and the drag queens loved it, dressing up. So I had great, great photographs of that. When I got together with Carlos we started traveling more, and I got some great shots of our first trip to New York City. And it was all black and white, and I had the darkroom set up at the Highland Park house so I spent hours and hours in the darkroom. But I couldn't sell one photograph. I mean, black and white wasn't selling. I would show. I would show; I was very well respected.

Maya: _____ for a second?

ELSA FLORES: Okay. Unlock the front door.

I was well respected as a photographer. I was gaining some recognition, but couldn't make a living. And I was working at Plaza and I think we all started leaving Plaza because of a turnover in administration and we just felt like we were being exploited and stuff so everyone started quitting. I don't even know what I did after. I think I was on unemployment for like a year or something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So Plaza was full-time employment?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, yeah. Although part of our salary came from like a rehab fund, when we were supposed to be drug addicts, and that's how we got the money.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, really?

ELSA FLORES: That's part of what pissed us off.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How they pushed it.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, that we were being exploited that way, and that was the only way they could get money for arts, and how we had to say we were these junkies.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so we all left. We all quit at around the same time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who was running the show there at that time? Do you remember?

ELSA FLORES: At that time? Let's see, Larry Ramirez I think was the director. [Margo, Margot] Albert was very involved. She was still alive. Did you know Margot Albert?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I didn't know her, no.

ELSA FLORES: Eddie Albert, the Green Acres actor? She was his wife. But Margot was this huge woman. She was a very fine actress when she was young. She was in. . . . Oh, God, what's the name of that movie where it was like nirvana?

Session 2, Tape 2, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . side A, interview with Elsa Flores on April 2, 1997, at the artist's house in South Pasadena, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. Okay, what. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Do you have to announce it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I already did. I already did.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, so Margaret Albert was in the movie Shangri La, way back then. She was gorgeous, a beautiful Latina actress. And Plaza de la Raza was like her child, and she took it under her wing and she tried to make this really great cultural center. And it's gone through its ups and downs. It's had some good times and some bad times. When we were there we had just such an assembly of talent that was. . . . It was a really great period.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So who was there?

ELSA FLORES: Well, there was myself, Louie and Dave-Los Lobos-Carlos in the art department, Victor Durazo did dance, Miguel. . . . Miguel. . . . Oh, he did dance, too. He does a lot of choreography for some of these Latino things. I forgot his last name [Delgado-Ed.]. A couple of actors who became good actors, who do movies now. I forget their names. But it was an incredible assemblage of people. But we were overworked. There was just too many kids. They were like just lining them up like busloads. Like hundreds of kids would come in. We'd do this big old performance. Like multi-discipline things, and we'd be changing costumes and doing sound effects like with these little computer toys and then do our whole history of Mexico music presentation and paint murals on the floor and then they went out and a whole other group. It was like four hundred kids a day would come in.

JEFFREY RANGEL: God!

ELSA FLORES: But it was great because we got to work doing what we loved doing and being around great people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure. Did you ever talk to any of the kids?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, we talked. . . . Oh, you mean since then?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: No, I haven't. I hope that it was. . . . I think it was really good that they actually looked for a woman. Because they called me. They said that they wanted me to come in and work in the music thing, and one of the reasons was they wanted strong, positive female role models in something you don't usually see, which is music. So I think it was good, and I would always give a little rap about that to the kids during our presentation.

Oh, so Louie and Davie-back to the photography thing-I had access to a lot of backstage. Which I love backstage. I think it's a real exciting place. And one of my most exciting backstage photo sessions was at the Olympic auditorium. I don't know if I said this in the past one, but Los Lobos were kind of taking off. Did I tell you that I did their photo session to try and give them their new look? We talked about that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And so they were opening up for Johnny Rotten and Public Image.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Did I talk about this?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. That was really great.

JEFFREY RANGEL: And the Kipper Kids.

ELSA FLORES: The Kipper Kids were there doing their food-fight thing. And I got some really. . . . And The Plugz. Tito Larriva was in The Plugz. It was a great time, because all these Latino groups were kind of starting to happen.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: The Brat and The Plugz and Los Illegals. I think Los Illegals are still together. I don't know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. In fact, they're playing with The Plugz pretty soon.

ELSA FLORES: That's what I heard, yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: There's like some sort of reunion show.

ELSA FLORES: Really?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Something like that.

ELSA FLORES: I have film, too. I need to find it. And Louie's wife and I, we had this 16-millimeter camera.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Of that show?

ELSA FLORES: No, it was this other one at Self-Help Graphics. It was kind of a punk music concert scene thing, and it was Los Lobos, Los Illegals, The Plugz, The Brat, some other groups, and . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sort of the Eastside version of The Decline?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, yeah. Louie's wife and I had this camera, and we were just going around interviewing people, and it was really a trip. Mary Pérez. And I think I told you. . . . [chuckling] I didn't tell you about this film? I don't know what happened. I was at my Mom's house at one point, and people were eating steaks or something, so our hands were really greasy, and we got it on the damn video tape-or on the film-somehow. I think it was on video tape. I have to find it. That would be a great historical reference to have.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that would be great.

ELSA FLORES: So I don't know when I stopped photography. Oh yeah, so I couldn't sell a photograph. It was very frustrating. I wasn't making any money. I was living on very little, because the house in Highland Park had some rentable apartments downstairs that I kind of managed them,

so my rent was only like \$250 upstairs. Then Carlos came in and he would bring in a little money but we were always broke. And then I still liked photography. In fact, I'm getting the urge to go back into the darkroom because I have so many unpublished negatives that I want to play with. And I've been doing more shooting, too. But I think, again, Carlos inspired me to go back to painting, because his painting was becoming so wonderful that [it] makes you want to paint. So that's when I went back into my studio-to my first love. So I kind of went through the whole thing. And part of the whole photography period for me was when I started doing stuff for La Opinion, like. . . . Oh, I did a few interviews-one of my old mariachi teacher, Don Chuy, and one which I never finished on Arturo Valdez, from the Valdez guitars. And during that interview and my sessions with him I contracted him to. . . . No, no, I wanted to buy one of his guitars. He makes really fine guitars. And I did, but it was on payments. It was like a \$500 guitar, so I made all these little payments and I finally got the guitar, and when Carlos and I did get together there was a mouse in the house one day and he jumped up [laughs] and fell on my guitar . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, God!

ELSA FLORES: . . . and broke the front of it. I had it repaired but it wasn't the same. And then some kids stole it from the log cabin when they broke into my house there. So there went my Valdez. And Los Lobos borrowed it for one of their albums when they did one of their albums.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The reconstructed version?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. No, I think it was before it was broken.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, God.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, photography's always still. . . . I'm getting the urge again to do music and photography.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, it seems like there would be a way to combine the different media.

ELSA FLORES: Oh yeah, especially with technology today. I hesitate, because I'm really fighting technology. Because I like getting my hands dirty. I hate . . . I don't want to see myself as an artist sitting in front of a computer generating art, because anyone could do that. Anyone could be an artist on a computer. It's great. I mean, there are so many things you can do. But the actual primitive act of putting pigment on some surface, that's what's more appealing to me, because it's like it's an organic form of expression, which I think will never die, even though technology is the latest craze. Well, it's the sign of the future.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That may just make it more valuable.

ELSA FLORES: I think so. And, yeah, I think people will always paint.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: So paint I like. Maybe it's from being a kid and playing with mud cakes or something, you know. It's just getting your hands dirty and getting in there and spreading things around and letting the accidents happen. But more and more we've been talking about. . . . Like yesterday I was talking with Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.] about. . . . We apply for different public art proposals as a team, because we work well together. And the last one we're thinking about is going to involve computer, because it's a commission to produce thirty-five hundred square feet of painted tile for one of those Metro stations in North Hollywood. And Robert and I were like. . . . He was sitting at his

computer playing with his computer-art program, which I hate sitting in front of an art . . . , and I couldn't even get his attention because he was so zoned into the computer. I was like, "Focus, I can pull this face out of the computer!" He goes, "Look, Elsie, we can do this. We don't have to hand paint it. We can have computer-generated images, and it would be really easy." I said, "Yeah, but you know if we painted it we would do it a lot faster and we'd make more money." Because, you know, you'd have to give it to some computer house to generate an image and put it on the tile and bake it in a . . ." And he goes, "Well, let's make more money instead." [laughter] But, it's true. I mean, you can do the same thing in most cases.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, I would think that the computer work would be easier . . .

ELSA FLORES: And cheaper?

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . and less time consuming.

ELSA FLORES: I don't know. That's something I think we'd need to price out. It might be cheaper to produce. But . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: But you just paint faster.

ELSA FLORES: We could paint faster, yeah. I would think, because I know when I get on-maybe because I'm not proficient-but when I get on the computer, oh, God, even just to pull a letter out, it takes me ten times longer than if I was sitting there writing a letter. Just because of the process. But if you're a computer whiz it's probably way faster to do computerized stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So technology, I don't know, I'm kind of a dinosaur in that I'm fighting technology. But in photography computer stuff is great, because you can have a lot of fun with the photo programs on a computer. Although I still love the classic black-and-white photograph. And also the act of photography for me was a way to be involved in all these weird scenes, like all these strange back-room things, scenes and stuff, and yet not be a participant, but participate like a voyeur behind this machine.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Sure.

ELSA FLORES: So that was fun. And, again, the darkroom thing for me was part of getting my hands dirty, getting in there, manipulating light and stuff like that. So I love the print process part of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That makes sense.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so that was fun. And actually I did a whole series of these little Polaroids where you were able to manipulate it with a blunt object. It would squish the chemicals, and so the colors would kind of like get weird and blurry and stuff so they would become little paintings. It was really pretty. Everyone started doing that at that point, so I thought of getting the originals and blowing them up, photographically, and so they'd look like a painting. So that's one idea to play with it. My other idea was blow-up black-and-white photographs real big, and, actually, we did this a couple of times. Robert did one big piece that we had on our living room wall of this body wrapped in this sheet with ropes all around it. It was his political statement. And then he painted on it, he kind of tinted. But I started painting on the photographs, and that's when I moved on to actual painting. And the more I . . . Just in the last month or two, I was so full of self-doubt and insecurity about

what my life is going to be, where I'm going, what my future is going to be, that I started thinking about it. I'd be in a bookstore and I'd say, "Well, maybe I should write a book." Or "Maybe I should get a job," or "Maybe I should do this or do that." And I was thinking of all these things that maybe I should be doing rather than being a painter. And I came to the conclusion that I think I'm best at being a painter. I think I'm a. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Out of all the different things that you. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Out of all the things, I think I'm a very skilled painter and it brings me a lot of satisfaction-especially when I know the painting's good. And from what from what I see out there, there's not a lot of good painting. So it's just a real hard life, because you're not acknowledged as a woman in this field. Maybe you have to be dead sometimes before you're acknowledged as a good painter. I mean, how many women in history do you know as famous artists? Very few. And most of them were dead before they became known as that. But in American art, living female artists, not too many that are household names.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So we were speaking about mentors or role models earlier. Are there particular women that you hold as mentors, living or dead?

ELSA FLORES: Well, lately I've been on a Bette Midler kick. [chuckles] And she's not a painter, but she's an artist, and I'll tell you why. A girlfriend of mine was also on the kick. It happened because. . . . It's just like energy. I think her energy is peaking right now, and it's almost like collective unconscious energy where I tapped into it because her. . . . I've always loved her as a performing artist, because she's. . . . And it was interesting, like I said, her energy's just circulating because there's this craze that happened just recently in the last couple of months, and there was a TV biography on her a couple of nights ago that I caught, and her husband, who's Harry Kipper from the Kipper Kids, said a real beautiful thing. He said, "As a performing artist she has the ability to move people. And in that sense I think she's a force of nature." Because, for me, as. . . . I knew her way back from-not way back from her [Conno Linno Bath] days, but when she started doing her shows, her revues-and I fell in love with the power that she had, because it was really raw emotion that did move me in a way. She made me laugh, she made me cry. And then, just recently, the reason why I kind of took her on as a mentor. . . . Carlos is still my main mentor, but, as a female, the reason I took her on as a mentor was because she's in her fifties, she just did this new HBO show thing. . . . And I never real got into her acting stuff, except for *The Rose and Beaches*. The others I wasn't turned on by. But her performance is what really would get me. And so she just did this TV program for HBO called "Diva Las Vegas," and I watched it one night and I was blown away because she was at her all-time best. I mean, from all these years that I've always loved her as a performing artist, she was like the best she'd ever been. She's looking the best she's ever looked. Her voice is more powerful than ever. She's broadened her range. Even in the hard-core rock 'n roll songs like "Stay with me, Baby," that she did in *The Rose* and she did later in *Divine Madness* that was filmed here at Pasadena Civic. I went to that concert and I snuck into the next two nights. She was sick as a dog, she had a terrible flu, she sounded awful, they wouldn't reschedule the filming, so it wasn't a great performance but. . . . But on this *Diva Las Vegas* concert she belted out the song like more powerful. . . . And it's a powerful song. It's like she's going to die if this guy doesn't stay with her. And it was like, "Wow!" It was like blown away. And then her comedy and everything, you know, just laughter and tears. So for me she's an important role model because she came from a working-class family-born and raised in Honolulu-and had a struggle, found her creative outlet and sort of made it her own-she created her own genre-and fought all the odds, had lots of ups and downs, and now has a very successful, very secure career after going through all that stuff. I think she had a breakdown and terrible relationships and all that stuff. Finally found a loving husband, has a family and like is complete, she's happy. And she's looking good, sounding good, very successful, tons of money, and I feel

happy for her that she actually has accomplished all that in her lifetime. And in the interview, during the lifetime biography of her, they would interview her and a lot of the things she was saying would ring true to me because I was thinking about a lot of the same things.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Such as?

ELSA FLORES: Well, such as, one of the things she was saying was that in her life she knew there was . . . it was to become a performer. She knew that was the only way out of her life. It was the only way out of getting out of the conservative working-class kind of life that she had in Honolulu. She always felt different because she was the only white girl in this whole Polynesian environment. But also she wasn't allowed to have much fun as a kid, which I don't relate to because I had lots of fun as a kid. And in being a performer she can have fun. She can create any character she wanted to and have a lot of fun, and she said she had an incredible amount of fun in her life from her career. And another thing she said was that she always. . . Oh, back to that last thing she said. She said that she was very smart, she was a good student, and she knew that she can be a librarian or she could have gone to college to be something, a nurse or something, but at one point. . . Oh, she had a few experiences on stage where she won some applause and that just won her over. She knew, "This is it for me," right? So I kind of related to that because I had done several school plays, and it's kind of cool to get applause, and being out there, and being in costume so you're not really yourself. You're like in disguise, so you can still like. . . A lot of actors are very shy. And when I went up to ISOMATA [Idylwild School of Music and the Arts-Ed.], I did that play Godspell, and that was another great. Because it was a higher level. It was like full-on orchestra, and there was these really talented lead actors and actresses. And here I was, part of the chorus, which was incredible. I got to sing and dance and play. Play act.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And then another thing she said is that she knew all along that that's what she had to be. There's no other thing she could be; she had to be a performing artist. And she knew she could make it. But she had to continue this incredible belief in herself that was undying, and even though she got knocked down time and time again she'd pick herself up and continue her efforts. Whereas, you know, other people might say, "I'm giving this up. It's just too hard." But she had this incredible belief in herself and I've kind of have always felt that, too, that I've got like a certain destiny and I know I can do it even though all the odds are against me, and lots of people are very pessimistic, and some of my girlfriends are saying, "Well, maybe you should give it up. It's so hard. Do something else. Don't be an artist." And I'm like, "No! That's what I am, that's what I've always wanted to be, and I know that's what I'm destined to always be." So, it's just that hearing that from someone who is successful and someone older than me makes me feel confident, because I feel, "Hey, I'm just in my forties. I'm going to have a tremendous decade, and the fifties are going to be just as good if not better because I see someone that's doing it, and it's really cool."

JEFFREY RANGEL: It is cool.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so that was good. Plus she was very connected with her mom which I was, too. And her mom was very supportive. Her dad wasn't, which I didn't have to deal with because my Dad wasn't around. But a lot of stuff like that, like a lot of similarities.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you find that your peers also become role models? Or that you sort of have to fill that role for one another at times?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I think we do. I think we do. I'm closest really to Roberto Gil de Montes and

another painter, Daniel Brice. Carlos mentored all three of us. And I feel that I've really helped him mentor Daniel, because he was ten years younger than I was. And just encouraging each other to keep on going. It's not always equal. In many cases. . . . I give praise openly and often, and I think it's important to support each other and continue to do that, and it's not always reciprocated from the guys. It's like a competitive thing, I think. Like every once in a while they can break down and hand a compliment over, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And also, in some cases, it's the competitive thing. They're just like threatened by talent, and that you're going to take something away from them, or it's just the macho thing. Or it's maybe guys don't. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Are less expressive?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, maybe they're less supportive in that way, less expressive in their support. But, all in all, I know it's there. Like Robert will always come through for me. And Dan was one of the only guys who stood by me during-Dan and Robert-during Carlos's death. Everyone else disappeared. Magu [Gilbert "Magu" Luján-Ed.], John Valadez, all those guys. They just disappeared. It's like they couldn't deal with it, or now that the magic was gone, now that Carlos was gone, why hang out, you know? That's what they were after.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm kind of curious about that magic because a lot of people have talked about it in certain ways, and I think it. . . .

ELSA FLORES: About Carlos's magic?

JEFFREY RANGEL: About . . . yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Or just magic in general?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think about that. About . . . particularly related to Carlos and particularly about the way he's spoken about in terms of mentoring people-sort of drawing out the best that people have to offer or something like that. I wonder if you might comment a little bit about that.

ELSA FLORES: About his magic?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I don't know if that's . . .

ELSA FLORES: No, I really think he possessed. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . too big a topic to get into.

ELSA FLORES: Well, I think he really. . . . It is a big topic but we can talk a lot about it. I think that he definitely was a magician. He definitely possessed magic. I mean, his energy was so tremendous that it moved things, and it moved people, it moved movements of people, it moved political thought, it moved artistic expression. He gathered a lot of people around him because of this energy that actually that he possessed and it exemplified itself mostly in his eyes. It came through his eyes and his hands, in his expression. But his aura-his field-was like beaming. It would just suck you in-unless you were like really competitive and you were jealous of it. And a lot of his peers competed with him and it was very frustrating for them because they could never touch that which he possessed. They didn't have that magic. But yet they were competing with him, and there was

no way they were ever going to ever get there. And it was frustrating for them. But his magic was like. . . . I didn't know it at first. I didn't respect his work, because it was very propagandistic and cartoony and it was like "uh." And I didn't know his history and I didn't know all about his life, and then suddenly I was exposed to his studio work, and I was like, "Whoa! This guy's got genius. He possesses genius." And when we got together and I allowed him into my life, I realized that he was a genius, both intellectually and creatively. And that just turned me on because, like I said, I'm a quick study and I was never well-read, I was never an intellectual, but I just soaked it all in from Carlos. I had all this knowledge, and I learned about world religions, I learned about art movements, I learned about all this stuff that he'd read incessantly about, and it was like a lifetime of education just in the short period that I had with him. So to me it was like this incredible gift that he was passing on to me.

But the magic came . . . He often talked of himself as the shaman, like the artist in society as a shaman. And in primitive cultures they indeed were shamens [sic] and were respected as that. It's much less in modern society. But the power that an artist possesses-much like what Better Midler has-is to move people in a way that they can't express themselves, but you need to tap into those emotions. And if there's a work of art that is so moving in some ways, so passionate that it transcends the viewer to another place or to another level of one's own emotion or intellect, it's magic. It's magic. And just his power of. . . . When we'd enter a room, his energy field would shift people. I could see it. We'd walk into a room and people would shift. Because he was so animated, he was so charismatic, he was so alive, full of all this wisdom and energy-and a lot of love. I mean, I think he exuded love, although I don't know if that's how people would describe him, but I saw a lot of joy and kindness, and he had an incredible sense of humor. So he would touch people in those ways, too. But I think it was just that he was driven. He had this incredible thing that. . . . I don't think I've ever experienced that type of giving or creating that kind of magic. I hope one day I would have that power to command that kind of stuff, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How does one sustain themselves by continually, giving off so much and mentoring people, moving things. Where's that energy generated from?

ELSA FLORES: I think in Carlos's case, it was generated from his near-death experiences, that he fully appreciated being alive. Because he had definitely gone through some very dark times and some destructive, self-sabotaging, demon-filled periods of his life. And I think hitting those dark places and coming out alive made him stronger, made him realize what was precious in life. And I think especially coming back to L.A. and finding the kind of art that became him, and not trying to be a New York minimalist. You know, it was killing his spirit. I think that was feeding him, the fact that he had all these images already-he was born with this imagery-and the fact that he was able to finally express it and people connected with it and it kind of just like fed him and he was able to produce and produce. And luckily he was able to make money and finding a love in his life that he really connected with and having the family and all that stuff. That was all like just feeding him so much, because, you know, for how many years before that-thirty years prior to his . . . no, even more-was all. . . . Except for his childhood. He had a very happy childhood, because he was creative so he played a lot. He played a lot, also. But from his adult life it was all pretty tragic, pretty sad and soul-searching. Like I said he, what, he has eighty-three volumes of journals, and most of them are soul-searching discussions about all the dark stuff he was going through. He was very depressed for many, many years. I write when I'm depressed, and I have only a few volumes because he was way more depressed than I ever was, for many more years. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, God, that's funny.

ELSA FLORES: I know. And his sexual energy was so tremendous. I think because he fully realized

his sexuality in his explorations-and because he had that passion, he had great passion for life. And I think the pivotal point was when he had this near-death experience at General Hospital from pancreatitis and he bounced back and then he became very political and then finally developed his own studio-Almaraz Work, which was truly his life's work, his body of work. That was what epitomized him as an artist, was the works of his last ten years of life. No, twenty years, actually. More like fifteen. Because the first five after the hospital was all political stuff. But that was helping him gain perspective and balance, I think, on cul[ture]. . . .

Session 2, Tape 2, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Side B of the interview with Elsa Flores on. . . . I can't remember today's date!

ELSA FLORES: April second.

JEFFREY RANGEL: April 2, 1997. Okay.

ELSA FLORES: So I was talking about the first five years after his near-death experience where his political awareness stepped in. He was positioning himself also in a social sense, where he was gathering around him people from his own tribe. So he felt supported by people, he felt like he belonged to a group, and in that atmosphere, having possessed this magic that we're talking about, boom, he became a leader in no time. Because people wanted to tap into his energy. And he organized so many different art collectives and political things, and people were always gathering around him. He was very social-very, very social. But it was taking him away from his work. He wasn't able to do his work. There was too many demands socially on him, and political demands and, you know, "The next publication is due this Friday. We've gotta work on it." And so he was kind of doing that thing, which was part of the process that he had to go through to finally come out the other end and discover-I think-what he was meant to be doing here, which was creating these fantastic images that no one else. . . .

You know, no one had the vision that he had in his work. And it's obvious because so many people tried to copy him, stylistically, and tried to capture that, but there was that energy that was in that work. I mean, when he worked it was like he was projected into another realm. And I get to that point, too, when I'm working, where you're just, you're sort of. . . . It's almost like out-of-body experience when you're just like somewhere else, and it's like "timeless awareness"-Deepak Chopra talks about that-when you have no concept of time. You could be there for hours and it seems like a matter of minutes. And that's really when you're in the groove, when you get to that point. And that's one of the most satisfying times because it's really. . . . It's Dharma, you know, what you're meant . . . what you're here on this earth to be doing. Having that connectedness is such a blessing. I get there . . . once in a while I'll catch glimpses of that.

That's why I know I'm on the right track, that this is what I'm supposed to be doing. But every once in a while, it's so strong that feeling of Dharma that it's like. . . . It's great. It's bliss because you're really . . . your life has meaning. I mean, you know that it's not arbitrary-that this is why I'm here: to do this. He would put himself in that space I think almost all the time he was working, almost every time he worked. He was driven. He wouldn't stop working, and he was always working on ten things at one time-and fast. He worked very fast, and from floor to ceiling he'd fill the studio full of stuff. And it was very inspiring. So when other artists were around that, he would share his excitement for creating art, and it would encourage artists to want to do the same thing. And it would. It would encourage anyone around him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. That's probably the deepest sort of mentoring you can have . . .

ELSA FLORES: I think. Yeah, just by example and. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . having him show you that kind of energy and spirit about creating.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Exactly, exactly. And that's what turns me on about Bette Midler. Not because her voice is so great, but because the passion that she has in her creative work that, like, God, just so powerful that it makes you feel like that's what you want to do. And luckily if you have any talent and someone like that inspires you, you sort of go on a roll. You start going with it, and you become more powerful as an artist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

ELSA FLORES: But sometimes you fall, like all humans do, and, you know, don't paint for a long time. [both chuckle] Like me. And then it's hard to get started again. But I have periods. . . . See, Carlos would constantly paint. Even when we went on vacation, he wouldn't stop. But I like work, and then I need to take a break. And then I need to get myself up and inspired and going, work. And it's torture, getting back into it, for like a couple of months because nothing looks good. And then it starts flowing and you feel great. And then you're exhausted from so much work, and then I take a break again.

He was inexhaustible. It's kind of a type-A personality, real hyper, had to keep active. And mentally, too. I mean, just wouldn't stop reading, devoured any information that he could find—periodicals, art magazines, books on world religions, and philosophers, and psychologists. Anything, anything. He was just incredibly voracious about educating himself and finding the mysteries to life. And it was funny. We were having dinner, this great dinner that we were invited to, and we were sitting with Octavio Paz and David Hockney. And I was like a kid. You know, I was in my twenties. I was like, "Whoa!" [laughter] "What am I gonna say?" And so I was just like observing it and very nervous. In fact, when I first met David Hockney, he walked into the room, and I was so awestruck that when I was introduced to him I spilled wine on his hand. I was so clumsy. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Classic.

ELSA FLORES: I know. That was another example of people wanting to touch his energy. The same happens with movie stars, like people just want to. . . . Like a touching stone. They want to touch this thing that these people are believed to have. And some of them do have it, and some of them a lot of it's just gloss, Hollywood gloss.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: But there's many people who do possess that. So, anyway, so we're at this dinner, and it's big intellectual discussions going on and I was very quiet, just sort of taking it all in, and Carlos was holding his own in these discussions. I knew he could, but I was very impressed: Octavio Paz and David Hockney!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who set that up?

ELSA FLORES: Margarita Nieto, I think. I think she was friends with David. So, at one point, Carlos was making some kind of statement, and David said, "Well, you can't believe everything you read." You know, it was like . . . wow! That kind of hit home to me, because I'm like, "You know what? He's right. You can read all you want, but it's not all true. It's just a point of view." And Carlos came back with some good rebuttal. Like I said, he held his own. But the other thing that stood out for me was a statement David said about, "It's all transitory," in his heavy English accent. And that was before my spiritual awareness, so I get it now. It is all transitory.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So that was a real trip. And I'm still like a mess, just because David Hockney was sitting in front of me the other night when I had to speak. It was like, "Get out'a here," you know. And I think that's how people became around Carlos a lot. They became silly and awkward and clumsy. Even Louie Pérez was very nervous around Carlos, and he spent a lot of time around me, and Carlos wanted to hang out with him because Louie was very creative, but Louie would get all like weird. He'd get all nervous. Because he admired him so much, I think. So it was interesting watching people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you ever go through that stage?

ELSA FLORES: Of what? Awestruck with Carlos?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, or awkwardness.

ELSA FLORES: No, because like I said I grew into admiring him. I never initially admired him. [chuckles] I was kind of like, "Oh, there's that guy again, oh no." [laughter] Because I just knew him as a muralist, and, again, it was very cartoony, I didn't think it was very good art, and I knew he was interested in me and I just thought he was too old, and I wasn't interested. Until we kind of crossed paths at the same time. Did I tell you about our first date?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't think so.

ELSA FLORES: Well, we had been friends for seven years, since that first Los Tres meeting in his mom's kitchen, and, like I said, I knew he had always been interested. And at one point at Plaza de la Raza, I was talking about guy trouble or something. He goes, "Well, I'm available." You know, I said, "O-h-h-h." I avoided him, I changed the subject. So he started this. . . . He was then, at that point, at the public art center in Highland Park with Richard [Duardo] and Valadez and everyone was over there. And he decided he wanted to break away because there was too many weird people coming in and leaving food and the roaches would come. And he just kind of was ready to move on to his own studio. So he and Valadez rented a space on Spring Street-814 Spring Street. He was on the second floor. It was half. . . . Most of the studios went from Spring Street all the way over to . . . what's on the other side? Main Street?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Behind it?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Broadway?

ELSA FLORES: No, on the other side.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'm not sure, it may be Main.

ELSA FLORES: I think it was Spring to Main.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, _____ L.A.

ELSA FLORES: Because the California Theatre was on one side of the studios, and then there's Spring Street. At that point, when he and John moved in, there was a dividing wall, so they were only. . . . They were on the California Theatre side, which was Main Street, and later they knocked

down the wall and they got the whole space. So they were sharing this tiny little space and he was talking-I guess we were still at Plaza-he was telling us we should move down there, "There's space in this building!" And I never knew what it was to have a studio. I'd always worked at home. I didn't even know artists had studios. Like I said, I hadn't read anything about artists' lives. So Victor and I went down, because Victor needed a place to live, and he had lived in many creative spaces in his lifetime. So we looked at the space above his on the third floor and it was full space from Spring to Main and great big beautiful windows. A poured concrete building, concrete floors. It was great for roller skating. [laughter] And so we took it, and Victor was going to live there and we were going to share the studio space, which was a lot of fun. At that point I noticed Carlos's. . . . You know, I'd spend more time with him. I'd go down and look at his work, and he'd come up and look at mine. And then I'd talk to John, and we'd share ideas and work, too. And then I think Guillermo Bejerano was sharing the space down there with them before John Valadez came in-or maybe not-but he was in there at some point. Maybe he was there before Carlos took the studio. I think that's how he became aware of the space. So then I'd started noticing that Carlos was getting more interested in me. I was real shy and I was, I don't know, I still thought he was too old, right? And I was in love with Victor, even though he was unattainable. But I was like totally infatuated with his beauty. He had the best set of buns, his ballerina buns. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [I didn't think you would have said that]. [laughing]

ELSA FLORES: Why? Oh, you know, I like buns. What can I say? I'm a figurative artist. Show me a cute set of buns, and it's all over, it's all over.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You're had, huh? That's funny.

ELSA FLORES: So, at one point. . . . Oh, yeah, I still was working at Plaza during this time and my car was always breaking down. I always had these old cars. And my mom had given me a ride to the studio after Plaza de la Raza, and Carlos was standing up at his studio window, which at this point they'd already broken down the walls so he was on the Spring Street side. My Mom pulled up against the road, and he was standing in his window, probably smoking a joint, looking down. He loved looking on the street scenes. Very voyeuristic. He was always checking things out. And so I pointed him out to my Mom. I said, "Mom, see that guy up there in the window? He likes me. But he's so old." And then she goes, "Oh, son los mejores." And I said, "O-h-h-h, okay." So she gave me the high sign, right? So I said, "Huh-h-h, okay, well this must mean something." So then I accepted a date. We were going to go see a movie. Before that I had gone to his house for Thanksgiving-when he was at Frank Romero's house. And I was being real guarded, like I kept the guitar next to me at all times, like, "Don't touch me. I've got my guitar here." Oh, I think it started with. . . . We were supposed to go to John Valadez's house for Thanksgiving, but when we got there, there was no turkey because John and Irene, his then mate, had this. . . . They fought all the time, and she had just thrown a knife at him or something, so it was really a weird scene. So we left. We wound up at his house cooking. But that was it. No good-night kiss. . . . well, a little peck. But that was it, not a big thing. And so then I decided to accept the date with him and we were going to go see a movie, and we went to see, of all things-I think I told you this?-Black Stallion.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, you didn't.

ELSA FLORES: I didn't tell you this story? I just told this story to someone. So we went to see Black Stallion, right? A kind of corny movie, okay? But we went to Hollywood, stood in line. We're talking, very comfortable, we've known each other for years. And so in the movie the initial scenes of Black Stallion were very beautiful, cinematically. They would fade in from water on the beach to these other scenes, and it was visually beautiful. And I noticed that we both reacted at the same time in

the same way to these visuals. And we would squeeze each other's hand and like, "Wow, look at that! Wow, look at that!" So we were in tune with each other. And then that night we went to his Echo Park apartment. He had this tiny little apartment-I'd never been in it before-overlooking the lake. And we kind of just hung out together, just kind of watching TV, and then it kind of evolved into something else. And it felt so natural, the way it happened. It was like . . . real natural, real perfect. It was just like a very pure expression of sharing love. It just happened that way. So it was a real nice first romantic encounter, and going on all night. [laughs] And then so after that, I got scared because it was too intense, and I tend to back off from intense emotions initially. And he had been seeing a shrink at this point, and the shrink was encouraging him to ask me out, because he had, I guess, been telling him about me. Oh, one thing before that. Actually, the first. . . . No, no, no. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I didn't know this would be so juicy!

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, yeah. The first date was really strange because he had all these male models. And this one guy, Bruce [_____-Ed.], who was his male model-a real handsome white guy, real muscular. . . . I had the car. I think Carlos's car had been crashed. And then Bruce came along. So it was weird. I didn't know if I was his date or if Bruce was his date. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Uh huh.

ELSA FLORES: So we finally got rid of Bruce, and I think we went to the movies. But so after that intense romantic encounter I ran away. Like for two weeks, I was hiding from him, right? I'd sneak by his studio on my way up to my studio, and then I'd run in and lock myself up. And then he'd come up and he'd scream through my little hole in my door, "Elsa. Are you there, Elsa?" And I wouldn't answer the door.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, no!

ELSA FLORES: So for two weeks. And he told me later that that was a good sign, for some reason. That it did mean something, because I was so threatened by it. So after that we started a series of date-nights, because the shrink wanted him to take it slow. So we would see each other on Wednesdays and Saturdays, I think. And that went on for a long time. We'd have our date-night, which was cool, because we still had our own lives and stuff. And Robert was getting a little jealous, not because we were involved or anything, but we were buds. So it was like, I think, Carlos, at one point, I dropped him off, and I guess we were making eyes at each other, and Robert was like, "Oh, stop with the goo-goo eyes." He was like really not supportive at first, but he got into it because he was a big fan of Carlos' since art school. So on the day that John Lennon died-that was the sign for Carlos-he decided to move in with me at that point. His shrink wanted him to wait a year, but he just couldn't wait so it symbolized something to him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So you had invited him earlier?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, he could have moved in. Yeah, we were so into it that it was unspoken maybe, even. [phone rings? door knock?] I think that's mine. I think I'll go get that. What time is it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's ten to five.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. So John Lennon died, and it was very traumatic-for the nation and the world. And I think it represented-because John was, I think, thirty-three when he died, like Jesus Christ, and other important people in history-and so Carlos decided, "Life is too short, let's do it." And so he moved in. So he left the Echo Park apartment. And at this point it was good because one of my

roommates had just moved out, and I had the whole house to myself. So it was great and it was a great house. He really brought the house to life, because he brought his energy to the house and the whole thing came alive. There were like paintings all over the place, and, you know, I had paintings, but this was like a visual treat. And he always had projects going. We had lots of good parties there, lots of people came over. We'd paint on the balcony and stuff.

And it was financially a very lean period for us, especially once I became pregnant and had the baby, because I stayed home with Maya for a year and a half before I went back to painting or back to studio. So I wasn't making any money, and he was barely making any money. He'd sell paintings whenever he could, from thirty bucks to a couple of hundred if he could get it.

Oh, that was another story. When I first went down to the studio and realized his genius, there was one painting in particular that really I connected with. It was a small painting like this oil painting, maybe-what's that?-like fifteen inches by twenty inches, something like that-twenty-four by fifteen-of this couple making love on the beach, and the guy on the bottom was this dark tropical-looking man and the woman on top of him on this blanket was a lighter skinned, kind of heavy-set woman on this tropical beach. And I wanted the painting, and he really needed some money that day and so I gave him twenty bucks. He offered it to me for seventy-five dollars. So I gave him twenty bucks and he was happy to get them because he said that most women wanted him to gift them some paintings. And later it became like a destiny piece, because it became us. It was like him and I on a tropical beach making love. Which became our life, right? So it was like a really pivotal piece. But there was a part of the painting that looked unfinished. This is psychologically kind of interesting. And I said, "Well, the blanket . . . are you done with it?" Kind of like, "I don't know, it doesn't look finished. Or the color's not right or something." He goes, "Well, leave it with me and I'll finish it. I'll change the color." And sure enough he changed the color, and I went down and it still wasn't right, and I still don't think it's right. But I took it. I didn't want to make him feel bad about it. So that was interesting that. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And the significance of that?

ELSA FLORES: I don't know. I don't know. It was weird. So we were cohabitating [sic]. He got along really well with my parents. His parents liked me a lot. My parents and his parents like each other a lot. They were both Spanish speaking, and they just hung out together. They started doing Vegas trips together, all these senior citizen's things. We'd take them to Hawaii together and stuff. But that was after we were married. But before we were married, we had a great time in that house. It was like the best of times, even though we were very, very poor, but we'd always . . . he was very. . . . Part of the magic was exemplified in his ability to create reality-which I've been playing with and it works. You can do it; you can create your reality. It's all about focus and energy. And he was studying a lot at the time. One of his favorite books was *The Richest Man of Babylon*, it was called. It was the true story of this man, the richest man who lived in Babylon. And there were ten steps to wealth. And the first one is, if you're doing what is right, money will come. And then other steps which everyone talks about now. There's so many books written on the same idea. So this Carlos would often, when he was down to zero and our rent was due or we needed some money for some reason, he'd ask for it. He'd put it out there and ask for it, you know, say that, "I need five hundred bucks." I don't know if he'd pray for it or if he'd say it out loud or whatever. And, sure enough, it would show itself. It'd be produced somehow. And it works. You should try it sometime.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: It does work.

JEFFREY RANGEL: The other thing is, be careful what you wish for.

ELSA FLORES: Exactly. Because when I was in Kauai and I was going through my funk, this last period, at the beginning of the trip I was asking for salvation, for some release, for some answers, right? And I got the release, but in ways that I didn't expect. And part of it was I had to be careful what I asked for. Because I did get the release, but in a way that I didn't think. . . . I would never ask for it, you know, in a painful way. But it was a release nonetheless. So, yeah, you have to be careful what you ask for.

So it was a really cool time in Highland Park. The first year we just locked ourselves up together and made love all day and all night long. Naked all the time, running around the house naked all the time, and wouldn't answer the door to people and stuff like that. And people started getting really angry because they didn't have contact with him. And they were getting really jealous and they were pissed off with me-because I was the woman who took him away from them. And still a lot of people harbor that resentment. But we were just so much into each other that we didn't need anything else, we didn't need anyone else. And at that point it also helped to focus him in on his studio work, because he didn't. . . . He needed to be surrounded with people. That's why he was such a social animal. He liked being around people, he needed dialogue, and he needed that kind of stimulation. And when he got together with me, he found it in a deeper, more personal level, so it wasn't something he had to go out and look for anymore. So that also helped him. It enabled him to go into his studio and dive into his work and then come home and be with a family, or be with me, or. . . . Oh yeah, at one point, I moved downstairs, before. . . . I think before we were married and before we had Maya, I moved from my studio because Victor was moving to New York City. I moved down into his studio and I kind of displaced John Valadez, which he didn't appreciate. And it was just an obvious move. We were just like a couple now, and we wanted to share our life in every aspect. So it was difficult, but it was nice that we were sharing the studio, because, again, just being around this incredible painter, and I learned so much about color and form. Like the education just. . . . He's a master, so I learned. . . . The gift for me was learning from a great colorist about painting. Because I didn't have a full education in color. I was just about to take that class at Art Center when my scholarship ran out. I had an innate sense of color but being surrounded with his color and his sense of color, it was a gift-a major, major gift. On the other hand, he learned from me about surface, about lots of paint and how to manipulate it and articulate a surface. He would come over and watch me do that and then go over and do it on his canvas. And then call me over and say, "Look, look, you should do it more like this." He was still always the teacher. He'd never acknowledge. . . . Well, once in a while he would. But it was hard for him to acknowledge that I could teach him something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I was going to ask about that: how the lines between mentoring, collaborating, and then raising a family together, being in sort of a different type of intimacy in terms of relationships-not necessarily working in terms of art and stuff-how that all fit together.

ELSA FLORES: It was strange because it was something that kind of rolled into itself on a real natural way, in a natural way. But there were always points where there'd be friction over the change, especially on my part. The motherhood thing initially. . . . Well, initially, the getting together, the sharing the house and the studio was great. It was very romantic; it was lots of energy, real creative. The motherhood thing, I wasn't totally ready for it. I could have waited till my thirties. It wasn't a big deal for me. But he was getting older. He always really, really wanted a family so badly and he was such a great lover of children, great nurturer, and he was getting older. He said he didn't want to be a grandpa when he raised his child. And because I loved him so much, I wanted to give him a child. So we did that immediately. But that was good. Once I got into motherhood I had no. . . . You know, I didn't hold back. I was totally into it. I loved my pregnancy, I loved raising my kid and just really enjoyed her. And Carlos was a tremendous help because he was older, he was ready for a kid, he

was totally helpful in feeding and changing and all that stuff. So he was very involved. So there were no problems there. When I started going back to the studio and started making some strides in my career, that's when there was some problems. Not big problems but I resented his lack of political support for me. I think I talked to you about that, about the fact that, because he was known as one of the big leaders in the Chicano/Hispanic art movement, all the important curators from important shows would come to him first and ask him to recommend to them the artists he felt were good strong artists. And he would never mention me. He'd mention every Tom, Dick, and Harry. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: . . . even if their work was terrible, and sometimes I'd be standing in the circle with these curators talking to him and I'd be like [makes panting sounds-Ed.], like a dog, "What about me, you know?" And never, never. And then we'd go back. And that's the only real fight we'd ever have was over this issue. And it was like, "Well, Carlos, don't you. . . . You respect my work. We were peers before we were married. What's the problem? Why can't you say, "Elsa's a great painter. Look at her work." "Well, it's a conflict of interests. I can't say that about my wife." I'm like, "O-o-o-h." That would just set me off. I'd get so angry, so angry. And I'd get so. . . .

Session 2, Tape 3, Side A

[Note: The duplicate tape from which I was audit-editing tangled in my tape recorder, so this part has been only text-edited.-JEFFREY RANGEL]

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview with Elsa Flores on April 2, 1997. This is tape three, side A, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel.

ELSA FLORES: I'm full on this stuff. It's like food!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I know. Your tongue's all green, too.

ELSA FLORES: Oh-oh. [giggles] So is yours! Oh, yours isn't, is it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No.

ELSA FLORES: Why?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Maybe it's just your sweater.

ELSA FLORES: I've got a clean tongue!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, I don't know.

ELSA FLORES: What, Maya? [brief exchange with her daughter-Ed.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, so. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Let me consult the crystals. [shakes them]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yes. Just let it all hang out, Elsa. [laughter] We're rolling.

ELSA FLORES: Oh. So, as I was saying, we'd be in these circles with important curators and I would not be acknowledged as one of the up-and-coming talents of the Hispanic art movement, and it was very disappointing, especially when I started seeing these guys that he did recommend, who I felt I was as strong as, if not stronger, a painter than some of these guys. And their careers took off

from these recommendations. They just like showed around the world because of it, and I felt displaced, I felt discriminated against. I felt all that stuff that I had always felt growing up-with my brother and then later with my boyfriend. And just the fact that a Hispanic woman is a threat to a Hispanic male, if she shows any strength in any areas. So that was a hard thing, and it still happens, but actually I look at it now, in retrospect, as a blessing because, even though I fought hard at the time and I was very verbal about it, it made me more determined; it made me work harder. It was like, "I'm going to show them! I'm going to show them who's a good artist," and all that stuff. And it also did something really interesting that I think will work to my advantage in the art arena of American art, in that I wasn't ghettoized as a Hispanic artist. My images were never Hispanic-oriented anyway. They were always more autobiographical. I think maybe that's another reason that. . . . Because I wasn't doing low-riders and all that stuff. A lot of guys were doing, you know, bleeding hearts, and the stereotypical thing that some of these curators were looking for. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that I wasn't being recommended by someone who was important to me and who I know respected my work. But he would often talk about. . . . When I started showing and getting response for my work, he would say it would be difficult for him if I was successful, that he would. . . . He loved old movies and old Hollywood musicals or Broadway musicals. Any kind of musical comedy he was a big fan. So he would joke about using the line from. . . . What movie was that? Vicky Lester, where the husband would be called, "Oh, Mr. Lester." [laughs] So he doesn't think he would be able to deal with me being more successful than he was. Which wouldn't have happened! He was so much older than I was and more mature in his career. We were at different levels, career-wise. But just the thought of that like freaked him out. So another way I think it helped me was because I was not ghettoized in the Hispanic . . . I wasn't grouped as a Hispanic artist. And at some point, because I was being rejected from so many of these big-time shows, I said, "Fuck 'em! I'm not going to even show in any of those shows, even if they ask me." And every once in a while, I'd be asked, and I'd say no. You know, I'd just decline. And it's worked because it's created a mystique. I suddenly became this phantom artist. Because no one ever sees me-because I don't go out and I'm not social. But people know of my work, and they know of me. Who knows what they know of me! [laughter] Depends on what story they've heard.

JEFFREY RANGEL: After this!

ELSA FLORES: Well, it's funny. People come up to me and they [go], "Oh, yeah, we've heard so much about you!" Like, "Well, from whom? What did they say?"

JEFFREY RANGEL: Exactly. Tell me who said it and I'll tell you.

ELSA FLORES: Because it's amazing the things I hear about me. Like this filmmaker guy was very surprised because he had heard that I was very difficult, and I was all this stuff, and I was like, "It depends on who you're hearing it from." So I haven't been ghettoized, and in a way it's good, because I would like to be acknowledged as an American artist who is Hispanic-you know, a Latina who is an American artist-and I want to kind of make my mark on my own without being grouped. In one way it hurts me, because a lot of these big shows are funded by themes, and the Hispanic big shows get [full] on books and catalogues and films and all that stuff, and here I am a solo artist who . . . I don't have that support. But it might work out for me, in the long run, because it's kind of. . . . It's kind of my ultimate revenge to be successful. Like, "I'll show you! I'm going to pay back my brother, I'm going to pay back my boyfriend, I'm going to pay back my teachers, I'm going to pay back my husband." [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, please!

ELSA FLORES: Payback time!

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it's going to be ugly.

ELSA FLORES: But that's not why I work. I mean, I don't work for that reason.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, of course not.

ELSA FLORES: But that would be a sweet revenge.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, definitely.

ELSA FLORES: If there is such a thing.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, well, maybe this is a good to wrap up, and we can. . . .

ELSA FLORES: So my sister could eat. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Because actually there's a whole lot of questions that we can go into . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I know, from here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . off of that, so we'll save that for next time.

ELSA FLORES: Okay.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Have the feeling we're picking up all the kids.

ELSA FLORES: I think so. Bam!

[Session 2, Tape 3, Side B, is blank]

APRIL 10, 1997

Side A

[As the tape goes on there's a more and more pronounced forward-echo effect, causing problems with clarity when both talk at once.-Trans.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. Today is. . . .

ELSA FLORES: The tenth.

JEFFREY RANGEL: January, February, March, April 10, 1997. This is an interview with Elsa Flores for the Archives of American Art. We're at the artist's house, and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And today we're going to pick up sort of where we left off last time.

ELSA FLORES: Um hmm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I guess we'll venture into the mid-eighties and talk about, I guess, your movement into the gallery networks in Los Angeles and kind of that stage of your career and your relationship with Carlos and stuff like that.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. Did I talk about us eloping?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, you didn't.

ELSA FLORES: That probably happened before, so let's cover that first.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, okay, we'll back up a little bit.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, because I was thinking. . . . See, again, I don't know. I'll go into it, but I don't know if I already talked to you about. . . . We were talking about the courtship and how the day John Lennon died is when Carlos decided to move in.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Was that on tape?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. You're sure?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. So he moved in, and after about a year we decided we wanted to get married-I think I talked to you about this but maybe not-but he felt he was too old to have a big old wedding. He had never been married before. And I was kind of shy and I really didn't want to do a big to-do over the whole thing. So we decided we were going to elope. We were going to go to Oaxaca to be married. So we did. We planned a trip. We were going to go to, first, Oaxaca, be married. Or was it first? No, first we landed in Mexico City. Let me see. There were two trips, actually. That's why I'm a little confused. First we went. . . . Well, it either happened the first time or the second time, but at one point we landed in Mexico City. But I think the first trip we went straight to Oaxaca. We bought our rings at a little jewelry place, one of the little shops there in the plaza, stayed at this wonderful little colonial hotel and toured a little, and then said, "Let's go find a justice of the peace and get married." And so we tracked down some guy-it was hard to find him-and he asked for our IDs and stuff, and Carlos's passport had expired, and because he had been born in Mexico City, but he was a U.S. citizen but his passport said Mexico City, the guy thought he was trying to get out of the country. I was going to marry him and smuggle him out of the country illegally. So he wouldn't marry us until we had proper ID. So we stuck our tail between our legs and had our little rings, we came back home, we were really bummed out.

Oh, but from that trip, we took a little excursion after Oaxaca. We were so disappointed, and then that's when we land in Mexico City to stay with our friends Robert Gil de Montes and Eddie Domínguez. They were both working for the museum down there, the Belles Artes. And we did a little . . . hung out with them. Our friend Carol [Brawley-Finkelstein] had also been living there in the house with them. And Beto's sister, Carola [de la Rocha-Ed.], was down there doing some folkloric dances, as well as Victor Durazo, who I shared that first studio with. They were doing Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City. So it was a nice little group of locals down there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: We did the tour and I remember we went to the Tamayo Museum. They had just built this fabulous new hand-chiseled museum. That's where the steps are all hand-chiseled, this incredible stonework. And they were doing some films, so [Rufino-Ed.] Tamayo was there. They were filming him, and we saw him smoking in the hallway-you know, this old guy smoking cigarettes in the hallway-and then we stopped and talked with him a little bit. So that was exciting. And then from Mexico City we. . . . We didn't tell our friends Robert and Eddie that we had just tried to get married. Is Oaxca below Mexico City?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Maybe we stopped in Mexico City first. I'm not sure how the scenario went, but we didn't tell anyone. So from there we went over to Cancun just to check it out, and we all really loved. . . . Carlos and I both were water people, so we fell in love with the coral sands and the beaches and snorkeling and all that stuff. It was just great. And at that time Cancun hadn't been quite developed, so there were just huge stretches of abandoned beaches. Now it's wall-to-wall hotels. So we said, "You know, this is great." We hung out there and had fun and said, "We're going to come back here to be married." So came back to L.A., took another two months before we planned our second trip. We still didn't tell a soul. Planned our second trip, still had our rings from Oaxaca and, again, stopped in Mexico City, didn't tell Robert and Eddie, and went over to Cancun, went and saw the justice of the peace again, and grabbed a couple of witnesses out of the hallway there at city hall. And Carlos was real strange that day. He was kind of like in a daze, and I felt bad because I thought, "Don't you want to do this? You know, you don't have to do this." [laughs] And he was really strange. And I have some great pictures of our wedding where he's sitting on the edge of his seat and like kind of protecting his groin area, like he was kind of like . . . with his legs crossed. Real nervous, kind of like that. [demonstrates posture]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So it was funny. So we were married. But it was like it didn't register; he was like in shock. We didn't even make love the first night. It was like weird. It was like I wanted to cry and go home, because I thought he didn't love me. And it wasn't that. He was just so shocked. This change, that he actually did this. And after twenty-four hours had passed, then he was totally into it and excited about it, but he definitely went into shock. So from Cancun we crossed by ferry over to Isla Mujeres and spent a week or so there. It was great. Isla Mujeres was wonderful. It, too, had not been developed yet, and there were these great palm-lined beaches, Cocoa Beach and all these great beaches. We stayed at this little hotel-the [Carousel], I think. No, that was a hotel in Cancun. We stayed at the. . . . No, actually, the first trip we went to Cancun and then over to Cosomel. But we didn't really like Cozumel. There's a lot of. . . . We loved it for its beaches and its reefs, but there were a lot of drunk Texans. You know, it was spring break and it was like, oh God, real loud and really boisterous. So the second trip we didn't go to Cosomel, but we went to Isla Mujeres, and there was a great snorkel spot on the tip of that island. Garafon. Have you been there?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And it was great. Had a good time, and we said, "We're gonna . . . we gotta come back here." We just fell in love with it. Came back to L.A., told everyone. Called everyone up, and everyone was excited and kind of pissed off because we snuck out and they wanted to be involved in it. And especially Robert and Eddie, they were very upset because we were there and we didn't tell 'em, right? They would have loved to have flown out. But for some reason it was something we had to do in private. And no regrets. It was real sweet, and just being in that environment. Then what we did was, came home, told every. . . . I think we had. . . . No, we didn't have a wedding shower or anything like that. We might have had a wedding party at the house in Highland Park. I'm not sure. But when we finally decided-this was 1980. . . . When was I married? 1981?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think that's right.

ELSA FLORES: Okay.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's what I have down here.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, oh, we wanted to be married on his birthday. He wanted . . . let's do it on his birthday, so I said, "Great." And we couldn't get the reservation done so we were married a few days later, October 8th. And then came home, started living in Highland Park, working, and talking about having a child. Again, I think I talked to you about this.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Did we talk about it on tape? Was it on tape?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, you told me that Carlos was really into it.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, he was. He'd always, always wanted to be a dad, and he had been a dad to [Coco] and had been very nurturing to their children, so he was great with children. Always wanted to do that. And I could have waited. I was in my twenties, and I could have waited till my thirties, but because I loved him so much I wanted to give him the child he's always wanted. And he also said that he didn't want to be grandpa, you know-like an old dad. He didn't want to be an old grandpa when he finally had his child. Because he was already forty then. Maybe forty-one or forty-two. I think he was forty when we actually eloped. So it was a big change of life for him; it was a positive entry into his forties. So we started talking about having a baby, and we decided we wanted to go back to Cancun, back to Isla Mujeres, actually, to conceive Maya. And we did. We stayed in Cancun for a couple of days, and I remember we were doing this mating ritual dance in the water where we'd pop our heads up, and we'd just kind of take dives and we'd kind of like slither around each other underwater. And there were these big clouds of some kind of sperm that either coral or fish had let out so there was all this fertility stuff . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: . . . and we were just spontaneously doing this strange water-ritual dance. And so it was all really happening, and it was during my fertile period that month, and so we went over to Isla Mujeres, checked into the same hotel, and just went at it and tried to have a baby.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Not knowing if it'll work, but we did our best and, sure enough, I got pregnant. It was perfect timing. And for that reason it was like. . . . Isla Mujeres was considered an island of fertility, but also the pirates would go and hide their women there on that island. Or maybe the Mayans would hide their women from the pirates. I forget which story it was. But it was very fertile grounds. So I was pregnant. Totally enjoyed my pregnancy. We knew that this child, since it was conceived with such love and wanting to bring this child into the world, such a planned pregnancy, that she was going to be a great kid and, once she was born-you can sense it-she had this air of Mayan royalty. I mean, she just glowed of some spirit that was injected in that part of town. It was like really amazing that she's. . . . The area definitely resonated in this child. So I went through my whole pregnancy pretty much in the Highland Park house. When I became. . . . Oh yeah, I was almost ready to give birth at the time that Carlos had his show at ARCO Center for Visual Arts. Because I have pictures of me very pregnant during that time. Totally got into it. Did lots of self-portraits of myself nude and pregnant. So I used that in creative ways. So that was really fun. And Carlos was doing pretty well. He was. . . . When was the Olympics? '84?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Maya was born in '83. He was gaining a lot of attention for his own personal works, and he was selling-not well, we were still hand-to-mouth. But we were making ends meet, and he would sell a drawing for a hundred, two hundred dollars, and we'd be able to pay our rent and stuff. And he had focus at this point, because suddenly he had a family to provide for, so it all kind of worked itself in that direction. It just sort of manifested a living, because now he felt he needed to provide. And he actually liked that, because it would produce for him a life-style that he wanted to give his family. And it wasn't extravagant, it wasn't anything like that, but he felt competent as a provider. And it created work, and it also created a family environment where it enabled him-which we had talked about before-to detach himself from his social activities from the past, all his political work and his leadership role in the movement, and concentrate on his work. So he'd go to his studio in the morning, do his thing, go work out at the gym, do his swims. He loved swimming. Sometimes he'd ride his bike to and from Highland Park to his studio. Yeah, he was on Spring Street at that point. I had already left my studio that I had shared with Victor and I think John was still with him. Or we. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, you were telling the story about how you were kind of pushed him out. Or was that. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Well, Carlos. . . I don't know. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't know what kind of term you want to put on it.

ELSA FLORES: Ask John his side of the story, but either it was time for. . . It was just unspoken, and it just happened that way, and I don't know if Carlos actually asked him to leave. I know I didn't, but somehow I got blamed. [laughs] As it always seems to be.

JEFFREY RANGEL: _____ put in those terms.

ELSA FLORES: Well, that's what John must have felt, like he was being booted out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He never said anything about it so. . . .

ELSA FLORES: You should ask him about it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I will.

ELSA FLORES: I'd like to know, because it just was never the same after that, because John and I, you know, we were starting to have a close relationship. It just sort of fizzled. So maybe Carlos was alone in the studio at this point. I think we had knocked down a wall so that we had the entire, from Main Street to Spring Street, studio. And I had been sharing it with him. . . . Yeah, that's it. I had been sharing it with him before I became pregnant. So suddenly I was devoted to my pregnancy and getting so big I couldn't go and work-and wanted to nest and wanted to stay home and do all that stuff. And. . . [someone knocks on the door] Gotta open the door quick.
[Interruption in taping; unfortunately, the echo increases]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, so I enjoyed my pregnancy. My mom was very involved in being around to help and stuff. She didn't live far. She still lived here in El Sereno where I grew up. So I was only a couple of miles away, so I'd see her often and she was into it because she didn't really have a chance to help in my sister's kids because my sister's kids were born in different cities so she wasn't around for that. So she was really kind of into it and that was nice.

So, let's see, it came around March-time and Maya was overdue by two weeks. She just was too comfortable. She just didn't want to come out. During the pregnancy we did fun things, too. Carlos wanted her to learn French, so we'd put headphones on my tummy, and play Edith Piaf or something like that. And I'd sit at the piano and I'd do scales so she'd maybe be a musical genius. So all this prenatal stuff. I read a book called The Language of the Unborn Child, or something like that, that definitely what went on in your pregnancy affected your child, who that person would be. So I tried to make it really pleasant, and it was. It was a good pregnancy. So we had to induce. We did all the Lamaze stuff. We were going to do natural childbirth, and we were going to do the ABC room, which represented what? The Alternative Birthing Center? Could be. It sounds like it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It sounds good.

ELSA FLORES: At Hollywood Presbyterian. Our doctor was Dr. Mak. Nancy Romero had recommended him to us. And he was a sweet Chinese doctor. He was funny, though. You'd go and see him and he would like . . . you can hardly hear him, he's so soft-spoken. You'd have to say, "What?" And get closer. "What?" And suddenly, in the birthing room, he came in like this white knight. He took charge, and he was articulate and loud and clear, and it was like, "Wow!" It was transformation. Thank God, because I didn't know what to expect. So, anyway, here we are. Baby wouldn't come and I felt like I was in labor for a week. I was in pain for a week and I was huge and I was achy, and I was exhausted because I wasn't sleeping and I said, "I'll never get through natural childbirth like this." And because we had induced because she didn't want to come out, I couldn't do the natural stuff anyway. So they injected me with some drug to induce labor and, sure enough, I started dilating and all that stuff. I guess they gave me Demerol for some reason, for the pain I guess. And then I crashed. My blood pressure dropped, because I had low blood pressure to begin with, so they were buzzing around me trying to stabilize my blood pressure. I was having a good time because I was like sleeping. [laughter] Slept for hours and hours and hours, and finally I came to and I was in the middle of it and they couldn't give me any more drugs so I was really upset. And then rolled me into the delivery room and it was just really painful and terrible. It just was hard, because I was so exhausted. It was just "Oof!" And Maya's head: she had a really large head and it was coming out in the widest position possible. So she was stuck in the canal for a long time. So she didn't want to come out and the doctor said, "One more push or else we're going to have to c-section." And he got the forceps and like, "Boom!" One more push and "Boom!" They pulled her out violently. Blood splattered everywhere, and I just was happy she was out, right? And I looked over at Carlos, thinking he'd be crying from happiness, but he looked stunned, and I thought he looked disappointed. And I said, "Oh, are you disappointed because it's not a boy?" And he was in shock because it was so violent, it was so bloody and so like, "Wow!" And I didn't have my glasses on, because I wanted to see it. They did have a mirror, so I couldn't clearly see it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: God!

ELSA FLORES: I know! And he later said, "No, no, no." And, actually, he preferred a girl. You know, he liked women, he liked female energy, and he didn't want to have to be the macho dad for his little boy child and have to go to the baseball. . . . I would have had to do that. I would have had to go do all the baseball games and soccer games and all that stuff. So, I was happy and. . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Who's to say you wouldn't do that with a girl?

ELSA FLORES: Well, I do, too. I have. Maya does all that stuff, but I would think it would be more intense with a boy.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see. I hear you.

ELSA FLORES: That's my sexist upbringing, I think. Ah, I don't know. But just, you know, the activity, the energy that boys have.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: So they placed her on me, and I saw like in her eyes. . . . Her eyes opened right away, and she was, again, this beautiful little Mayan head, this beautiful well-formed. . . . Even though she had gone through the birth canal and she still had the forceps marks, she had this light in her eyes, this shining little like stars almost, one in each eye. And it was like, "Wow!" I was tripping out and she recognized us in our voices and she took to breast feeding immediately so it was like great.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [Way to go.]

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. For the next year and a half I pretty much stayed home with her and really enjoyed it. Carlos couldn't wait to get home from the studio and play with her and stuff. He was a great dad. He'd feed her in the middle of the night when I just couldn't roll over and pop out the breasts soon enough. I was sometimes just so. . . . She was up every hour and a half, unlike most children. She didn't sleep through the night till maybe a year and a half. And when I get deprived of sleep, I'm a mess so I was like, "Oh, God." I don't know how I made it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So a lot of times her nap-time was when I'd knock out, because I just couldn't keep up with her. And so at times Carlos would try to pull out some breast milk we had stored in the freezer and feed her for me so I could get a little more sleep. But most of the time she slept in bed with us because it was easier. We just rolled over and , boom, there it was. She was a great kid. She was real mellow as a baby. Very mellow. People couldn't believe it. And she was really in visual touch with people. She'd like check people out as a little baby. People would walk up to her and say, "Is she looking at me? She's like intense, you know?" And she was. She was like this keen observer, poom! pinpoint into people. Really fun. Again, we were still quite poor. Oh, the day of birth. . . . Our insurance. . . . What happened with our insurance? Oh, we didn't have insurance for childbirth. We didn't get insurance till later. We still couldn't afford it. And so we had no health insurance, and the doctors demanded payment then and there. So Carlos had to run out and I guess he had to raise like \$5,000 or something. Something like that. And so he hit up whoever he could and, sure enough, he raised all that money in a matter of hours and showed up and was very proud to be able to pay the bill and take his family home. [chuckling]

JEFFREY RANGEL: God! That's like a crime.

ELSA FLORES: I know, it really is. And most carriers didn't cover pregnancy. Now they do. But most carriers didn't. They'd only cover in the event of a cesarean, which could be a lot of money. Later we did have. . . . Well, during the pregnancy we did have a baby shower, and Los Lobos came over and they played and it was a great party there. I think we had a mariachi, too. So that was fun, and it was a way that we [were] sharing some important event in our lives, so that family and friends wouldn't be jilted. [laughter] But again we were very complete, very insular. Carlos was starting to do some really important work-you know, very prolific. And after a year and a half. . . . We'd spend a lot. . . . Oh, during that time, during Maya's early years, we spent a lot of time with both Frank and Nancy Romero up at the Wyle Ranch in Norfolk, just below Yosemite. And we'd go for like Easter and certain weekends and hang out with them. We'd like to stay in the Wyle trailer. The Wyles had this original little trailer that they lived on on the property before they built their massive glass house, right. And so we always liked to be private and alone, so we'd sort of get away from being under

other people's control. You know, we liked to just . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do your own thing.

ELSA FLORES: . . . do our own thing. And not worry about putting clothes on or, you know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right, [small world]. [chuckles]

ELSA FLORES: So we had a good time. It was fun. It was a whole community up there of people that would come up, so that was really nice. So after about a year and a half I decided it was time to go back and start working and I started painting, sharing the studio with Carlos. People would come up, and I was doing these big paintings at the time. I started working real large, real dark, purposely trying to get away from Carlos's palette, because he was such a strong colorist, and people were constantly coming up and ignoring me and just swooning over him. And often when they did look at my work they would compare me to him, which was an injustice because my work had always, thematically, been very similar to his, and my palette had always been similar to his. So at this point I was fighting it and I was going in the other direction, "Well, I'm going to be definitely different than him and I'm going to go into this dark palette." Which I had done in the past, too. So I went way in the other direction, and my work was very angst-filled-you know, a lot of like angry heads and mutants and explosions. I did a series around nineteen. . . . When did. . . . My mom died in 1985. A year prior to that-maybe it was two years-she was sick. No, I think it was 1984. Yeah, because Maya had been born in '83. My mom died in '85, so first year and a half my mom was pretty healthy and then she got a lymphoma. She had worked as a nurse for City of Hope. When she got back on her feet she went into nurses' training. So she was a nurse's assistant, and so she'd do the graveyard shift. And she worked in the radiation lab, so she thought maybe that might be. . . . She had to handle a lot of radioactive stuff. And I don't think this can be part of it, but I sometimes suspect that we were in Vegas during the atomic testing . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: . . . although we weren't downwind; we were upwind. So apparently there was no fallout there. But you never know. Who knows? It could be a lot of things. She also was feeling displaced because she was living with my brother, who kind of bought her the house we grew up in and redecorated the whole thing-gutted it and redid it. And I think it made her feel insecure because it wasn't her old house. And she felt she was in the way because she never got along with his girlfriends. They were always fighting; they were fighting like married couples sometimes. It was not healthy. And so I think she transferred a lot of that male husband kind of relationship to my brother, which was too weird, and so it might have been a way out for her, to check out. And she saw her kids were grown and they were doing okay and they didn't need her anymore. I was trying to convince her, "No but your granddaughter needs you. You have to stick around, right?" She was ready to check out. And then I told you the dad thing, when she found out he had been murdered seven years previous.

So my mom got sick and. . . . Oh, during that time, the day I found out that she told me she had cancer and I had already been doing like real sort of real drippy, kind of intense themes, the colors were kind of foreboding. And so I answered the phone and she told me that she had just come back from the doctor and they said she had cancer. And so I was pretty devastated and I hung up the phone and I just went over to this one canvas I was working on and just started throwing this paint, like just letting all my pain and anger out, just attacking this canvas. And at one point I stood back and I noticed it was forming itself into the shape of a mushroom cloud, like an atomic-bomb cloud. And so it was like, "That makes sense to me!" It was like so real. And so that was the first of the Atomic series. I did a whole series of atomic bombs. I did this kimono for like a homage to Hiroshima, called

Kimono of Guilt, and it was this hanging, loose canvas-a large painting-hanging loose in the form of a kimono and with a big atomic bomb-you know, the mushroom-coming up the center part of it and then mushrooming out to the arms of the kimono. I did two of those, two different pieces like that. And during her illness. . . . I had totally abandoned my spiritual side, especially religion, but I had left it way back-in college and maybe even before that. And I started thinking about it again because here my mother, who I adored, was sick, and if there was a God he could make a miracle for my mom, you know. So I started exploring this stuff, and I did contact a [santero], a Mexican santero, who's actually a friend of Robert Gil de Montes's, and he was going to perform these [limpias], and he did stuff with eggs and coconuts and candles and pigeons and stuff like that, and he was trying to see if he could help heal her, and she was actually open to the idea. He was a little flaky, and he'd never follow through on some of the things, so she kind of lost hope that way. You know, she was really into it, but he didn't follow through. So that was disappointing, but during that time I started playing with that theme of Healers. . . .

Session 3

Interview with Elsa Flores
Conducted by Jeffrey Angel
At Casa Buena Vista, California
1997 April 10

Tape 1, Side B
[Echo occurs on this side too-Trans.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, this is tape one, side B. Interview with Elsa Flores.

ELSA FLORES: On April the 10th, 1997!

So during my mom's illness I started doing themes of Healers and making paintings of figures-sort of almost corpse-like figures, like the Jesus in Pieta, where he's sort of draped . . . or these figures are draped in the arms of women. And I had some santero-type elements in it. I had a glass of water and some birds flying, and the first of that series was called The Healer, I believe. And the second of that series was more powerful than the first. It was more articulate. And my mom was definitely battling this life-threatening illness at this point, so that the paintings became more intense and dark and really kind of sad. And the second image, Maya was in it. She was in the foreground as a cherub-I often painted her as a cherub because she had this cute little cherub body-and she was holding a hoop, like a magician's hoop. And again there was this figure holding up this corpse-like. . . . I think the second painting the corpse figure looked more like a man than a woman. I'm not sure if the first one did, as well.

[Interruption in taping]

ELSA FLORES: So male or female figures.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've got this thing on now. [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: On automatic pilot.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Totally.

ELSA FLORES: Just leave me the machine next time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You can do it, without me? [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: Never. It just wouldn't be the same. So. . . [sound of something thumping] Hey, that's pretty good! [tasting juice-JEFFREY RANGEL]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: So this whole series of Healers began, and also the sort of reemergence of my own personal spiritual side and thinking that there are other forces that guide us and can create our reality or our destiny. And so I just sort of got into that, because I was so hard-core political that that stuff sort of took a back seat. Or I thought I had totally dismissed it, but it was still within me. I definitely would never go back to organized religion, so that was clear at that point. So exploring that more, did a lot more of that whole sort of radioactive mutant kind of [fissionary] kind of stuff. I did a lot of series, and some of the pieces were quite abstract. I started exhibiting the paintings 1984. . . ? Prior to that. . . . Yeah, I had exhibited some of those in different shows, mostly noncommercial galleries-sort of university galleries or nonprofit galleries-throughout the city, and some went to shows in. . . . Don't know if. . . . No, that was later where I did a couple of shows in Europe. Prior to that I had been exhibiting my photographs regularly, you know, pretty much internationally, and with great success but no sales. But great critical acclaim. So the paintings were large, and some were small, but mostly they were large, and I started really playing with volumes of paint, just lots of paint, very action-like in technique, lots of accidents. I liked to see what happened-the accidents-but also tried to keep the figures articulated, because I have a love for figures so the figurative work was important. And the paintings always start as abstracts. They always start as just throwing paint on-like I did that day that my mom called-throwing paint on a canvas or a surface and sort of in a random sort of . . . but organized composition, and then stepping back and drawing out things that I saw. And once developing the painting, stepping back and realizing it makes perfect sense to my life. Because I try not to preconceive or predesign any work. I can't do that. I've tried that before, and it just doesn't work. Never comes off the way you envision it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So when you do a series, it's a series that kind of creates itself?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it kind of creates itself. The theme develops out of my unconscious or my subconscious, and then at that point, because it's surfaced, it kind of sort of carries itself out and plays itself out until I go into some other flow of idea or theme. But at that point it was a lot of pain. That's what I think it was; it was pain. I did a couple of series called Ecce Homo. But it was in the figure of a silhouetted male figure and the planes were defined by like masses of dripped paint. So it looked like this person was either bleeding. . . . It wasn't necessarily a red paint, but it just felt that way. So there was a lot of heaviness and a lot of working out all that loss and pain and stuff. So thank God for that-you know, that I had the work to deal with that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did the images change once you got through that series? I mean, did the style change?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you lighten up at all?

ELSA FLORES: Definitely. What happened was that my mom passed away, so that's how that period ended. I was with her on her deathbed. We had pretty much come to terms. We understood each other. There was no unfinished business. I took her to the hospital the day that she knew. . . . And she didn't tell us she was going to die. She told us like, "Oh no, it's treatable." But the doctor had told her like a month before that she only had so long to live, and so she kept it secret until we arrived at the hospital and she checked in, and then I talked to the doctor, and he said, "Well, maybe

a week." And I was at that point blown away. And it turns out she died that night. I had promised her that I would take her remains-she wanted to be cremated-I would take her remains to Kauai, to bury her at this beautiful cemetery that overlooked the ocean right between the cities of Kapaa. It was the St. Catherine's Cemetery, and the beach in front of it was [Kailea] Beach, this great stretch of beach. And I didn't know if it was a Catholic cemetery, so I promised her on her deathbed, "Don't worry, I'm going to. . . ." She was already in a coma, fully drugged, said, "Don't worry, Mom, I'm going to take you to Kauai to bury you." And then at that point she opened her eyes and acknowledged me and just looked at me and then went back into her coma, so it was like, "Wow!" And sure enough I was planning to take her urn and go bury it in the middle of the night if I had to, because not knowing if I was allowed to be in that cemetery, right? Turns out it was a Catholic cemetery, and we were able to legally bury her and put a legitimate headstone there. So I went home that night. She was going to die that night. Oh, we weren't sure, but I had a sense that she would. And all my family and some of our neighbors and friends stayed with her all night, and I just. . . . I didn't have that need. I didn't feel like I needed to be there, that we had closed, and there was closure, so I went home and got the late-night call that she had died, and so that was really tragic.

Maya had a funny reaction. She was young. She was, what, three, I think. Let's see, three, four, five. . . . Two and a half, maybe? Three? She couldn't have been two. I think she was older. But she was giggling. She really didn't know what was happening. So on the deathbed everyone was crying and real dramatic, and she was kind of giggling and not knowing how to process it. But looking back, she was very young so how could we expect her. . . . And my concern was, "She's not processing it." But, again, she was a child, a baby almost.

And Carlos, again, was very close to my mom, so it was hard for him, and his parents were very close to her. They'd go to Vegas together-the senior citizens club-and they all did a Hawaii trip and rented this house on Kauai. They loved Honolulu, because they just liked activity. And then my mom, who always loved Kauai-because it was the same tropical region as Sinaloa, where she was raised-she was at home in Kauai. She wouldn't want to leave when she came to visit us. We'd have to kind of push her. "Time to go, Mom. Go visit Margaret in Honolulu." I have a sister who lived in Honolulu. So the last day she ever spent on Kauai, she was really pissed off because we were kind of like wanting to be alone. She had been there several weeks and we were like, "Mom, don't you want to. . . ?" She didn't want to leave Kauai, she loved it. And we had a tiny house and kind of needed some privacy at the point, and she was being real. . . . sort of in a bad mood, probably her illness and the drugs and all that stuff. She was kind of in a bad mood. So she wanted to go for her last day there-she was pissed off with us already because we had asked her to go visit Margaret-but she wanted to go to her favorite beach, and I said, "Okay, well let's take you to the beach." And so we were driving over there and on the drive over there it was obvious, there was this massive wall of dark heavy rainfall right on the beach she wanted to go to. And I said, "Look, it's pouring. We can't go there." She insisted on going to this beach and we refused, said, "No, let's go to another beach. I mean, it's like dumping. . . ." And so she got really mad at us, and we took her to this other beach, and she was very unhappy and so she left Kauai really disappointed and pissed off. And we decided, "You know, that's how it goes. Sorry."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So that was a bummer, but later we scattered some of her ashes at that favorite beach.

So my mom died, and the work. . . . I had exhibited at different places. I think I did exhibit the big kimono at a show at Security Pacific. They had a gallery downtown. And I did exhibit also. . . . I did a show in Hawaii. I think it was a two-person show with Carlos. At that point, people started respecting my work and would actually look at me, instead of just come and look at Carlos, and

wanting us to do two-person shows. So we did a few two-person shows. One was during the Hispanic Art in America show, which I had been excluded from. It was one of those! One of those shows! And Jane Livingston, the curator, wrote about both me and Diane Gamboa in the essay, and we were both pissed off, because, you know, why write about us if you. . . . She was saying, "Well, these are very promising new artists," and she knew that we were upset that we were snubbed, and that all the guys got in and all that stuff, and so we were kind of really burned out. And we had talked about doing something together but Diane, at that point, said, "You know what? I'm just sick of playing this game, and I'm not going please them by . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Responding?

ELSA FLORES: . . . yeah, responding. So I'm not even. . . ." And then I said, "You know, you're right. Fuck 'em and let's just keep working." I always connected with Diane real well. I didn't know her well, but I had previously been in love with Harry, following them around when he was with ASCO, and I thought Diane was going to be more like Harry-kind of more aloof and kind of stand-offish a little bit, like the ASCO people were. But Diane was real down to earth. She was like a really, really sweet person, very open, and her work reminded me of my earlier angst-filled work, these angry screaming heads-which I continued for many years after that. Did a whole series of mutants. And that was all based on that whole atomic, you know, the modern society and all that stuff, the repercussions from it. So we were doing two-person shows throughout the country, and we did one in Santa Fe during the Hispanic-that's how; got back to the story-during the Hispanic Art in Latin America tour. . . . I think it opened in. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Houston?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, right. We didn't go. I think Carlos was already fighting with his illness at that point. And then by the time it got to New Mexico, Santa Fe-I think it was at the museum there-we had arranged to do a two-person show at the [Channing Dale Throckmorton] Gallery, which was a big beautiful space right in the plaza area, upstairs, and it was a really successful show-not financially, but visually it was beautiful. And I got to show some big works, and I got to show during the time when these other guys were in the museum, so, you know, it kind of spoke for itself. And Carlos was. . . . He was suffering at that point. . . . He started, . . . Yeah, at that point he had started becoming quite ill. Probably the whole year before that he was in and out of the hospital, mostly with pneumonias. Later I'll talk. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is '85, right?

ELSA FLORES: No, this is beyond '85. No, he wasn't diagnosed till '87. Yeah, so it was a few years later. So I'll get to that later, I'll get to that.

Yeah, so New Mexico was actually later. In between that time, we were working side by side. I had a show. My first one-person show was at the Janus Gallery, which was owned by Jan Turner and Dan Saxon. They had once been partners and had a relationship, and they were-they kind of hated each other at this point [laughs]-but were still business partners. So it was a very stressful environment, and I think Dan was suing her at that point, so she was having like a nervous breakdown or something and she wasn't quite focused. She was just a mess. She was a mess, so she couldn't really help me, you know, help push the work, because she was dealing with personal problems. That's my take on it; I don't know if that's true or not.

But Carlos had had many successful shows with her. This was the space over on Melrose when it was on 8000 Melrose. It was a beautiful space and. . . . Oh, this is what! They were fighting over who was going to keep Carlos, because they had split already and. . . . No, it was still the Janus. . . . No, they were still together, but they knew that they were going to split. And they were kind of each

approaching Carlos to see who he was going to stay with, because he was their number-one gallery artist. And Carlos had always known he would stay with Jan, because she was the mama. Dan was the money guy, but he didn't have a lot of art chutzpah. He was mostly a salesman. He wasn't refined and he didn't know about art history. But he was good with the money, so Carlos respected him for that, but it was clear he'd never go with Dan. And Dan was opening his own gallery which was the Saxon-Lee Gallery with Candy Lee, who once worked for Jan Turner. And Carlos actually, when they trying to get him to join the gallery, he says, "I can't. I'm not leaving Jan. But you should go see Gronk's work." [laughs] So he tooted Gronk's horn and, sure enough, they picked Gronk up, and that's his history with them.

So Carlos was doing quite well with Jan Turner, and Jan came into the studio many times to look at Carlos's work and stuff. And she was keeping an eye on me, and she thought I was a good painter. And at some point, she offered me a show. And at first I thought, "Well, is this kind'a like she's trying to score points with Carlos?" But later I realized that it wasn't, because it wasn't even at that point yet, and she really did like my work. She felt I was a strong painter. And so I was thrilled, because this was like, to me, a big-time gallery. It wasn't a little community gallery. She offered me the small gallery, and I was going to show alongside Jay de Feo, who I didn't know at the time was a big-time beat artist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I remember you saying that.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, I was blown away now that I know that it was such a great honor. She was still alive. Jay died several years ago. But at that point she was still alive, and the show looked great. It wasn't. . . . I had left that theme of the angst-filled, spiritual, radioactive stuff, and sort of went more to a brighter palette although it was still muted. But it was mostly about very sort of interpersonal relationships between figures, between people, and at this point they weren't the spiritual . . . the auras . . . they weren't the figures surrounded by auras like I did later, like in my more recent work. But they were pretty much nude figures, running through landscapes or dancing and sort of just relating to each other and nature. And very thick. They were very painterly. Lots of impasto. I was working with wax to build up the surface, and they were very strong paintings. She only sold one. She was, again, a mess during that time, but I was just happy to show and I got a lot of good response. William Wilson didn't get it. You know, he gave me some nasty review and I was disappointed about that but. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've heard that a lot about him. [laughing] Other people have said that.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure. You know critics. [laughter] Especially. . . . And he's the old guard. He'll never leave the L.A. Times. We won't have a decent critic-maybe we still won't-but not until he leaves will. . . . He's the main guy there. And Christopher Knight, the same thing. He's got his own little group of artists that he pumps up.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Isn't that the way all critics work, though?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And I was hoping for Suzanne Muchnic, who's more sensitive, and she would have gotten it because she had reviewed me in the past, too. So we were doing lots of shows. That show was good. At the dinner at that show, since it was like Jay de Feo-which I didn't know-suddenly all these big-time artists show up at the dinner. And it was like Ed Moses, Craig Kauffman, and some other big-time. . . . Billy Al Bengston. Some other artists that were part of her historical group. And I was like, "Wow! This is pretty neat, being around these famous artists and stuff." And that's when Ed Moses told me [ELSA FLORES deepens her voice in imitation], "You're a pretty good painter, kid." He's like this Harley-Davidson dude sometimes and he's real kind of rough around the edges, and I was so blown-away because I totally respected his work always. He once was with

Janus Gallery and now he's with LA Louver. He's made the big-time. And so I was really blown away that I got that compliment and validated in that way. Although Carlos would also support me morally, he saw the talent and he thought I was very good and that I should keep struggling even though I was snubbed from a lot of shows and even though we fought over it. He supported me quite a bit. But it was good to hear from outside, because I didn't know if it was just subjective]. . . . Someone who'd never seen my work before.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. Did you ever end up having more contact with them?

ELSA FLORES: With who? Ed Moses?

JEFFREY RANGEL: With that circle of Jay de Feo.

ELSA FLORES: Well, just recently. No, no, Jay's dead. [laughs] Jay's dead. But, yeah, just recently, in fact, I got a call on my machine while I was in Arizona last week from Ed Moses, and so. . . . Should I tell that story about the thing?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think you did, actually. Did you not?

ELSA FLORES: I think I didn't. I don't think I told it on tape.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay. I'm not doing my job here. [chuckling]

ELSA FLORES: You're going to have to listen to tape of last week . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's the one I haven't listened to.

ELSA FLORES: . . . because that's when I spilled a lot of beans privately to you, and I don't know what I said.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: So I don't know what didn't go on there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, it's worth telling again. It's a good story.

ELSA FLORES: Umm, I hate repeating myself. But anyway I'll tell you the little part about what he said. That whole event for Joan Quinn was amazing, and if it's not on tape let me know so we can through that. But at this reception after this event for Joan Quinn, I went up to Ed and said, "Ed, do you remember me?" No, I said, "Ed, you probably don't remember me but when Jay de Feo showed at Janus, I was showing in the room next to her." And he goes, "Yeah, I remember you." I said, "Well, I just want to tell you you had given me some really kind words of encouragement and I just want to tell you how much it meant to me. In all these years, I think about it a lot and I just wanted to thank you." And I think I had said, "You said that I was a really good painter." He goes, "You are a good painter." [Each time ELSA FLORES quotes EM, she imitates his deeper, louder voice-Ed.] I'm like, "Well, thanks. So are you." [laughs] You know, what can I say? And there were other artists at the table. I think at that table there was. . . . George Herms was sitting at the table and Gwen Merrill and some other artists were all there, so they were all . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sounds like a play.

ELSA FLORES: I know. And so they were all checking out my conversation with Ed, right? So I was

trying to be like real low key. I was sort of kneeling down by his chair. You know, I didn't want to sound pretentious or anything. And so then he goes into it even more, which blew me away. He goes, "Well, sometimes. . . ." I said, "It's really good that artists should support each other." He goes, "Well yeah, I don't have a problem with that. I'm not threatened that way. I think artists should support each other." He goes, "But sometimes, every once in a while, I'll look at someone's work and I get jealous. I get competitive and I actually get mad." He goes, "It happened once when I saw Frank Stella's new big assemblage pieces. And it happened the second time when I was in . . ." I think, he said [_____ -Ed.] Poons. It couldn't have been Jeff Poons.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs hard]

ELSA FLORES: I think it was Kuhns, because Kuhns was a major-ass painter. Kuhns was good. And Poons was like. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: But I forget who it was. But it was either Poons or Kuhns, and I suspect it was Kuhns, because Kuhns. . . . Because his studio must have been. . . . Jan Turner said she was in his studio, and he had paint drips sort of like these tall buildings of just paint on his floor that had. . . . And I had liked Kuhns' work a lot. So he goes, "I felt it again when I went to his studio in New York. And I felt it when I saw your work." And I was like, "Wow!" I almost fell on the floor. It was the biggest compliment I could ever receive. And even the other artists were like, "Wow!" That's amazing. That's pretty wild." So that was really cool.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's a great story.

ELSA FLORES: That was a great story. And so then. . . . And Billy AI was sitting at my table and so we were talking, and Billy's kind of another animal. We never connected on a personal level. He can be pretty pompous, so the conversation was kind of superficial. We talked a little bit about. . . . He spent some time in Hawaii. We'd try to talk about that. He wasn't too giving in opening himself up or anything. So it was an interesting event.

So big show at Jan Turner. I thought, "Well, good. Now what's going to happen? When's my next show, right?" Well, Jan said, "Well, just keep working. I can't promise anything." And often you think that if a gallery picks you up and they're going to take care of your career, right, and often they just like you and give you a try, but that doesn't mean that they're going to show you again. And she had purchased some of my pieces in the past, too, so you know it was a little anticlimactic in that way, that I thought big things were going to happen. And it was important that I showed at a prestigious gallery and a lot of people saw it. That was an important thing. But I haven't had a one-person show in an L.A. gallery since that show-twelve years ago. 1985. Is that twelve years ago?

JEFFREY RANGEL: You're due.

ELSA FLORES: But I've been showing regularly. Yearly I'm in several shows and it's all just people knowing my work and me kind of doing my self-promotion and meeting people, showing them the work, picking pieces, putting them in nonprofit shows or gallery shows or museum shows. But that takes a lot of work. That's what a dealer is supposed to do, so the artist is left free to do his work. But I have to create a lot of self-promotion, so it takes a lot of time away for me, to do my studio work. Plus managing Carlos's estate takes tremendous energy. It's overwhelming the amount of work that I have to put into that. So I've been trying to let go more and more of estate business, although I depend on it for a living. But I'm hoping. . . . My goal is to be able to make enough money to survive from my own work, so I don't have to concentrate on selling his work. And that would just

be an added bonus when I could sell his work, but not have to push it and really like hustle it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like they come in conflict? Like people who would otherwise might be interested in your work don't see it because you are handling Carlos's estate?

ELSA FLORES: Oh, probably! Although the people who come to look at estate works are after his work. You know, they've known his work or they've followed his work, and they call me because they want to see the work. And when I did have established studios, often they'd come to the studio and I'd show them work there, and my work would happen to be up, and sometimes they would respond. And sometimes they wouldn't. So, yeah, it worked where I'd get some sales from people who weren't familiar with my work.

So I did the Jan Turner show, and Carlos started becoming ill, and when the Hispanic show hit Albuquerque-I mean, Santa Fe-we had taken a house for a month and were hanging out there and doing our show, and then the museum show was coming, and we were going to the opening. And I remember Carlos was real weird at the opening. Because he kept like hanging on my arm, like "Come this way." And normally at openings we'd go our separate ways, and he was off doing his charming host thing, which he was real good at, and I'd be kind of like hanging out and talking to friends or just kind of like, you know, keeping myself busy. And that was just our way. Right? And so it was really weird that he was actually like hanging on to me and wanting me to be next to him. And once we left the opening, I asked him, "What was that all about? You were real clingy." And he said, "Well, I'm having problems with my vision. I couldn't see." I'm like, "What!" And it was one of the, what'cha call it, the symptoms that AIDS patients would get, you know, with the CMV virus for the eye. You know, they were checking him regularly, and he didn't have it, but he was getting their weird narrowing kind of vision thing, and it was happening at this opening. So it really scared him, but he let on like nothing was wrong. And so I was kind of like guiding him, you know, like where to walk and stuff, so that was a little strange. And later we were staying. . . . We rented a little house next to our friend's house, Carol Brawley-Finkelstein, who had been living there for many years. Her neighbor was out of town, so we got to stay in their house, and he had a seizure there. That was another part of the disease, which was one of the scariest parts for me, because the first time he had a seizure we were in. . . . We were driving-and I always drove-and we had this big old Cadillac Brougham, this big old silver Cadillac-which I was always embarrassed to be driving.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: You know, Carlos, when we first got together, he didn't have a car, and I was always the chauffeur, and I had this cool surfer van with a rag top-you know, the safari van with the windows all around?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It was the best van. And I guess it started breaking down. I had to sell it, and then Carlos. . . . You know, Frank Romero always had Cadillacs. They were old beat up Cadillacs, but they were big old Cadillacs. And Carlos kind of wanted to compete him, and get like the top of the line. It was a used car, but he wanted the Cadillac, right? Big one! And so here we are with this big old like, God! Cadillac car that I had to drive. You know, it was comfortable driving it. The thing was like a boat!

JEFFREY RANGEL: I can just picture it.

ELSA FLORES: But it was old like totally out of character.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And so anyway I was driving and Maya was in the back seat, and we were like in the back streets of Hollywood, and I looked over to him, and he started having this attack of something. I thought he was having a heart attack, because I didn't know what it was. And I like totally freaked out. I thought he was going to die right there, right? And I was screaming and like, "No, no, don't. . . ."

Session 3, Tape 2, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . side A, interview with Elsa Flores. . . .

ELSA FLORES: . . . on April the 10th, 1997.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Thank you.

ELSA FLORES: So we're in the back streets of Hollywood when he started having this attack, and I said I had to drive to where there was people on the streets who can help me. So we finally got to Hollywood Boulevard and I screeched over to the corner and there were all these scuzzy kind of guys on the street, and I said, "Please someone help us." And so they pulled him out of the car, and this one, like, alcoholic bum guy was like [untranscribable sound signifying he was totally out of it-Trans.] And this other sleaze guy was like. . . . My daughter was . . . at this point, she knew something was wrong, because I guess he had bitten himself, so he was bleeding. And she was curled up in the fetal position in the back seat and then, even though I was dealing with this emergency, there was these sleazeballs around, and this one guy was looking, like walked around to the other side of the car, and the keys were still in the ignition. He was like checking out, you know, if he can take off with the car with my daughter in it, you know, and then so I had to handle all these . . . this situation and be aware of the whole thing. And they called the ambulance, and by the time they got him to the hospital his seizure had stopped. I didn't know it was a seizure. But it was the most traumatic thing for me because, just like, oh, just the whole thing. You know, thinking he was going to die, not knowing, and then the whole shaking and the eyes bulging. It was awful. Awful, awful.

So in New Mexico he had his second seizure when we were staying at this house next to Carol Brawley, and he saw it coming then. He started shaking when he was standing at the mirror in front of the bathroom, and at this point I knew what it was, so I tried to sit him down so he can go through it. Carol came with a pickup truck and we threw him into the back of the pickup truck and ran to the hospital. And again it had gone away by the time we had gotten there, but it leaves you wiped out. You know, you just kind'a like. . . .

So those were the only two seizures he had because. . . . They were awful. Hated the seizure thing. So how did that. . . . Oh, okay, so he was experiencing a lot of ill health during that New Mexico trip. Actually, we had made two trips to New Mexico. The first trip he wasn't sick. He had been diagnosed, but he had not shown many signs of the disease. I think the second trip. So the first trip must have been. . . . I think the first trip. . . . I'll have to check my resume to see when that Channing Dale Throckmorton show was. I'm not sure it was the same time as the museum show but. . . . I think they were two separate trips.

So the second trip he was already in ill health. But Channing, Dale, and Throckmorton eventually split up, and I had become good friends with Spencer Throckmorton, who was actually the pre-Columbian dealer of the gallery and he's got a pre-Columbian gallery in New York City, although he's doing more like contemporary Mexican photography now than pre-Columbian. So Spencer was a good person to have met-and his assistant Pam Mitchell, who's a dear friend to my family now. She's actually staying here with my sister. She's been there almost a month. And Pam was a great support because Pam had been through the death of Spencer's lover and really helped nurse him in

New York City and went through the whole thing. So when she found out about Carlos she was just there. You know, whenever I needed her she was there, so she was incredible.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So it was good to have people like that. So back to my career in shows. Not having. . . . We did a two-person show at the Laguna Art Institute. Is that what it's called?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Laguna Museum?

ELSA FLORES: Not the museum. The school.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I have that written down here somewhere. [looks through papers] Art Institute of Southern California.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, that's it. The Art Institute where Carlos and I did a two-person show and I got to show my big paintings. Oh yeah, at this point Carlos had been diagnosed and my palette changed dramatically.

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

ELSA FLORES: It went from dark, foreboding, kind of muted, kind of . . . sort of toned-down palette to really bright and optimistic. And it was like I was trying to reverse what I had gone through with my Mom and try to keep things light and optimistic, and that transferred over to my palette. Like I was keeping us going, I was keeping positive, I was hoping for the miracle. And Carlos had been the pessimist throughout this whole thing. So I was putting all this energy into trying to heal him, keep him alive. And he had put a lot of responsibility on me, too, saying I was the only thing keeping him alive.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sounds exhausting.

ELSA FLORES: It was. It was totally exhausting. But it's interesting how it showed itself in the work—that the work was very bright, very whimsical. There was a lot of sensuality. There were a lot of commentary about demons that lurked in this fanciful scene, like serpents that were very phallic-like and these sperm-like figures that were never scary but you can tell they were lurking somewhere in the landscape or in the interior, and there were also commentaries on . . . not so much personal commentaries. Maybe I was trying to remove myself from dealing with that pain. 'Because I was dealing with it daily, you know, so close that. . . . They were commentaries on modern man. Like I did a piece called Remote Control, and for a while there in our house the whole war was who got control of the remote control. [laughter] Who had control. And so this one piece had this guy sitting—this big O—in an armchair, like, "Bam!" zapping the TV, and the TV was like exploding with all this color and paint. It was all this fanciful stuff, you know. Octopus flying through the air. All this stuff was happening. Real powerful paint. A lot of paint, a lot of movement, very large-scale. And another piece was The Computer Age, which was this guy on a flying carpet at a computer. It was kind of talking about modern man. A lot of futurist kind of buildings started surfacing in the piece. Some other pieces were very romantic, with lovers and roses and things like that. But, again, very sort of a hot palette.

And I think Marlena Donahue reviewed that show, and she went on and on about Carlos and his powers of masterly exaggeration with paint, and she was talking about one of my paintings. [laughter] And I was like, "See, that's not fair. You know, just because you're Carlos Almaraz, you know, you're looked at as this great master painter, and here she is talking about my painting." I

wrote her, and I think she retracted but I never saw it. So it was kind of a little bit of a coup. It was like, "Ah-hah! Validation." So that was kind of cool.

And so I had shown that at different places and just continued showing my work. I did a lot of-still do-a lot art auctions. Because it's a way to keep your work out there and your name out there and people keep abreast of your progress as an artist. And apparently it's worked, because a lot of people know of me and my work, and I feel like I haven't publicly been shown as much as has been warranted by people's comments. So that's interesting that, even though I'm not out there publicly, in person-well, I guess I am shown regularly-that people know the work and respect it. So that makes me feel good whenever I hear people. . . . And artists-you know, other artists. That's the biggest compliment, when other artists say, "Oh yeah, I know your work." Like [Ann, Anne] Preston was at that thing for Joan Quinn and I like Ann's work. She had shown with Jan Turner, and I think she still does. She complimented me, and she said she'd been following my work for a while. It was like, "Wow!" That trips me out all the time. It's like . . . I have no idea.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: I'm so cocooned out here.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you see yourself becoming more involved in that. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Socially?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I mean, do you have a desire to [work] through those circles more?

ELSA FLORES: Well, I think the desire would be a political one and not a personal one. Personally, I'd rather not have to do that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

ELSA FLORES: But realistically it's something you have to do . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . you know, if you want to sort of make any advances in your career. And there are definitely groups of people that are very influential, and if you're in with that group or that crowd then you're included. You'll be one of those people that Carlos would recommend. You'll be one of those people Ed Moses would recommend. So it's a political idea that I'm thinking about right now that you've got to play politics. Either you say, "I'm the type of artist, I don't want to play that game". . . . And I did that for years, and actually I didn't have to because Carlos's work was selling so well. So I was fortunate enough that I didn't have to compromise myself that way. And now I think it's part of the work that I have to really start coming out more, and that was one of the reasons in the back of my mind why I accepted doing the presentation at Joan Quinn's event, because, although I thought it was a social move, because people were telling me, "You've got to get out more, you gotta meet people, you gotta show your face," and I always rejected it. I always just didn't want to do that. And then I said, "Well, okay, I better go do it. I'll be social. I'm going to make a conscious effort to go out and be social and meet people." And in retrospect, after I gave my little talk, I felt like, "This is more importantly a political move than a social one," because my proclamation was powerful and people responded to it and it brought a lot of attention to me. And a lot of people will remember that, I think. And already I got a couple of calls, and I think maybe subconsciously it was part of the reason why I decided to do it.

But, yeah, I have been thinking more about it in recent years. Especially now that Maya's not as

needy. Because after Carlos's death I . . . The first period, maybe a couple years, I was, of course, concerned about how she was dealing with it and really wanting to make sure she was okay. But she had a very private way of dealing with it so she wouldn't open herself up. And then I think I was involved so much in my own pain that I probably wasn't even there for her in the way that someone might have been or should have been. Maybe that's just the way it went. That's just the way it developed. But I think she handled it the way that she needed to handle it, and I handled it the way I handled it. But after that, in the last seven years, I really devoted myself to being a good parent for her, and she was like my focus. She was number one, and my work was number two. And now she's less needy and she's thinking about going away to school and I'm thinking this might be when I need to come out and commit myself to my work as number-one priority.

Because I don't find a lot of time for my work, and most of it is because of all this business bullshit I have to deal with. And at times it would drive me crazy because I wouldn't be able to paint. I'd have seven meetings in one week, and that would kill my whole day and I had to be. . . . Normally, I'm a night owl and I like working late at night, but I'd have to get to bed at a certain hour because I had to wake her up and get her ready for school and take her to school. So it wouldn't work, so I was feeling exhausted and cheated and all that stuff-and resentful of Carlos at times for leaving me with this nightmare. And although he knew and he had verbalized it to me, that I would do the right things for him and his work. . . . And I did, sure enough. I scheduled all these things so that. . . . My fear was that he'd be forgotten after he died. And it was my job, because I loved him and I believed in him, that he would not be forgotten, so I immediately scheduled all these shows and retrospectives and museum tributes and all this stuff. And now I realize he would not have been forgotten. But it was something I had to do-to pay homage, I think, in just . . . in my belief of him. But it took its toll on me personally-and my work. Because there were times when I did have a good chunk of painting time, when there was money in the bank and I was able to not concentrate on having to sell his work. So there were periods when. . . . At one point. . . . Ah, yeah, yeah, that's what happened. [laughter] Uh huh, [now I get it]. After his death. . . . It was right at the point when we had both been. . . . A couple years before his death we had been. . . . Before his illness, we had been commissioned this big mural at the Ronald Reagan State Building. We didn't know it was the Ronald Reagan State Building.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: They didn't tell us that when we signed the contract. But we did it anyway. It paid very well. I mean, the biggest commission we had ever received. And Joan Quinn was instrumental in that. She was working with the California Arts Council and she really recommended us, so we were in the running and we won this award. And it was this huge mural, like ten feet by seventy feet, to go in the atrium lobby of this new state courthouse building in downtown L.A. on Third and Spring Street. Carlos had made the initial design and, knowing it was collaboration, we knew that at the moment of creation, the collaboration would happen. It would be a mix then of my style and imagery and his style and imagery. Well, the bureaucratic mess. . . . Red tape just is always there, but it strung us out for like two years. Carlos died. There was this big struggle in power. This one artist, Betty Gold, who had a sculpture commission in the pond right immediately in front of our mural, started this big campaign to take the mural away from me, saying that now that Carlos is gone maybe someone else should get it, like one of her friends, or maybe I wasn't qualified enough to do this. So she wrote all the politicians and suddenly. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: God.

ELSA FLORES: I was aware of it, but I just couldn't deal with it at the time, so other people rallied for me and made her look bad. And in the long run. . . . At the opening, people loved my mural and they hated her sculpture. [laughter] It was like this big fascist thing. It was way oversized for the space,

and unfortunately it's in front of the mural. But so I had this mural commission to do all alone. Carlos had died. I wanted to pay homage and be true to his design so I really didn't put a lot of my style into it except for the thick treatment of paint. But I really wanted it to be sort of homage to his last work. And I had only two months at this point to complete it, because once all the in-house fighting over what to do with it and finally the money came in. And we had been sharing a studio on Molino Street at this time. We had left Spring Street for a while. We were in Spring Street for a long time-Spring Street Studio-and then after Spring Street I think Carlos took a little studio in Highland Park. No, in Eagle Rock. Just for a period when he was doing a show for Jan Turner. And after that we were awarded this commission and we took a big space over on Molino Street. Big old beautiful industrial space. Actually, we did part trade with the owner who was something Zimmerman, Steve Zimmerman. So it was a great space. I got to paint really big. You know, I was doing my own painting, so I was painting these really big splashy paintings again and waiting for this commission deal to come through. Canvases were ready to go and everything. But then Carlos became very ill, he died, I had two months to do it. It was the hottest summer in L.A. history, and the building was like an oven. It was like an oven. I swear, I would like be overcome by the fumes because I was using such volumes of paint, and it was so hot there was no circulation of air, and I'd get dizzy and I'd have these mood swings and I'd get off my ladders and try to lay down on the cool cement floor and it was hot like an oven. It was awful. And somehow I finished that whole mural in two months.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Didn't you have fans working in there?

ELSA FLORES: Fans didn't work. Nothing. I had fans on. Yeah. It was so sweltering hot. And I finished it, though. I got it done. Got the last payment, was able to buy this house, and made some investments. I had a little money in the bank from Carlos's life insurance policy. We had a small policy. And so I was able to have periods where I could concentrate on my work. I left the Molino Street studio and rented a studio over on Boyd Street. Boyd and Maple, I think. It was like Skid Row, it was like scuzzy area. I was from this real modern Molino Street studio and suddenly I'm in this real bad building. And I forget who led me there; someone led me there. Anyway, in this building there was an interesting mix. On my floor there was Terry [Schonhoven], the muralist, George Herms, Francine Matrizano, who is a painter, Lita Albuquerque was on the floor below us, and there were some recording engineer guys in the basement. So it was a real interesting mix of people. So I had taken this big space and I started painting again. Lots of abstract kind of stuff. Just real kind of lots of paint, very abstract without developing the form. I was trying to get more abstract but still keep a figure development, and sometimes it would go completely into the figure and sometimes it would stay abstract. And at that point Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.] needed. . . . He was doing, I think, his Metro piece for-forget where his station is-and so I let him come in and share the studio. And we work really well together, because we are such good friends and we both know how to work communally. We had shared that space for a long time until there was like lots of break-ins happening. The manager of the building was letting his crack friends come in. He was selling crack, but he was letting his homeless guys come in and sleep in the building. So they were ripping us off. And my car kept getting broken into, and I had Maya at home, and I thought, you know, "This Bohemian stuff is great when you're young and no responsibilities, but I have too much to lose. I have to be here for my daughter. I can't take these chances anymore." Because I liked to stay late and work at night sometimes when I can arrange daycare. So it wasn't happening, so I retreated. I came back here and Robert went. . . . And a month or two later everyone got kicked out of the building anyway. They redid everything and it's now, I think, some kind of toy manufacturing center or something.

But . . . I moved here and started. . . . I rented the studio a few blocks away in Pasadena on State Street. It's a great space. It was kind of expensive but, again, I wasn't so worried about money then and had this pretty nice showcase area. We did a lot of sales there, studio sales with friends; we did

group sales. I had this big area again where I could throw paint-you know, get really, really messy. And I started doing a new series of paintings, which were kind of themes that were a take-off from images that I had imprinted in Hawaii, sort of these spiritual kind of fishermen. When I go to Kauai, I rarely work. Sometimes I do, but I don't have a space. The house there is tiny, and if I do work I'll do little five by seven paintings. But normally I just need to be there to replenish and just sort of. . . . I observe a lot of images. Especially all the beautiful bodies on the beaches. And like the reef-walkers, the guys way out-it looks like miles out-standing on the reef! You know, it was like Jesus walking on the water.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] Walking on the water, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And so these images would show up in my work. All these spiritual fishermen guys, which I call them. So the series was Spiritual Fishermen. I also at that time started. . . . Well, several years prior I started doing my first angel series, which is nude women sort of flying through the air. And often the landscape below was Mt. Washington, the scene from our Highland Park house. Oh, and the interesting story is. . . . I think Carlos was reading the life of Yogananda. I forget the name of the book. Yogananda had founded the Self-Realization Center up on Mt. Washington. And Yogananda when he was looking where he would place his center. . . . [knock on door] My sister's here. Well, pause!
[Interruption in taping]

ELSA FLORES: This is Sean. He's my-how old are you, Sean, six?-six year old nephew. And godchild. No, he's not my godchild. Yes, he is. He's my godchild. [laughter]

ELSA FLORES's sister Olga Messarra: Tell about your auntie's memory.

ELSA FLORES: Okay.

SEAN: All right. She's a great artist.

ELSA FLORES: Thank you.

SEAN: And every time I like her paintings, and this April me and her are going to make a fountain together.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Cool! Where?

SEAN: At the L.A. Zoo.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right.

ELSA FLORES: Tell him what you're going to draw in the fountain.

SEAN: Tortoises.

ELSA FLORES: He's an expert tortoise. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Ah, you are?

SEAN: Expert. I have two tortoises.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

SEAN: And me and her are artists.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

ELSA FLORES: He's a good artist.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What do you draw? Do you paint, or do you draw, or what do you do?

SEAN: I paint. And Pam, she has a tortoise that's named Lois, and she carried it, and then I copied her tortoise.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, really?

SEAN: How to paint it.

ELSA FLORES: Tell her what your tortoise is called.

SEAN: Carlos and Cindy.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Carlos and Cindy?

SEAN: Um-hmm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right. That's great.

ELSA FLORES: It was Carlos and Elsa, wasn't it?

SEAN: No, not Carlos and Elsa.

OLGA: Those were the fish.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, the fish.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, okay.

OLGA/ELSA FLORES: Sean never met Carlos. Oh, you guys weren't even married yet.

OLGA/ELSA FLORES: Yes, he did. We were married. We just got married at our house.

OLGA: Yeah, he just got married.

SEAN: Carlos eats a lot. He eats like a pig, and so does Cindy. First Cindy was taller than Carlos, then both of them are getting bigger.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, great.

ELSA FLORES: Did you see Maya's daddy Carlos . . . his car crash painting yesterday at the museum? You went to L.A. County Museum. Did you guys see the painting?

SEAN: No.

ELSA FLORES: You guys didn't go in?

SEAN: Nah, we didn't.

ELSA FLORES: He has a painting there right now.

SEAN: Wow.

OLGA: In which building?

ELSA FLORES: I don't know. I don't know the galleries.

OLGA: [I know there's a free. . .]

SEAN: And I send postcards and I do wonderful pictures.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

ELSA FLORES: Tell him about Carlos's gravestone at the cemetery. He loves the cemetery.

SEAN: Carlos is on it and he's swimming in the water.

ELSA FLORES: He has a snorkel mask on, huh?

SEAN: Um-hm, he does.

JEFFREY RANGEL: All right. What cemetery is that?

SEAN: It's the . . . Hawaii.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, it's in Hawaii?

SEAN: Um-hmm.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

SEAN: All the way to Hawaii. You have to take a long plane.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, you do.

SEAN: But I think it wasn't too long when I went on it. It wasn't too long.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh yeah?

SEAN: Right Mom?

OLGA: Right. Five hours.

SEAN: Um-hmm, five hours.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Especially if you're in first class, huh? [chuckles]

SEAN: Yeah. I'll be in school forever. I won't get a vacation.

ELSA FLORES: You won't?

SEAN: Well, I don't know yet.

ELSA FLORES: Okay.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, thanks for sharing those stories.

SEAN: You're welcome.

JEFFREY RANGEL: We'll see you.

[Interruption in taping

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay, we're back.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, Yogananda story. So I was relating Yogananda to my angel paintings. He was in search of his center, where he would do a center. And he had a vision back in India of this place, so he was traveling the world to find this place and it brought him here to Los Angeles. And he found it on top of Mt. Washington. And when he had his vision, he had a vision of an angel flying over this particular landscape, and not until later, once I had already started the series of angels flying over Mt. Washington, did I hear the story.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: So I thought it was an interesting thing.

Another related kind of a story to my work was when I was doing my. . . . I was doing these exploding heads during that whole mutant series, and I did several with flaming heads, like these flames coming out of this dark figure-often blue figure with like red flaming eyes and things. And someone-I think, Robert Gil de Montes-said, "Well, do you know what this image represents for the [Oodeman, Odoomon] people in the Caribbean?" Which is derived from some African cultures. I said, "No, what?" He goes, "This symbolizes Jesus Christ." I go, "Wow! That's really trippy." So it was collective unconscious.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You tapped into something!

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, definitely. So I was talking about the differences of subject matter. So I was doing this whole series of angels. I stopped doing them because angels became so trendy. You know, everyone's like . . . the whole angel thing. I hate doing . . . you know, I hate that. So I try not to do angels, although a lot of the more recent images are not literally angels, but they're beings with auras and energy and light-and again still very much involved in interpersonal type relationships and nature and a lot of water, a lot of women sort of in fertile waters. And the whole show in Honolulu that just closed on the eighth was pretty much about that-these images of spiritual-type figures and people who hold light and who share it and show the way, guide the way, with this light out of, a lot of times, dark landscapes, like, you know, nighttime settings.

So I was talking about being in Hawaii and how observing the reef-walkers kind of led to a lot of these images, and so when I was at the studio here on State Street it was great. I was playing with a lot of that. And then my Gateway project kind of took me away from my studio, so the studio kind of sat there empty for like a year in which I didn't get a chance to paint. And I finally let go of the studio. I was working at Robert's studio in Echo Park for the project, so I should have let go of the studio a year before I did because I was paying rent all that time. And I miss having it because it was so local. It was just there. Maya felt good that I wasn't in downtown. She was always afraid for me in downtown. And here I was close by so I could work late and be in total touch with her. I can just run home if I needed to. And during that whole . . .

Session 3, Tape 2, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . side B, interview with Elsa Flores, on April 10, 1997. Go ahead.

ELSA FLORES: Yes. Oh, there were four major works that I completed prior to my Gateway project, and they were all completed here at the State Street studio and later shown at Eighteenth Street Gallery in Santa Monica. I had a show with Gronk. They were large-scale works, and they were old canvases that had never been resolved. And often I do that. Often I work on many different canvases at the same time, and sometimes the canvases I'm working on for years and years. I have one canvas that I've had since high school that I'm still working on, and it's not a good thing as far as a conservationist's point of view, because the thing will probably fall apart at some point. But that's not my concern; that's for the restorers to deal with. [laughter] So I'm not too careful with technical stuff.

But I still take care. Lately I've been using quality paints. Before Carlos and I would use like ninety-nine cent tubes of paint from Standard Brands—you know, student-grade paints. And unfortunately some of the hottest colors that Carlos liked using have faded since then, because they were just cheap paints. So now I use quality materials. But the way I lay it on, and because some of them are years old, they're more fragile. Some will fall apart.

And in other cases, when I was really heavily into the prepared wax. . . . It's a wax medium, so it's already been prepared. You don't have to melt it down—which I hated that process of having to melt wax. Plus I was afraid because it can easily start on fire, and I didn't want to put myself in that kind of danger because I could see an accident happening really easy. So I used this prepared wax, which was like lard. It was like this really great surface. I was doing this series of Maya's toys. After the Jan Turner show, I was so sick of the figure it was like okay, I want to do something unrelated to the figure. So I got a bunch of Maya's toys, some of these old Mexican chairs and a little tugboat and other things, and I would paint that. And I would use this Dorland's—much like cake frosting. I call it my Betty Crocker technique.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So with the paint brush and the spatula I would do these great. . . . I did several birthday cakes. They were great. The cakes were fabulous. And so that was fun. That was a whole other thing. But those are more fragile, as well, because as they get older they're brittle, so you have to be careful how you handle them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I can see that.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And so the last four paintings I did. . . . Let me tell you about one painting before these last four paintings. The first painting I did immediately after Carlos's death. . . . I went into the Molino Street studio, which I had my tent set up for big painting, and I just like attacked this canvas, and again what surfaced was this woman sort of in the center of the painting. She's nude and she's covering her face like this. [demonstrates] To the side of her is this face surging forth, like kind of like. . . . It's hard to make out but it's there. It's just like this spirit just surging forth. And on the other side there were elements of sperm and I think maybe a little fetus, but that might have been in a different painting which I took after Edvard Munch's Death and the Maiden. I had redone that painting, sort of contemporized it, using an AIDS theme for symbolizing modern man's dilemma—where there's a fetus and the sperm kind of floating around. But this one painting was very powerful. It was called Lover's Lament, and it was obviously gushing, for my loss. So that was a really strong painting.

The paintings that I had completed here, one was called Strange Rituals, which had all these. . . . Again, it was an unresolved canvas but it had wonderful areas that I didn't want to lose but it still

hadn't come together. That was a really hard way of working. I did the Honolulu show that way, too, because of time restraints. I wanted the surface to be articulated, so I didn't want to have to spend all those months building up a surface of the canvas, so instead I took old pieces that I didn't like or that were not finished and started working on them. But often they have a ghost of the old painting . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . so you either have to work with it and turn it into something or try to get rid of it, like scrape it down or something. And it's really hard working that way, and I didn't like it. I was not that pleased with the show in Honolulu for that reason. It wasn't normally how I would work from my subconscious mind. I had to struggle with getting an image to fit on this painted surface. So I didn't feel great about that series of work.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How was the response?

ELSA FLORES: Good. Yeah, I sold some work and people loved it, they just loved it. I had a good turn-out, lots of friends and artists from Kauai and stuff. And now I'm real excited because I've got tons of material-from that mural job still. We had bought so much paint . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: . . . that I've got this stockpile of paint. So I've got like all the material in the world, which is great, because I couldn't afford to buy the paint right now, and I've got stretcher bars that I bought from a friend-a bunch of stretcher bars-and I had just stretched canvases. And in the good days when money was flowing-I was so spoiled now that I realize-I'd have the stretcher-bar people stretch the canvases for me. And I was stretching canvas the other day. I was like, "This is hard work. I forgot." It's physically demanding, you know. Just on your hands, pulling with the pliers and trying to get it taut.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It's really hard work. And back to basics. [laughter] And the fun thing is that it's like all going to be fresh, and I'm just going to do what I want to do. I'm not going to do what I think people want to see. I notice that, with Carlos in his work, at one point he had become such a commodity and there was waiting lists for, "Give us another Echo Park, give us another Car Crash, that he was afraid to . . . he started becoming timid about his imagery, about changing and developing his imagery, because he felt suddenly he had an overhead to maintain, financially, and he didn't want to fall out of favor because it might ruin him financially. You know, it often happens with artists that you sort of get stuck in a style for the same reasons. So he started like becoming very unhappy with his work, because he felt like a machine, and he was like pumping out these paintings and giving them to the gallery. The gallery would sell them and he'd get the money, but at the time it was all going to the tax man, so he wasn't even benefiting from his creations. You know, we were like in a hole with the tax man because he was making money but we had no write-offs. We didn't own anything. It was frustrating for him, and I saw him struggle with that, because, you know, the type of person and artist he was, it was only natural for him to develop into different ways. He got through it, though. He got through it. He realized that. . . . I think he started trying new themes in his work and he did just as well because his painting was so great that. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I've seen that happen before that people are hesitant or reluctant to break out of a certain theme or mode that they've been working in . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . and it ends up being counter-productive in the long run.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it does, it does. So I'm in the fortunate position where there's no demand for any particular work that I do. I know I can do certain images and I would sell them, but I'm not dependent on that, so I'm going to go in there and start a new body of work. I really want to paint thick and lushly and spontaneously, maybe even more abstract like an Abstract Expressionist would paint.

And the good news is that painting's back. It's made it's resurgence, thank God, because there were years of like conceptual and minimalist shit. It was like killing me, because I like to go into a gallery and see beautiful art, something that will inspire me and make me want to come and paint. And you'd go into galleries and have to read, or you'd have to "get it," you know, and it was like so like, "God, anyone could do this." You know, there was a lot of times no skill involved. You know, very heady, very intellectual pursuit, but I didn't see beauty in a lot of the art, and so that was really like bringing me down. And we were still painting, and Carlos would always say, "There are cycles, and painting will always come back." And so now that painting's coming back, I said, "Well, this is my time. I have to show. You know, people have been waiting to see me come out and do a show again and people have been asking me about it and so maybe it's time to jump on this wave of painting before it rolls back out to sea."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Does that feel exciting for you?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Do you feel like there's a degree of pressure involved in that?

ELSA FLORES: No, there's no pressure, again because I'm not dependent on selling it and I'm not afraid of changing my style because no one's expecting a style. The pressure would be in trying to find a gallery to exhibit them, because I do want to have a show again. It's time. It's been twelve years.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. I was going to say, it seems like it's a matter of timing.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it's timing, totally. Totally timing. And I feel like this is it. I think my forties are going to be very productive, focused, full of energy. They're physically demanding, so I'm getting my body in shape and ready to tackle it, because I physically get very involved, and I use like big like brooms and all kinds of tools, just to spread masses around.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'd like to see that.

ELSA FLORES: I know. I like dread it because it's going to be like Kuhn's studio. It's going to be like paint everywhere-the ceilings, everywhere. That's why I tented myself in, but even with that it just gets everywhere. And since I'm working at home now I really hate that idea, because it's going to wind up in the house, it's going to wind up on the furniture, on the rugs, everywhere. God, I'd hate for that to happen. So I'm thinking maybe. . . . I'm going to start here, though. I'm not going to let it stop me. And then maybe when some of my commission money comes in from the zoo project and the El Sereno Rec Center then I'll get a studio to do those projects and I'll also get to paint as messy as I want to get.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I'll look forward to seeing it.

ELSA FLORES: Me, too. So, then there's a Hawaii chapter we never talked about.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Shall we go on?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Umm, I'm getting a little cold.

ELSA FLORES: Do you want to go in or do you want to wait and do it next time?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Why don't we. . . . I don't know, it's up to you. What do you feel like doing?

ELSA FLORES: What time is it?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Five-thirty.

ELSA FLORES: Five-thirty. Oh, I probably have to prepare dinner for Maya.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And help her with her homework. Or I could just let her fend for herself. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Hang on a second.

Session 4

Interview with Elsa Flores

Conducted by Jeffrey Angel

At Casa Buena Vista, California

1997 April 30

Tape 1, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is an interview with Elsa Flores on April 30, 1997, at the artist's house. The interviewer is Jeff Rangel. Yeah, okay. Good, so you can just go whenever you're ready.

ELSA FLORES: Do you have to date it and all that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's already done, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Wow, you're on top of it this time, huh? Got the date right? Got the date right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. Let's see, we're January, February, March, April thirtieth.

ELSA FLORES: Is it the thirtieth?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, tomorrow's the first.

ELSA FLORES: O-h-h-h . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I know.

ELSA FLORES: . . . my mortgage is past due.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Rent.

ELSA FLORES: Bummer. [laughter] You can get fined. I hate that. Okay, hello. We're talking about Kauai today-or Hawaii-in the Hawaiian experience. Well, let's see, actually, I was the first one in my family to ever travel to Hawaii, and it happened during. . . . After my high school graduation, Roosevelt High School which is in East L.A. was having this trip sponsored by the school with some chaperones to Hawaii and a girlfriend of mine, Elsa Rivas-we call her "Chocolate" because she's dark, so I was "Vanilla" and she was "Chocolate"-and Elsa Rivas convinced my mom to let me go. My mom wouldn't let me out of the house. I mean, I couldn't go to dances or parties or anything. So she loved Elsa Rivas and she trusted her-not knowing that Elsa Rivas was wild. She was like the party-est girl you would ever know, but my mom dug her. Everyone loved Elsa. She had a great personality. So she let me go. And it turns out that a whole bunch of my crowd, which my mom didn't like, they were going, too, so I hung out with my group and Elsa kind of went off with her group and we used to meet up once in a while. So we went to Hawaii on this graduation trip. I got to go instead of going to the prom-although I didn't have a date for the prom anyway, so I was happy to go to Hawaii. And we went and we did, I think, two weeks there. It seemed like two; maybe it was a week.

JEFFREY RANGEL: In Honolulu?

ELSA FLORES: It was Honolulu. It was my first exposure. We had a great time. Bike rode and hooked up with these Hawaiian guys and Filipino guys and smoked Hawaiian dope and went to the beach. We just had a good old time partying.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] Some Maui wowie?

ELSA FLORES: Maui wowie! And actually the last night we were there. . . . The Filipino guys and the Hawaiian guys didn't like each other. The Filipinos are pretty violent when it comes to feuds. So in our hotel room they started fighting and the Filipino guy pulled out a knife. And luckily no one got cut, but it was like this panic and we were waiting for the bus out on the curb. We were terrified they were going to come back and attack us or something. It didn't happen but. . . . So that was my first exposure to Honolulu. Since we didn't have cars, we did a little bit of exploring of the other side of the island. With these guys. Oh, yeah, the Hawaiian group took us up into the hills where they had this little shack and they were growing this [pocalolo] everywhere. So, you know, we were just young and naive and sort of taking _____. I had my camera. I took lots of pictures. And came back. Just fell in love with, even though it was a city, getting out of sight of the city. I'm real connected to natural places, and the countryside and the beaches and the mountains and the forests were so beautiful that I was in love with the island, not thinking I'd ever go back for a long time.

Then a few years later my sister Margaret, my older half-sister. . . . She was married to a Navy guy, and they had been living all over the world. He was a real jerk, and he wanted to take her as far away from her family as he could. And he actually told us that. Because we were a very close family, and he was very egocentric and he wanted her total attention. He was actually very childlike and he would act like a baby. He'd have tantrums and he'd want her total attention. So he said, he's taking her as far away from us as he could. And Margaret and I were closest. . . . She was my closest sibling. She was very bright. She went to my same high school and she could have gotten a scholarship but she never pursued a college education. Because we were so poor, she decided to

go straight into the workplace and she got a job with Security Pacific Bank. That's when she met her husband, who was working with title insurance downtown and they met in the parking lot. And so anyway they ran off and she was stationed all over the place. The last place she had been stationed was the Philippine Islands, where she had her second son. Her first son she had here in [Tahatchopee]. The first son, Douglas [Davidson-Ed.], is a performance artist/drag queen and he just won. . . . Last year he won the talent, beauty pageant, drag queen show in Honolulu. He moved back to Honolulu. He was living here for a while, and I sponsored him to join Rachel Rosenthal's workshop . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, great.

ELSA FLORES: . . . so to try to channel him into a more sort of creative. . . . Because he was living on that real edgy kind of dangerous place of the underworld, the drag-queen scene. But he was more than a drag queen. He was really an artist. He was an intellectual, he was brilliant, but he didn't know how to channel it, so I was trying to get him to actually go to an art school so he would be appreciated for what he did. But he's also kind of attracted by that whole life-style, that underworld. And this year he just finished the second pageant, and he got first runner-up.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh.

ELSA FLORES: And my sister actually went to the performance, so it's funny.

JEFFREY RANGEL: He's losing his beauty in age.

ELSA FLORES: He sure is.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh.

ELSA FLORES: He likes to expose himself and he produces these 'zines-you know, the 'zines everyone-but his are very pornographic. He likes to shock people. Shock value is important to him. Her other son, Ian, who's now living in Honolulu, too-full of tatoos, just full of tatoos, and he was pretty much wild for a while, he had once. . . . When my sister and her husband, Jay [Davidson-Ed.], broke up, they were getting ready to leave Honolulu where they had been stationed to go be stationed in Japan, and the marriage, after fourteen years, just wasn't working. So they split up then, and Jay faked a fake heart attack, to have pity so his son Ian wouldn't leave him, so he wouldn't be alone. So he says, "You can't leave me. If you leave me, I'm going to die." So he faked this heart attack and poor Ian had to stay with him. And Ian said when he finally grew up and left his dad, the last thing his dad told him was, "And don't you go getting tatoosed."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Nice thing [to remember].

ELSA FLORES: So Ian's like tattoo man; he's got tatoos everywhere. So it was a highly dysfunctional family. There was not a lot of sharing and generosity with the family, because the dad was so selfish and my sister Margaret was not a giving mother either. She tried. I think Margaret suffered from being the eldest child in our family. She had a different dad, she was much older than we were, and my mom was having problems with her health because of my dad, so she kind of was the adult child, she had to take care of us. So she tried to get out of the house as soon as she could. She just picked the wrong guy. So that's that story.

So when Margaret and Jay moved to Honolulu, I started visiting them regularly and getting to know the island more. I had never been to any of the other islands. But I just really dug being there. She'd take me out and stuff, and then when I was old enough we'd go with-well, I was old enough then-I'd

take trips with my other sister, Olga [Messarra-Ed.], we'd go there, or friends-like Elsa Rivas went with me one time and cousins and we'd do yearly treks there.

Then after she had. . . They went to Japan. She came back to live in Honolulu. Margaret was working on the base as an employment officer. So she was Civil Service and was still pretty connected to that. Funny, Margaret was always much more assimilated than the rest of my brothers and sisters. She wanted to be in white society. I mean, she never dated Chicano guys, and she was the perfect letter-girl in high school, and hung out with the goodies. And very conservative in that way, which is funny, because she was the most Méxicana. She had actually lived in México as a child. When her dad and my mom split up they went back to Mexico and lived there for. . . So she was very fluent in Spanish, much more so than my brothers and sisters. And yet she turned out to be very conservative. So she kind of was attached to the umbilical cord of Civil Service-you know, government employment. And she could have done much better had she left, because she's very bright. You know, she had a lot of potential. And people liked her. She had a good sense of humor. But she just couldn't leave the security-which paid nothing. Civil Service is still. . . The cost of living in Hawaii is tremendous. So she was always broke and struggling.

And had a series of relationships. She lived with one other man at one point, and we would still go visit. She just recently married. Last May-a year ago-she married-finally-a Chicano. She went through a rebirth. She was a born-again Latina. After all these years, finally in her fifties, she-well, late forties now in her fifties-she discovered her ethnicity.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow, better late than never.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. And then she started this whole Méxicano-[Hawaiiano] group, and she's putting together these cultural conferences in Hawaii, trying to bring speakers and arts.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Great.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, so she's totally into it. So it's funny that she's finally come back to her roots. Maybe that'll happen to Maya. Hope not until the fifties but . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: She's got a while.

ELSA FLORES: . . . she's got a while. So during . . . I forget . . . probably. . . When was it we first went to Hawaii? I'm wondering if the first trip was it. Yeah, I guess Maya had born. Because Maya was an infant. She was still sort of in her stroller and stuff. I had married Carlos, we had our baby, and I hadn't been to Hawaii in a while, so I said, "Let's go to Hawaii." And he protested, "What do I want to go to Hawaii for? It's like Las Vegas. I don't want to go to Hawaii." You know, his image of Hawaii was this commercialized Las Vegas kind of thing, where culture was processed and canned. And I said, "Oh, come on. Let's just go." So I convinced him to go, and we wound up. . . We were always very independent. We never wanted to stay with relatives. Because we liked being in our hotel room and walking around naked and doing whatever we wanted to do. Always upset our family, because they were hurt, but it's just our style. So we stayed in this high-rise hotel which overlooked Waikiki, and Carlos had always been a voyeur so he always had his binoculars with him.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So he spent hours on the balcony checking out the tourist trip, you know. It's like so stereotypical tourist-you know, their big Hawaiian shirts, and their cameras hanging, and their Bermuda shorts and their what-you-call-it . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Athletic socks.

ELSA FLORES: . . . athletic socks. And he loved it. He tripped out. He really dug Waikiki. He was checking out the dope deals down on the street and stuff and drawing and painting. I just came across some of his pastels of that scene off of our balcony in Waikiki. And so he loved it and he was a tropical man. He loved the water. He loved swimming and snorkeling, so he really got off on the that.

And I had, for some reason, never explored any of the other islands, and Kauai had always intrigued me only because it's known as the "Garden Island," and because I have a connection to nature and gardens, it's like, "Gotta go there." Molokai was the "Friendly Island," the Big Island was the "Big Island." [laughs] And what is Maui? The "Island of the Valleys," I think. So we said, "Let's go to Kauai." So we had booked a week at this hotel over on the south shore, which was Poipu and rented a car and checked in. My sister Olga was with us on this trip. Hated it. It was like, "This is Kauai?" It was the dry side of the island, so there were cactus growing it was so dry on that side.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: But it was perfect for tourism, because it never rained, so people who wanted sun and beautiful beaches, it was perfect. But for us it was like, "Eeuw, this is awful." And the hotel is like, you know, you had to wear a dinner coat at dinner. And Carlos said, "I hate this kind of place. I hate this restaurant. Let's get . . ." And we'd have this big fight, and Olga would laugh at us. And so we said, "Let's get out of here." So we made up some lies so that they would refund our money and we got in our car and we said, "Let's just go. Let's go explore the rest of the island." And we got in our car and headed around the perimeter of the island. Actually, there was only one road at the time, that only went around this island. And it didn't even connect. It stopped at some point. You either had to go up to one point and turn around and come back, and there was an eleven-mile gap in between which was a grand canyon.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: It's an incredible grand canyon. It looks like the Grand Canyon here in Colorado. It's awesome, but it's laden in green foliage against the red rock, and incredible hiking trails and stuff. So we headed north towards the north shore, because we always knew the north shore was the wet side of the island, south was always dry. So we said, "Let's go north." Got in the car. Soon as we rounded the bend, like getting into Hanalei Bay on the north shore it was like, "Whoa!" Like awesome, dramatic, scenic, tropical, lush, verdant, paradise. It was like this is, in my mind, what Hawaii should have always been like.

And we just fell in love with it and we just cruised-we didn't know where we were going-and cruised over past Hanalei Bay-again, there was like ten miles of winding rural, scenic, incredible country road-and passed by this little bungalow on the beach that said "Auntie and Uncle's Vacation Rental." We said, "Let's go there. Let's see if we can stay there." Called the phone number. Sure enough, it was available. It was a little duplex. And we checked in and we stayed there for a week, and said, "Wow! This is great. We love Hawaii." And he fell in love with it; I fell in love with it. At the same time, he started making a lot of money-more money than we had ever known. You know, we were always very poor, from hand to mouth. And the tax-man was killing him, because we still were poor, because all of his extra money was going to taxes. We had no write-offs. We had no idea of what to do financially to protect ourselves, and finally his sleaze-bag accountant, who screwed us in many ways, said, "You've gotta buy something. You know, you need the write-off or else this is killing you." And we were in tremendous debt. We owed the tax guy a lot of money. So we started looking around here in L.A., Highland Park, and we actually wanted to buy our house in Highland Park. It was a great old Craftsman house overlooking the valley, Mount Washington, the Southwest Museum and down-on a clear day-Palos Verdes and the peninsula. It was a great house but had major termite damage, like underground termites. And the contractors came to see it, and

they said, "You're going to put a lot of money into it and for this neighborhood you'll never get it back."

So we said, "Well, what are we going to do?" So when we finally went to Kauai we said, "You know what?" And we had been looking to buy houses before that, and anything we could afford at the time was in a real bad area. So when we got to Kauai, fell in love with it, we said, "You know what? Maybe we should buy something here." Not knowing what the market was like. We said, "Well, let's look around." And hooked up with. . . . The rental agency that rented us the little bungalow also did real estate. And it turns out this man, Lee Hefner, went to the same elementary school Carlos did in Compton or something, when they were kids. They weren't in the same class-they were a few years apart-but it was like this, "Wow!" This incredible coincidence. And this guy Lee went to Kauai twenty years prior because he was a surfer and all the surfers went to live there. And so the guy lived for surfing and he was selling real estate to make a living. Now he's a fisherman. Now he fishes tuna. And he moved to the big island but he still surfs.

And so Lee started showing us some stuff and we told him what we can afford which was not a lot, and Lee said, "Well, once in a while there's some fixer-uppers that do come up." For our purposes, we needed a house that was rentable-but as a vacation rental-because we wanted to go spend time there every year, and we didn't want a full-time resident in there, tenant. So we were looking at different areas around the north shore, different little communities, but he said, "You know, the best place for a vacation rental is right here in this little neighborhood called Haena, H-a-e-n-a, Haena. It's great, the Hawaiian language. It's like ah, eh, ee, oh, oo. [Hawaiian pronunciation of a, e, i, o, u-Ed.] Total like Spanish. So it was like, "Got it down."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Like, "Got it."

ELSA FLORES: And everyone thought Carlos was local. They all thought he was Hawaiian, because in a day he'd turn chocolate brown and they'd all stop and ask him for directions and stuff. And he was always wearing Hawaiian shirts, even before he went to Hawaii. He loved Hawaiian shirts. So that was really funny. So Lee Hefner started showing us properties, and we didn't find anything. We went back for like two or three years, still looking, and we still hadn't found anything. I think maybe at the end of the second year Lee says, "There's something coming up, and it's the last fixer-upper in this side of the island." Because they started developing the north shore, this big-I guess it was the Sheraton then-built this five-star hotel up on Princeville. And Princeville is like Orange County. It's like golf-course community, condos. It's in a fabulous location overlooking scenic Hanalei Bay, but it's like Orange County and we definitely didn't want to live up there. And Hanalei Bay was inaccessible, like million dollar lots. You know, all the celebs were down there. So we dug Haena. It was so great, and the best beaches were in Heena. The best, incredible snorkel spots and surf spots-they were all there. And so he took us to see this house and it was a run-down, little, low, nothing plantation cottage, like a prefab kind of-they call it a Hicks home-that most of the locals lived in and there were twelve hippies living in this house. It was totally overgrown on the outside. It was like all wet and damp from all the rain. They used to call that area the swamp down there, because it was inaccessible. Not until ten years before had they put a road in. In the seventies what was called the Taylor Camp was down in Haena, and was it Robert Taylor? Liz Taylor's brother [_____-Ed.] owned this stretch of beach, an incredible amount of property, and he let the hippies come in and squat. So they built tree houses, and it was like this paradise, this Shangri La, and it was called Taylor Camp. Very famous. All the hippies went there to live. But the hippies started shitting in the ocean and the reef was suffering, and so the authorities came in and burned down all their homes, all their dwellings, and got them out of there. Well, most of the hippies stayed. You still see old hippies all throughout the island, but Taylor Camp was no more.

So this one group of hippies from Taylor Camp were living in this house that we were looking at. One was a Rolfer. She had this huge, heavy-duty bed in one of these tiny bedrooms that she'd

perform her heavy-duty massage in. And another guy was a gardener . . . two guys were gardeners. They were just like really nice people. The house had a really good feeling, like really good energy, and and it was affordable. It was \$125,000 or something like that, and so we said, "Let's do it. Let's buy it." And so, not knowing-again, being very naive financially-we always thought you've got to pay it off. "We've got to put down as much as we can and pay big balloon payments a year, try to pay the sucker off," because that's what we thought, not knowing that was going to kill our tax . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: The tax write-off.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and the stupid accountant never told us, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: God.

ELSA FLORES: It was a blessing in disguise, though, because three or four years into these massive balloon payments, which were really hurting us-they were like \$40,000 a year balloon payments-we decided at one point when we only owed \$40,000 on it that we should refinance. [laughs] And we did, so luckily we had this great house which now has a small balance on it.

Since then I've had to get a loan on it and so the mortgage is higher than it had originally been, but still, now, since that hotel came in and all the celebs came in, also, down into Haena buying million-dollar stretches of property, all property value just sky-rocketed, so just the lot that we had we couldn't touch it, you know. The prices were so high. So we were really fortunate to get this last fixer-upper.

So we let the hippies live in there for another year, and we kept coming back to Kauai and renting this little cottage, the vacation rental place-Auntie and Uncle's-and got to know some of the locals and became part of the community, became involved with the art community. Carlos being very group-oriented and very charismatic, of course, found the only good gallery on the island, introduced himself, set up a show, got all his artist friends in on it, and they all came and had shows and became real active with the local artists there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: What gallery was it?

ELSA FLORES: It was called Stone's Gallery. And actually it started in this funny little outdoor mall, and when we first found the gallery it was a bookstore and the gallery was way in the back. But it was like the only place you could see contemporary art. Everything else was tourist-oriented art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Even in the . . .

ELSA FLORES: Honolulu?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, on Kauai in the really exclusive community, there were no. . . .

ELSA FLORES: No art?

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . galleries in there?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, it was all like rainbows and seascapes. Yeah, nothing like that. So these were real working contemporary artists that had their little community thing happening there. And eventually the gallery evolved getting rid of the books and made it all gallery and coffee shop. So it was a really cool scene happening, and curators from Honolulu, at the museums there. . . . There really was just one museum at the time, which the Honolulu Academy of Art. She had a nice collection, but, again, there wasn't a lot of support for the contemporary arts. Each island had there little communities of artists. Lots of artists working on the island, as you can imagine. It's just a place

artists would want to flock to. All kinds of artists: writers and filmmakers. You know, people just want to be there. Most of the contemporary artists that were at all successful-you know, monetarily-usually were bi-coastal. They couldn't make a living in Hawaii. None of our artist friends who live there make a living off their art. You know, they all have jobs and make their art on the side. So those that did make a living off the arts usually lived in L.A. or New York or San Francisco or Seattle. They all sort of were stationed here and went over there to make art and spend time, then come back here and make money. So that was kind of what we were planning to do. We realized it would be nice to live here but we couldn't do it, the first place.

Carlos could actually have done it, because he had already been set-up gallery-wise. I mean, he can produce work anywhere, send it to his gallery here, and they'd sell. You know, no problem. But his ego was insecure about it. He felt like they would forget about him if he had disappeared from the scene. And, sure enough, you have to be here to make it happen, if you're going to be in the scene. Unless you're big-time and you can live anywhere in world, then you show up and you do your openings and that kind of stuff. But he learned that politically you had to make it happen for yourself.

So that was our plan. We were going to spend summer. . . . Well, at that time it wasn't as structured because Maya wasn't in school yet, so we can spend October there if we wanted to. And then once she started school here in L.A.-or in Pasadena-we had to start just doing summer there and her spring break. Once in a while we'd take her out for an extra week or two and do a trip, but we started routinely going over for summers, hooking up with the artists, doing shows. At one point, I think Carlos did a first show there at Stone's Gallery, and then I did a show with him there. And then after his death we did a sort of a memorial show, and then I actually got, I think, a solo show there, showing some big paintings.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Is this the same gallery that you showed in recently?

ELSA FLORES: No.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Not there?

ELSA FLORES: No, no. So Stone's Gallery was doing really well and, like I said, it was very well respected throughout the islands because it showed some of the finest contemporary art. I mean, real sort of gutsy stuff that you normally don't see. And then the gallery had moved. After Carlos's death, the gallery had moved out of that shopping center and into this other old, historic plantation mansion, which turned into gift shops and restaurants, and they had a gallery in this building. And still doing pretty well-they also framed; they were framers, too-so they still did pretty well. And then the hurricane hit and destroyed the gallery, and after that, after the hurricane hit, the guy. . . . Remember that crazy guy who went into a law firm and killed everyone in San Francisco? Killed a bunch of lawyers?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

ELSA FLORES: Happened probably around 1992, '93. Well, one of the guys that was killed was one of the chief financial backers of Stone's Gallery.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, God.

ELSA FLORES: So they couldn't rebuild. They had no money, they had no backers, and no one was willing to do that. The island was a disaster area, so everyone was hurting financially, so the gallery kind of disappeared. So there's no contemporary arts gallery on the island at all now. Most of my friends are showing in restaurants, once in a while. Or they go to Honolulu and try to do shows with

the museums.

Well, since before Carlos's death. . . . Fritz Frauchiger, who used to run the ARCO Center for Visual Arts, which was in the big ARCO Towers downtown, had left ARCO once it closed and done some other gallery work in the city. And then he won an appointment to become the director of this new museum that was being created in Honolulu called the Contemporary Museum-the Contemporary Museum of Art. And Fritz had always been a big fan of Carlos's and gave him his first really big show here in L.A. at the ARCO Gallery. And it was a fabulous gallery. It was set in the old Spaulding mansion in this residential neighborhood, a very wealthy residential neighborhood overlooking Waikiki. Downtown Honolulu. Imelda Marcos lived across the street. You know, it was like all gated estates. So this fabulous old mansion was converted into gallery spaces-cafe, book store-really fine . . . had beautiful grounds so there was sculpture gardens. David Hockney produced its permanent installation, a pavilion, and so it was like Fritz. . . . It was great because we were excited that there's a contemporary scene happening. I think Masami Teraoka had one of the first shows, so we went out and we had met Masami through Fritz. He had made dinner for us at Fritz's, and Chris Frauchiger, Fritz's wife, [at-Ed.] one of their many director's homes because they kept moving because they were still constructing stuff. They lived in four different. . . .

Session 4, Tape 1, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, this is tape one, side B.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, so the Contemporary Museum was a real big deal for the arts in Hawaii, a fabulous showcase. Masami had the big first one-man show, and then they had planned to do a show of Carlos's. He died before they got to do the show, but after his death they did a print show of his, so they did exhibit him. And since then the owner of the museum. . . . It was a private museum. It was owned by Thurston Twigg Smith, who . . . a very wealthy old Hawaiian family. And he had married one of his curators, Lila, who was now Lila Twigg Smith, and Lila and [Twigg] collected contemporary arts from throughout the islands, so they supported a lot of artists and they had collected some of Carlos's work, some of my work. And from time to time they'd do permanent collection shows, so we would be exhibited in the museum in that way. And then the latest show I had was done there at the Contemporary Café, which was a good showcase for emerging artists. I wanted to show in the big room and the now current curator, Jay Jensen, who used to be the curator or the assistant director at the Academy of Arts came and took. . . . I don't think he took Twigg's job, but he came in and became-not Twigg, Fritz [Frauchiger-Ed.]; because Fritz had left-he had come in and now he was the big curator. Really nice guy. He works incredibly hard. He does like twenty-hour days sometimes. I mean, he doesn't leave the museum, and he does everything. So I had been talking with him throughout the years and saying. . . . He liked my large works but it was just very difficult and they had a low budget so getting the paintings from here over there. . . . And he was watching me, and I told him. . . . They like to support local artists, right? And even though I had been migrating there since the seventies they didn't still see me as a local artist, because I didn't have a space there. But when I was there I would produce art-not always but I would-and definitely influenced by the location of some of the themes of paintings that I would produce. So I was talking to him and saying, "Look, I'm trying to make a move over here." Actually, the reason I took a loan out my house was to build a studio there, like a little garage, so I can produce works because the house was so small I was limited. And I told him I needed exposure, I need the collector-ship of Honolulu-like the contemporary collectors-to get to know my work. And so we decided to do a small show. He had offered me another annex gallery for larger work, but no one ever went to the annex gallery. I wanted to be up on the museum grounds. So I opted for the cafe gallery, which a lot of my friends had done and had had successful shows. So I got to do small work for that show. The largest work I think was, what's that, maybe four feet by twenty-four inches.

Most everything was small-eight by ten inches, five by seven inches-and a few larger works. So the show had been up for a little over three months and sold four pieces, which I was happy about, and it got lots of great response. So that was kind of putting my foot in the door. Now I want to get him to show my big work!

JEFFREY RANGEL: [Hang them up] in the main gallery?

ELSA FLORES: I want to be in the main gallery. And I will eventually. It's just timing and politics.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: So, anyway, since then Twigg Smith had divorced Lila Twigg Smith and he married her best friend-she was really mad-her best friend Carol, who took over her old job as curator so . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Movin' in.

ELSA FLORES: . . . it was like a pay-back, too, because Lila had sort of moved in on Twigg's previous wife.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

ELSA FLORES: So there was all these politics, but Lila kind of spends most of her time in New York now. So the new director. . . . Oh, the new director's really interesting. Oh God, I'm trying to think of her name. I'm forgetting names today. She used to work in San Francisco at a museum, I believe, and she married the ex-director of the Mexican Museum, who is now the director at the Academy of Art in Honolulu. So she's the director of the Contemporary and he's the director of the Academy. So it's funny-this Chicano in one place and then his wife in this other museum. So it's kind of interesting. I'm trying to get them interested. They had always been interested, but I want to kind of finalize that they do a show of Carlos's Kauai landscapes. That would be perfect, because when we did do our trips to Kauai, he wouldn't stop working. I mean, after a month sometimes. . . . The longest time we'd spend there is two months, and after the first month he finally was able to look up and like kind of be in the landscape rather than have to draw it. He always had his materials. We'd pull off to the side of the road and he'd draw something or paint something. Just driven, driven, driven. He just couldn't relax. After a month he'd get scared. He'd say, "I've gotta go home." Like they were going to forget him, right? and he would lose some kind of, you know, something. And we'd have a big fight, and I said, "No, you promised me we'd be here two months." And I'd win and we'd stay, and he was fine the next month. He would chill. He'd finally actually get to really relax. It took him a month to unwind, basically.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I see.

ELSA FLORES: It took me a lot less. But it took him a month, because he was very high-strung, and then we'd return and he'd sell all his work that he had produced there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, great.

ELSA FLORES: So he and there's a few. . . . They did an article in L.A. Style of coast-to-coast artists and Carlos was featured along with Masami Teraoka, Billy Al Bengston, and. . . . Who's the guy who works in glass? Oh, god. Duane Valentine. They had all four based in the West Coast and then come to Hawaii for extended stays to produce art. Billy doesn't spend much time there any more, and Masami lives there pretty much full-time now. Mostly because of his health. I don't know if he has asthma or some kind of respiratory problem and he can't live in this air so he lives there most of

the time.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, that makes sense.

ELSA FLORES: So then after a year we told the hippies we had to take the house over. They were all prepared at that time; they knew they were going to go at some point. So they were all prepared to start a new life, so they were ready. So it was a nice transition. We didn't feel . . . there were no bad feelings. So they moved out and we fixed up the house, we decorated it, we put art everywhere, and furnished it and painted and stuff and cut back all the trees and relandscaped and stuff. And it was great. It was really nice. It was a house like. . . It was right on the road, which was this country road that went around the entire island. It was actually a country road when it got over to the north shore. It was kind of a two-lane highway at point in between and it was right on the highway. Across the street were a few houses and then the beach. So we fixed it up and started spending time in it and then when we were gone Lee Hefner's company, Na' Pali Properties, would rent it out.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you have many folks from the L.A. scene here go out there?

ELSA FLORES: Not initially. Initially we just kind of. . . We didn't promote it. Just friends of ours and stuff. But they would rent it once in a while. They weren't an aggressive rental agency. But it was enough to pay the bills, to pay for itself, because our mortgage was so low at that point that we didn't need a lot of money to make it pay for itself. So that was a good thing. And Carlos would work constantly. We had put in this big countertop and then there was an island dividing the kitchen and the living room-it was kind of open floor plan-and so he would work there. He'd work on the kitchen table. It was really great. It was a very romantic spot. Oh, so, the backyard of this house butted up against this reserve land which was owned by the Robinson family-old, old missionary family. They owned probably like eighty percent of the interior of the island, and they own this little island, Niihau, which is a forbidden island right off of Kauai. No one can land there and talk about colonialism-this island was dedicated to . . . only a hundred percent Hawaiian blooded people can live on this island. But it was owned by these rich white plantation owners, right? And they regulated it. No one could come in on the island or even land on the island; they'd shoot you. So now, just in the last few years, one of the Robinson brothers started a helicopter tour company where you're allowed to land on this remote part of the island away from the population but under his supervision. And the actual population . . . they have no electricity and that kind of stuff. It's very primitive.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Interesting.

ELSA FLORES: They're trying to preserve the culture, but most of the kids want to leave there. You know, they want to hit Honolulu and see the world.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So it's kind of a sick experiment.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Changing dynamic over there.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So the Robinsons own this reserve behind our house that went up to these incredible mountain peaks, and they used to graze cattle back there and one night I woke up in the middle of the night and it was a full moon so I went outside on the deck and there were cows all over in my yard-the back yard. I thought I was dreaming. It was like a hallucination in this moonlight!

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laugh]

ELSA FLORES: They were these jersey cows. You know, like, "What is this?" Apparently the fence had come down or something. [laughter] So somehow the Robinson brothers had a fight and they stopped grazing the cattle, and so this jungle started growing rapidly and we'd have to go out. . . . Carlos would go out with a neighbor and I'd go out and we'd start chain-sawing and chopping down the jungle. And then this other family leased it from them and they started grazing horses, which was nice. The horses would come by. And just this summer. . . . The guys had been real abusive to their horses. They weren't taking care of them and some of the horses were sick and my neighbor next door was always caring for the horses, and one day we were all home and we heard some gunshots and this horse comes . . . stumbles. . . . This one horse that my neighbor Rick had been taking care of stumbles and collapses right in front of our house, like in the backyard. And Rick comes out and is trying to soothe it, trying to help it have a peaceful death. But so now there's a movement with the Humane Society to get these guys to take care of their animals. So since then the Robinsons kicked them off the land and now nothing's grazing in the back. But there's some wild boars back there and stuff like that. But it's still very, very scenic.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So how does it affect your art-making when you're out there?

ELSA FLORES: When I'm out there?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Once in a while I'll be driven to produce work, and when I am they're small pieces because of my work space.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So did your studio space never materialize?

ELSA FLORES: Never happened. What happened was because I was. . . I was suspicious because I was a self-employed artist. They couldn't pinpoint my income, right? So it took two years before I got loan approval and finally, at closing, they dropped the bomb that I have to pay off my credit card debt. So all of the money for my studio went into paying my bills, which pissed me off. Now I have a bigger mortgage with no studio. I was so upset. So it affects me mostly by observation. I go there and usually by the time I leave L.A. I'm so burned out-like on the verge of collapse sometimes-that it nourishes me, it replenishes me, and I spend a lot of time just walking on the beach, sitting on the beach, visiting beaches, swimming on the beach, just being on the beach. I'm hardly ever in the house, except the mornings and night. And observing. I'm a figurative artist, so there's lots of beautiful figures on the beach to observe. Carlos would often paint them, too, but for me I would imprint these images. Just the dramatic scenes that you would see at different beaches, there'd be different feelings. But mostly what I really was impressed by was the really dark skies way out at sea or when a storm was coming in, and it would be black, black on one side coming in and sometimes the fishermen-net fishermen-would be way out on the reef, like a mile or two out at sea walking on the water like Jesus, and they'd be throwing their nets and it was like, "Wow, this is so beautiful!" And so I'd come home and I'd paint that. I did a whole series of spiritual fishermen. And just the whole the body stuff-all these healthy, brown, beautiful, muscular bodies-and so I'd come home and paint a lot of figurative work, lot of figurative stuff. And so that's how really it mostly affected me and still does.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Seems like the landscape would be parallel to your style, which is very-like we were talking about before-very . . . using a lot of paint, very expressive . . .

ELSA FLORES: Very messy. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . very messy, right. Right.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So it's kind of like the landscape is in tune with your way of producing.

ELSA FLORES: Definitely. Landscape's very important to me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Seems like it would be a good match. How about what you were saying before: Does it enhance this idea of being connected to the earth more than when you're here and things like that?

ELSA FLORES: Oh, God, definitely. Yeah, definitely. You know, the interesting thing is much more so after Carlos's death. Before his death we were pretty much [a-Ed.] complete little unit. Everything revolved around our family. So there wasn't a need to really sort of look at the bigger picture, because we felt we were the bigger picture, right? [laughs] And after his death I found myself alone and I found myself with a lot of quiet time for soul-searching and trying to make sense of it all. Like, why did we lose this man? What does it all mean? What's the meaning of life? What's the meaning of God? And all that stuff. And I started connecting even deeper, even though my spirituality had already developed prior to his illness-started with my Mom's illness-but after his death I started sort of. . . . Because I would find myself alone on the beach or at a sacred site, I would find myself soul-searching for those answers, and it would come to me in the form of realization that this fucking island was so awesome-it took eight million years to produce it-that that was bigger than life, that what I was going through was insignificant in comparison to the bigger picture. And in doing that I would find God in nature, and that would nurture me. And I would connect myself even more, just in every act-in the act of swimming, or in the act of hiking, or just sitting at a vista point-which I did a lot of on my last trip there-just sat up on a hill and just stared for hours at the horizon, at the landscape. And that would sort of feed me and I would feel a connectedness. I would feel myself sort of projected out of my body into this natural sort of becoming one with nature and disconnecting my ego from that. And through that exploration, through those experiences, I would also have revelations-involving my art in many cases and my life and decisions that I needed to make.

And some of the revelations with the art. . . . At one point I was doing a lot of walking-and I'd cry a lot on the beach during my grieving period-and I was walking on the beach and I was feeling like, "I'm not an artist any more," just feeling really demoralized, just felt like no inspiration. I was like, "This is really fucked up. What am I? I'm not an artist. I'm not making art," and just feeling down. And then I was taking this long walk and I started coming across like a fish or a seaweed or some driftwood and I would make something out of it and then I'd continue walking. And it happened throughout this entire stretch. At the end of this walk I said, "You know what? I am an artist." [laughter] Like, "Yeah!" But I was trying to figure. . . . And at this time after Carlos's death I was working on Kauai. Kauai has always been, for me, a healing place. Especially after his death. Because of the replenishment and just the spiritual aspect. But there are incredible healers there, too. Like master healers. Like this island is so powerful, the energy from its natural state, that it draws these incredible people to it. On all levels. All these incredible people with incredible histories and stories come to this island. So I've met a lot of interesting people and have made a lot of really incredible friends. So this one healer guy-who used to be a jazz pianist and he still plays-at one point, he had a crisis of body and mind and he had to choose. He made the choice that his music wasn't healing society in any way, that he was going to be a healer. So he started studying Chinese medicine and became a doctor-but a true healer where he wasn't exploitive [sic] and he wasn't all New Age-y, you

know, but he definitely had an inner truth that he can tap into and you can tap into. And so he would know what was wrong with your body and he can sense it, like do. . . . What do you call that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Read it?

ELSA FLORES: Read it with his hands, and your energy and a lot of it was talking, just. . . . A lot of true healing is about listening to what the patient . . . what's bothering them.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Most western medicine doctors don't do that. They just like, "Okay, what are your symptoms? Okay, here take this drug."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Trust your instruments, right.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, but this guy will take the time so that. . . . I went in to him fearing, because I had this white stuff on my tongue, and I said, "Oh, shit," and I'd been doing AIDS tests for many years and I know I didn't have AIDS, right? But the fear was always still in the back of my mind. And when I saw this I thought it was thrush; I thought it was candida. And I said, "Oh no. Maybe I have aids." And of course I didn't. But I went in with this fear, and he looked at me and he says, "No. It's not candida. It's a vitamin. . . . It's a lack of. . . . It's the [chi] energy. You're eating foods that are too hot, you have to cool down your body and all that." So he started doing that, and then we got into his program and, basically, he was helping me work through the grief, which is the stress that was creating these problems for my body. So we do a lot of like medi[tation]. He was teaching me meditation. He was doing a lot of guided meditations with me, and at one point I wanted him to work with Maya, because I thought she was really repressing her feelings about her loss. And she was, but, you know, now I realize that that was just the way she dealt with it, that she processed it in a way that made her go inside of herself and put her feelings in safe place. After trying to work with her with James Winkler, this doctor, he says, "You know what? She doesn't want to play. This isn't going to work for her. She's got her own private way of dealing with it." And my fear was it was going to become this neuroses, she was going to grow up to be an alcoholic or a shop-a-holic, just because she was storing her grief, but really she was dealing with it in the way that was right for her.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was the healing that you did on the island different than what you had to do here? Or was that. . . .

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Actually, it was hard to heal here, because I had to deal daily-and still do-with the Carlos estate business. So I didn't have time to give to myself.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It kind of keeps the wound open?

ELSA FLORES: It kind of what?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Keeps the wound open, in a way?

ELSA FLORES: No, because I've sort of become so used to it now that maybe it's been callused, maybe it's just sort of. . . . The wounds not open. It had been for years. But at a certain point-and just a few years ago-I realized it's not open any more. And I sort of actually saw light at the end of the tunnel, that I would go on and start a new phase of life and Carlos would always be involved in my life-and still is-but in a whole other capacity now, and I could let go of the strong emotional attachment I had in our relationship. So I could see things a little clearer, more detached, and so that's when my healing kind of really came full circle at that point.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was painting a part of that process?

ELSA FLORES: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. From the . . . I mean, from the [get]. From the minute that I knew he was sick to the moment after his death, you know, I went in and produced this wild painting, just gushed this stuff. It was called Lover's Lament, and it was this woman who was hiding her face. She was nude-very messy, very splashy-she was nude, sort of with her hands crying, sort of her face cupped in her hands, and this spirit, very dark, kind of scary kind of face almost, which was kind of subdued, you almost couldn't tell it was there, but it was kind of surging forth. So that was like my releasing some of the pain and the grief in that painting, Lover's Lament. And since then, lot's of other paintings like that.

So, yeah, the work has always been my salvation. You know, from anxieties as an adolescent to real heavy-duty questions of life and loss and that stuff. So, yeah, I thank God everyday for giving me this vehicle to work out my stuff. But when you're grieving-especially in my case-because I had Maya, I couldn't indulge myself. I had to be strong, had to be stoic, I had to take care of business. I wanted Carlos to be out there and I wanted to continue his work and keep his career going for his sake, and I probably emotionally wasn't even available to Maya because I was dealing with my own pain, but I was keeping so busy with all the details and all the hassles. . . . Like he left me with a tremendous amount of work. Here I had this huge estate to manage and people who wanted a piece of him left and right, people who were trying to cheat me and screwing me, and dealing with all that stuff and legal issues, and trying to make a stable home environment for Maya-and then trying to do my own work, which was taking second seat. And that was frustrating, because suddenly I was so overwhelmed with Carlos business that I had like-I still do-I get twenty calls a day. Most of it is not money-related, which I could really use; most of it is just details of people putting a show together or people needing material or people needing a bio. You know, all this meetings, meetings, meetings. So it was like overwhelming. I did it because I felt a duty to do it initially and I felt dedicated to Carlos and I felt that he would want me to do this, and he left me telling me that he knew I would do the right thing with his work. He didn't want to leave any instruction. I said, "What do you want to do with your work? What shall we do with the works in the estate?" You know, "What do you want?"

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: "Oh, you'll take care of it. I know you'll make the right choices." So it was like a big responsibility and I thought I had to do the right thing. And then after. . . . The first year was when I had to be the strongest, most stoic. And after that I started resenting and getting tired-actually, I was physically exhausted-from doing so much work and not having an outlet myself, a creative outlet, that I started resenting it and I started feeling like pissed off at him for leaving me with all this bullshit to deal with. It was hurting me because I wasn't making art, so I had to deal with those emotions and all that stuff. And I think that's at the point when I started feeling like I wasn't an artist any more; I was an administrator.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Did you have sources of support? Either in people or. . . .

ELSA FLORES: I had a few very good friends, yeah, and family. On an emotional level, Roberto Gil de Montes was the closest person who was always there for me-and he was always there for Carlos-who would support me and encourage me and when I was down I'd call him. I'd talk to him every day. Another good friend, Barry Sky, who had moved out of L.A. but he was very nurturing and very good. And I became more attached to my family-my sister and my brother-just hanging out with them a lot. But not going out, not seeing a lot of people. I was considered "the phantom artist." I still am, I think, because I don't get out. And so at that point. . . . Oh, the horrible thing right after Carlos's death was that. . . . This is funny; we're talking about after his death instead of talking about before,

the pre. We'll do that later.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. We'll work backwards.

ELSA FLORES: Maybe it's easier. So the hardest thing at the time of his death was that he and I had been commissioned a collaborative public art commission for the Ronald Reagan State Building, probably three years before his death. He hadn't even been diagnosed yet. But the bureaucratic process took that long. And by the time we finally got the first monies to start the project, he was close to death and had this huge mural-this ten-foot by seventy-foot mural-that we were collaboratively going to paint. We had already stretched it out, we had done the studies, it was all like ready, set, and go and he dies. So it was like, "Oh, man." It was like the biggest money we had ever received on a commission piece, so I didn't know what to do. Here I was dealing with my immediate grief. It was just a few months after his death, dealing with all the bullshit. I mean, people knocking on my door wanting to buy the rights to his life for a dollar-you know, the week after he died. And then this other guy crying on my shoulder wanting me to sign a contract. You know, it was all this stuff.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Somebody that would have the audacity to do that! Real vultures.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Our accountant wanting a huge painting in return for his work, and, you know, they all wanted a piece of it, and it was like, "God!" my head was spinning. And I didn't have anyone to protect me. There was no one I could trust, in a business sense. Dealing with his gallery, who was in huge debt to the estate. They owed a lot of money and they looked like they were in trouble and all this stuff. And then this mural that's like. . . .

Session 4, Tape 2, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is tape two, side A, with Elsa Flores on. . . .

ELSA FLORES: May the thirtieth.

JEFFREY RANGEL: April.

ELSA FLORES: April the thirtieth. [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: April the thirtieth, right. Okay.

ELSA FLORES: Okay. So I have already talked to you about the mural-the Ronald Reagan mural-and all that hassle. So anyway I had this mural to do and full of grief and this terrible weather and all the political ramifications surrounding it. Did it. Done. And close to the first-year anniversary of his death, Maya and I needed a change. Well, I decided for us, but I felt we needed a change. We needed to get out of the house that he had-he didn't die in the house but where his last days were-and start a new beginning. So I completed the mural and got the last payment on the commission and was able to purchase this house. I'd looked around for many months and finally found this one. Which was really interesting the way things kind of find their way to you. Because I had been looking in a neighborhood that had a good school district, and so South Pasadena was one of the safest and one of the best. Actually, I wanted to live in Mt. Washington, but it was very unsafe. Lots of robberies and stuff and schools weren't good. But I always loved that area, so I said, "Okay, well South Pas." And I couldn't afford most of the houses in the neighborhood, so I was cruising with the realtor one day and we passed by this house and I go, "That's a great house." She goes, "Oh yeah, but you couldn't afford it. Everyone wants to live on that street and it's a very expensive street." I said, "Okay." So we went on, she showed me other houses, and finally I told her-

the houses she was showing me-I said, "You know what? I can't afford that. You know, I thought I could but I really can't." And she said, "Well, okay. You know what? Let me go back and show you this house." And it was more affordable. She just wanted to sell me the more expensive house.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Ah-h-h!

ELSA FLORES: But the interesting thing was that day we had little Max [Blum], who was one of Maya's schoolmates and Max was born missing some fingers and his limb was all deformed so they had to amputate him at the knee. So he was wearing a prosthesis. He and Maya were very close. And Max was with us. But Max had this very endearing relationship with Carlos, like no other child had with him, and they were really connected and Carlos really inspired him. He felt he was an artist, too, and he would copy some of Carlos's painting. He would go visit him in the hospital, and the last time he saw Carlos he said, "I'll see you, old friend." You know, this like really sweet good-bye. And so Max was with us, and we came in and saw the house and I said, "Yeah, I see possibilities. Yeah, let's make an offer." And it turns out there were three other offers on the house, but the Children's Orthopedic Hospital owned the house. The prior owner had donated it to them. And it was just this connection that here Max, this physically challenged kid, was with us who had been so connected Carlos, kind of was with us, and she pleaded our story to the board of the hospital, and they chose us when we had given a lower bid than some of the other people.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: So it was like Carlos kind of guided us here. How did we get off on that? We were. . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You needed a change.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, I needed a change and how I was dealing with myself as an artist during that time and the healing, the Kauai. . . . Oh yeah, we were talking about Kauai, how it was a healing place.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: So I had that realization on the beach that, "Yeah, I am an artist. I am an artist, and I'm a good artist. I can't forget that." But at the same time I was dependent on maintaining our lifestyle by selling Carlos's work. Because my work had not yet been commercially available and I could never make a living off of my work. So I was really still dependent on having to sell Carlos's work. And still am. That's changing now with all the public things and hopefully with my new work. My goal is to try to make a living off my own work. But so far it's still dependent on Carlos's work. So I do dedicate a lot of time to his ongoing career and realizing that what he left us in the estate was works of art. We don't have any cash flow but we have works of art. And the eighties were great but the nineties were really, really bad. Prices dropped and there's a lot on the resale market because he was so prolific. And a lot of sleaze-bag dealers who are undercutting the market like crazy, and there's no way I can compete because I have to maintain the estate price. Because people have purchased from me at estate prices, and I can't screw them. I can't devalue their investment. So it's been really hard for me, but luckily these public commissions-these past commissions-have helped me stay afloat. But it's been the hardest ever financially. I think that'll be changing, though.

So here I was thinking, "Yeah, I am an artist," and all this stuff, but I was feeling like, when working with James Winkler, this healer guy. . . . He would ask me, "What is your role as an artist? How do you see yourself as an artist?" And I kept saying, "Well, you know, I'm tired of. . . . My past work had

always been real self-involved, and egocentric, and filled with angst and anger and all this stuff." I said, "I don't want to do that anymore. I don't feel that's giving anything. I think that's really too involved with my own ego and I don't think it's. . . ." You know, having been through all these life-changing experiences, I saw life differently-that it wasn't about me, it was about something greater than me. Carlos had always talked about the role of an artist as that of a shaman, and indeed it had always been that in primitive societies. And I thought, "You know what? I would like my work to be in some way healing to society. Finally I want to give. I don't want to indulge myself in my neuroses any more. I want to inspire. I want to create beautiful works of art that move people and make people think and heal a part of them, hopefully." And there had been a movement away from painting towards conceptual art. And I just felt it wasn't nurturing. It didn't do anything for me. I'd walk into the galleries and I'd leave uninspired. I might be intellectually stimulated but that's about it. It didn't change my life in any way, you know? And so I thought, "You know, this is bad. I don't like this movement." And, of course, it lingered on for years and years and years. Now painting's on a comeback, so I feel good about that. John Baldessari. . . Did you read the article in the last Sunday "Calendar"?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't think so.

ELSA FLORES: He was interviewed, and John Baldessari was talking about painting, actually, and he was saying that he actually misses it and he still reacts sentimentally when he walks into a studio and smells the solvents-you know, the oil paints. And it was like, "Wow, it's like John Baldessari, like the father of L.A. conceptual art, is talking about painting. So I was talking to another friend. One of Maya's classmates' dad's an artist-Brian Hollister-and I say, "Hey, did you read Baldessari's article?" And he goes, "Oh, he's such an asshole." And I go, "Why? What happened?" And he goes, "Well, don't you know what happened? He was interviewed for that article in December, and every since then his colleagues, his conceptual school, started getting down on him for talking about painting . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Really?

ELSA FLORES: . . . and he's changed his tune." He says, "Now he's talking about how there's no painting in L.A."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, God.

ELSA FLORES: So I'm like, "Ah-h-h, I didn't know that." It was like, "Wow! More than the painting, though. I mean, the painting for me is number one. For me that's what I think I do best and that's what I relate to mostly. And again it's about my connection to nature. It's about the earth in materials. It's about getting messy and getting my hands in there and getting it all over my body and like just throwing this unconscious expression on a canvas. And so it's like the contact. And painting. Well, they say painting's dead but painting will always exist. People have to do things with their hands. They have to create somehow. But what I found when I really found myself in what they call "the gap"-or Dharma, your purpose in life, when you're really in that zone-the time I felt it the most and the strongest was the time I realized that this is how I can best give back. And that had to do with the public artworks. I was working in the studio for nine months on the Gateway Project. I created this fountain called Urban Temple, and I wanted to create an urban place of worship. You know, a spiritual place where commuters could come and sit by the healing sounds of the water in the fountain and see all these cultural images of spiritual practice and kind of relate in their own way. It doesn't matter how. Did I talk about the guy, the homeless guy?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No.

ELSA FLORES: Well, another artist on the Gateway Project-Michael Amescua-who I'm working with now on an L.A. Zoo. . . . Another fountain. He called me in to do a fountain for his project. Michael said he was installing some of his ironworks, his metalworks, at the Gateway Project. He says every day this homeless guy would come up to my fountain and bathe. I had this anthropomorphic mask-a jaguar/man figure-he would bathe this jaguar mask with water and he would talk to him. And I'm like, "Well, that's really cool, that's what I want." I mean, the guy might be a little crazy, you know . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES; . . . but he's relating. It's like healing for him. You know, he probably needs it more than anyone in society.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Right? So, it's like co-o-o-l. Then I had put this image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, carved this image. Have you seen that fountain?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I haven't.

ELSA FLORES: Oh yeah, we've got to go down there. I carved this image and [Benito], this seventy-year-old master from Guanaguato-eighty years old, actually-who had helped me work on this ceramic piece, said, "Ten cuidado por que sabes que lo que pasan?" And I said, "Well, what?" He goes, "Well, you know, people are going to come and leave flowers and candles at the feet of the Virgin." And I said, "Well, that's great. You know, I want that." So I don't know if that's happened. It probably has, but I haven't visited it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Should we go check it out?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. I haven't paid much of. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: And bring some.

ELSA FLORES: [laughter] Yeah, there we go! Yeah, I have to go photograph it tomorrow. So it was interesting that. . . .

[Telephone rings; interruption in taping]

ELSA FLORES: So back to Dharma, my purpose in life. Here I was for nine months sweating away in a hot, dusty, toxic studio. We were using Robert Gil de Montes's studio. Leaded glazes in the air everywhere. I was carving away. I felt like I was an ancient artisan in the back room carving these deities for the king. [laughter] And here I was carving away, and, in a funny way, I started feeling like I was totally in the flow. I just felt like this was my purpose in life. It was like timeless awareness where I didn't know anything else was happening. I was just involved in the process and creating something that was meaningful, and not just like to the audience of high art that would walk into a gallery but to public. You know, like to Joe Blow and this homeless guy and little kids and people of all color who normally don't go into art galleries. And so I felt like, "This is it. This is a great gift that I've been given, having this opportunity to put something out there publicly." Like I said, it took nine months, it was back-breaking work, I got toxic poisoning, and major mood swings and all this stuff. My body was all out of whack because I was sitting for hours and hours.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Because of the toxins?

ELSA FLORES: Well, that, too. But mostly for sitting for hours. I was not active; I was not moving.

And so I was all out of alignment. And then put that out there. Had some political problems with one of our collaborators and realized, "It's okay. I did what was right. I worked hard but I'm happy with the results. I'm happy with the work." And, sure enough, everyone responded very positively. They thought it was a great piece of art. So I was really happy and went on, made my money-although I lost money on that project because it took so long to do. It was very labor-intensive. And then, through that project, I guess the energy was so good with that project and it was so beautifully done, that it got some attention, and I've been receiving a lot of calls from public art consultants who want me to do projects for them. And Michael Amescua called me because he liked my fountain and he called me on board for the zoo, so now I have a gig with him starting after summer. So people. . . . [chuckles] It's so funny, too, because I just wanted to paint and here I am suddenly a ceramic artist. [laughter] But when I was carving. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's just right and fitting with the way of the story.

ELSA FLORES: I know. It was just evolving. And when I started carving, I said, "You know what? I've got talent for this stuff. I'm pretty good at this carving stuff."

JEFFREY RANGEL: Surprise! [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: "But I don't know if I want to do this, I really enjoy painting more. It's so much more immediate, and the other stuff, oh, God." I hate process. I hate having to roll out the clay, carve the clay, dry the clay, bisque the clay, glaze the clay, fire the clay, and then the thing could break or it could all be screwed up.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: It's like, I don't like the process. But I found it likes me. [laughs] It likes me, but I don't like it. And I just want to paint. If I do another public art commission, I want to do another big painted mural. That's what I want to do. But the forces-that-be want me to do what I'm doing right now, so I'm just going with the flow. I've learned to be easier that way, that I just follow the direction that I think things seem to. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That things are available to you.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Not resist and not fight.
[Telephone rings; interruption in taping]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Go ahead.

ELSA FLORES: So I'm gearing up now, after this summer thing. . . . You know, I do my summer trip to Kauai, and Maya might go away to school in Arizona in August. But in any case, even if she doesn't, I'm coming back. Probably starting the L.A. Zoo project and this new El Sereno project. Did I talk to you about that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Hm-mm.

ELSA FLORES: I didn't talk about that? When was it? Over spring break, which was, what, March or April or something. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh no, you did tell me about it.

ELSA FLORES: About El Sereno?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, the . . .

ELSA FLORES: Elsa Rino? [chuckles]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Elsa Rino. The club there or the community center?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, the new indoor pool.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: So I'll be starting that, too. I'll be starting both of those projects after summer. I hope, I hope, the monies come in, in which case I'll need a studio, because I've been working here at home. I'll need a studio because I just can't do it here. It's just too much of a mess.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I understand that.

ELSA FLORES: But I have started paint. I've started throwing things, throwing paint, getting messy, getting real messy, and it feels good. It feels good to play with color again. And so hopefully I'll get a painting commission at some point. But I like the public art, the whole deal with public art. I was commissioned also years ago-God, it seems like many years ago-one of the M.T.A. [Metro Transit Authority-Ed.] metro stations for the Pasadena line. I had lobbied to get this one particular station on Raymond and [Del Mar], which was like the key station, right in Old Town.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It was where the old train station was. And we were almost at nintey percent design phase. It was great. It was a beautifully designed. . . . It was a collaboration with the architect.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I saw the sketches for it.

ELSA FLORES: You did?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: The undulating roofline and all that stuff? And it was in keeping with the whole theme of the arroyo-you know, the movement of water and the river-and we were doing some kind of, what do they call it? like Craftsman-style work with brick and rock and ceramic. And it was great-everyone loved it, the community loved it, the advisory people loved it-and then at the last minute the fascist commissioners of Pasadena came in and said they needed to review it. And the M.T.A. people said, "Too late. We're at nintey per cent. You were supposed to come in months ago and you never did and now you want to come in." They said, "Too bad, we're going to come in." They're fascists. Pasadena is very fascist as far as their government, and they just bashed it to death. And they said it was like "Camp Snoopy" and blah-blah-blah and . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Camp Snoopy??

ELSA FLORES: Well later, politically, I figured out what it was. These commissioner guys, their buds, were going to develop the two empty lots on both sides of the station. You know, it's like very political. Because there were these key lots; there were these two huge blocks of empty lot that were going to be developed into shops and stores and buildings and offices. And our design was so dynamic that it would compete with whatever they were going to build. And they said at the meeting, "We want something understated. We want something generic looking."

JEFFREY RANGEL: God!

ELSA FLORES: "We want something like. . . ."

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's so sad . . .

ELSA FLORES: It's sad!

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . in terms of a public art project.

ELSA FLORES: It was an incredible design that everyone loved, and we got everyone's approval. It was culturally significant, historically significant. And here these guys were concerned about it competing with whatever they were planning to develop. Plus, they went around us. They went around M.T.A. to some higher up and they got their veto. Plus, after a year of my working in collaboration with these architects-I had to go out to Marina del Rey regularly to do all this-so it was like a year of my life wasted because these bureaucrats decided that it wasn't appropriate.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's too bad.

ELSA FLORES: So I was so pissed off. So now what's happening. . . . And I said, "You know, if you wanted Plop Art you should have told me from the beginning. You wasted a year of my life." And they didn't let me speak at the meeting. I'd raise my hand. . . . Even the M.T.A. officials were saying, "Don't say anything. Don't rile things up." They were afraid of the city hall and I thought later, "I could have made a stink, I could of went to the papers, I could have sued them. But forget it. It's not worth it." I'd like to work for them again but, shoot.

So apparently since then M.T.A. has had money problems, and all the stations along the line that were going to be designed by artists seem to be going into a generic state where they've designed generic stations for each station and then they're going to have Plop Art, basically, which is sad, because. . . . Except for, I think, South Pasadena they really. . . . And the Southwest Museum. Because Teddy Sandoval designed Southwest Museum and they had a really strong community group behind them. And the museum said, "No, this is. . . ." Even after he died they said, "Okay now, we'll pick another artist." And the community stood by Teddy and said, "No, we want Teddy's design. We wanted it finished as we had stated," because the museum had told M.T.A. that the only reason they decided to stay at this location in Highland Park was because of the promise of the station that was going to be right there at the museum door. And if they renege they've got like a four-million-dollar lawsuit. So they're letting Paul [Papablisky-Ed.], Teddy's partner, to fabricate.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So the M.T.A. basically decides on design and stuff like that, along with city councils or city governments?

ELSA FLORES: There's so-o-o many phases. You have to go through M.T.A. approval. Then you have to work with the architect, and the architects don't normally like working with artists because, actually, there was a movement for architects to take the "1% for Art" away from artists . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: . . . because they claim that they can design artistic architecture into the building. So they wanted the money, right?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And they don't like working with artists. Most of 'em. Some will; some are more

progressive. But most don't because I found out that architects are way bigger prima donnas than any artist I've ever met.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: They're like ego-maniacs. So it's interesting. And not everyone, not every architect, but the ones that I've run across. So, yeah, who knows, I think now the project's been pushed back to 2004 or something like that. So who knows what. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: By that time you could be living full-time on Kauai.

ELSA FLORES: I don't think so. There's still not a living there.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You never know.

ELSA FLORES: You never know. So, yeah, it's interesting, the public art thing that came into my life sort of by. . . . Was it by accident? No, I really competed hard for the Del Mar station, because I thought it would be an important station and I was so much part of the community for so many years that I felt it was the right place for me. And then the Gateway thing came up, and that was a really important commission, just because where it's located. It had a lot of visibility, so it was really good. And painting, I hope, will take off. I hope. Yeah. I'd like to just paint, after I do these public art. . . . The public art is really, really demanding, not just physically. It's like pulling teeth. It's like the art of compromise.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure, you have a lot of people to work with.

ELSA FLORES: It's the art of compromise. They'll never let the artist do what the artist wants to do. So it's never a pure expression of your own art. It's always art by committee. And a lot of times they give you a theme. Speaking of the imagery at the Ronald Reagan Building, originally we had this design, took it to design approval, and they didn't like the buildings. They thought it reminded them of earthquakes because they were stylized; they were swaying. So we had to get rid of that. Then there was this purple female figure in the right-hand foreground. They thought she looked too dark and foreboding. She was a purple lady, you know!

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: It's like, God. So that kind of stupid stuff always, always comes down. So when they give you a theme. . . . That one was, like, they wanted a history of California. We had to kind of work illustratively yet kind of throw in our own kind of imagery and magic and stuff. And when we first got that commission, Carlos was really bummed out because he had just finished a commission for Home Savings, which again was a history of old California theme. And it just kind of killed his soul, because none of it was really him. It was just him as a technician portraying this historic scene, and he hated it. It was like he hated the whole . . . he hated the painting. It took months and just didn't feel it was . . . just didn't want to put it out there. It was beautifully done and sits in Home Savings downtown on Figueroa Street but it definitely didn't take advantage of who he was as an artist. So when this came up he goes, "Ah, I don't want to go through that again." And Joan Quinn, who had worked for the California Arts Council, was very encouraging. She wanted us to do this commission, and she was really pulling for us on the panel and stuff and really encouraging us-both because it's a husband-wife team but mostly because we were people of color and it was a man and a woman. So she really was championing that idea. And so when we won the commission, he was still bummed out. I go, "Carlos, there's no reason that this can't include the fantasy imagery that you're

known for." I was fighting with him on the Home Savings mural saying, "Carlos, put some more of your own stuff in there." Because he was so hating it and I was like, "Why are you doing this to yourself? Why don't you just do a big Echo Park scene?" He could have done that, but his whole thing was he thought this is what they wanted to see. So the whole process was such a drag for him. Then when it came up again, he goes, "Oh God." And so finally the first design, which was his drawing, again was still very sort of illustrative, very stiff and kind of conservative, and I finally worked on him after months and months and got him to redesign it and had him add his stuff to these scenes. And he started feeling better about it. And, sure enough, he still had the Hollywood Bowl and the L.A. freeways and City Hall but he had clowns and chairs and hearts and things that were his iconography. And I had added some angels and some other stuff. And I knew that during our physical collaboration on the piece that we would be changing imagery so I would be more involved creatively that way. And after his death I wanted to honor him and finish according to his design, but I did throw in a few little secret love images and one was. . . . I think I threw some flying kisses up in the sky-I think there's some kisses in the sky-and there was a burning heart somewhere in San Francisco, I think, on the streets of San Francisco with a harlequin, a buffo image holding a hoop, and a few other things like that that are in there that weren't in the original design, the maquette. And the two little kids way over on the far side on the beach were Max and Maya. His little friend Max?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And Maya. They were sort of sitting there at the beach sort of looking off into the future. So it was nice to be able to do that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's good.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, but I'd like to do one of just my expression-you know, the expression of my own creative mind, and so hopefully I'll get to do that. I hope so. If not, I can keep painting my own paintings. Yeah. But who knows? Who knows where life will take us, you know? Through all this you kind of realize that it kind of has its own idea and its own direction, and if you trust it, it'll lead you to the right places. Because maybe I'll be doing films or who knows what? Maybe I'll be doing something else totally different.

JEFFREY RANGEL: From what you've told me, you can almost rely on it.

ELSA FLORES: [laughing] Oh. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: You haven't gotten to that medium yet, have you?

ELSA FLORES: Oh-oh. Well, in high school. But, no, I don't know. Interesting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: You haven't left too many stones unturned.

ELSA FLORES: We'll see what stone wants to be unturned. So do you have any other questions about my own painting before I talk about Carlos and his illness and all that stuff?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't think so. I think maybe as you talk maybe some questions will come up.

ELSA FLORES: I talked to you about the theme in the work during my mom's illness, how it was very dark and I was dealing with spiritual imagery then for the first time and did I talk. . . .

Session 4, Tape 2, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . side B, continuing with Elsa Flores on April thirtieth.

ELSA FLORES: Thirtieth.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Okay.

ELSA FLORES: There was one story I forgot to tell you. I was talking about how Carlos was a gatherer. He would gather people and then create dialogue and very charismatic and very well-loved leader. And, at some point, he had established himself-there's a hummingbird!-in his studio, finally, doing his own personal work and, let's see, with John Valadez initially, and I had a studio upstairs from there, sharing it with Victor Durazo, and we hooked up, and then Carlos would gather people, even though for the first year, he just was just us, you know, and no one else sort of was allowed in because we were so much basking in our relationship that . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's nice.

ELSA FLORES: . . . yeah, it was very nice . . . that, once we got into it and had Maya and sort of comfortable in that, his friends would come around more often, and he decided that we should get a bunch of artists together and talk. Have a little . . . like communicate with each other and. . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: A salon.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, a salon. So one afternoon he invited Magu over. I don't know if he invited Roberto Gil de Montes. I think Robert was in Mexico City at this point. John Valadez, myself, Gronk, and Harry. Maybe Robert was there, I'm not sure. But he invited them over, and Gronk and Harry were very suspicious. They were like, "Whoa, what do they want?" And they were funny. They were like shoulder-to-shoulder, like everywhere they'd go they'd kind of like huddle together and they kind of sat off by themselves. Very like, "What are we here for? What do they want from us?" Like, really weird. "No, we just wanted to sort of communicate." So I thought that was really funny. And I don't even remember anything about the meeting. I guess nothing really . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Nothing significant transpired?

ELSA FLORES: . . . I don't think there was much dialogue because it was so weird.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I find that kind of interesting that there wasn't more dialogue, or maybe I just haven't heard about it. You know, more of an exchange between different kind of groupings of artists at that time. Was there. . .

ELSA FLORES: Does that seem to you, from what you've researched, that seems to be the pattern?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, that's interesting.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I mean, from some of the interviews that we've conducted so far, I mean, it seems like there's been less mix and less exchange than you might imagine.

ELSA FLORES: Than in the seventies?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. Or even during then.

ELSA FLORES: I think maybe because a lot of artists started actually competing on the commercial market. I mean, Carlos was the first success, and there's a lot who wanted to follow suit so suddenly everyone kind of became weird and competitive. It wasn't that communal feeling of the seventies, where it was like we were all in a movement together and it was like a cultural movement. Now artists were considering themselves more as individuals rather than as collectives. And when you do that, there's competition. And there's weirdness and there's envy and sabotage and all that stuff. All that stuff comes up. So maybe that's what it was. I don't know.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, it's just interesting to hear you comment about maybe suspicion between or of other folks . . .

ELSA FLORES: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . or something like that. It's come up in other interviews, in ones that I have not conducted.

ELSA FLORES: And some of. . . . At one point, Carlos came out. . . . Because he was always being quoted in the press. They were doing an article on the arts, and Carlos came out saying that he felt grants were hurtful to the creative process and to artists because they became submissive and dependent on them, and so they weren't . . . you know, that it was not a good thing, grants. And a lot of artists were grant-recipient artists and were depending on their on-going work through the grants, and Carlos had never applied for any grants. And Harry Gamboa wrote an article, in, I think, L.A. Weekly or The Calendar or something, and he was basically bashing Carlos. He never mentioned him by name, but he was talking about "Some artists say. . . ." and it was obvious, so I think Carlos was a threat to lots of artists, not only because of his tremendous talent but because he was controversial and he wasn't afraid to speak his mind.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, it seems like he's one of the few people [that-Ed.] from his position could make an argument like that.

ELSA FLORES: Right. That's true.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Because he was commercially successful and pretty independent. But it seemed like his work with the Concilio [de Arte Popular-Ed.] in the seventies was just about that, about making people aware of funding sources . . .

ELSA FLORES: Oh, is that what they did?

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . and how to write effective grants and having that sort of exchange between artists in California in many ways.

ELSA FLORES: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So it's kind of like that transformation to get to that point.

ELSA FLORES: Although, politically, he was pretty true to his philosophy, being a heavy-duty [leftist, Leftist] for many years, he never personally pursued grants.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's interesting.

ELSA FLORES: And he was dirt-poor for so many years that he kind of. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: He didn't want to depend on government and sell out that way. If he was going to make it, he was going to make it on his own.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's interesting.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, it's good to hear, too, because I think those discrepancies, conflicts, disagreements, really point towards a developing sort of a vital arts community rather than one that's kind of fragmented and doesn't even sort of care about one another.

ELSA FLORES: Right.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Otherwise there wouldn't be that sort of conflict.

ELSA FLORES: That's true.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So that's interesting. That was interesting to hear.

ELSA FLORES: Okay, let's see, 1987, he had really established himself as a successful fine artist with his own sensibility, his own imagery, and very well respected for his personal work now, and he became a commodity. He was selling his works so rapidly that he became. . . . Did I talk about this? How he became sort of disillusioned because, you know, when you create a work of art it's like one of your children, and he didn't receive anything in return because they would be taken away from him so soon, sold, and all he would get is money. And he wouldn't even get to keep the money; it would go to taxes. So he was feeling very cheated, and of course the gallery would, "Give us another Echo Park, give us another Car Crash, give us another this, another that." And he was trapped for a little bit, just a little bit, in that mind-set where, "I've got to do another Echo Park, I've got to do another Car Crash. How will I pay my bills if I don't? Will they like me if I try anything else?" Which is what every artist goes through, and some artists get stuck there because they don't want to chance losing that popularity for what they were known for or popular for. And he was stuck there and it was depressing him. Finally he got out of it. He decided, you know, he's going to do whatever he wants to do. And he still did it well and it was accepted. But he had that fear before he was able to launch into that direction.

And so 1987, 1988, '89, it was about, probably, end of '87, summer of '87, or the summer of '88, when. . . . He had been feeling. . . . He had high blood pressure, so he'd go see his doctor regularly, but nothing else, really. I think he had a bout of shingles, and he went and saw his doctor and he got medication for it. But in the back of his mind, he had worried about his past sexual promiscuity and experiences, because AIDS was everywhere to be seen. Originally, [when-Ed.] we first got together, we started hearing about it, but it escalated so rapidly that it was always in the back of his mind that maybe he had been exposed and maybe he should be tested. And we were so monogamous that we never feared anything within our relationship. And he was relatively healthy. So I think one time he went to his doctor for a regular checkup, and he said, "Well, why don't you test me." And at that time he was teaching up at Idylwild School of the Arts, the same school that I went to for summer, and so he was the guest painting instructor.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [I remember].

ELSA FLORES: So I had been up there with Maya and I was hanging out with Maya while he was doing his classes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: A returning success story. [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: [laughs] Yeah, I know. And he was trying to call the doctor that weekend to get the results because he couldn't get a hold of him. Finally, he couldn't get a hold of him or something, or the doctor didn't want to tell him over the phone or something. He wanted him to come in. So he went in. . . . No, no, he didn't go in. I remember we were back at the log cabin, we were about to leave for Hawaii after his class had ended in the mountains, and he got the call, and he found out that he had AIDS. He got off the phone and he was pale, and he came up to me and he said, "I have it. I have AIDS." And I couldn't believe it, I was like numb, and I felt like I was going to faint and that I wanted to sit down. And I just felt totally numb. I was in shock, not believing it, and I was saying, "No, no, no. It can't be." And the second thought that came into my mind was, "I must have it, too," you know, after seven years of unprotected sex. And totally destroyed. We were shocked. We canceled our trip to Hawaii for several days. We finally did go, but we were like totally in disbelief, and so it was like. . . . And at that point everything had been fairy-tale-like.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: It was like money was good, we were living in this beautiful neighborhood, we had this beautiful family, this great child, and suddenly this bomb drops. So I think he goes in to see the doctor and they. . . . What happened? He started getting really bummed out. Of course. We were both bummed out.

[Interruption in taping to answer phone]

JEFFREY RANGEL: You couldn't tell anybody?

ELSA FLORES: No, he didn't want to tell anybody because he was such a public figure, and we had just dealt with it, and we just had to like deal with it ourselves before he decided what he was going to do with this information. Who did he tell? I think he called his friend Dan [Guerrero] and told him—his best friend, Danny Guerrero. Danny had been gay for many years, and Danny had known many friends who were getting sick, so he couldn't believe that Carlos, who was full-on into his heterosexual life, was being afflicted by this. So we went to Hawaii and we talked about it a lot and we cried about it a lot. Oh, no, no. Before we left, the first thing I needed to know was if I was infected—for my daughter's sake. Because if I was going to die I wanted to leave things in order for her. You know, mothers are so important to a child. So I was like, "Okay, well, get myself tested." So I went down and got tested, and we were waiting anxiously for results, just nervous wrecks and it came back that I was negative. It's like, "God, that's so great!" But we'll have to test in six months, right? So it was like, "Oh shit," sweating for six months.

And so we went to Hawaii and dealt with all that stuff, talked a lot, and he had to go through all the emotions of dealing with this kind of news. And then started feeling a lot of the old religious guilt, persecution. You know, "Well, because I was a sinner," and all that childhood bullshit stuff that was ingrained in him. And so we were dealing. . . . He didn't want to tell anyone. Finally, he said that I could tell my best friend, Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.], who had. . . . We had become estranged from Luján Robert for a year. I told you this, I think. No, no, no, it was after! It was after Robert found out. I wrote Robert. Robert was living in Mexico City. I think he was living there, or he was visiting. So I wrote him this long letter saying, "Where are you when I need you? This is happening and I can't talk to you. I need you." And so he got the letter and immediately he flew—I think we were back in L.A. by then—he flew back to be with us. And we were sort of like [a] very small circle who knew what was going on. Didn't want to tell his parents, didn't want to tell his dealer, didn't want to tell even close friends that might leak it. I think I was able to tell my sister, but other friends I wasn't going to tell. For a couple of reasons. Number one, we wanted to know how. . . . No, he didn't want to be known as "the artist with AIDS"; he wanted to be known as an artist, and he would become. . . .

Since he was a celebrity artist in a certain respect here in L.A., he didn't want to be known as "the celebrity artist with AIDS." And people would interview and use him for that and become a spokesperson and all that. He didn't want to deal with that. And he also didn't want to disrupt Maya's life any by having like ignorant parents say, "Well, we're not going to let our kids go over there and sit on your toilet" and that kind of stuff. So he wanted to protect her. And also he wanted to protect the then public commission of the Reagan Building, because if they found out he had AIDS they might take it away thinking he was going to drop dead before he finished.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Which is what happened, unfortunately. But he didn't want to sacrifice that, because he realized it was going to bring us some kind of financial security, so if he did die we wouldn't be destitute. So during that whole time we had to deal with a lot of bullshit, and had to get our legal stuff in order. He wrote a will. We got a living trust established and all that stuff. And six months later I tested again. Negative, thank God. You know, I couldn't believe that that could have happened. But it did.

JEFFREY RANGEL: It's absolutely amazing.

ELSA FLORES: It's awesome. And since then I have heard of other stories and not only. . . . I mean, it was harder for a heterosexual to contract it, because of the amount of tearing. I mean, in gay sex there's a lot of blood and tissue tearing. But in heterosexual sex it's not so much that. Unless you're involved in anal sex, which we never did, thank God! That's what saved me, I know. And so the commission, he was trying to protect that. And finally I got to tell a couple of girlfriends, and that was good because I needed more support group. Oh, and our friend Dan Brice, who is an artist who had spent a lot of time with us, he too was very close and was helping a lot. And Carlos, because he fell into a depression over it, he became sick for the first time. And I think had he not known he wouldn't have developed it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, so I was saying that there are many other couples since then that I've found out that one guy died of it and his partner-even gay partner-was negative. So I don't know if it's a genetic disposition where you can fight it off but . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's strange.

ELSA FLORES: . . . finally I had a test again for my life insurance because we had to create a life insurance policy for myself: negative. So I was like, "Wow," I still couldn't believe it. And finally, because I was still so insecure about it and thinking about my daughter, like what if she has it, I talked to Carlos's doctor, Dr. Eugene Rogolsky, who later became a big collector of both his and my work, and Gene says, "There's a new test, state-of-the-art test, will detect the minutest amount of virus or antibodies in your body. So come in and we'll do the test so you can have peace of mind." And nervous again waiting for the results. "Negative." So I was finally free knowing that I definitely don't have it. And I felt good. And Carlos felt very relieved because, for him, that would have been the worst thing-if he had given it to me. You know, it would have destroyed him.

So he was older and he was being very reflective about his life and thinking, "You know what? I've done everything in my life that I wanted to do. I've achieved everything that I've wanted to achieve. You know, I can die. I'm happy. I'm not afraid of death." Because he almost died twenty years prior, and he knew it was a beautiful experience. "I'm not afraid of death." The only thing he was afraid of was leaving me and Maya, leaving us alone. But he didn't fear death. So he fell into this depression,

and it weakened his immunity, of course, and he got his first bout of pneumonia-the Pneumocystis pneumonia. And then somehow. . . . I don't know how we wound up there. Oh, his doctor, Dr. [Fader], from East L.A.-his childhood doctor since he was a little kid-told us take him over to San Gabriel Hospital. So we went over there and the staff there was so paranoid and ignorant about the disease they put him in isolation in this wing that no one was in and they taped off, this yellow tape, and like the nurses didn't even want to be around him so no one was attending him. And at that point, we had Danny Guerrero, my friend Barry Sky, Danny's partner and Carlos's assistant Richard Read, and probably Robert and Eddie-Robert's partner Eddie Domínguez-and Barry Sky was very much into Native American rituals, so he said, "We're going to do a healing circle," so everyone. . . . Carlos was kind of like out of it. "Leave me alone, I don't want to do this." He was kind of bitter and didn't want to play the game. And so we all kind of did a hands-on healing thing and projected health and good luck and stuff. Apparently, later Carlos really voiced his appreciation for that and said it felt good knowing that these people cared enough to want to do this for him. And the doctor there at the hospital was a real asshole, too, and he was saying. . . . He came in and he said, "Well, I think you should not expect to be leaving the hospital, so you should get your things in order." We're like, "What are you talking about?" And he goes, "Well, your t-cell count is the lowest I've ever seen so probably you may not make it." So we're like, "Fuck you," and I said, "You know what? Carlos is a Porsche and here he is at a Volkswagen mechanic." I go, "We have to get him out of here."

So sure enough, research. . . . Barry had been very connected with the AIDS movement, and he knew all the good doctors on the Westside who were specializing in this, and he hooked us up with Eugene Rogolsky and transferred him over to Sherman Oaks. Well, he pulled out of it. He pulled out of the pneumonia, and Sherman Oaks was a whole other ball-game. Like the whole floor was dedicated to AIDS patients. The nurses were there because they wanted to be there. They ate out of the same bowls as the patients. There was no fear or paranoia. It was a very loving environment. What we had discovered during his illness is that there was this whole support group that had been developed through the years of people with AIDS, and we were sort of brought into these groups and we would go to Louise Hay's-I think we called them the "Hay Rides"-where every Tuesday or Wednesday night in West Hollywood there was a huge group, and she would talk to you, and she would talk about healing and she'd do meditations, and there were this big audience of people at all levels of illness. And she'd have healing tables with Reiki workers working on people's bodies and stuff. So we did a lot of that workshop. And then Barry had introduced me to this woman, Sally Fisher, who had also done workshops healing people with AIDS and meditation tapes and stuff. So we were doing all the reading on hea[ling]. I was actually doing all the research on alternative healing practices. Carlos, at this point, was pretty much resolved that, "I'm going to die. I don't care. I'm ready." And he wasn't so much into it, although there was a ray of hope that he did get into it when he was there. He would go along with it. But he was fighting it. He was very much a pessimist. And here I was trying to think of all the miraculous things that could heal him, that "If we can just keep you healthy long enough they'll find a cure," and "We can do this," and "Don't eat that hot dog," and this and that, and like feeding him healthy foods, all these vitamins, all these Chinese herbs, taking him to acupuncturists and herbalogists [sic], and just doing whatever I could to try to heal this guy. But spiritually he didn't want to accept it. So Sally Fisher had this workshop. It was a weekend workshop. Her son was Fisher Stevens, the guy who . . . this is like the [brat pack] kind of actor.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Coming up, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And she had healed him from cancer when he was a kid. He had cancer and she worked with him and she had developed this whole thing. And it was basically dealing with confronting your issues, why you had allowed yourself to become diseased-"dis eased," as Louise

Hay would say. It's "dis ease," there's something not at ease with your life and that's why disease manifest itself in you. And stress also is involved and old religious beliefs that didn't support you. All that stuff. Especially dealing with the gay community-and that's bigtime, like all that stuff. There are big issues, deep wounds. And so Sally had this workshop. I signed Carlos up. It was like three hundred bucks or something like that, and he was pissed off at me. He didn't want to go, and Barry said, "Yeah, just do it." So I signed him up. I said, "You've got to go. I already paid, you've gotta go." And I made him go. He went begrudgingly and, sure enough, he started responding. He came back after the second day feeling way better. You know, very much more optimistic. He'd got to vent a lot of his fears and pain and guilt and all that stuff. So that was really good, and that kind of kept him up.

So I'd have to do things constantly to like prop him back up. And at one point he says, "You're the only thing keeping me alive." And I was like, "Oh God." And I was getting tired, you know. It was like constant stress. He was in the hospital probably four or five times with Pneumocystis pneumonia, and each time I thought he would be dying. It was constant stress.

And watching Maya, trying to make it okay for her. We hadn't told her yet. You know, trying to protect her. And she knew something was wrong. She heard all the secrets, all the whispering and stuff. Kids know that. So it wasn't good for her, but we thought it would be good for her. Later I found out it's not. And so we decided to talk to her, but it was already towards the end of his life. But she was very relieved when I finally told her. We said, "Daddy's sick and he has AIDS." And her first reaction was, does she have it. "Do I have it?" I said, "No you don't. I don't have it and you have it." And she felt very relieved. So I guess she probably heard us talking and maybe she thought she might have it. So that was her initial reaction, and she felt . . . she changed after having the information. Like it empowered her. She became a happier child, because, you know, the house was dark; it was like this weight on us. And so she, of course, reacted to it. So having that information, it freed her up a little bit.

But prior to that, okay, we had all these illnesses and then all these other things-all these treatments, all the doctor appointments, all the meds that he had to take like around the clock. I had to wake him up every four hours, "Take these meds." And I had every body fluid imaginable thrown on me, gushed on me. It was like having terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible experiences. At one point we were driving-I was still driving; I was the chauffeur-and. . . Did I tell you that story, how he didn't like to drive?

JEFFREY RANGEL: No.

ELSA FLORES: Well, when we started dating, he had his car, which had been parked along Echo Park Avenue, smashed to bits. Some guy smashed into it. And at this time Carlos was having these psychic episodes of cars crashing in his mind-you know, cars crashing. So he was afraid, and his shrink said, "Well, be very careful. Try not to drive. Take the bus or get a friend. And paint it out. Just paint it out. It's just anxiety." So that's when the Car Crash thing started. So when I met him, I always had a car, and I think at that time I had a Volkswagen van, and I became the chauffeur on our dates. And when we got married he got used to being chauffeured and he kind of liked it, so I was the driver. So here I was. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: That didn't bother you at all?

ELSA FLORES: No, I liked being in. . . . I liked driving. Plus, you know, he painted car crashes. I felt safer if I was driving. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, sure.

ELSA FLORES: So here I was, cruising in this big old ugly Cadillac. I hated that car, but it was

comfortable.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I heard about the Cadillac.

ELSA FLORES: You heard about the Cadillac?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, you heard about that. And so we were in Hollywood going somewhere. Maya was in the back seat, and then I turned to him and his eyes were bulging and he was shaking and I thought he was having a heart attack, so I was like, "Oh, no, please don't do this! Don't do this now! Don't die!" I didn't say "don't die" because Maya was in the back. And she thought we were joking. She thought we were fooling around. And I didn't know what to do so I wanted to find people who could help me, so I pulled over and went around for a couple blocks till we got to Hollywood Boulevard, pulled the car over, and I asked some guys on the street to help me, so they all pulled him out. And he was having a seizure. It wasn't a heart attack. But it was so traumatic to go through that. And Maya at this point. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I thought this was before you found out that he had AIDS.

ELSA FLORES: No. It was part of the AIDS-related. . . . At this point Maya knew that there was something seriously wrong, so she was kind of in the fetal position in the back seat, and it was like the sleaziest part of Hollywood on a Friday night or Saturday night. And then this other guy was like coming around the car, and my keys were still in the ignition and the car was running and he was like checking it out to see if he can take the car with my kid in it. And it was like, here I was trying to protect. . . . Here my husband's on the floor, and then this guy's trying to take my daughter. It was like, "Oh, my god!" The ambulance came, and I said, "You know, there are blood precautions. Please be careful." So they put their gloves on and we went to the hospital-and it was over. I followed the ambulance, and by the time I saw him in the hospital room the seizures had stopped. They told us it was a seizure and it's one of the symptoms-one of the many symptoms-of AIDS. So there was lots of episodes like that. Another seizure happened in New Mexico when. . . .

Session 4, Tape 3, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: Side A, continuing the interview with Elsa Flores on April thirtieth. I keep getting mixed up what month it is. That's a bad sign.

ELSA FLORES: How come?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't know. Okay, and then you were in New Mexico.

ELSA FLORES: Uh-huh. I love the way your hair curls [down].

JEFFREY RANGEL: My little ringlets.

ELSA FLORES: Little tiny ringlets.

So, yeah, he had another episode there and this time he saw it coming. They had to put him on a seizure medicine, which was not. . . . You know, seizure medicines zonk you out. It's not a good thing. And so this one he saw coming, because he was [looking-Ed.] in the mirror of this house and he saw himself starting to shake. And so I tried to distract Maya and then I got him to sit down before it hit fully. But, sure enough, he went into seizure and then Carol [Brawley-Finkelstein-Ed.]. . . . We threw him in the back of her pickup truck and went to the hospital, and again it ended. So those

were actually the only two seizures he had. He had a couple while in the hospital, I think, but he was heavily medicated for different reasons.

JEFFREY RANGEL: How long was the course of the disease? Like from when you found out.

ELSA FLORES: Two years, but when he found out he was still healthy for another six months before his first what they call. . . . I guess, first, before you're full-blown, you're something else. It's something else. And then once you have a certain type of illness, you're considered full-blown. And so the Pneumocystis pneumonia was what was the . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was symptomatic of the full-blown stage?

ELSA FLORES: . . . yeah, the full-blown disease. And apparently the shingles that he had was related, because many AIDS patients get shingles.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've heard that.

ELSA FLORES: And the thrush, the candida, which he constantly had. So they. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: What is. . . . ?

ELSA FLORES: Thrush is. . . . Candida? It's bacteria or a fungus that grows in your mouth but it can get so bad that it could choke you. You could swell up so bad. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Babies get that, don't they?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, babies get that. It's just like a white film. So there was always many doctor appointments, and there were a lot of. . . . At that time, there wasn't a lot of progress in treatment, so they had to try different things. And AZT was the stable . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . but they were . . . for the Pneumocystis pneumonia they were inhaling this [Pentamidine], which was an antibiotic that you would inhale as a preventative. So he had to do that treatment all the time. And all the very expensive drugs. Luckily we had health insurance. And his doctor was very accommodating. He just wanted him to be comfortable. And Carlos had always known. . . . He didn't like pain and he knew that he didn't want to get to the point where he would be in bad pain. So I think he had planned to check out before he got to that point. Because we had other friends who we saw and who had met during this whole AIDS thing that swore that they would not get to that point and they would kill themselves before they get to a terrible point. But in the last minute, they'd hang on to the very last thread of life. They were blind, they were senile, they couldn't walk, and they just wouldn't let go of life. It's funny how that happens. But since Carlos had been there I think he decided that he wasn't going to let himself. And he had never talked about taking an overdose of pills or anything. I think in his mind he knew he would choose to check out when he felt it was time. So at this point he was becoming weaker and sort of dementia was entering the picture, so he couldn't focus like he used to. He loved reading and it was frustrating him because he couldn't read. He couldn't focus. And he would forget things and forget people who he had known. Very weak and very thin.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So he went through the physical transformation, too.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: So people at this point obviously know what's going on.

ELSA FLORES: If he was out in public, which during these times. . . . Because it would be up and down. Like he'd be up and he'd be like fully healthy and doing really well and everyone was really happy, and then in a matter of weeks you just decline and you lose all this weight and you're on your deathbed. It was amazing the way the. . . . You know Philadelphia? I was watching it with a girlfriend, and she goes, "Well, that's not very realistic. You know, like just the month before he was fine and now look at him." I go, "That's how it really is." It's amazing how the body can go through such a dramatic change in such a short period of time.

At the beginning of the disease, Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.] was there and he was all freaked out because Carlos was like his dad, you know? He was like a very important role model to him-and mentor. And we had a falling out over some stupid group that he and Eddie [Dominguez-Ed.] had joined, some positive-thinking group and Robert convinced me to go to this seminar. And I said, "Ah, okay, I'll go." He goes, "Just come." I go, "All right, I'll go check it out." They were supposed to recruit so many people. And so I went . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh-oh, one of those.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and there are all these like [_____-Ed.] [Stepford] people there. They're all like, "Hi!"

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Everything was positive and everyone was happy and I was like, "This is weird. People can't be like. . . ."

JEFFREY RANGEL: "Get me outta here." [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: "This isn't real. This is too weird." But I went. I was open to it and like, okay, I was listening to the seminar and the head of the seminar. . . . Guy, during the break they try to get you to sign up, right? Three hundred bucks for this course. And I'm like, "Well, you know, I'd do it for Robert's sake if he really believes in this. I'll do it but I don't have my checkbook with me. I'll send you a check." And then the head guy started like leaning into me. "You're nothing. You're a nothing. You're spineless. You're a coward." You're this, you're that. And I was like, "_____"! [untranscribable intake of breath-Trans.] And then I looked at Robert, like, "Defend me," right? And he's like just totally like Stepford. And I was like, "Oh my God!" And then I said, "I'm leaving. Robert, how could you let him talk to me like that? He's an asshole."

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: And Robert was, I guess, totally brainwashed by this group. And then I said, "I'm getting out of here." And he goes, "No. You promised me you'd stay for the whole thing." And I said, "_____" [sharp intake of breath] So he made me stay so I was staying there, and during the second half of the seminar the guy started making these comments directed at me and he would look at me . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: What the. . . ?!

ELSA FLORES: . . . and try to psych me out and say nasty things. And I'm like, "[sharp intake of breath] Oh, my God!" And so I went home and I told Carlos. Carlos was like pissed off, and then we had this conversation with Robert and Eddie and they were all upset because. . . . And later I found out what it was. It was like Robert couldn't deal with the thought of losing Carlos. Robert had lost

his dad to stomach cancer when he was probably already out of high school. But it was very traumatic for him. And suddenly this other father figure for him is going to be dying. And it was a vehicle for him to detach from us. So we were estranged for a year. We didn't talk for a year.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow!

ELSA FLORES: And then when I found out that Carlos was sick, I wrote him the letter and then he came back. No, no, no. I wrote him the letter, he found out, he came and visited us, and then we had the fight, and he disappeared for a year. When he finally came back he had realized that that's why he had left, that he couldn't deal with it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Amazing.

ELSA FLORES: But then he was fully there. He was the main person who was my support person, who was like there every day that I needed him. He was there, and he would massage Carlos's feet and take him to the doctor when I was tired, because it was just physically exhausting for me.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Sure.

ELSA FLORES: And then finally, it started leaking. You know, people who were sworn to secrecy couldn't stand it and it got around, and at this point Carlos was still pretty upset about it because some of these people were dear friends and they promised not to say anything, and it got around. So there was a lot of gossip, a lot of speculation. He chose not to tell Frank Romero till way at the end because Frank likes to talk [chuckles] and he definitely didn't want to tell Frank. And Frank and Nancy were hurt that this wasn't shared because they consider themselves dear friends and Carlos didn't feel safe sharing it. Finally, when he did Frank would come around more to see him and stuff. John Valadez couldn't deal with it, couldn't deal with the loss of Carlos, so he kind of distanced himself. He didn't come around till the day Carlos died; the next day John was at the door, feeling really bad.

[Interruption in taping to answer knock at the door]

ELSA FLORES: God, you're good.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Today? I'm listening sharp. [laughter]

ELSA FLORES: John Valadez didn't come around until after Carlos's death so he had a difficult time dealing with it. Another big disappointment for Carlos was Gilbert Luján, Magu, because Gilbert was one of the first people Carlos chose to share this information with, and so he went and he met Magu at the beach and they went out and took a walk on the pier. And he said, "Gilbert, I have AIDS." And Gilbert turned around and responded, "I'm not afraid of death." And kind of didn't acknowledge what he was saying. Just kind of said, well he, himself, personally was not afraid of death and didn't really want to talk about it. And then didn't come around too much. Every once in a while he would, but it was detached, you know, it was like denial kind of stuff. Because it was a huge loss for all these guys who were involved with Carlos in the arts.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And they just probably didn't want to face it. And both Frank and Magu had a crisis of body and mind immediately after Carlos's death. They both got really sick. Magu got pancreatitis-and he wasn't a drinker but he got severe pancreatitis. Frank had problems with his diabetes and he was very sick. So I saw it as a sign of sort of emotional kind of physical breakdown over the loss. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just not dealing with it.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Just kind of ate away at them. So again it was very hush-hush but the word got out. And then Jan Turner, his dealer at that time, like dealers would, you know, used it as a sales pitch, although he didn't tell her for the longest time. Actually, he didn't tell her. She knew. She found out through the grapevine, so anyone who would come up. . . . Sales started happening. People were just like wanting his work suddenly before he croaked, right? And it was like, God, really sick, but it was to be expected. And I think she would tell prospective buyers, "Well, you know, this is it. You'd better get it now." And so that was kind of used by her-and probably by other dealers who were handling his work. And she didn't find out until. . . . I mean, she didn't find out from us until he had scheduled a show in 1989 and he was already pretty sick. That was the time Margarita Nieto interviewed him for the Archives, and they did the interview there at the gallery when the show had been installed. But prior to that. . . . We were working in our studio on Melina Street, and Carlos was very weak, he could hardly stand up, and here he wanted to do these big canvases. And I'm like, "Carlos, don't do that. You're going to fall or something. You're going to hurt yourself. Why don't you sit down on the stool and try to paint? Or paint smaller. Don't try to do these big things." And he still wanted to do them, so he like _____. [untranscribable sound signifying going limp] And a couple of times, because he was so weak, he had me do the first couple of coats, and then he would finish them off. That's the first time I had ever touched his canvases and because he was in need, I didn't .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Refuse him.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. No one could tell because I did a good impression of Almaraz. [laughter] But it was the first and last time that I'd ever done that. So when I realized that his show was coming up, it was coming up close, and it wasn't enough work to fill that entire gallery, and I called her and I said, "You know, you'd better come down and really take a look because. . ." Then we started talking about it and when it was mentioned to her, it was mentioned in the form of, "Well, you know what's going on, right?" And we were like, "Yeah, is it?" And we were like "the Big A?" And she goes, "Yeah?" and I go, "Yeah." So it was like this kind of funny way of going around it. So sure enough she came down and she took a look. There was still a good body of work but not to fill the gallery, so she said, "This has to be a spectacular show." So she borrowed some masterpiece paintings from collections to fill in some of the big spaces. And one of them was that four-piece panel of Echo Park, like his biggest masterpiece. And that really was a big show-off piece, and a few other pieces and then everything else filled in. And it looked great, looked great. And he showed up, thin but he had this custom suit made by our friend, Arnie Araica, who died of AIDS two years later. And Arnie and he connected and he was such a sweet man. So Arnie made this over-size suit so he looked fuller, and he was all thrilled because he got. . . . He rented a limo to take him to his opening, and we picked up Robert and Eddie and we were like, ["Oh, oh."] Stepped out of the limo and there's a huge crowd at his opening. He always had great. . . . So it was a great moment for him, and he felt very successful.

But he was weakened and you could tell. You know, at a certain point they look drawn and their color is gray. So you can tell if you observe it and you knew what was going on. Plus all the gossip that had been out there. And so he finally told his parents. . . . No, I think his parents found out. . . . His parents suspected. His parents always tried to ignore serious issues, and even though they knew something was going down, they didn't want to deal with it. So his dad caught wind because I was trying to protect Carlos from his parents finding out, because his mom was so fragile he thought she'd freak out. And so when he'd come to the hospital-to that first hospital stay in San Gabriel-they had all these "contaminated area" signs everywhere. So whenever his dad would come I would take down the signs so he wouldn't suspect. And one time he was there when I wasn't

there and he saw the signs. So I know he knew, but Carlos didn't actually tell him till later. And finally when we told Maya she. . . . It was probably six months before he died and that's when I told her. And, again, it was a big relief for her to know that. So he was becoming sicker and sicker, thinner and thinner. We were still doing our Christmas sales and stuff like, that and his last Christmas sale was going to be a big deal because he wanted to stage this production where he was going to be the king and we were going to do a throne and he was going to sit on the throne [laughter]-this whole performance art thing, and he was all into it. But he was totally so weak and he could hardly walk. He had to walk with a cane.

And at that point. . . . During that time, I decided I couldn't do it anymore. I had to bring in a nurse to help me, and he was really upset. He didn't want a nurse to take care of him. But I just had to say, "I have to do it." So a nurse would come in and help me during the day, and we had to move him from upstairs to downstairs because he couldn't climb the stairs anymore. He fell a couple of times, I remember. And people would come by to try and to see him, and he didn't want to see anyone. He was getting angry and bitter towards the end of his life, like was real grumpy. Plus the dementia-he was this other person; he wasn't the old Carlos anymore. And then at the opening. . . . Oh, at the Christmas sale, he had been in the hospital. They were feeding him intravenously just to build up his body weight. He didn't have an infection or anything. There was no medical reason he was there except for . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: His weakness.

ELSA FLORES: . . . yeah, his weakness. What do they call it? Wasting syndrome. And so the doctor wouldn't let him out that day to be the king of the sale. And so I had my video camera and I went around and videotaped everyone and said, "Do you have any messages for Carlos? What d'ya say?" And everyone would say, "Hey, Carlos!" And Magu was there. He was in our sale. And all kinds of. . . . Teddy Sandoval was in the sale and Robert and Eddie and Dan. All these people were in the sale, and then all these well-wishers gave these great things. So then we took the video to the hospital room and we played it for him so he was all excited seeing everyone. We stayed up real late that night, the night of the opening. We went out to eat after and I didn't see him till the following day. So we went to the hospital, showed him the video, he was all excited. Told him how much money we made. He was even more excited. And he was seeing himself fat. He said, "Look it, it's working!" And his tiny little chicken arms, these skinny little arms, he was waving them up in the air saying, "Look, look! I'm like Ricky Ricardo!" [laughter] And I was like, "Okay, Carlos." And I was like totally kind of out of it because I hadn't had much sleep. And I was, "Okay," and he was being really, really super loving. He was like reborn. It was like his energy was back. It was like the old Carlos. He was like, "Oh, I love your arms." He was kissing my arms and I'm like, "Wow! What's going on?" And he was calling everyone he knew, telling them how much he loved them. And he'd never do that. He was calling everyone that was important to him and telling them that he loved them. I thought, "Wow, this is really great! Maybe this stuff's really working." And we spent some time there. And this shrink that we had seen a couple of times-Susan Habif-had come in and we didn't like the work she was doing-she was just too harsh-and so we stopped seeing her. But she thought, "He's gotta deal with his death. He's gotta do it. We gotta do it now." And I said, "I don't think so." So she decided to come uninvited to his room.

JEFFREY RANGEL: God!

ELSA FLORES: He saw her coming in and he tells me in Spanish, "Get rid of her. Get her out of here." And she wouldn't leave. We were so happy, everyone was in a good mood, and then she started saying, "Well, so are you ready to die?" And Maya was right there. And she was like, "Are you ready to die?" And Carlos was like, "Get here out of here." And so my friend Pam from New Mexico was here-Pam Mitchell-and she escorted this chick out. I was so mad at her. I called her

later-or I wrote her a letter-saying, "That was so fucked-up of you to do that." So it was a real happy day-very, very happy day.

Prior to that. . . . Oh, there was a Max [Blum-Ed.] story, but I'll talk about that later. So it was a great day, it was real exciting, we were all basking in our glorious sale, very successful sale. He had talked to our friend Spencer in New York who had worked with Pam Mitchell in the gallery in Santa Fe-the Channing Dale Throckmorton Gallery. He was Spencer Throckmorton. And Spencer had lost a lover several years back and Pam had helped him in New York nurse this lover, and Carlos was talking really happy with Spencer on the phone and telling him how much he loved him and all that. And then Pam got on the phone and said Spencer sounded funny, sounded kind of sad, and then later we found out Spencer said that he knew that Carlos was going to be leaving because he had experienced the same thing with his lover John, that it was kind of like coming full circle and finding your love again, your self-love, and being elated and having all this love and energy, and then saying good-bye. He didn't tell us that at the time; he told us later.

So that night he started going into some fevers and we didn't know what it was. They were testing stuff and they couldn't find out and his dad had brought a priest over and I was like, "Oh, no." It's like that's the last thing we need is some guy saying that he's a sinner and all that stuff. And luckily, Carlos was asleep. So dad and the priest exit. And after them comes in Jeffrey Vallance, the artist, who had very endearing relationship with Carlos-a dear, dear relationship, sweet, like little boy kind of relationship-and Jeffrey just sat with him. And he said that Carlos was kind of in and out of consciousness. And he started praying with Carlos so it was like. . . . Later I called Jeffrey the high priest. He gave him his last rites, basically, because he died that night in his sleep.

The interesting thing was that that evening. . . . I had been preparing myself for his death because I knew; it was looking so bad that it was going to happen soon. So I was reading books on death and dying-Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Stephen Levine. Stephen? Yeah, Stephen Levine. He had several books and one was called Death and Dying. So I was reading the chapter, and it was probably eleven o'clock at night. I was in bed reading the chapter on the moment before death. It was a guided meditation that you were supposed to sit with the dying person and read to them during . . . to help them pass through this passage. And I kind of like looked at it and I fearfully thought, "Well, I don't know. I might be channeling something to him. So I don't know if I should read this." But I went on, fearfully I went on. And I read "The Moment Before Death" chapter and then the next chapter was "The Moment of Death." So I read that chapter. And all along I knew that I wanted to be with him when he died, I wanted to help guide his spirit out of his body and feel the crown of his head, and they say you're supposed to feel this warmth on the crown of the head. So I read that chapter and then the following chapter was, "The Moment After Death." And so I read that chapter, and then I put it away, went to sleep. And he had passed at that time, at that exact time that I was reading that. So in a way I was helping him. But I don't think he could have left his body had we been around him, because it would have been too painful. So he had to be alone. And again he wasn't in any pain, he wasn't suffering any illness at that time of his hospital stay, but he chose that was the right time and he knew that we had just made some money so we would be okay and all that stuff, and so he died.

And, you know, the hospital didn't call me because they couldn't find my number in his charts anywhere. And so the next day I call up to talk to him and they like gave me the run-around and finally a doctor gets or-or a nurse gets on-and tells me that he had expired last night at this hour. I was, "Wow!" I was blown away. The funny thing was that, once getting through the shock and having to tell Maya that her Dad died and all that stuff, and calling friends. . . . They came over and we're all hugging and crying and stuff. Robert came over and started, just spontaneously, putting together an altar, and the living room became this living, breathing space of altar. Half the living room was altar. And people would come and pay their respects and bring things to the altar, and Maya would put all her little toys and the things that she had special with her and her dad on the altar. And she'd make drawings of Dad going to Heaven and she'd put on the altar. And she would

dialogue with this altar, and it really brought her great comfort. And we had a memorial a few days later and everyone brought stuff. We would tell them, "Bring stuff for the altar," and everyone brought . . . so it was like this vibrating thing that brought him fully back into the house. It lifted the darkness and the heaviness from the house, and suddenly it was like he was in his full glory, in color and vibrancy again.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: You could feel it. And I was happy, I was elated, because I felt him back with us. And so you know people thought I was a little weird-a memorial that I was in such a good mood-but I was feeling so good because he was out of pain, he wasn't suffering, and he was back with us. Because he was not Carlos before he left; he was another person. So it was like that was a very beautiful thing.

And the next morning when I went. . . . You know, I said it was important for Maya to see him. And they had already taken him down to the morgue, so I said, "Can you please put him back in his room so his daughter can visit him." So we went up. I think Magu and Robert went with me. So we went up into the room and, sure enough, he was very peaceful looking. I cut some locks of his hair, and I had Maya do whatever she wanted, to touch him and stuff and say goodbye. And then that was the last time I saw him. Then they cremated him. I think his mom and dad went down to see him before they did that.

But the memorial was strange because Danny Guerrero, who's usually Mr. Gift-of-Gab, the perfect M.C., he was supposed to kind of M.C. the thing. We had a little microphone and no one could say anything. He was hard-pressed to say anything.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Where was this at?

ELSA FLORES: In the back yard of our log cabin. People brought food and it was great. A bunch of old friends and new friends and it was a real nice. . . . Louie Pérez had put a little pick from Los Lobos on the altar, a little pink pick, and Peter Shire brought a little jar of Echo Park water, so there were really beautiful things on the altar. And the altar, we kept it up for like six months. We really cared for it. We nurtured the altar for all this time. And it was great for Maya because, like I said, she wouldn't express her grief in any way. She never cried when her dad died. But she would often go and talk to this altar and have this conversation. And during the memorial she walked into the room and a candle popped, exploded. So it was like, "Oh Maya, Dad's talking to you."

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: So Maya had. . . . So we took the altar down finally six months later because we were doing this show at Barnsdall Park, on Raging at the Visible, it was AIDS in the City of Angels. And they used an image of Carlos's that he and Maya had worked on together-a pastel, it's in her room now-it's called Anonymous Donor, because it was the only piece that she had ever worked on. And at this time we had left our studio on Molino Street, and he was working in the garage at home at the log cabin, and so he would be out there drawing and she was beside him this particular day. And he was drawing these little dino dinosaurs and then she would copy him and do her dinosaurs on the same paper. He'd do a little bee and she'd do a little bee, and he did a bunny and she would do a bunny. So he titled it, Anonymous Donor. And so it had been sent to the gallery and sold, and suddenly. . . . I was looking through slides after his death and I was like, "Oh, I wish we had kept this one." It was the only piece that Maya and her Dad had ever worked on. Too bad that we don't have it." And then later I get a call from the gallery that it mysteriously turned up at the gallery, that it was returned, that the buyer didn't want it. So it was like, "All right, Carlos! Thanks for sending it back." [laughter] So all these little magical things kept

happening. So it was like, "Wow, the power!"

And so after his death. . . . Oh, so then we waited. We had the ashes and we waited until summer so we can go to Kauai and bury him next to my Mom. We buried her ashes at this Catholic cemetery on Kauai. We talked about that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And so we were going to place Carlos next to my Mom, and Jeffrey Vallance had designed this beautiful gravestone with all these imagery, and I used a quote from Rebecca [Rickman], who's married to Ken Brecher, this beautiful writing that she had sent me about Carlos, and so I used the quote on it and we had an image of one of his Echo Park scenes etched into the marble. So all the Kauai people came out. All the artists and friends had come out and all my family and Carlos's parents. And Richard Duardo showed up because he was on the island, so he was there. And Kauai, of course, the tradition of flowers and leis and stuff, so everyone had flowers and we did the ceremony. Robert did some readings and we placed . . . we buried the urn. We had created this great time-capsule in the urn, and we had put his fav[orite]. . . .

Session 4, Tape 3, Side B

JEFFREY RANGEL: . . . interview with Elsa Flores on April 30th.

ELSA FLORES: So we buried it and placed Jeffrey's [Vallance-Ed.] grave marker on it, and then everyone starting putting their flowers on it and then, before you knew it, there's this three-foot-high pile of flower leis on this. . . . It was so beautiful. I have pictures of it. And it was a real joyous ceremony. And then we went over to this little bungalow that we rented for my family and had a kind of barbecue party kind of thing. And that morning before the ceremony, it was really raining. We thought, "Oh no, it's going to be rainy," and suddenly there was a double rainbow that appeared out at sea and then the skies cleared and it was great. It was a really beautiful day. So it was real nice. He sits there and I go visit him all the time. And he's happy with my mom. My mom said that. . . . On full moon she's out dancing on the beach, in front on Kealia Beach, with bailando con los muertos, so I'm sure Carlos is partying down with her. When she was sick, she had a morphine party with him, because she was given morphine for her cancer and she knew Carlos like, you know. [gestures-Ed.]

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: She knew Carlos. So she says, "Come on, have some morphine with me." So we sat there and they had some morphine; they had a morphine party. But before she died, she dumped the morphine. She didn't want us to find it. [laughter] So that was funny.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, my god! How did you take that?

ELSA FLORES: What?

JEFFREY RANGEL: In pill form or something?

ELSA FLORES: No, it was liquid.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, it was liquid?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So that was funny.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow!

ELSA FLORES: So yeah, there he lies, so it's definitely my spiritual home. And there's a plot there for me, waiting for me, although I hope not to be there for a long time. But what we did also was privately, Maya and I took some of his ashes. . . . I think during spring, before we did the burial. We did the burial in summer, but in the spring we went for her school break, and we took some of the ashes and spread them at his favorite beaches. We went out to his favorite reef and we spread them out, and we went to Stone's Gallery and we threw some in the gallery. [laughs]. And we went to different places and it was like he's all over the island. So that's funny.

And so after his death, like I said, it was that real difficult year and subsequent years, and now it's been seven years since his death. And Carlos had always reinvented himself every seven years. He went through one thing, then he'd go through another thing, then he'd go through another thing, and he was just constantly searching and going through life fully into learning and soaking up whatever knowledge he can attain. And so it's been seven years, and at the anniversary of his seventh year, his death, stuff started happening. You know, it's like all this activity. Because things had been dying down, the market was really bad. But the phone started ringing suddenly, and then there's this film project that started coming up, a documentary on his life and all this stuff started happening. And then I started thinking, "You know what? This guy was so powerful and he did possess magic-he's like reinventing himself again. Like his energy is. . . . He's still a master. He's still out there making magic happen."

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's amazing.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. So it was awesome. So we had. . . . Richard Read stayed with me-his assistant-for like another year, and after Richard left the wonderful thing was Coco Romero, who is Frank Romero's daughter-Carlos had helped raise her-and suddenly she came back into my life and helped me with Maya, and they became very close, like sisters. So Coco became my assistant-I had hired her-and she was basically Maya's nanny, too-you know, just totally there for her and they loved each other and traveled with us. She finally met a boyfriend on one of our trips to Hawaii and is still there. She's on Maui now.

So later. . . . Did I talk to you about the hurricane?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I think you've mentioned it.

ELSA FLORES: Oh, let me give you a little story about the hurricane. Okay, so we went through all that stuff, and one thing that really hurt me was that I noticed a lot of his friends kind of abandoned the friendship with me, like kind of disappeared. I was like, "What's going on?" Here when I need their support the most they disappear. So it was like, "Okay, I get it. It's like he's no longer there. He was the touchstone, so it's like they're gone." And a few good friends were still there, and, like I said, Robert [Gil de Montes-Ed.] had always been there, Barry had always been there, Dan Brice. We had a problem, too-we had like an estrangement-but he also came back and was there. And Richard Read and then my family. So. . . . What was I saying?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Hurricane?

ELSA FLORES: No, before that. About . . . oh, friends leaving. And so other people just disappeared so I kind of had to learn a lesson that way. So that was kind of hard for me but I spent a lot of time alone. I didn't go out. I didn't want to go out. And pretty much dedicated myself to Maya and handling his estate.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Um hmm.

[Interruption in taping; they apparently move to a new location in which a building project is taking place, with it's accompanying noise and distractions-Trans.]

ELSA FLORES: Okay, so I kind of had to recreate a new life for myself, which was real difficult because having had this perfect life and then suddenly it all came crashing down. It was real hard. So I went through many years of grieving. Many years, I think. It was probably five years of still dealing with it and stuff like that. Because I had that delayed grieving period because I couldn't break down initially. But, again, Kauai was my salvation.

One year, 1992, we were about to leave Kauai and my sister called me like five o'clock in the morning. She was here in L.A., my sister Olga. "It's coming, it's coming, the hurricane's coming!" I'm like, "Get outta here." There had always been hurricane threats on Kauai, and ten years prior to that, the first time we had visited Kauai, they had just had Hurricane Eva that was a pretty strong hurricane. And when we checked into that lousy hotel, it was like, "Oh, God, it was so ugly," and then we had gone up to the Grand Canyon one day from that hotel, which was closer to the hotel and it was devastated. It was just this fallen trees everywhere. But throughout the years there had always been hurricane warnings and they always missed the islands. So suddenly here Olga's calling me. And I had heard that there was a hurricane watch, there was one out there. But they had predicted if it was coming towards the islands it wouldn't hit till Saturday and this was Friday. [hammering sounds] Should I ask them not to. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

ELSA FLORES: So, okay, Olga called me up, "It's coming, it's coming." I said, "You're crazy. Even if it were to come it's not coming till tomorrow and I'm leaving today." She goes, "No, it's coming! Watch. . . ." I didn't have TV then on Kauai. She goes, "Call your weather service." And I go, "Okay, okay, okay." And I started getting a little scared. And then we get a call from Maya's friend Tiffany, a neighbor, and she says, "It's coming, it's coming, it's going to be here at three o'clock. We have to go to high ground, we have to abandon. We're being evacuated." I go, "Tiffany, what are you talking. . . ?" I'm still half asleep and then my heart started pounding like, "Oh, my God! A hurricane's coming!"

JEFFREY RANGEL: This is for real.

ELSA FLORES: And my flight was scheduled to leave Kauai. So, boom, boom, my heart started racing. And I'm like, "Oh, my God." The flight was scheduled to leave that morning and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute." I'm more afraid of turbulence than I am of a hurricane." [laughter]. "I'd rather be on the ground than in an airplane."

JEFFREY RANGEL: I love turbulence.

ELSA FLORES: Oh God, do you?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I love it.

ELSA FLORES: Oh God, I hate it. So I said, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to stay here." So I called my friend Marti [Paskal-Ed.]. Her nine-year-old daughter was Maya's friend and her husband had been in New York so she was alone. I said, "We've got to evacuate. Get your stuff. We'll caravan up to the evacuation center," which was this five-star hotel in Princeville that they had built. Luckily I had been fully packed because I was ready to leave that morning. So I just threw everything in the car, all the suitcases, and then I started packing up the art and wrapping up pillows and couch cushions and throwing them in closets. And you're supposed to. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Tape your windows?

ELSA FLORES: We taped the windows, and if you had stayed in your house you're supposed to open one side of your house ...

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . and when the eye passes, you close the windows and you open the other side. But since I wasn't going to be there I opened them all, right? Thinking, "Okay, I'll just take my chances. And we went up to the evacuation center and tried to get a room but they had just given them all out, and so they said, "Go to the ballroom, that's where we're sending everyone." And so we went and we dropped our stuff. It was like *Gone with the Wind*. There were like bodies laying throughout the ballroom. And we had other friends and neighbors that we found there. And then we went up to have breakfast at the café, and here we were having this elegant five-star buffet breakfast.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: There's a piano player playing classical tunes, you know? This is surreal. And there was hippies doing these meditations in the hallways and everyone was praying and stuff. And we were like, "This is so bizarre." And there was hardly a breeze in the air. The skies were clear. We were like, "This is so weird." So then we went and we settled in the ballroom, and then other friends and family came up. And we ran into these other friends, and my friend Marty was a little claustrophobic-she didn't like being in that crowded room-and we ran into other neighbors, who said, "Come up to our conference room. There's no one up there. We're one level up. It's the Queen Emma's Room. Come on up." And so we said, "Okay." We left most of our stuff there. We went up there and we checked out. We said, "Yeah, this is pretty cool." So we took some of our suitcases up. And then we went and then the hurricane started to hit, so we went and started watching it. [Sound of power tools] We were sitting in front of this hallway of glass windows and just watching these trees start breaking apart, bit by bit, just like _____. [makes a sucking-in sound] It was eerie, right? And the hotel was really great because they kept us well-informed, so there was always this. . . . The manager was always on the sound system. He was real funny and he was trying to put people at ease and he was saying, "Okay, they predicted it's coming. It's doing it. It's going to hit Kauai straight on, so be prepared" and stuff. And so they. . . . [background noise breaks her train of thought-Trans.] [laughs] Got noisier, got noisier, got. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, I know. We'll get the story down.

ELSA FLORES: We'll get it down. And so we started watching it, and suddenly it started intensifying after all this time had passed and pieces of the roof started flying and started coming at our windows, so we had to move away from the windows and so we wound up back in Queen Emma's room. No one was allowed in the main lobby of the hotel because it was all wall-to-wall glass. And so everyone was kind of watching the wall-to-wall glass activity from the side, so there were these crowds, and things are hitting the windows and there's all this noise and doors were being smashed in. And the skylights-you know, you see rooftops flying overhead and some would crash into skylights. And we're like, "Ooh, ahh." There's all these huge crowds making all these incredible sounds. And then suddenly we heard a big, boom!, like an earthquake. The whole building shook. And we're like, "Whoa, what was that!?" And the lights went out, and I heard this huge gush of water, just gushing. You know, "What was that?" And, at this point, Maya started running into the darkness and I grabbed her so she wouldn't get trampled by hysterical crowds. And then I grabbed her and then I looked out the doorway of the conference room into the hallway, and there was a huge gaping hole in the ceiling and the main water main had been severed by this roof that had hit the hotel and it was just dumping this waterfall right in the middle of the hallway. And then everyone was panicking, right? And then I sort of went into survival mode because my girlfriend Marty . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: She was. . . .

ELSA FLORES: She was helpless. So she'd just kind of followed me. And so we were stuck because behind us it was a wrought iron balcony that fell two stories into the lobby and we couldn't go anywhere that way. So I went into one of the other rooms. There was no way out. And so the only way through it was to go through and under this. Because I saw that thing flapping and I just thought, "One more gust of wind, pho-o-o-m, it'd be off, and we could be sucked out or something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And so we were really in a life-threatening situation, and so I said, "Come on, we've just gotta go through it now. We've gotta do it now." So I grabbed them and said, "Okay, ready?! One, two. . . ." And then this surfer guy grabbed me. "You can't go over there! You'll kill yourself!" I go, "Yes, I can!"

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: I let him go and we ran. We ran through it. We got all wet. And so we wound up in the hallway and then it was like a Poisiden Adventure. Water was going all the way down. And everyone was evacuating from the. . . . There was one more level above us. They got hit really bad, too, and then everyone starts running down the hallway, and then the staff started trying to evacuate us. They kind of were holding the doors open like in the lobby, trying to get us through it and down into. . . . They led us into the bowels of the hotel, like the kitchen, and there was all like all these pipes overhead. We were drenched, like rats. And so they finally led us back into the damn ballroom where we started. And we were like totally traumatized, all soaking wet. And then all our other people were there all calm and stuff. "Hey, what happened to you?" So that night the thing apparently . . . the hurricane stalled on Kauai for five hours. The eye had stopped.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh God!

ELSA FLORES: And so just caused major disaster, major damage. Everyone had damage to their homes and businesses. And there was a military base over on the west side and they had clocked the winds at one point at two hundred and twenty five miles and then the clock broke.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Whoa!

ELSA FLORES: So gusts were bigger than that.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That was serious, yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And it was great during the eye. Everything was calm, and so we all kind of like checked it out and went outside for a little bit.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Really quick.

ELSA FLORES: And then it hit real hard, and they were saying, "Okay, now the back side of the hurricane shouldn't be as strong as the front side of the hurricane. So sure enough the back side of the hurricane hit even harder than the front side. So everything that had been rattled loose got torn off, right? So finally it passed. The manager of the hotel didn't have the sense to turn off the water main, so the whole hotel lost their water pressure so the toilets weren't flushing and there was no water. But they were feeding us. They were being really good. They gave us linens and everything. But the toilets were a mess.

And that night everyone had conked out, everyone was so drained, and I just couldn't sleep. I was like pumped up. So I'm like, "I'm going outside. I want to see this." It was full moon, and just looking down into the valley, the view of Hanalei Bay, all I saw was like sticks. Like Mt. St. Helens. Every leaf had been torn off of every tree, if any tree was standing. And so I was like, "Wow!" It was surreal. It was awesome. And there was like this haze of dust that was just kind of hanging in the air, and then the moon over the bay was wild. And I said, "I'm going to go up to the parking lot to see if my car's okay." It was a rental but, you know, "Well, I'm going to check it out." And then I was going to check on Coco's condo. Coco Romero had a condo close to the hotel. But she had been in L.A. with her boyfriend. I said, "I'm going to go check on their house." And so I went and I checked, and there were cars on top of each other and my car didn't have one scratch on it. And luckily I had filled the tank because I had to return it the next day, so I had a full tank of gas. Because you couldn't get gas for days after that. And then we went over to. . . . It was dark, and I was like, "Where's Coco's condo?" I couldn't recognize it because the landscape had changed so dramatically.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: And suddenly I saw her car and there was something on top of it and I couldn't make it out. It was dark so as I got closer I realized it was a couch sitting on top of her car. And I said, "Oh, this is not good!" [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Was it from her house?

ELSA FLORES: And then I looked around and there were stereos and there were pots and pans, and finally I figured out that was her condo. And, sure enough, at daybreak I went back over there to try to save whatever they had. Ben [Silbert-Ed.] was a big surfer. He had surfboards. They were all in the hallway, like all piled on each other, and I had to break in to get there. And their living room and kitchen wall had blown out so it was down in the valley and all their stuff. So Coco's walls had been blown out and all the stuff had been pushed out, so I plastic-sheeted those walls so that any rains that came in wouldn't destroy what was left, and then put a sign, "Danger. Do not enter." And then we had packed everything in our cars and Marty and myself caravanned to visit this friend who decided to stay in her house. She was a long-term cancer survivor. She was on a morphine drip. This woman's amazing. And she wouldn't leave her house, so she was with her nurse and her son and, as we turned up the street, every house on her block was destroyed. And we said, "Oh no, Deborah [_____-Ed.]. What's going to happen to Deborah?" And we got to her house, it was the only house standing. And they said that they had to go from room to room and finally wound up under the staircase. And originally we had planned to stay with other friends in their house and their house was totaled. They wound up under the staircase; it was the only thing standing. And we wouldn't have all fit under the staircase, so it was lucky we went to the hotel. So we started making our trek down. Deborah was fine. We decided we'd take her with us, but she needed to be evacuated because her morphine had to stay refrigerated. So we said, "Okay, let's go check out what happened at our house on the north shore first. Normally, it's a five-, ten-minute drive from Princeville down to my house and Marty's house. There was a huge, long caravan of cars all heading towards Haena, and we stopped every five feet, ten feet and everyone would get out of their trucks and their cars and with the chainsaws and remove the debris. It took two hours to get down to our house and it was like this adventure. Everything had changed. You know, things were gone. You'd see these vistas off of the highway that you could never see before [laughter], and everything was like there were no trees and it was hot and you didn't want to turn on your air conditioning because you didn't want to use your gas up. And it was like, "Oh, my God." Finally we got down to my house. And I looked in the driveway and you couldn't get in the driveway, there was so many trees that had fallen, but my house was still standing. And I said, "Oh shoot," you know, "I would have liked to have built a new house." [laughter] I was kind of hoping, "Oh that would be kind'a cool. I could build the

house with the studio that I've always wanted." But luckily it was standing. And then we decided to leave Deborah at a neighbor's house, and Marty and I and the girls walked along the beach to her house. She had lived in Taylor's, of Taylor Camp. She had bought his house, so she had this fabulous house, and they were building this brand new five-million-dollar house next door to it. They had just moved here. They are from Beverly Hills. Like they had just made this big change in their life and ready to move into the new house in a few months and they're living in Taylor House. And we got to it, and the beach looked like. . . . There was no tidal surge, which was amazing. The south shore did have a tidal surge, so all those houses were destroyed. But this just had like . . . it looked like holocaust. There was this really strange feeling to the beach. And the beach was all muddy and, you know, there were sharks out there and the reef was being suffocated by sediment and stuff because all the rivers had just gushed. And we got to her house and she broke down. Her house was destroyed. And all her stuff was over in the next lot-you know, the next acres. So we went hunting for all of their stuff. Here we were, disaster victims, like picking up mementos from her house. We found her underwear in Glen [Frey's] house.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: He had a house next to her. At Charo's [_____ -Ed.] house we found one of her paintings out there. A whole section of her roof was never found. They had a huge watercolor that was never found. Also one of Carlos's pieces was lost. Luckily, the art that I had saved from the house stayed in the ballroom, because if I had taken it up to Queen Emma's it would have been gone, because all of our luggage. . . . This much water, like a foot of water. So, luckily, the art was saved for me, but. . . .

Prior to leaving Kauai, I had a feeling that, "There's something going to happen." I thought it was going to be a tidal wave. So I had an intuition that there was going to be some disaster, and I wanted to save this one pastel that was very sentimental to me. I loved it. It was one of Carlos's Kauai scenes. And so I took it to Stone's Gallery, and I said, "Can you pack it up and send it to me? But don't ship it to me until September the eleventh because I want to be in L.A. to receive it." So, okay, it was ready to go. It was on the floor of the gallery. It disappeared. The whole framing shop was gone and they went looking for it in the cane field. They couldn't find it. It was gone. So that was real heartbreaking that we lost that. So we stayed for another week. You know, we just felt like we were part of the recovery group . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: . . . because at this point, we felt so bonded, with having gone through this communal experience, and, unlike the hurricane they had just had in Florida, Kauai came together like a family. They really like. . . . And prior to that, the island had started becoming. . . . They started having some attitude, like you would in like Honolulu. And it used to be a real loving, friendly place. But it was being developed rapidly so people were getting kind of attitude. And after that it just like kind of slapped everyone back into shape, and people again were open and loving and helping each other. And everyone shared each other's food because refrigerators weren't working, so everyone cooked as much as they could and shared it with your neighbors. Restaurants were cooking their steak and lobster for everyone.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: It was like Vietnam. The Red Cross helicopters would come, hover low over the area. But by this time the hills were turning brown, so it was like really weird. This beautiful green island was now brown. So we were just like amazed. We had to wash our clothes in the. . . . Marty, finally her husband forced his way back to Kauai. They wouldn't let him on the island but he forced his way

in. And they also were living in my house because my house was livable, although it had major water damage. So I got to redo the whole house after the hurricane with insurance money. So they stayed on and it was hard for us to leave because my heart was breaking to leave there. But before that, Marty had joined me on our way to Honolulu because she needed a break. She was just burned out. And it was so funny because on the airplane they gave us ice and it was like, "[sharp intake of breath]." We were like kids, like, "Ice! Oh my God!" We were like so traumatized. So it was a real trip. It was a real life-changing experience. And now whenever there's hurricane warnings everyone on Kauai takes them seriously.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Heeds them, huh?

ELSA FLORES: Everyone goes and gets water and batteries and watches the weather stations and see where it's going and stuff. We had like four close calls in the last two or three summers. Real close calls. So it was like major. And then so Maya was supposed to start school the week prior to the day after the hurricane, and so she came back like a big hero because she was like...

JEFFREY RANGEL: She survived it.

ELSA FLORES: . . . "I survived Iniki." Iniki means "piercing winds." And I said, "Oh, great." When a hurricane enters Hawaiian waters they give it a Hawaiian name. I said, "Great, just welcome it to the island. Give it a Hawaiian name." [laughter]

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: And so recovery was slow, but it was really great because it ended tourism for a long time. It was hard on the economy of the island because ninety per cent of the people were dependent on tourism. But it was great. They had these abandoned beautiful beaches now. Mother Nature kind of knows what it's doing, because it did a severe spring pruning and the island came back more beautiful than ever. It's gorgeous. Yeah, new lookout points.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's great.

ELSA FLORES: And, amazingly, all the trees I had on my property, not one of them touched the house. The big damage I had was a piece of my neighbor's roof came and like speared my roof- because we had tin roofs- and it speared the roof. But, like I said, I got this great new house out of it.

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's great.

ELSA FLORES: It's really beautiful now, real charming.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow, and the experiences.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, and that incredible experience. Yeah. And Carlos had always wanted to be in a hurricane. He was like begging for a hurricane to come his way. He would have loved it. And I was like, "I don't want to be in hurricane." But after going through it and surviving, it was awesome. And there were only two or three deaths. One guy had a heart attack. One elderly man was hit by a board and that killed him. And at our hotel all these like real stupid surfer guys, they all brought cases of beer to the hotel; they were going to have a hurricane party. Stupid. So one of these parties, which was in one of the hotel rooms, a guy was so drunk he was like leaning on his balcony, like testing the wind, like doing that [gestures], holding himself up just by the wind, and then, of course, the gust died and he like fell and hurt his leg. He didn't die. But stupid, stupid guy. And then the weird thing that happened also on the island was, after the hurricane, we get these

kind of construction workers that follow disasters. They're kind of like leeches, you know? Kind of like real bad element, like kind of the Wild West. They're abusive, they were druggies, they were like beating up on their girlfriends in front of the markets and stuff like that. I'm like, "God! What's going on?" And there was one rape. That had never happened. A rape and murder of a young girl. So it started feeling really weird. And then, finally, when all the new construction was finished most of them left.

But it was a hard transition. And then people had to live through that. On our side of the island we didn't have power for two months. The people had to live with generators, and that was driving them crazy, you know, running those generators and so there was a lot of post-traumatic stress syndrome, and the Red Cross had come in to try to help. They were feeding us K-rations and stuff. That was awful. Yuck. But I remember the first morning waking up, after spending the second night at my house, and what I noticed most was that there were no birds singing. The birds had all disappeared, and I'm like, "Where do they go during a hurricane?" They eventually returned, but they must have known something was coming or they got, what, pushed out in the winds?

JEFFREY RANGEL: I have no idea.

ELSA FLORES: And the other amazing thing is the horses all survived and they were all out in the field. I think they turned their butt to the wind or something.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Just hunker down?

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. Because they were all still alive.

JEFFREY RANGEL: If it's ripping off roofs and taking out trees, you'd think it could move a horse pretty easily.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah, if you get hit by one of those things. Blades of grass were like stuck in trees, like knives. So imagine. You know, the movie Twister?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: That is so phony. Like all this stuff is like flying at them and they didn't get one little splinter, not one nail.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: A nail could have killed them, like a bullet, that's coming at you that fast.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. I'm sure.

ELSA FLORES: I was kind of critical of that. I had my own experience.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs] That's a willing suspension of disbelief, right?

ELSA FLORES: Um hmm. Funny that I didn't really. . . . That experience. . . . Ooh, that bird has a yellow crest on it. Not a crest, a breast. See it? It's on the tip of that pine tree. He's really yellow.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I don't see it.

ELSA FLORES: He's on the second branch down, the little branch.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh.

ELSA FLORES: Wow, he's all yellow. That is so cool. He looks like a canary. There he goes.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah.

ELSA FLORES: Wow! Don't see those too often.

JEFFREY RANGEL: No! A little garden back here.

ELSA FLORES: My experience wasn't reflected in my art in any way-that I realize, you know. I had thought about doing hurricane things, and during the first visit after that Hurricane Eva-our first visit to Kauai-we did, I think, take a trip to the big island of Hawaii, and there were still a lot of hurricane damage there and houses were tipped over. So I did a whole photo essay of the hurricane and did a painted photo series of Hurricane Eva, but with this experience . . . didn't transform itself into art.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Interesting.

ELSA FLORES: I think I did do one painting of a hurricane, but it was so corny that I stopped.

JEFFREY RANGEL: [laughs]

ELSA FLORES: Said, "God, I've got to do something better than this." Maybe I wasn't making art after that. I have periods where I stop working.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, maybe you were doing something different.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. '92, so this would have been the year after '92. I don't know what I was doing. I was here at this house. '92. Hmm! I don't know. But I would think I would try to . . . it would work itself out. My first experience with a shark in Hawaii, I totally painted that for a year. It's like I was out on the reef and I was in the shallow end of the reef, just, you know, real comfortable, and I look up and, boom! there's this big old shark. It's a reef shark. And he had seen me. He was on his way back out. He was like a six-footer. And I was like, "Whoa!" I did all the wrong things. I panicked, I swallowed water, I splashed, and all stupid, and he had already left. And later I regretted that I didn't stop and observe this beautiful animal so I painted the shark. . . .

Session 4, Tape 4, Side A

JEFFREY RANGEL: No, I think you've pretty much hit it all. This is tape four, side A, an interview with Elsa Flores on April thirtieth.

ELSA FLORES: April . . . Fools.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah, not quite.

ELSA FLORES: So I was talking about my shark experiences and how they affected my art. So last year I was snorkeling at the end of the road, Keé Beach. No, last summer. I was out there by myself. Maya was on a camping trip, I think, with her school. So I had a girlfriend, another parent from Maya's school who was out visiting. But she wasn't a swimmer, so she stayed on shore. And I was out there snorkeling and like, "God, I really want to go over the reef, but I know it's not safe and Maya's not with me. What if I die? Then my daughter doesn't have a parent, right? I can't do it, I can't do it." And it was like something was calling me, you know, just like beckoning me to come over. And then I saw this couple walk over and jump over and start snorkeling. And I'm like, "Well, if I get in trouble I could always flag them down; they're out there. So I'm going to do it." So I waited for a little wave to come

up, and then I got as close to the edge of the reef, and then my stomach was hitting the reef and I was like, "Oh God, I hate that," because there's animals down there so I don't want to like. . . . So I waited for a little swell and then I swam real fast and then I got to the edge of the reef. And I said, "Cool, I'm here." And so I started like just checking it out. I started swimming on the reef. And at that particular spot there wasn't much to see. And so I'm like, "Hmmm, well, I don't want to be too adventurous and like really swim the reef, so I've checked it out, I did it, I'm coming back." So on my way back I look down, right before the I get to the edge of the reef, back to the edge of the reef. I look down, way down in the cave, there's a shark and he's kind of like tipping over on his side, almost like he's dying. And I panicked. I go, "Oh my God, a shark!" And so I swam back to the reef and I was like total panic, like ready to go back to shore. I said, "Wait a minute. He's probably sleeping," because I've heard of sleeping sharks in the Yucatan. Because if there's a current, the guys can be drowsy and take a nap, right? They don't have to keep moving. And it appeared to me that's what he was doing . . . later. First I thought maybe he was dying. And I go, "No, the guy's asleep. So you know what? I'm going to go back and just swim off, push off the reef, take a look down, boom, come back and like head back to shore, just so I could really look at him this time." So I was getting ready, I was getting my nerve up and I was like, "Okay, one, two. . . ." and right before I started to kick off this shark came up right under me like this.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Whoa!

ELSA FLORES: And if I had kicked off, we would have been nose to nose, like right there. And I'm like, "Whoa!!" I'm like totally tripping out. But it was so beautiful. And I scared him and he kind of swam off and I swam back to shore. I came back to shore and my girlfriend's like, "What's the matter?" I was like, [pants very fast], like my adrenaline was pumping and I was like, "I saw a shark! I saw a shark!" And she was so happy that I was so stoked. [laughs]

JEFFREY RANGEL: That's great.

ELSA FLORES: But the reefs sharks don't bother you. Sometimes you'll get tigers out there that are real territorial and they'll bite-boogie boarders mostly, because they think they're turtles.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Oh, yeah?

ELSA FLORES: Or surfers. One of the friends that was working on my friend Marti's house, before the hurricane, she was a house painter. She was also a surfer. So she was out on [Cannon's] Point, and she was by herself, I think, and a shark went for her board. Took a big chunk out of her board, like that [gestures], and luckily she was able to get away.

JEFFREY RANGEL: I've seen that before.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah. This other guy, a shark took his hand. He was able to backstroke out. But he was boogie boarding at a remote spot by himself where he knew he shouldn't have been. So he had no remorse. He talked to the newspapers about it. "I was in his territory, I shouldn't 'a been there," you know, that kind of stuff. And so he walks around with a hook now.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Wow.

ELSA FLORES: Um-hmm. So in conclusion. . . .

JEFFREY RANGEL: I guess this is the point.

ELSA FLORES: Well, how do I conclude? Just that it's been a roller-coaster of a life, and it's on-

going. There's no end to it. There's been experiences that I would not trade for the world, including if I had to go through Carlos's illness again, I would do it because I got so much out of the relationship, and if I hadn't felt such great love I wouldn't have such great pain either. So it's just the human condition that that's part of life. And I think my resiliency was given to me by my mom. So I would do it over again. And, hopefully, it's going to get better. It's a roller-coaster, but I also realize there's going to be some down time, too. There's going to be some bad times. But it's funny how when we go through a good period-a good period of time where things are flowing, things are good-that you forget about the bad periods, and it's a constant; it will always come back. It's a cycle, it's going to come back. We forget that, though. And so I'm going to try to remember this. I think I'm going into a new phase, a good period, and at the end of the good period I hope to remember this moment [laughter] so that I'm not so blown away when bad stuff starts happening. Do you do that? Do you have cycles like that?

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. Totally.

ELSA FLORES: Yeah.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Yeah. Seems like the bad ones or the down ones last longer.

ELSA FLORES: Seems like it, huh? But if you look at it and look at the dates, probably not, but it feels like it does.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right. My saying is that it's all good.

ELSA FLORES: That's good. It's true. All the experience is good.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Right.

ELSA FLORES: All the experience is good. And it's what makes us who we are.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Well, thanks for the interview.

ELSA FLORES: Thank you.

JEFFREY RANGEL: Signing off.

[End of interview]

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