



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Al Rendon, 2020
August 18

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Al Rendon on August 18, 2020. The interview took place at Rendon's home in San Antonio, Texas, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Al Rendon at his home in San Antonio, Texas on August 18, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Al, could you tell me a little bit about how your life and work have changed since March of this year?

AL RENDON: Well, uh, starting in the middle of March through almost, uh, middle of May, for, like, two months, uh, we were shut down and I really couldn't do any outside work, commercially or artistically. It was just not safe, uh, we had, uh, Black Lives Matter demonstrations going on, uh, you know, just—I live in a downtown area so some of those demonstrations came near us and they were damaging some businesses. So, we were, kind of, vigilant, but luckily, nothing happened here, and just to avoid getting sick, uh, normally I would go out and take pictures of something like that, but I was a little—because of my age and I was, kind of, in a high-risk group, I just stayed away from that Black Lives Matter and so, for two months, basically I worked here, catching up on projects that had already been committed, that I had already photographed beforehand and getting them to my clients.

I spend a good amount of time trying to figure out how to lower all my expenses and, uh, consolidate my income and so that I could survive for a couple of months. Luckily, I had built up some reserves. We had a really good year in 2019 and the beginning of 2020 was really looking real good. Um, I have a whole portfolio sitting here of Selena images that are going to the Museum of Natural History that I can't deliver. It will be income eventually when the museum's open and I can deliver that project, but I spent those two months finishing up those prints, organizing them, signing them, making sure everything was ready to go so that when I get the call, I can send it in. Uh, and then once, uh, we got through May, I did start to get a few calls for some commercial work, small jobs, you know, ones that didn't involve any large groups of people or anything, mainly individuals portraits, um, a little bit of editorial work for magazines. And the reason I talk about my commercial work is because a lot of my artwork has flowed out of my commercial work, uh.

A good example would be the Charreada series that I have that was collected by the Museum of American Art, uh, they collected a whole portfolio. Well, that whole series came about because I got hired by the Fiesta Commission to go photograph Fiesta and Charreada was one of the events, and I literally fell in love with that event. So every year, I would go to it and document it and then I would go document it on my own time whenever they had Charreadas outside of Fiesta. So, that's just, kind of, giving you a little background on how my art is, sort of, related to some of the commercial work I do.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, how is the commercial work different now? I'm guessing there are all sorts of precautions you have to take. Are you also finding that there's a difference in subject matter that people want for these projects?

AL RENDON: Yes, um, another example of my commercial work leading to more artistic work—one of my commercial clients is, uh, WellMed which has a big, uh, network of clinics and they deal with Medicare patients. And normally I would just go walk in a clinic and photograph a doctor or whatever assignment they give me, but since the pandemic, they're very carefully about who they let into the clinics. I have to wear a mask. They have to take my temperature. I have to answer questions, and, uh, one of the things I proposed to them was, uh, well, how are you taking care of your patients that can't come in? And they're saying, well, we're going to them, and one of the things they're doing is they're delivering these little iPads and they call it a GrandPad, and it's a way for the patient to track all their, uh, medical needs and to contact their

doctors directly. And so I photographed some of those being delivered to patients just from a distance and with a mask and, uh, it wasn't easy to get their releases.

[00:05:01]

A lot of these patients are elderly and they don't understand and they don't want to be photographed because they're old. Uh, and a new project I'm going to start for them that has—I'm a little bit excited about is I'm going to be going into these patient's homes with the caregivers with the providers and taking portraits of them in their homes, in their home environment and also documenting how the providers provide care to them, you know, taking their vitals, um, making sure their medication is up-to-date and that they're taking it properly and answering any questions that patients might have about their, you know, their ailments or whatever.

BEN GILLESPIE: Wow, that sounds like a very timely project, um, and I know that elderly agency and autonomy has been important in your photographs before. What about your own sense of home and caring for yourself and your family during this really fraught time? Um, do you find that you have different rhythms at home, um, kind of, how you—

AL RENDON: It's—everything's changed. Uh, before—I live here in the building with my brother and my wife. Every morning they would take off for work and not come back until the evening, but now, everyone is here working from home and we, kind of, each have our own little workspace and, uh, so, it's different—yeah, we're more communal. We're having our meals together, not just dinner, but breakfast, lunch, dinner, and, uh, we're taking turns, you know, cooking or providing food for everybody.

So, yeah, it's created a little different environment. Uh, my brother is a lighting designer and so now, he is going out and meeting with clients. The store is still closed. It's only open by appointment. They only let people in one at a time, uh, so, yeah, it's—everything—everybody's, kind of, going to curbside service or by video chat or telephone or, you know, it's just a different world for sure, and I'm not sure it's ever going to be back to the way it was before.

BEN GILLESPIE: Right, and I'm wondering are there projects that are coming to mind for you—what do you want to be photographing in the wake of this or as this changes, um, what are you thinking about? What sorts of subjects are drawing your attention?

AL RENDON: Well, I'm an urban person so I'm usually out taking pictures of the urban environment with people in them, but right now, there's not a lot of people out. Uh, San Antonio's a big tourist draw and a lot of my photography involves documenting Latino culture or festivals, like, right now. We have Day of the Dead coming up in November which normally I go out and photograph the altars and I photograph the people creating them or I go out and create an altar and right now, we're not sure that's going to happen. That's still, kind of, left up in the air.

We had—Fiesta is supposed to happen in April. That got pushed to November. Now, they completely cancelled it until next year. So, a lot of the cultural events I normally would be documenting are not happening. Um, you know, it's kind of strange. I'm, sort of, in a survival mode this year. Everything was going great until March, and now, I've just decided, you know what, I just need to get through this year, get through the election, get through the civil unrest, the pandemic, the financial consequences of it, all those things. And, uh, I would like to be doing more, but I need to conserve my resources.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thinking about those—the festivals and the gatherings of people, are there ways in which you're finding communal connection, um, without being in close proximity or at risk of viral transmission?

AL RENDON: Well, a lot of my friends are working artists or craftsmen that do things, and so, we've managed to get together for drinks or dinner with just another couple or another two—one or three people and we, kind of, sit far apart so we can communicate and talk and not have to wear a mask and, uh, we're just trying to be as careful as we can be and limit our exposure to as few people as possible, and so far, we've done real well. Nobody's gotten sick or no one we know has gotten sick, uh, knock on wood. So, that's, kind of, what we've been doing.

[00:10:01]

An example was this weekend, we were celebrating our wedding anniversary and we had

planned a trip back in May that we had to cancel so we just did a little weekend at a friend's bed and breakfast here by Mission San Jose where we could stay in their little casita behind their house and enjoy their swimming pool and keep our distance. I mean, we—they're our friends. We can talk to them, but they, kind of, stayed to themselves, and we had our little fun weekend and enjoyed their food. They cooked for us and brought us food, and, uh, we took a great bike ride over to the hot wells, uh, ruins that are right near there along the river. They live near what's called the Mission Reach part of the San Antonio River. It's a linear park with, uh, trails and bike routes and you can, uh, kayak down the river. There's, you know, there's a lot of activities, and so, we've been trying to do things like that, kind of, get out in nature a little bit and enjoy those sorts of things that don't involve large groups of people.

BEN GILLESPIE: I wanted to turn back to the WellMed project for a little bit just to ask, are you learning new things about San Antonio, um, and your community there, a community that you've documented for so long and so intimately already? Is there something new in this project that you're learning?

AL RENDON: Well, we haven't quite got started yet. We're still in the logistical stages of setting up the appointments. I think next week, I'll have my first subject to go photograph and it's a subject I'm familiar with because, uh, they had me go photograph him once before, uh, his name is Mr. [redacted] and, uh, he's a very poor gentleman and he lives on the far east side of San Antonio and they—the WellMed foundation—they have a charitable foundation, uh, associated with the company, and, uh, it was started by the founder, Mr.—Dr. Rapier, and the foundation gives grants to a lot of the non-profits here that support seniors.

And this particular gentleman had survived brain cancer and he's doing pretty well, but he was living in really poor conditions in a very, very rundown, old mobile home. And if you can, kind of, imagine—he lives out, sort of, on the fringes of town. The property is on—he's on—is, sort of—the best way to describe it is, like, a junk-yard with a lot of old cars and all kinds of stuff that people collect to sell later or fix and sell, and so, the WellMed foundation provided him with a brand new, uh, mobile home to live in. And so, they had me come out there when they delivered it to him and his family, uh, and it was, kind of, real emotional and, uh, I got some really good documentary photos, and so now, we're—that trailer is now fully set up and operational and so now, we're going to take pictures of him inside it for this new project, uh, where the caregiver, you know, because he still requires quite a bit of care. And, uh, you know, that—going over to that side of town and seeing how he was living, to me, that was a new experience, and I'm sure, you know, I'm always—it's, funny.

I've lived here in San Antonio my whole life. I'm 63 years old. I've seen this town change and grow dramatically in my lifetime, not just the boundaries, but businesses and buildings come and go and all that stuff. So to me, it's a perfect learning experience. I'm always finding out new things about San Antonio, I mean, just today, we found out there's going to be a new bakery opening up across the street with, uh, some nice sweets for us. So, that's exciting, and a new doctor is moving into a building, um, right next door that had been vacant for over a year, uh, so, we'll have a local family doctor right in the neighborhood. So, you know, things are always evolving.

BEN GILLESPIE: You know, that's wonderful that there—in times that feel so heavy and elegiac, that there's also space for celebratory moments to document the good things that are going on in the community—

AL RENDON: Right.

BEN GILLESPIE: —is there anything beyond getting those Selena photos delivered, which I'm personally looking forward to, um, are there other things that you're looking forward to as the year goes on in your work?

[00:15:02]

AL RENDON: Well, the last, uh, original project that I did is, kind of, behind me. You can see some photographs on the wall there, fruits and vegetables I did in September of 2018, uh. Another project I'm working on that's not completed is I'm working on a book of Hardburger Park which is a recently, uh, open park to the public named after one of our former mayors that helped get the park going. Uh, they're creating a land bridge. The park is a huge ranch that had highway running through it, not a major highway, but a pretty big thoroughfare running through it and it separated the park into two sections, and they raised the funds to create a special land

bridge that connects them, that the cars can drive under, but the bridge is not like a traditional bridge.

It's going to be landscaped. It's going to have—it's going to look like you're just walking over a hill to get to the other side, and there's going to be, uh, viewing blinds that local artists here produced so that you can sit in to watch the wildlife and things like that. So, that project's been—was started after I completed the, uh, *Fruits and Vegetables of Mexico* project. So, that one should have been done by the end of this year, but because of the pandemic now, there are some things in the park we haven't been able to document, uh, so that's been drawn out.

So, I'm working on that project, and because I've been doing this for over 40 years, Benjamin, uh, I have a huge archive and I'm constantly going through it and trying to just—it's fairly organized. I know where everything is, but so much of it, uh, from 1970s until 2000, 30 years' worth of it, is not digital. It's all in film or transparencies or color slides and—so that takes a lot of work to go through that and find things that I can scan and add to my archive, but eventually, I want to have some kind of retrospective or some kind of book I can produce of all the work—artwork, not just the commercial work, mainly the artwork that I've created from the '70s on up to now.

BEN GILLESPIE: That's amazing and an incredible archive to pull from. Uh, just to, sort of—to wrap up here, I'm wondering, um, are any of those pictures that you've taken over the years, uh, is something speaking to you especially strongly during this period, um, that you found some new urgency in, um, during the pandemic?

AL RENDON: Uh, I've been a little, uh, I don't know what the word is—nostalgic I guess of my past, and so, I've been digging more into my family's archives of photos, uh, pictures of me when I was growing up that my family—my parents took of me, uh, pictures I took of them, um, just things like that. Just trying to—I was one of those kids when I was growing up in the '50s, my mother would take pictures of every birthday, every Christmas, every Easter, every graduation, every Halloween, every [laughs] thing you could think of, she was taking pictures.

I think it influenced me to become a photographer because as she got older, and, uh, those old Instamatic Kodak cameras. The viewfinder was this tiny little thing you look through, and she wore glasses and she started cutting our heads off when she would be taking pictures. So, I, kind of, took over that camera part of it and started documenting at a young age, and so, I've been going through, looking for some of those photos from my early days, um.

On my website, I have a series called Photo Historias and they're photos I pulled up from the past that I put a little story to behind the photograph, and one of the earliest ones I took back in 1969. I think I was, like, 11 or 12 years old. I think I was 12. And they were filming a movie in front of the Alamo called *Viva Max*. It had, uh, Peter Ustinov. It had Jonathan Winters. It had a bunch of pretty well-known actors, and I was downtown all the time because I went to grade school—Catholic grade school downtown. I would have to go down on the weekends because I was an altar boy. So as soon as I would get out of Mass, I would run down to the Alamo which was only about three blocks from where our school was and hang around and watch them film the movie because they were downtown filming for, like, three weeks, four weeks.

[00:20:07]

So, one weekend I asked my mom if I could take the camera and she said, yes, take the camera, and I'm standing, you know, where they would keep the crowd back and Jonathan Winters and Peter Ustinov were rehearsing a scene in front of the Alamo, and the media had shown up. Apparently, they had staged this for the media, and so when they called up all the media, I just ran up there with them, and I'm, kind of, shooting behind these big old adults, you know, with big, bulky cameras and I'm squeezing in there and I took, like, one or two pictures before they—security ran me out, uh.

So anyway, if you get a chance, you can look at it. You'll see what I'm talking about, but—so, things like that I'm trying to organize and put together so I'll have a—right now, I'm up to about 15 photos with stories. And unfortunately, the gentlemen—the writer I had been working with on this project passed away a couple years ago—a very good, dear friend that I collaborate with a lot who's a very, uh, creative writer. So, that project's been a little stagnated because I need to find a new person to partner with for that.

BEN GILLESPIE: Um, sounds like a tremendous project, um, you know, I hope that you get to pick it back up very soon and that—and the rest of 2020 goes your way and that you get some more

amazing photos. Thank you very much for speaking with me today.

AL RENDON: You're very welcome. Thank you for interviewing me.

[END OF rendon20_1of1_digvid_m.mp4.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]