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Oral history interview with Leo Tanguma and Jeanne Stanford Tanguma, 2021 April 22-23

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Transcript

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Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Leo and Jeanne Tanguma on April 22 and 23, 2021. The interview took place over Zoom at the Tangumas' home in Arvada, Colorado, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Leo and Jeanne Tanguma and Josh T. Franco have reviewed the transcript. 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right, this is Josh T. Franco, national collector at the Archives of American Art, and I am conducting the oral history of Leo Tanguma. And Jeanne Tanguma has also joined us as well. I am in my office in Washington, DC, and Leo and Jeanne are at their home in Arvada, Colorado. And it is April 22, 2021.

All right, so that's the only scripted part of this whole thing. So, Leo, we'll just start at the beginning, so I'm curious about your childhood, where you were as a child, and what your family was like.

LEO TANGUMA: Well, let's see, I grew up in Beeville, Texas, about 50 miles north of Corpus Christi. And also to the north, I'm saying—what did I say?—yeah, and then south from San Antonio about another 50 miles. So it was a very very Mexican American area. The populations of all those towns along the southern part of Texas were heavily populated by Mexican Americans. Most everyone native born. Very very little, at that time, immigration directly from Mexico. Also, it was easy to go back and forth across the border.

In any case, in a lot of those towns—small towns and even the larger towns like San Antonio and Corpus Christi—there was a lot of racism. Mexican Americans lived mainly in agriculture in most of those places, but we experienced police brutality quite a bit also. In my family, my wife's cousins, three cousins, were killed by our sheriff in Beeville, Texas. So we grew up, or I grew up, with those kinds of observations of what was happening. Even when I was younger, I could tell, you know, the way we were treated in school, the racism in the general community. Whites were very—they assumed the kind of superior attitude towards us. And so I grew up with those kinds of influences on me.

Some people I noticed later were very accepting to those conditions, but in my family, we had those experiences with my mom's family. And then also with my brother-in-law who was almost killed by the sheriff beating him, beating him, near death. So we had those experiences that I

think molded my attitude in later years.

We mainly worked in the fields. We picked cotton, crops, and sometimes we would go away from Beeville to other cities, like way way far, like Sweetwater, Texas, 300 miles away just to pick cotton. We were so innocent. Why in the world should we go so far? Can you imagine? People would say, "*No, hay buen trabajo allá,*" you know? So there we go in the back of a truck for 300 miles to pick cotton. But anyway, that's the way we lived.

But despite those things, it was so beautiful to see the community, the different—or the kind of love that was in the family and the extended family and neighbors and so on. I could observe those things. I could observe my family—my parents especially, they were very religious. My parents were illiterate but so loving. We attended the Protestant churches, Baptist, throughout my life actually. Even today, I'm a Protestant and I attend churches. But in any case, those were also molding matters in my life.

I remember we were so apart. One of the little girls at my church in—who was 14, and I think I was 13—said, could I go with her to a young people's service at this Anglo church, I don't know, miles across from our little neighborhood all the way across our little town to the Baptist church? So we walked. I had to get clothes, man. I had no nice clothes. I had to borrow an old jacket somebody loaned me, and a white shirt that was like two sizes larger. I had to fold it under my sleeves, right, the jacket also.

[00:05:21]

So we walked clear across town, and when we get there, they'll not allow us in, because we're Mexican, right? So that poor girl who had been invited was really light-skinned. Amparo Leal. She was really light-skinned, looked like an Anglo. And so to her—actually when I told her, "You know, I don't feel right about going over there with those white people." And she said, "They're not like that. See, they invited me." But it would have been no problem to look at Amparo among other Anglo kids because she looked so white. But me, I was real dark, so I was worried about that. So it happened the way I thought it would.

And then a major incident that happened: When I was in the fifth grade—you know, remember there's all these feelings in me and in many others about the sheriff. We were conscious of what he had done. In any case, that one day, we had no teacher for some reason. We were going to get a—*¿cómo se dice?* A—

JEANNE TANGUMA: A substitute.

LEO TANGUMA: A substitute. So we were waiting for somebody to come, all my classmates and I. And somebody says, "Let's go draw on the blackboard." So everybody goes up there, not only that, but we're playing around throwing paper wads, and just [they laugh]—everybody just having a nice time. So I decided, well, you know, I guess I'll go up and draw too, you know. So as I was walking towards the blackboard, somebody says from—one of my classmates from behind me, I never knew who that was, but he said, "Polo, draw me killing the sheriff." Polo is my short—my name for Leopoldo, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I thought, "What a nice idea." You know, because we all hated the sheriff. And I have written about this, asking myself, Why in the world would a kid, a fifth-grade kids and others like him and me, want to see our sheriff killed? It was because of what I've said: the utter racism and brutality. So I began to draw in large-scale, and I surprised myself because I didn't go draw little figures, right? I drew big figures in the blackboard, as far as I could reach. In those days, we had these blackboards, right, that you drew on them with chalk.

But when I was—in an hour, I had already done quite a bit, I think. Because I was drawing little kids plunging knives into this figure on the ground and then I had drawn another one hanging from a tree. The sheriff, right, with a cowboy hat and pointed boots and the star. I had various kids with knives like this, the little hands, and then somebody said, "Draw my name, Polo!" Pedro or whatever. So we had all kinds of names with these little kids right next to the little kids with the knives. I had Pedro, Juan, María, all those names were already on those figures of the kids when the substitute walked in.

And that woman was shocked and so angry with us. An older, fat-looking, awful-looking white woman. And I ran back to my desk, right, like all the other kids had run, but she told me to come

back and erase this garbage, I think she said. So I was erasing them, man, when she hit me across the back with a ruler. And not only did she hit me once, she hit me a number of times. And by now, you know, I thought I had finished erasing, so I ran back to my desk, but she told me to come back, I was not finished. So when I was erasing again, she hit me again, man. That woman so ugly in there, but I couldn't see because I had tears in my—I could not see the blackboard, so I was just erasing wherever I thought the drawings were.

And I've always—later on, I thought, Well, you know, that was my first mural. And not only that, but that kid that told me or asked me to draw him killing the sheriff—I've later thought why that was the community asking to "draw me" or "draw us," right.

[00:10:03]

So the years went on. We finally moved out of that little town that we hated so much. Or at least I did. I had those feelings where I hated this place, right. But we would pick cotton all the time in the fields. When there was no work in the fields, you know, I helped my father in the yard work that he did. Of course, this yard work was in Anglos' homes with the nice kept lawns, and my dad would do all this work. I mean, just walking again clear across town to where the white folks lived. So that was our lives, right, until—

JEANNE TANGUMA: And when did you stop going to school and why?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, I quit school in the sixth grade because it was time to go to the fields again, so we packed and went off. And all the time, I'm learning things that are so interesting now that I think back on them. For example, we were picking cotton in these large fields, and we were sleeping in a barn, right? We cleared the floor from poop, from cow dung, and then from chicken poop. And that's where we slept, on the ground there.

But anyway, one of our people had brought an accordion with him. And so in the evenings, he would play the accordion and would sing. But one day, here comes the owner of the farm with a large accordion, right? And so they talked, our friend and the farm-owner talked and talked, and then they began to play polkas, right. And somebody said, "*Son bohemios!*" They're bohemian or German, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And that's the first time I had the inkling of a combination with our music with some other group. Because they knew the same polkas, right, that we knew. And later, later I discovered that our influence for polka music, accordion music, had come from the presence of German and other immigrants that brought with them their accordions, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So all this time, I'm learning from what I'm seeing around, and also other personalities, right? My family is so—some of my cousins are so funny. Let me tell you a little story about two of my cousins. These guys, Armando and Reyes, they had an old beat-up pickup truck, and every year they would go out to the fields and load up the truck with watermelons, right. But my cousin Armando was so tricky. People would ask him, "How come you charge so much?" And I used to be the crier, right, I would ride at the back of the truck crying, shouting out, "*¡Sandía barata! ¡Dulce y colorada y garantizada!*" Right? So that's what I did, right. But so we stop and sell watermelons to people, mainly housewives, and my cousins said, "Well, they cost more because they're from Canada. You know, thousands of miles away." [They laugh.] And —

JOSH T. FRANCO: That was not true, right?

LEO TANGUMA: No. [They laugh.] There was a little town close to Beeville named Kenedy, K-E-N-E-D-Y. So people will say, "*Oh, ¿son de Kenedy?*" "*No, no, no, señora, son de Canadá, al norte, tres mil millas de aquí. Vienen por tren.*" You know, they come by train. [They laugh.] And so that's the way those guys were.

Later on, they were—somebody challenged them, you know, "You liar, you don't go to Canada! I know where Canada is. These are from Kenedy." And finally, the—I don't know what happened, but they stopped saying that. But those were some of my family members. So I had all kinds of views of people in my neighborhood, in my family.

Our next-door neighbor was an older man that was a widower. He had two daughters, and he had a wagon and a mule. And what he did, he would buy these blocks of ice, and he had a scraper, and he got some sweet syrups and drove around the neighborhood clanging on a bell, selling *raspa*.

[00:15:10]

People would call him—oh, they called him *Don José el Raspero*. But some of the people called him *Don José el Raspero sin los conos* because he had no ice cream and no cones, right. People brought their little cups or dishes, [they laugh] and he would put the *raspa* and then the syrup on those little plates, and people were real happy with him. Everybody liked that man. So I have memories of that wonderful, wonderful man, so friendly and smiling all the time. He was real, real dark, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. *¿Muy rascuache movida, no?*

LEO TANGUMA: *¿Cómo así?*

JOSH T. FRANCO: *Muy rascuache movida*, to have no cones.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. [They laugh.]

JEANNE TANGUMA: *Exactamente*.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, but he—and so the guys called him *Don Jose el Raspero sin los conos*, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: *Sí*.

LEO TANGUMA: And people would laugh about that. So he lived next door, and he parked his little wagon there, and his mule was at the backyard. And so my little brother and I would play on the wagon, jumping up and down, playing like we were driving the wagon with the mule. So there were all those kind of characters.

But I was also touched by mother's friend who had rheumatoid arthritis, and she was so deformed, even her face was deformed. But I remember my mother taking me with her, and my mother told me, "I take you because she likes to see children and she likes to see you." And I was just a little kid. And the first time she touched me like that, I was kind of frightened, right? But after that, I got used to it. So every day, every time we went before we left, my mother would bring me close to her, and that lady would caress me, you know, with the hands. So I remember those people and so many others, right? Uncle—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, can I ask a question?

LEO TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm going to follow up on a lot of things that you just said already, but I want to ask a question about the border. Can you recall a time when—what were the reasons you would cross the border? Was it family or were there certain stores on the other side? What would be a reason for crossing?

LEO TANGUMA: No, we never crossed the border.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LEO TANGUMA: My family, we never crossed the border, never went to Mexico. All our antecedents were from Texas. You see, before the United States came here, there were already a few thousand people, *mexicanos*, right, but born in this side of the border. So we had very—never did we, in my family, ever go across the border. We existed in Texas, people called us *tejanos*, we called ourselves *mexicanos*. We always called ourselves *mexicanos*. And I think very few people had reason to go across the border. We were really self-contained, and our families just in Beeville were, like, happy to be there in our community. So we didn't have—or in my family, we didn't have any contact with *México* itself except the culture that we lived in our own communities.

But we had the influence from Mexico very much. We had the *jamaicas*, these festivals in the Catholic church that had community festivals. And so everybody would attend. There was music.

We also had a wonderful singer that visited the small towns singing beautiful *rancheras* and *boleros* even, and her name was Lydia Mendoza. You might have heard about her.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Of course, yes.

LEO TANGUMA: Anyway, she would visit the smaller towns, not only the largest cities like Corpus or San Antonio, but small towns, and I remember her coming to Beeville. So we had those kinds of connections, you know, like with *cultura* more directly. We also had Mexican theaters where they showed Mexican movies. So we were familiar with Pedro Infante, Sarita Montiel was a Spanish singer, but we saw in the movies all these characters, *Tin Tan y Marcelo*, *Cantinflas*, and so many other—and so much more through the *teatros*, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: I remember—I even remember Perez Prado, you know, "Que rico el mambo." So we had all these influences coming in on us.

[00:20:00]

In our own homegrown culture was *el pachuco*, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: *Los vatos pachucos*, right? And so these guys were real real cool, you know. My brother had a funny friend, man. Everybody called him *el Destrampado*, which I think means the disjointed one, but he liked to be called *el Destrampado* because he didn't know what that meant, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So everybody's, "*Ese vato está loco, hombre. Chingado.*" He thinks it's something big, "Hey, *Destrampado!*" "Hey, *¿qué pasó, esé?!*" You know? It's so funny. So we had all those wonderful influences, you see, that later on I would remember these people, and I was part of them, right? Except that we grew up in the Baptist church, which was real conservative, right. The pastor was always wearing a suit, right. I mean, in Beeville, why in the world would anybody wear a suit? When he would go visit people, he would wear his suit. And I don't think I learned very much from him, you know, except *Cristo*, you know, which became my figure, my liberator, my protector. I felt like that.

So when I was in the fifth grade, I had been given an oil-paint set first of all for my ninth birthday by my older sister, who was an incredible incredible woman. So she gave me that paint set, and I began to paint almost right away. They couldn't read the instructions, but I learned how to use it. The linseed oil, the oil paints and—you know what, I've lost my train of thought a little bit. What was the—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was it very expensive?

LEO TANGUMA: Oh yeah, that—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was it very expensive for her to get that?

LEO TANGUMA: I have no idea because she bought it to—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Your first painting.

LEO TANGUMA: No, he meant—do you mean how expensive the set was?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah, was it—

LEO TANGUMA: Right. Well, you know, I never knew except that my sister bought it through the *Montgomery Ward's* mail-order catalogue, and she paid for it in installments. What's so weird about this is she's only like 14 years old. She was already working nights, working in the daytime in the field, and so she very much took care of the family, even at a very early age. So she bought me this paint set through the mail-order catalogue. So I remembered she liked this young man named—his name was Encarnación, and his family had a nice grocery store in

Beeville, so he had some means, right? So I think being my sister's young brother, he bought my first painting for five bucks. Man, in those days, that was a lot of money.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: In any case, I remember the painting being real nice. I copied it from a magazine, I think. It was a black panther, so I really enjoyed that. And then another painting I did at that time was a painting of mountains with snow and river and trees with snow on the branches. That one I gave to my aunt Tina, and I hope the family still has it.

But in the fifth grade, there was an art contest and so I thought, Wow, I've got my paintings, right. So I did a large—you know, a pretty large painting of Christ bearing his cross, just this part, right. And I won the first place with that, but the teachers could not believe that I had done it. Because there's a photograph of the family and then on top of—on the wall, there is my Christ, right. So that was from the kind of attachment that I had in my mind, you know, a religious symbol. So throughout my life, I've carried that same faith and same attitude as Christ, as a liberator and a revolutionary. So that's how I developed in Beeville.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Why did the teacher think that you hadn't painted it?

LEO TANGUMA: Because it was so well done. You know, it was so nice, so nice.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Was she being racist?

LEO TANGUMA: I think so. They [laughs] didn't expect much from us. I knew that they were so funny, these teachers. Not only my teachers but I think in general. So we had to—we were almost all *mexicanos* in that school, I don't know anybody else except us *mexicanos* who went to that elementary school. So now I lost my train of thought again.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, Leo, were you the only artist in your family, or were there other artists in your family, or did it—you know.

[00:25:05]

LEO TANGUMA: There were—in my family, there were singers, like my younger brother later on had a *conjunto*, right, just a small band of musicians. And my sister sang fantastic. So there were those kind of people, right, kind of talents. I don't remember anybody else in the family being like a painter or somebody that drew. But mainly singers. There was also another group, cousins, *las hermanitas Gutierrez*. It was another singing group. There were those kinds of singers. Now, my grandfather sang a lot in the family and in church, special hymns, so I had that experience also. My sister and her friends used to sit in the front yard on the little—no grass in those yards in those days, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Anyway, they would sit on the little steps that we had, and they would sing Mexican songs and some Anglo songs also. I just remember being in awe of these beautiful sounds because the neighbors would come out. I could see the neighbors looking on the right side of the house, [laughs] and then on the other side, there's all these families just listening to my sister and her friends.

But the song that I liked the most that they sang was an old Anglo song called "The Tennessee Waltz." I don't know if you remember that, but look it up some time, it's—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay!

LEO TANGUMA: —so beautiful. So you see, I had all those beautiful influences on one side. It was culture. That I was immersed in this culture, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: In my family, there were no tough guys or ex-cons or—nothing like that that I remember. Until my brother and his friends began to get in trouble and my brother was sent to prison on two occasions. But initially during those years, I don't remember there being any—I know there were fights. And there was a dance hall about two blocks from my house, it was called *El salón las flores*. But there were never any great instances of crime or *vatos locos* in my family, right. Although down the street, with my brothers, there were those *pachuco*—and I was

even a bit of a *pachuco*. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, would you—for a larger cultural reference, are *pachucos* and zoot suits the same thing? Or how are they different?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, the zoot suits were in the large cities, right? But not very many in Texas that I remember, except maybe in San Antonio. But the zoot suit was an expensive item to buy, first of all. We never had, you know, money to spend on such things. So our *pachucos* were just guys that liked to wear khaki pants, taken up on the lower part of the pants until they're narrower, and they wore them a little low in the hips with a thin belt, right, with the shirt open, right, and a crucifix, and then these pointed Stacy Adams shoes that you took out part of the heel so that they would sit with the points kind of arching upward. And also, they had this *crucita* right there. I tried to do one, but it didn't show, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Where are you pointing? You're off the screen. Are you pointing on your—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, I'm sorry, right there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But I didn't—mine didn't work out for some reason. Another thing that I did was that, and I did that myself with a needle, okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is that the *Sagrada*?

LEO TANGUMA: No, it's just *un corazón* and a little banner with my initials on it: LT.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Nice.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, those *pachucos*, they were real cool people, right? Like *el Destrampado*. There were other ones with funny nicknames. My brother's nickname was *Palilo*, and I never knew what that means. But in any case, those were some of the colorful people in our neighborhoods that were a little bit more, [laughs] I guess, conservative to me than the people in the large cities like Corpus Christi and San Antonio, El Paso, and so on.

So I had those influences that had molded my attitudes and the way I saw the world and I saw the beauty in our community. And I remember, though, wanting to leave, wanting to get something better.

[00:30:06]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Can I ask you, Leo, what was the first language that you spoke in your home? And what happened when you went to school? And what were the rules?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, well, there was no Spanish allowed in our schools. And by way, they spanked you if they caught you. And sometimes they spanked you severely, man. These brutes, they just spanked us too much, too hard, I thought, for speaking Spanish. The little kids, they would just hit them like [demonstrates] this, right. But like, in the fifth grade, I know I was spanked a number of times and so were some of the other kids. But we always spoke Spanish to each other.

When I moved to Pasadena, back, later on, I was real surprised that the Chicanos there spoke English, mainly English, although they understood Spanish and would occasionally speak it. I was surprised by seeing the urban setting for the Chicano and ourselves in South Texas towns. But we had our language, and our culture was always molding you, you know, influencing you, so that in later years, sometimes I felt a little closer to the culture than some of the more educated Chicanos, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: That I found a little distance from them—automatically, right—because of the way I had been brought up in the smaller towns and some of these Chicano university students, let's say, who had another attitude, a real self-assured *algo*. And I mean, I was a little shy among those folks because—but anyway, we finally—oh, one more story about my father.

This is a little comical, but we all—we wanted to leave. You know, the family wanted something better, you know. And so my father said one day, "I am going to the city. *Yo me voy pa'l pueblo*,

voy a buscar trabajo," you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But I remember my mother saying, "There's no work in Corpus." Corpus Christi, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Corpus was the big city?

LEO TANGUMA: It was in those days. [They laugh.] But my father said, "But I'm not going to Corpus, I'm going to Houston."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's the big city, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: "Oh, well, how are you going to get there?" And my father said, "I'm going to hop a train. *Tú sabes, como los trampas*."

JOSH T. FRANCO: *Sí*. And how old were you, Leo, when your father decided this?

LEO TANGUMA: I was about 14, I believe, or 13 maybe.

But anyway, so he decided, and somebody had told him how to hop a train, right. But it was so funny because when he—there was no train that came through Beeville in those days, so we had to go to a little town named Tynan. So everybody goes over there, my two uncles, to go say goodbye to my family. We were so simple and so, I don't know, so innocent, you know. So my father is there waiting for the train to take off with all the family behind him. So anyway, so when the train begins to move, my father runs, "Okay, I will see, you know, I'll write to you," and all that.

So my father, he begins to run, but he had waited too long, you know, until the train—because the idea was to look around for the guards, right, that would beat tramps or people. They used to overdo it actually and beat people badly. So that was the fear that my father had, so he couldn't catch up to the train, and he fell. And the train went on to Houston and my father didn't make it. So after that, he was so embarrassed that he never wanted to leave anymore. He kept on with his yardwork and his fieldwork.

It wasn't until my older sister Dina, who had been raped and had a child and wanted to get out of Beeville—apart from wanting a better life, she wanted a better life for her little baby, and so she and I came to Pasadena, close to Houston, right next to Houston, to look for work.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Pasadena, Texas?

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Not California, okay.

LEO TANGUMA: [Laughs.] In any case, there had been a pastor that came to our church to preach from Pasadena. My sister and other people had heard about there being a lot of work: "*Hay mucho trabajo en Pasadena and Houston*."

[00:35:02]

So my sister ran up to him, man, almost dragging me with her by the hand, right, and she asked, "*Hermano Rodríguez, hay mucho trabajo en Houston y Pasadena?*" And Brother Rodríguez said, "Yes, there is." He worked in an oil refinery, so he was much better off than most people, and so he would know more about Pasadena. Two weeks later, my sister and I take off and we arrived in Pasadena, said our hellos to Brother Rodríguez and his family, and then we took off to the employment office.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you travel? Did you do the train?

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, we had a car. We had an old Pontiac. And I drove because my sister didn't know how to drive, and I was 14, but I made it all the way. Actually, we were stopped along the way, but the policemen felt sorry for me, so they let us go. [They laugh.]

But anyway, so we got there, and we get a job the first day.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: I got a job as a dishwasher, full time. My sister got a job as a presser in a laundry. So we were so happy, man, for this incredible luck. I remember going back to Reverend Rodríguez's house, and we gathered the family around. He had two kids and his wife, and we formed a circle. It was such a beautiful thing, man. And he said a prayer thanking, thanking the Lord for the blessings that he had given us. So from that point on, we lived in Pasadena, we went to get our parents, and then somebody, a *troquero*, a trucker from Beeville, one of the truckers that used to take us to the fields to pick crops, he brought my parents and brothers and the little baby to Pasadena, and so we settled in.

I began after a few months—actually I was 14, so the next year, I began to want something better. I think my sister had inculcated this in us, me and my brothers, that we should always be trying to try something better. So all I knew was I was working as a dishwasher full time, and then the owner of the restaurant came and told me one time, [pantomimes Anglo-American accent] "Leopoldo"—that was my full name—"I like your work, and if you stay with me, I will make you a cook." Right? I thought, Well—that in those days was a big job, and a big job in the community, to be a cook.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What kind of food, Leo?

LEO TANGUMA: This was Anglo-American food, not Mexican—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Like a diner? Okay, burgers—

LEO TANGUMA: A diner. It was also an outdoor where you drove out, like a drive-in, and so it was both a restaurant and a drive-in, so you kept busy in there. But as glad that I was for having that job, I didn't want to stay there all the time, so I decided to get another job somewhere, and I went to a bowling alley and applied for a job there. I was hired as a janitor, and I was still only 14 or 15.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow, what was the restaurant called?

LEO TANGUMA: Vicky's Drive-In Restaurant.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Vicky's Drive-In Restaurant, got it.

LEO TANGUMA: Vicky's Drive-In, so—

JOSH T. FRANCO: And then the bowling alley? Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And then the bowling alley, it was called Pasadena Bowling Lanes. And the owner was a man named Mr. Loper, and he hired me, and I worked there for a month. And then he said one day [laughs]—by now they called me Leo—"Leo, I like your work and if you stay with me, you can be a pinball-machine mechanic. I'll train you, I'll train you." But even that—I mean, I liked it, I liked that job very much, but I was already thinking of, What else could I do, you know?

In the meanwhile, though, my brothers asked me, "Why don't you tell Mr. Loeper [ph] to hire us? Because we need a job." And so I was a little nervous about that, but anyway, I asked the man, and he hired both my brothers. My brother being an older *pachuco* type, my younger brother being real mischievous. But before I knew it, my older brother had got into a fight with the machine mechanic, the pinball-machine mechanic. And my younger brother was stealing cases of pop and beer out the back door and giving it to his friends, right? And so they were both caught, and all three of us were fired. And I was angry because I had liked that job.

[00:40:06]

I got another job as a janitor at another bowling alley, but then I had heard someone say—a young man talking—and I had overheard this young man say that his buddy had joined the Marine Corps by lying about his age, by falsifying his birth certificate to say he was 16, or he was 18.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Eighteen.

LEO TANGUMA: So I thought, Wow. And then, you know, he got accepted somehow, enlisted. And so I tried the same thing except I was 15, and I was accepted, you know, without any doubt. The sergeant just looked at my birth certificate and just put it aside. I was really nervous, right?

So there I was, I was 15, and I was on the way to the Marine Corps.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow, okay, before the Marine Corps because I think that will—I'm interested—but were you still making art? Were you using your paint set while you were doing the jobs at cleaning and cooking?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I was doing very little of that. At the bowling alley, I drew a large Christ figure on the back wall that came out real good, so people would get taken out to the back to see what this kid had done.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: So I had done that, and the year was now 1957.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So is that your second mural, after the blackboard?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes. Yeah, that was the second one. But I had done little paintings here and there. Sometimes I paint people's little portraits, right? And I know they were not very well done, but anyway, people liked it. So I kept on doing that. Plus I used to draw a lot. My sister would buy me an art tablet or a drawing tablet, pencils. She was so good about that. So I kept up by painting and drawing on the side a little bit.

Then when I joined the Marine Corps, it wasn't long before they caught me, right. I think what the Marine Corps did is they made a sweep looking for kids. So when I was taken to the separation unit after I had been caught, there were like 12 other kids, mainly *mexicano* kids that had been caught also, so there was a bunch of us there. So anyway, we were finally discharged, and I came back to Pasadena, but now I wanted to go to school. You know, I was wanting to—I thought, "Maybe I can get into high school, you know, I could lie about my age again, I guess."

But anyway, no, I didn't make it, but I started taking a correspondence course in cartooning. There was this correspondence school named Famous Artist Schools, so I started taking a course in cartooning, and I enjoyed that a lot, you know. And of course, I didn't finish the course because I was paying it in installments also, but I couldn't afford it after a while. So I stopped. I stopped taking it and then—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did learning cartooning influence your work?

LEO TANGUMA: It influenced me so much. Later on, many years later, after I had been painting for a few years, somebody said to me, a photographer, that he liked the expressions that I gave to my figures. And that what he started to do is to go photograph my murals wherever he found them, I guess, just photos of their faces and gestures and so on. But I attribute that to my course in cartooning. Also, I've always been able to draw the human figure in movement, drawing gestures, and I think all that started with that little course, the correspondence course in cartooning. So I've always credited that.

Actually, one time, somebody said, "Your paintings look like cartoons, Leo." And I felt bad about that, I wanted to hit that guy. [They laugh.] I wanted my artwork to be more refined than cartooning, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think there's some very fine cartoons. I think it's a skill, yeah, absolutely.

LEO TANGUMA: Later on, I grew to examine the work of Nast—there was a cartoonist named Nast—and others that did political cartoons or social cartoons.

[00:45:03]

But in any case, I joined the Army after being heartbroken by a breakup with a wonderful girlfriend that I had in Pasadena. My brother beat up her brother, and it ruined my relationship, so, you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, no.

LEO TANGUMA: —in a fit of depression and being heartbroken, I joined the Army.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You were 18 at that time?

LEO TANGUMA: Now? No, I was 17. The day I became 17, I was on my way to boot camp. But

what was so beautiful about my Army experience is that when I was stationed in Germany, our company commander—they had redone our recreation center, so it was a nice place. It had been redone and reorganized, whatever. But the captain wanted something done about the walls, the empty walls that we had, and so he asked for a volunteer that could paint murals. And I knew there were some guys in my unit that had studied art in universities, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: The reason I know that is because I was also painting when I was stationed over there, portraits of some of the guys' girlfriends, and I charged three bucks for that, so people knew that I painted, right, and I drew. So when the captain announced that in a formation of the unit, I thought, "Wow, those guys are going to volunteer, and they'll got the job." But I tried anyway, I raised up my hand, and nobody else did. So I got this job to paint murals, right. And I had never painted such a size murals, and this had been a German officer's club during the war, and it was kind of fancy. I guess officers had a special position, you know, that the place was really well decorated by—the walls, that is—with the varnished plywood panels, like seven feet by seven feet, more or less. I've always thought that that was the size. Although, at the time, I don't remember measuring the things.

So the captain said, "What I'm going to do—what we should do," he said, "is have some images of home, right. I mean, here we are, we have all these walls, we don't have anything that reflects back where we're from, right, like"—so he gave me a stack of photographs—not photographs. Like, cards, you know—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Postcards?

LEO TANGUMA: Postcards of different places in the United States, like the Rocky Mountains and Mount Rushmore and so on. So all I had to do was copy those things and then paint them. So I got all the paints I needed, I got to choose what postcards to copy, so I think—there was one of a cowboy on his horse, right. So what I did is I drew a cowboy on his horse in a water hole, so he's kneeling down on one leg, and the horse is right next to him—it's a Palomino, right—and some mountains in the background. And that thing came out pretty nice, I have to tell you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

LEO TANGUMA: And then I did another of the New York City skyline, with also images of a neighborhood of some kind, I remember. And then I did one of—actually, the first one I did was of a German village. I don't know how I got to do that because they were supposed to be paintings about sights in the US, but anyway that came out real nice. But then I painted a cowboy on his horse, the New York City skyline, and Mount Rushmore, you know, which didn't come out very nice. I couldn't get those faces right.

But anyway, so everybody was real happy with that, and it gave me a big boost, you know, so I figured that I could do anything almost in painting, right, murals. So finally, I came home—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, can I ask you—just to get some details about that, do you remember the name of the captain and what year was that?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I do. The year was 1959, and the captain's name was Captain Hook, or Hood—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Captain Hook? [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: Hook. I know a movie was made about [they laugh]—in the pirate movie. But that's Captain Hood or—I think it was Captain Hood, not Captain Hook like in the movie. [They laugh.]

[00:50:06]

I later thought about that. But in any case, he was such a nice man. Also, I was getting more used to being around white people, right? And now my English was better, and I felt more and more secure in myself.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were you the only *mexicano* in your—

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, no, there were a number of other *mexicano* kids, young people. Actually, the Army and the Marines and the Navy were a little outlet for us, you know, to get

better jobs. So there's a tradition in the *mexicano* Mexican-American family's community, a military tradition, so many of us went to the service and then managed to get our GEDs or get some training. That's exactly what happened to me. When I was stationed in Germany also, I took a leave and went to Holland, Belgium, and France, right? And that was a big experience from being in the cotton fields to being in Paris, for example.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: It was molding me more and more, by getting an education that way. Also, I got my GED while I was stationed there. I went to night classes so I got my GED, and I was real proud of that. Later on—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you—yeah. Oh, it's—

LEO TANGUMA: Go ahead.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because you went to those places, you must have seen a lot of art, whether cathedrals, murals—

LEO TANGUMA: I did.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —frescoes? Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. In Amsterdam, I went to the Rijksmuseum—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Cool.

LEO TANGUMA: —and that's a fantastic place. And I don't know where I had gotten the notion, you know, to go to museums at all, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But somehow, I had read about the Rijksmuseum, so I was amazed by all the paintings and sculptures and so on. But then what really impressed me, of which I kept memory more than all the other things that I had seen, was a large wall, maybe about 20-foot wall painted like gray—I remember kind of grayish—and just one painting was on that wall, and that was a *Self-Portrait* by Van Gogh. I went, Wow! I couldn't believe this special attention that had been given to this one painting. But when I got up close, I saw these wonderful brush strokes, almost magical brush strokes of Van Gogh on his own portrait. You know, so that really struck me, man.

Anyway, I went to Paris, and I went to a museum, but I didn't go to the Louvre. You know, I went to other places. I didn't even climb the Eiffel Tower, just walked around there [laughs] looking up. What did happen in Paris though, I had—I didn't have much money, you know, to stay for very long like I had wanted to. Actually, my parents never answered my letter or sent me my money, you know, so I had been—I had good savings—so I was limited, and I had to leave, I had to only spend like three or four days in Paris.

But one of those times that I was walking around, there was a big big noise, like an explosion. And that what I found out later is that the—I think it's called the Secret Army Organization in France trying to stop Algeria from being granted their independence. So there was a lot of bombings by—not Algerians, right, but by this French secret organization. Like I think that the place that they bombed that day was an Algerian restaurant, so I began to run to where I had heard the explosion. I did see a lot of people around this corner place. But then I stopped and I wondered—because I had read a little bit already, the Algerians being Arab, being dark-skinned. And me, actually, when I first arrived in Paris at the train station, I saw two men, both dark-skinned, and I think they were Arabic. They were arguing loudly, right? So I had seen already some people with dark skin, but I don't know what language they were speaking. I couldn't understand French but I—in any case, a big argument of two Arab people.

So I didn't go up to the scene where I think the explosion had come from. But anyway, so I got to hear a little bit of that political situation taking place in France. So the next day, I took a train back to Germany. But everywhere I went, it seemed I had these wonderful experiences. Some of them might have been sad like that explosion, but all along I'm learning.

[00:55:17]

Also, I began to learn German. Actually, I began to learn German in boot camp because there was a young man, a German-American young man named Schwermer, and I got friendly with him, and he began to teach me a little German here because I knew I was going to Germany. Then when I was already stationed in Germany, I met a young man named Paul Vogel, and he began to teach me German also, and also other people that you meet here and there. My German was beginning to get pretty good, I think. On the way to Amsterdam—from Schweinfurt to Amsterdam, it was like a little cabin in the train car, and there's two elderly women speaking, and I'm on this side on this bench here, and they're speaking about their relatives, I think it was in Amsterdam. And I could understand some of that, you know, [laughs] so I told them. "Excuse me, but I understand what you're saying." They did say something about *Amerikanischer Soldat*, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, American soldier.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Right.

LEO TANGUMA: And so I told them, "I understand some of what you're saying," and they were real surprised. [They laugh.] But my German had gotten so well that I was able, in a very good way, I think, not perfect, but to converse with them all the way, from near Schweinfurt all the way to Amsterdam. So all those little happenings, you know, gave me a whole lot more of a self-confidence, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so we got to Amsterdam, and I said goodbye and so on. I settled in, and one of the things that happened in Amsterdam that I still wonder, How did I fall into this situation? The hotel that I rented was also like a little apartment boarding house, and it had a nice, large, like a big living room, right, and there were like couches and tables and so on. And so one of those evenings at the very beginning of my stay there, there were a number of young—well, middle-aged people, men, talking excitedly. And I remember saying the word *Krieg*, which means war, and I heard the word *Nazi*. And so there was another man here that was not part of the group, and so I spoke to him in German, and he answered in English. Anyway, so I said, "What are they talking about? What are they saying?" They were drinking beer also, all these guys. And so the man told me, "They're all remembering what they did during the war. They were"—I forget what he said, like—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Resistance?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, they weren't the resistance, but they were fighters, they were some kind of fighters, he said. Anyway, so they were recalling their times that they fought the Germans. This is only 15 years after the war, actually. This is 19—

JOSH T. FRANCO: They themselves were Germans, but they were not—

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, they were Dutch.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, Dutch, I see.

LEO TANGUMA: I'm in Holland, I'm in Holland, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, right.

LEO TANGUMA: So downstairs in the big room that they had there, there was like a lobby, living room, I guess. So all these Dutch men are talking about the resistance and what they had done. They were remembering what they had done, and they're drinking beer, and that's what those guys were doing. And so I was amazed and mystified about what I'm witnessing there, listening to those guys. And Dutch is very much like German, I think, so I understood a little bit of what they were saying that the train, the I forget the word now, but a train—blowing up a train, or tracks. So they're talking about all this and I—anyway, so I go on. That's one thing. And then I'm traveling around. I wanted to see the house of Anne Frank because I had heard about the *Diary*, I think?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I wanted to go see the house and so I took a cab, and it took me right up to

the house, and it was being constructed or being remodeled, I think, so I only got into the first floor.

[01:00:05]

But this was another experience that was so dear to me in later years. I remember in the movie, they were showing the canal out the window that as she looked out the window from the annex that the family was in. You remember that right, Anne Frank?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. I've been to the house too, yes.

LEO TANGUMA: You did? Oh, wow.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: And so you know that there's the canals right there, man.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So I'm looking at the canals and remembering the movie that had just come out also, and the book. So that was a big, big experience for me, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, the impact of war on children comes out in your art later, right? So that makes a lot of sense to me.

LEO TANGUMA: That's right. It was an experience that—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Interesting.

LEO TANGUMA: —I wasn't a part of, but I was a spectator of in the case of those Freedom Fighters, I think. And then Anne Frank.

But anyway, back to Germany. I had this friend named Paul, as I said—and one time—oh, and there was a teenage place in Schweinfurt, right, a teenage place where they had music, games and so on, drinks. No alcoholic drinks, I don't think. Anyway, so my friend took me there, and I met some of his friends. One day outdoors, we're walking, and I asked him, "How is it that Schweinfurt was bombed to pieces during the war by the American Eighth Air Force?" Mainly because of the ball-bearing factories that they had there, but anyway, also the city was devastated by the war. And I told him, "You know, I've seen photos of Schweinfurt during the war, and look at this, you cannot see any sign of the bombs and the destroyed buildings." It was slick, beautiful, Schweinfurt was, and there's the Main River that goes by there. And it was so clean, you know, so beautiful. And I don't remember what they said, but one kid, one kid said, that "*Zwanzig Jahre*, Germany would be ready for war again. In 20 years Germany will be ready for a war again." And so I noticed the kids told that kid to shut up or something, and so I asked Paul, "I didn't understand what he said," and then Paul told me that he said Germany would be ready for a war in 20 years. And I thought that was terrible, of course. And they were upset, those kids. But anyway, so it went on.

So from there, I was transferred to Fort Ord California, near Monterey.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Can I ask you a question about the murals? So when you were painting on the murals, did you talk to any of those soldiers or get any input from them?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes. That's right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did you have a process, a mural process?

LEO TANGUMA: I should've mentioned that, *hombre*, but that's true. So when I'm painting—I was telling Jeanne, the mural about the cowboy and his horse, there were guys that had worked in ranches or rodeos, and they would gather around, you know, where I was painting, and they're talking about their lives in the ranches and so on. And then when I was painting the mural on the New York City skyline in the neighborhoods, there were some guys, some Italians and some—I think they were Irish—talking about the places where they lived in New York City.

And also, the other thing that I was—well, actually, so what I realized later is that, again, the

community—it felt to me like a community is being reflected in what I'm painting, right? These were all Anglo young men, and then on the other mural about New York, there were Italians and all.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So sometimes you've said your murals are a dialogue, and in some cases, they're a dialogue with the oppressed.

LEO TANGUMA: That's right, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So this kind of began in Schweinfurt, Germany, on the base, and continued in your work where you discussed with people.

LEO TANGUMA: That's right. Without me realizing it, you know, those guys were talking about it, and then talking to me also, "Do this, do that," you know?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So it was the beginnings of a way of painting where I was real comfortable with people all around while I'm painting, whatever it was. And also me talking about what I'm doing with these guys. "Why did you choose a Palomino?" Right.

[01:05:08]

And I told, "Well, because I think it's the most beautiful of colors in horses," whatever. "And what about the New York skyline?"

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because you've never been to New York, right?

LEO TANGUMA: No, I never had, you know. So I don't know, I guess I had seen photographs of New York, and it seemed fantastic to me, the incredible buildings and so on, the neighborhoods. So these Italian guys are talking, and I know their last names were Italian. I didn't see the accent very much in their English, but somehow, I knew they were Italian. And also, I knew one of the Irish-American boys from the Bronx or somewhere. So I'm getting that experience, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: Later on, when I came to Fort Ord in California, I did one mural in our mess hall and this was a larger extended rectangle where I painted Monterey Bay. Which is a beautiful place, actually. And at one end of the bay, I had already been there, to this gnarled tree like—I don't know what kind of tree it was. But through the sands you see they've been bent a certain way like it's bent with the wind. It's so beautiful. So I painted that on one side of the painting. And then of course again, I'm copying from a postcard, but the captain or everybody was real pleased with that also, and again, it gave me a lot of confidence and self—

JOSH T. FRANCO: How did you get that commission? Did you have a reputation at that point for doing this?

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know how they knew about it, but I think somehow our captain again knew what I had done in Germany. So I don't know why actually that came about but they asked me and I said sure, and so that gave a lot of feeling. Also in this painting of the beach and the ocean, the gnarled tree on the left, and then on the right distant side, I painted mountains, the outlines of mountains in the distance.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And what year was this, that you went to California?

LEO TANGUMA: 1960 and '61 and part of '62. In any case, so, let's see, after that what did I do?

JEANNE TANGUMA: So while you were at Fort Ord, did you continue with your education?

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, my God, yeah. While I was at Fort Ord—already in Germany, I had gotten my GED, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I was stationed in California. I was transferred to a unit using this kind of radios that they had at the time. But I wanted even more to get into something a little bit better even than the use of those radios and communication. I had learned Morse code at the time. So

to advance a little bit, I enrolled myself in an electronics course at Monterey Peninsula College, but also I took a course in painting. So that helped me also quite a bit actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What is an electronics course? Like a vocational course? Or—

LEO TANGUMA: No, it was very technical, in conjunction with my military training.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, I see.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, I was learning how to use a radio called the AGN19 and that included learning Morse code. Because the idea was to have American troops behind enemy lines, right, and being able to converse or to communicate with other Army units or headquarters by the use of Morse code if we had to. So that's what I was leaning. That's why I was taking that course in electronics, because I wanted to get a little bit more advanced or promotions, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But also, I took that other course in painting, which was a wonderful experience also for me, right? But the only thing is that we didn't do any figurative paintings of the human body. For example, this crazy teacher was heavily into abstract painting or abstract art—

JOSH T. FRANCO: *¿Y cómo se llama?*

LEO TANGUMA: I don't remember [laughs] his name, but he was a neat guy though.

[01:10:02]

LEO TANGUMA: But he was crazy about abstract in California, imagine. And so—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That was the '60s in California, that's abstraction for sure, yeah. [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: Anyway, but what I did is, I did a large abstract—I mean, everybody was painting just regular-size paintings, but I drew like a [laughs] 36-inch by 4-foot abstract. I had fun doing that, and I got an A for the course, so I was real surprised.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you do that on a wall or a big canvas?

LEO TANGUMA: No, a big canvas with—it was strange, but I had never heard of acrylics at that point, I used oils. But anyway, so that—also, like I had done the murals in Germany that were quite large and so for me, it was not unusual to do a 36-inch by 4-foot panel or canvas. So let me see.

JEANNE TANGUMA: But that was the first time you used acrylics on all those big paintings? What did you use?

LEO TANGUMA: No, in Germany I think I used enamel, you know, enamel paint—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, okay.

LEO TANGUMA: Kind of like oil paint but—

JEANNE TANGUMA: I thought they were kind of big to use oil on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, but this was your first abstract painting?

LEO TANGUMA: Right. [They laugh.] And I'm thinking—

JOSH T. FRANCO: So what was that like? How did you decide—how did you make your decisions?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, because for the final grade, he asked everybody to do something special, right? And for me, special—since I didn't feel that I was going to get any kind of good grade—we're painting abstracts, right—I said, "Well, hell, I'll just do something large," right? [They laugh.] I was kind of used by now to doing large paintings, and I got an A for the course—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's crazy.

LEO TANGUMA: —and I was real surprised.

JEANNE TANGUMA: What did you paint?

LEO TANGUMA: That's what I can't remember.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I remember angular, curved. You know, but I don't remember very—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is there an artist that you would compare it to, their style?

LEO TANGUMA: Let me see. I cannot think of anybody.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was it more Jackson Pollock or more Mark Rothko?

LEO TANGUMA: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No? Big shapes.

LEO TANGUMA: Large shapes interchanging with angular geometric, I think. And the reason for that was that I had seen some of the other artists using those images. So I don't know, it's just I had to do it, right, but I did it well, I think, and that's why I got the A.

Actually, I got an A in my electronics course also, so I'm just learning so much, you know, wherever I went, learning. The other poor guy that was with me, an Anglo boy, he had a nice new car, and we would drive from the mountains like 60, 65 miles away into the mountains, all the way to Monterey, and then go back to the mountains. But anyway, that guy was real talkative, you know, he talked a lot. So he was also taking two courses, one in electronics and I don't know what else. But he got two Bs, right? [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: So on the way back, the last day of—that we found out our grades, we're driving back to—it's called the Hunter Liggett Military Reservation, up in the mountains. So he says, "Listen Tanguma, let's tell everybody we both got A's." [They laugh.] So we told our captain and then in formation also, he congratulated us—

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: —for both having done so well. "Imagine," he said, "all A's, these guys!" [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That was nice of you to go along.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I didn't know what to say. But anyways, so we both got A's.

And so anyway, finally—and also, when I was there, I used to like to go to San Jose and to San Francisco. To me, those were—they hold very special memories for me. Also, one time, this young lady I met took me out to the wine country, the vineyards up in the hills, you know, and I remember that very much. And then, of course, San Francisco was such a special place for me. San Jose also, but I've seen so much in those three years, three and a half years, that I was in the Army.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What did you do in San Francisco? What neighborhood did you hang out in, or who did you see?

LEO TANGUMA: I hung around the downtown area along the shore and the trains, and I think not very—I didn't go to any neighborhoods that I remember.

[01:15:09]

I went to one neighborhood when I went to buy a car there after having been there for a few times. Then one time, I saw an ad in the newspaper for a car, man—for a nice car for 145 bucks—no, 175 bucks. And I had my nice savings, so I went and bought it, and I drove around. I had also met a girl in San Francisco, so, you know, I was very in love with that place. And of course, San Jose was similar, I went there a few times.

So I'm traveling a little bit, and a lot of those, I remember them being always alone, you know. I didn't like to go to bars like a lot of the other guys. In Germany, I had gone to a bar with a buddy and got drunk, man. So I was embarrassed of that, and I had gone to bars in Monterey a couple of times, and I didn't like the getting drunk and being loudmouths and so on. And so I did a lot of this by myself, and I think I've been like that all my life.

Later on, when I did murals, I didn't wait for anybody like in Chicano discussing the issues and so on. And then I thought, "Well, okay, I'm going to do a mural." Instead of just talking and talking, I went and did something, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And that's the way it's been all my life. I never waited for anybody to tell me. I've been invited a few times to do something, but not that I went looking. Like the Denver Art Museum asked me to do a mural. And what else? In Germany also, somebody gave me the opportunity, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: In California later, they asked me to do a mural. So I don't know it was just like being alone and—

JEANNE TANGUMA: And in Houston.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, Houston.

LEO TANGUMA: Also in Houston, but we'll get to that the next—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's the '70s, right? So you're in California, do you go back to *Tejas* after California, or when did your military service end?

LEO TANGUMA: It ended in February 1962, so I came home to Baytown, outside of Houston, and that's where my parents lived then when I came back. They didn't live in Pasadena anymore. So I went to Baytown where there was a lot of petrochemical industry, refineries and so on, all in that area, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: Actually, my first job was as a bookmobile driver, so that was also another learning experience for me. But after that—oh, and also, I got to go to all places in the Houston area. And I didn't work for the city, I worked for the county, which meant that I went to far places in Harris County, which is an enormous area. So we would go to little towns, little communities all over the place, so I got a real good—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Were these library books? Were you part of the library systems?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, library system, right. The Harris County Public Library bookmobile services, right.

So I did a lot of that driving all over the place for about a year and a half, and then I got a job at a place called Ashland Chemical and Rubber Company. That turned out to be an incredible experience for me, because you see now—by now, there is a lot of federal push for industry to hire more minorities, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So somebody from my church told me, "You know, they're hiring over there at Ashland and they want *mexicanos*," right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And I said, "Wow, well that's nice," you know. So I went and applied, and I got the job. But very soon, you know, I begin to notice that there were water fountains for Negroes, water fountains for whites. Just like that: Whites. Not Anglos, but just whites. And also the bathrooms, the showers, you know, so, my God—and also the coffee areas. There was like a place with nice tables with a little roof and then open sides, and the Blacks had another similar table over here in the right. So here I am having coffee or lunch with the white guys, and the

Blacks were there looking at me, right. But that only lasted like a few days before I said, "No, man, I'm not going to do this." So I went and began to join the Black guys, the Black workers, and at first they were a little suspicious, you know, but very soon, we became friends, right?

[01:20:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And so finally, the plant manager called me in to talk, right. So I went in there, I don't know what it was going to be about. I had kind of an idea, though, that they were going to say something about me being with the Blacks, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So that's exactly what it was about, because he began to talk about this and that. And he said, "I am very fond of your people," [they laugh] and so I thought, "Well, I don't know." So then he came to the point, he said, "You know, a lot of our workers are concerned that you spend so much time with the Negroes." Right, "with the Negroes," not African Americans or Blacks, just Negroes in those days. And he said, "You know, we gave you the same entrance tests that we give our boys." You know, so—

JEANNE TANGUMA: The white.

JOSH T. FRANCO: The white.

LEO TANGUMA: That's what he meant, yeah. So, I don't know, I think he saw me like a real good person. I had been in the service, I was now married, and I was going to school and doing all those things that I think they liked, right? But I did not like them, right? I mean, I had been around them, I had—I remembered Beeville, and I remembered growing up in Beeville, and then in Pasadena also, so what—now this guy tells me that they had hired me instead of going by the guidelines that they should hire minorities. So instead of hiring Blacks, they wanted to hire Mexican Americans. And I understood that right away. So in the next few days, I was sitting with the Black guys, and I told them what had happened. And they said, "You know, this is what was suspected, because some of our friends that had gone to college had not been able to pass those tests because they were giving more difficult tests for Black folks than to white folks. So you have all these rednecks, you know, with nice jobs because they passed some—like I did, right—this simple test, right?"

JOSH T. FRANCO: The easier test, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. But for the Blacks, they gave them this horrible, complicated test. So they told me, the Blacks told me, "You know, we've got a beginning a class-action suit against Ashland for all these discriminations," and so on. I said, "Well, I'm glad to be able to help in this case," but the whites began to not to talk to me. I even heard somebody say, "I hope somebody kills that motherfucker." And then another one said, "And I hope it's a nigger that does it." So by now—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, God.

LEO TANGUMA: —I am learning again, you know, about this racism that I kind of thought I had left behind in Beeville, and here it is in a very strong way, right. So by now, my wife has heard about all these controversies going on at the plant and that she is really upset. By now, she's pregnant, and we're expecting our first baby, and—but I couldn't stand the pressure of my wife's family—not my family, because they all understood that. And actually, we all went to the same church. My wife's family and my family, we all went to the same church, so there was a kind of a split and some people saying that I'm causing a lot of trouble, and they would not be hiring any more Mexicans, right, because of the way I'm behaving being over there *con los negros*, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But I finally just left one day and didn't come back. I got in my car and drove to Dallas where my brother lived and I forgot about that company. But I know that the Blacks won their class-action suit later, so that worked out pretty good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, isn't it interesting how, you know, racial dynamics are so often framed in black and white but then there's us and there's the Asian Americans and there's everyone—

you know?

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: That's right. That's what I was seeing. So I left everything behind, man. So actually, I had—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, can I ask just details about—you just dropped in that you were married by this point, and we didn't hear the story. [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yeah, I had gotten married in 1964. I had—

[01:25:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is this the woman from California or—

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, this is somebody from Baytown. So I married into this very, very conservative family, you know, and very different from my family. We're not radicals or anything, but my wife's family was very conservative. Later on, when I began to do more in the community organizing that I did, and the paintings that I began to do, the family was adamant against me, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: That I was a *payaso*—they called me *un payaso*, right, a clown. And so I had those awful feelings. So that's another reason I left, you know, because I couldn't stand that. I loved my family, but they understood. Also I was going to where another family was. My older brother was in Dallas, so I went there, and I began to look for a job. I did not like Dallas, so I drove to Fort Worth, and I looked a lot in there for jobs, but there I could not find any. Because I had experience in the petrochemical plants, so—but I didn't get anything.

But finally, I came up to the Fort Worth Public Library, and I thought, "Wow, well, maybe with my experience as a bookmobile driver, there might be something I can do here." So I went and I just inquired about it. I didn't fill out any applications or anything because the young lady said, "You know, in the art and music department, they're looking for somebody." Right, just like that. Not, "You have to have a degree," nothing like that. Just, "Just go see Miss Truder [ph]," right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So [laughs] I almost ran out to the second floor, man, I was so excited because I kind of expected I was going to get hired. And sure enough, I had a long interview with Miss Truder [ph]. And she was a young woman about 35, 40 maybe. Real real sharp lady, and she hired me right there, man, on the spot.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing. And what library was this? What's the particular branch?

LEO TANGUMA: Fort Worth Public Library, the Central branch.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, great.

LEO TANGUMA: So anyway, all of a sudden, I'm a library assistant, a librarian assistant. So I had my own little desk in the department. There were two assistants. I was an assistant in art, in art matters, and there was a young lady assistant in music. I knew very little art history or even Mexican art history, but I don't know how I talked myself into it, right. So I began to assist patrons in the arts. But of course, you have all this reference sources that you can go by, and I had gotten very familiar with those indexes, you know, to the arts, art history, art, artists, and so on. So I'm doing that, and I'm learning about artists and art history.

Also, we had some library stacks across the hall from the art department where they kept a lot of books, and I found books on Mexican mural paintings. So I began to look at those, or sometimes I would bring them to the desk where I—sometimes you don't have anything to do, so I'm reading and looking. And so I'm beginning to learn more and more about art, and artists.

Then, she put me in charge of art exhibits. We had a lot of reproductions of art, of paintings by—I think they only had one or two of Rivera, maybe Tamayo, but also other artists: French,

American. So we had a stack of a wonderful collections, framed reproductions, right. So every—I think every—like every two or three weeks, I had to take down what I had already set there, put them down, and put a new exhibit. Usually, this was done with some discussion with Mrs. Treuter and so I was also learning about other artists. And so I would—Kandinsky, you know, other artists, Modigliani and, oh, so many other artists that I'm putting up on the wall, and then a couple of Rivera. And so this is an education for me, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So anyway, it's like all my life I've been so lucky to be in situations where it benefited me. But finally, I could not afford to live on that salary, right?

[01:30:06]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I began to look again for a job in industry. And so I found a job in an air-conditioning manufacturing company, and I had to leave my job at the library, but I had learned so much in that year and a couple of months. And then I went to work for this company, and they paid really well actually. Let me go back to the library for a minute.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, actually, no, no, now I'm working at the air-conditioning company that I had to take a bus way out in the outskirts somewhere, and so I had to wait for the bus downtown and then go on. So I'm there like at six a.m. usually, and there this was couple, this elderly Anglo couple that pulled along a little dolly with newspaper stacks. And what they did is they dropped this off in restaurants and in other places around the downtown area, right. But I became fascinated with them because there was something wrong with the woman, you know, something mentally or physically—not physically because they both walked fairly well, but I could tell that there was something mentally, something wrong with her. So the man held her, you know, [demonstrates] like this, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: Not by the arm or, you know, but like this. And he would pull the little wagon, and she would carry a stack of newspapers with her other hand, and they would drop them, all these papers, along the way, and this was stacks of papers. And then many years later, I walked in a senior citizen's center, and I painted that couple.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, wow.

LEO TANGUMA: It was a mural like eight feet by eight feet. It was in the community center there, a senior citizen's center outside of Houston, but I always remember those faces, and it was incredible together.

You know, also it was—he wore a long overcoat because Fort Worth is a little windy sometimes. I don't know if it's called the windy city, but it's really windy and cold. So I remember them both. She had a scarf over her head and he had a large overcoat, and I remember the wind blowing his coat to the side like this. So in the painting, I have the part of his overcoat blowing in the wind, and she's looking real secure in my painting looking up ahead and so is he. They're both—they came out so well, I think. So that's one thing that happened, that kind of memory that I have about Fort Worth.

But anyway, back to the air-conditioning company, so I'm learning how to do the job, whatever it was, and then I meet this Mexican-American young man that had also been hired. And by now, there's this spirit in the community, the Chicano movement, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so this guy and I become friends right away. So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is this like '65, '66?

LEO TANGUMA: This is 1966.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

LEO TANGUMA: But already we hear about the farm workers and so on in the community, the word is out somehow. So anyway, so this guy—and in those days, we talked about—we called the community *la Raza*, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: *La Raza* this, *la Raza* that. So this guy and I are talking about *gringos* and *la Raza* and I don't remember what else, but we were overheard by some manager or something, and we got fired that same day.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: So, my God, it was so sudden like that, and again, I thought it was racist, but I know that we had provoked it a little bit but not enough to get fired for.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And you were just talking. You weren't even planning anything necessarily.

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, just talking about something about history or *la Raza* and so on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was the word "Chicano" being used at this point?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, it was, actually. You see, back in Beeville, when somebody referred to ourselves, los Chicanos, instead of *la Raza*. *La Raza* is really inclusive of everybody, right? Chicanos, maybe some. *Son Chicanos* or *soy Chicano* or sometimes they would say "*¿Qué esperas? Es Chicano.*" You know, "So what do you expect, he's Chicano," right, somebody a little bit lower than the lowest, right?

[01:35:04]

So we already were beginning to use that word. And so that young man and I were talking, and we got fired, you know, so. You know, then I didn't have a job at all. Here we are, and by now, we had a baby. We had our first baby, named Carlos. So I had to—we had to go back to Baytown. We went back to Baytown with our baby, and I began to get those jobs again in industry. And I got out a job at the Upjohn chemical company outside of Houston, but what I encountered there was the Klan, okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LEO TANGUMA: I didn't know the name or I didn't associate those guys with the Klan, but later on, a few years later, I began to realize those damn guys were Klansmen. Because they didn't want to teach me my job, man. There was one Anglo man that was real nice to me and friendly and so on, but most of the other guys, they had nothing.

Oh, by the way, I was already doing some community organizing, and what we were doing had already come out in the papers, you know, in Houston and also in Baytown. And they headed me because I was the head of our organization in Baytown, our organizing efforts.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you have a name for the group?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, a real simple name: the Baytown Civic Committee. [They laugh.] Because we met—sometimes we would have like standing-room only, man, in these places. It was such a spirit in the community. So I said, "You know what, we need a name for our group." And so they agreed on the Baytown Civic Committee. [They laugh.] I was—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was it all *mexicanos* or were there Black people also?

LEO TANGUMA: No, there was nobody but us. [They laugh.] So they named themselves that. I was a little embarrassed actually because I went to the city council, and I said, "I represent the Baytown Civic Committee." [They laugh.] You know, it's so funny. But we were so together, you know, that we had actual real-life situations.

For example, right next door, like two houses down, there was sewage spilling out into the street, right? I said, "What in the world can—why can people put up with this?" It was like afraid to ask the city to do simple things like that. There were no fire hydrants anywhere in our community, in our *barrio*. The speed limits on some streets and some major streets that passed through the *barrio* had no-slow down speeds. In fact, one girl had been killed and later on another kid injured by the speeding people though our *barrio*, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So we had all these demands, man. Well, actually, I had drawn up a petition. So we had a petition listing all these things, right. So I went before city council, and I remember they were trying to be friendly, right, but they were not very nice. When I was speaking, this councilman said, "Mr. Tanguma,"—interrupting me, right—"do you have a police record and if so, what is the reason for it?" And I said, "You know, I don't have a police record. Actually, I am married, I have two kids, and I go to night school at Lee College, I'm an Army veteran." I said a few other things real positive about myself, right, because I was proud of myself. And then I told the guy, "And how about you? Do you have a police record and if so what is the reason for it?" That poor man was red in the face, man, he didn't know what to say. [They laugh.] And then he didn't say anything, so I went on with my presentation. And at the end of the presentation, I was so bold, man, I told the council, "And I want you folks out on the street tomorrow morning," right? Just real real bold. I don't know what made me do that. In the morning, there's trucks in front of my house and down the street fixing these sewage-spilling pipes, or whatever it was.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

LEO TANGUMA: So people in the community were beginning to think, "Wow, this guy is strange, but he gets things done."

[01:40:06]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So the next year, I met an African-American seaman that was also concerned about matters like that, so we began another series of meetings with the council and so on. And I think that the city council were a little afraid of us by now. There's Blacks and Chicanos in front of city council, right, and so they were responding really well, man. By now, some of our Chicano issues were being taken care of, but the Blacks had a lot of issues. So we went with that. We continued with those kinds of meetings with the city council. And let me see, what else happened?

I had quit the Upjohn company because of those incidents with the white workers. And one time actually, I think they purposely set me up to inhale fumes from this phosgene, this deadly gas, actually. See, whenever you dealt with that, you had to wear a mask, a gas mask, and be real careful when—we had these filters that were upright like that, then they had the top that you unbolted and then you took out the filters, I think, and then close it. But that was only with masks. And even people in the near area had to be away or wearing a mask, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So they told me at the control room, "Okay, Leo, we need to take some samples of so-and-so vessel," right. So that's what we did, right, normally in our rounds around the plant. So I went off to get the sample, I had my little things with me and then I inhaled phosgene because the top had been left off. And so I didn't know, man, I was coughing, I could not breathe, but they found me and they took me to a little clinic that they had in the plant. But later on, I realized they had left that on purpose, knowing that I was going to walk past there. And, you know, you could die from that stuff, man. I don't know, I was real lucky. So anyway, eventually, I left the job, and I sued the company, but I lost the lawsuit.

So I got another job at the Exxon plant, Enco—whatever you call it now. This was not with the company itself, but with a maintenance company that cared, you know, for spillage or whatever. And here again, they were mainly Blacks. I think I was the only Mexican there. But somehow, I was told to do the graveyard shift, so I began to—at night, there was not all that much to do, right? And I was also amazed with the plant, with the towers and so on, the noise, and the silhouettes against the dark. And so I began to take a drawing pad with me, to get an idea to do a painting of that scene that I would see every day, man. And then this—what do you call it—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Supervisor?

LEO TANGUMA: Like a supervisor, came and said, "What are you doing?"

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: I said, "I'm drawing these things." [They laugh.] And so he said, "You're not

allowed to do that," you know? I said, "Nobody told me," you know, nobody had said anything. So I was drawing the plants and the—because it was silhouetted against the dark sky, but also there were flood lights on all the towers, right? So it was a contrast, and the shadows playing from the floodlights that were all over the place. So the next day, a big shot, I guess, came, and they took my drawing pad. And they called that industrial espionage, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh! So it wasn't just, they thought you were wasting time? They thought you were doing something nefarious, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: My God, so they fired me that same night. [They laugh.] Gee, it's so funny, man.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's strange.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, that plant, some—another funny incident happened. See, so you had to take the samples up in the towers. Different places, right, not just along the bottom, right, but in the towers themselves. So I was up on some level, and I looked down, and there was an African-American man that worked at the plant. When he entered the control room, they threw a snake at his feet—a big snake, man—and that poor guy jumped up, right? And then they were—oh, they were all laughing at all this. Five or six white guys, they were laughing, they had a great time with the poor—his name was Lawrence or Clarence, I forget.

[01:45:34]

So anyway, so later on, it was my turn to go down into the—and to write down my readings that I had gotten somewhere. And so I knew those guys were going to do the same thing, right? So when I walked in there, they threw that snake at my feet, and I knew it was harmless, right? It was like a garter snake or whatever. But it was kind of large and dark. But I just stepped over it, right? And went in and wrote down what I was supposed to write down and then I walked out, and those guys were just standing there. They had not been able to get a laugh off of me. But I was just lucky that that poor Black guy had been the first.

I don't know what I would've done if I stepped out, and there's a snake at your feet, you know, a dark snake. I had grown up with a lot of fear for rattlesnakes because they were in the fields and along the work that we did, and even in our home sometimes you would find a rattlesnake. So anyway, so I was really lucky to get out of that. So I left that job and so on.

Then, I got a job totally different than the petrochemical jobs that I had had sometimes or another. I got a job at the Houston Council on Human Relations, which sponsored the VISTA project in Houston.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, like AmeriCorps VISTA?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, except they were just called the Volunteers in Service to America, right? These—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I went to the VISTA, Leo.

LEO TANGUMA: You did?!

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, for two years in San Antonio.

LEO TANGUMA: Really?!

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And what year this is?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Excuse me?

LEO TANGUMA: Remember what year that was?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, when I did VISTA?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: 2006 to 2008.

LEO TANGUMA: Really?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: Well, this is 1970 to '71.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing.

LEO TANGUMA: So I'm one of two—I was hired—we were two supervisors. We had like 50 VISTAs, man, a big project. And so the other guy supervised part of the project, and I supervised the other volunteers. So we had a lot of volunteers in different conditions, like welfare rights, all kinds of—legal rights even. I didn't—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Where was the office? Did you go to Houston? Did you move to Houston, or you stayed in Baytown while you did it?

LEO TANGUMA: No, I stayed in Baytown for a few years, actually. So I would drive back and forth to Baytown, to Houston. So our volunteers were in many, many areas, and I enjoyed that very much. In the north side of Houston, they—this church and, I don't know, another group—had set up like a shelter for teenage runaways. But the runaways themselves had called—had named that place Pachuco House, right? It's in the north side. There was a lot of—not gangsters that I remember, but a lot of fights and a lot of drugs also. But these kids that had run away from home, from their homes, I began to get a little more familiar with them. So I asked them—or they just told me, "Yeah, we were sleeping under"—because some of the houses were off the ground a little bit. Not like here in Colorado, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So it was easy to get under people's house where it was warm, and sleep under people's houses. Or some of them would go to junkyards and get inside a car and sleep in those. And in those places, there was a lot of mosquitoes, man, in that area. And in different places like that, they ran away.

A couple of kids were afraid of their parents, man. They were afraid of their parents. Two kids that especially liked and got to know, and then I based the play on them, were a boy named Hongo who was like 11 or 12, and his older brother that they called Nigger Boy. He was real dark, and I don't know how he got the name, but anyway, they called him Nigger Boy and Hongo. And those were two of the kids that had been sleeping under people's houses. Like, for months, man, okay? Just living on the streets.

[01:50:07]

The church had gotten them a little food at this restaurant like beans and rice, and so that's where some of them ate some of the times, and sometimes other people would bring them food, like relatives. I don't know who they were, would bring them a little food, right? It was a big mess, that place. But anyway, I enjoyed talking to the kids and getting to know them, so that was a special, special project, in the VISTA project that I liked.

And there was another Chicano—what was it, another project of ours? Oh, yeah, it was called the Northside People's Center, and that was part of the MAYO organization, the Mexican American Youth Organization, that had sponsored or that had started that project. So we had one volunteer there, and what he did was mainly community organizing, which was not part of the agenda of the VISTA program but I thought—I mean, you know, "What the hell, you know, we need to do this." So we had that going on. And we had some of the Black community also. But I began—I had noticed from the beginning that all these volunteers were Anglo, some from wealthy families up east or even California, right. They came to work with the poor, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And so I noticed that all of them were Anglos. And so I told our organization, "You know what, we need to hire some local people: local Blacks, local Chicanos, and poor whites, alright." So I remember getting two Chicanos, VISTA volunteers. I recruited two Chicanos and two Blacks and two whites. The Chicanos and the Blacks were just right, you know, for the

jobs. Some of them were doing jobs already, they just needed a little bit of salary, a little bit of transportation and whatever else VISTA provided, right, health care.

But then I went into the poor white community in northeast Houston, I can't remember where, and I recruited two white young men. One was named Mathews, and the other one was named Whitmarch. So they all were doing their little jobs and so on, I was really happy, but at our meetings, I began to notice a little bit of one of the volunteers, Steve, that had a little bit more conservative attitudes, right? Not only that, but some of those meetings I had in my home because I lived in Denver Harbor. It's an area, like, northeast of the downtown area. This was a neighborhood called Denver Harbor. And our home that we had now had a nice large living room, and so it was—I found out it's good for meetings of VISTA volunteers. So some of my volunteers from that side of town came to my house, and we had meetings. But also those two white boys.

In my home, my wife began to get phone calls at night because I would go to meetings at night; I had to have meetings sometimes for VISTA volunteers from different parts of the city in the evenings. And somebody knew I wasn't home, so they began to terrorize my wife. And then a couple of times, they caught me before I went to my meeting, saying, "Leo, if you go to that meeting, we're going to go visit your wife." How did they know I had a meeting that evening? You see?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so that began to happen more and more, and then Steve left VISTA, and the phone calls stopped. Later on, I put this together, right?

Years later, there was a protest of white shrimpers on the gulf coast against Vietnamese shrimpers that had their own particular ways or whatever it was, but they seemed to have had a legitimate cause. [Coughs.] But the Klan was out there supporting the white shrimpers. [Clears throat.] Excuse me. And one of those Klansmen took his hood off, and it was Steve.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Whoa.

LEO TANGUMA: It's like—and so that was recorded and passed on to me.

[01:55:03]

And so that's when I realized that it had been Steve in VISTA giving out my name—because I would change my phone number, man, and the next day, we had the phone call, my wife had the phone calls, or I, if I was home. So then I realized that my friend had been a Klansman. But we had all the evidence, actually.

But worse than that, in 1975, we had a mural studio on the west side of Houston, going to do murals with young people, young teenagers, and we did get to do one large mural with girls, with teenage girls. But then my studio was burned down. I had built drawing tables, large, eight-foot-wide tables for the kids to draw, and for me to draw. [Clears throat.] Again, let me—excuse me just a minute.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you want to take a five-minute break, Leo? Or do you want to keep going?

LEO TANGUMA: I would like to keep on going.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

LEO TANGUMA: Is it okay?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah, you have water there, that's good. I'm going to have a sip.

LEO TANGUMA: Can I have a little bit more?

JOSH T. FRANCO: So VISTA, can you repeat the years of VISTA?

LEO TANGUMA: 1970, 1971. [Clears throat.] So let's see—[clears throat].

Actually, before the fire, let me talk about something else, okay? In 1971, I got a grant from the De Menil Foundation, which still I think still exists. They were a millionaire family or group.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, this is the Menil Collection, Dominique de Menil.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, right, Dominique. And so they gave me a \$3000 grant to paint murals at the McAshan Community Center, which was in the near east side in Houston. I began to do murals—and that was not a very big grant, actually, you know, for the work that I needed to do. So anyway, I began to do murals in different parts of the community—of the community center, which had been a church. So actually it was kind of big, a big altar sanctuary, and it was perfect for murals actually.

So it was—let's see, 1971—so maybe this is closer to 1972. Because one day, we received a phone call saying that somebody from the Houston Chamber of Commerce wanted to meet with me or to talk to me. I thought, Wow, that's strange, man, I've condemned the establishment in every way I can verbally as well as in my paintings. So—you know what, I've lost track also.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You're in 1972 and the city government of Houston called you in to talk—

LEO TANGUMA: Right. But before that happened with the Chamber of Commerce, the Mexican American Youth Organization at the University of Houston asked me to do a mural. So I was real glad for the opportunity, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I did a wonderful design, I think. It was a young man graduating from the University of Houston and being greeted by the president of the university with a diploma, with one hand holding a puppeteer's handle. That was the president of the university. And guiding the young Chicano to get his degree is Uncle Sam, a skeletal form. And at the feet, the US Constitution that's been stepped on by the skeletal Uncle Sam.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oof.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: On one side, I had the community that needs this young man, and of course, the president of the university is pulling him to the business, to the Anglo world, right, military. And so there's all these kids that are already graduating behind the university president, and they're all marching on, stoically, like robots, going on to this enormous industrial type of a skeleton that's swallowing all these young graduates. The community meanwhile calls to the young Chicano. And I think I got the idea from seeing these Chicano guys at the university that all seemed so—I don't know, so well-fed, I guess. I even thought—at one point I thought that they were like well-fed zombies. They all had forgotten about the movement and so on.

[02:00:28]

So anyway, so I began to do the mural. It was like 52-feet wide by about 8-feet tall, I think it was.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Was it on campus?

LEO TANGUMA: No, it was on—directly on the—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Campus.

LEO TANGUMA: On canvas?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Campus.

LEO TANGUMA: Campus, oh, yes. I'm sorry, on campus. I thought you said canvas.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sorry, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, it was on campus at the cafeteria there, and it was about four feet off the ground and then eight feet high up. So I began to paint that, and soon, they began some controversy, because professors and even other students came and began to take issue with me saying, "So to the left over there, all the good people are there, right? And to the right are all the white evil people. Is that what you're saying?" And I had good answers actually because I engaged them in good conversations, and other students also. Yes, I think I've mentioned earlier, I was real bold in what I said and what I painted. But I didn't realize that some of these was getting to the administration, and they were beginning to put pressure on the MAYOs, on my

sponsors.

On top of that, one of the students, Mario González, began to insist that he should be part of the painters, right? And I argued, "You can't have that," you know. And he would say, "There's no reason why a mural cannot be painted in two styles."

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: And so our awful arguments with those people, and they're beginning to get on his side, mainly because they wanted the mural to be stopped, because of the pressure that they were feeling from the administration. I was told this later, okay? I didn't know it at the time. So meanwhile, things were getting worse and worse, and finally they tell me, "You know what, Leo, we can't pay you anymore." They were paying me \$90 a week. I said, "I don't care, I'll just go ahead and do it anyway." So that put them on the spot. And I think in the discussions with students and others that are beginning to come see what I'm painting, this horrible indictment of what they thought was the white community—not imperialism, not racism—they were just thinking the white community is being attacked by a Mexican.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: But a lot of the—some of the Chicano students were pleased with what I was doing. But not my sponsors, right? They were feeling more and more unfriendly towards me, you know, and they were my sponsors. They had approved my sketch, which I had done in good detail, so they knew exactly what I was going to paint. But all of a sudden, they're afraid, they're unfriendly to me, and finally, they cover up the mural, right.

So, the last day, I had just seen them cover up my murals, I'm standing there, and I'm real depressed, right? And this young Anglo girl—as I found out later, was Australian, but she was a student here. And she came and said, "I want to give you this, it's a notebook." I saw it was a notebook, and she said, "I've been writing poems about you. And I've heard all the arguments, and they were so unfair, they crucified you," she said. And so that almost brought tears to my eyes, man. So anyway, so I accepted the book and then she left. And then amazing—but before I could leave, a young Anglo man came out and said, "I've been listening to all these discussions, all the time that you've been painting here." Because there were people that sat in the tables, in the cafeteria tables, and they were observing. Everybody's observing what's going on. So he said, "And I think they've been so unfair, man, and I heard that they were paying you \$90 a week." And he said, "This is my"—how do you call it?—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Allowance?

LEO TANGUMA: —"my monthly allowance from my parents, \$90, and here's this, so you can paint another week." He knew I didn't have a mural to paint. I think that he was just saying to go paint whatever you want, right? And so—

[02:05:06]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's amazing.

LEO TANGUMA: —those two little incidents happened right as I finished the mural, and I have a spiritual kind of a support that I felt from those two young people.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you still have the notebook from the Australian?

LEO TANGUMA: My wife tore it up in pieces. My wife threw it all out, saying she was a bitch.

JEANNE TANGUMA: She got jealous.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know. I was kind of innocent, just thought, "Look what some girl, some student, wrote for me!" And she read a couple and then she tore them up—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, no.

LEO TANGUMA: —and threw them, and such—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Terrible.

LEO TANGUMA: That's the kind of marriage I had, actually, but I don't want to go into that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

LEO TANGUMA: So anyway, I—the next couple of days, I go back to McAshan to paint there, when I'm told that there's a message for me from somebody from the chamber of commerce, and I thought, "Well, what could it be from the chamber of commerce?" You know? But anyway, it was a guy named McLanahan, the head of the cultural affairs committee of the chamber of commerce, and he said that there were some people that wanted to talk to me about a mural, right, and could I meet with them soon, you know, so I said, "Sure."

And a couple of days later, he shows up with two women, a lady named Diane Smith and another one, Rosalyn Battlestein. And so these were two Jewish ladies, that I found out later were Jewish, right? But anyway, so when they came to McAshan, I tried to show them my murals, they didn't seem very interested. They wanted to tell me what they needed. And so they explained to me that they were part of the—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oktoberfest.

LEO TANGUMA: The Oktoberfest in Houston, right. And they had seen that very few Hispanics ever attended the Oktoberfest. They wanted to do a mural with a Chicano, right, with a Hispanic artist about the Oktoberfest, to kind of draw in more Hispanic people to their Oktoberfest. And I had no intention of doing such a thing. But then I remembered this wall on Canal Street that I had been hoping to someday paint, somehow. I had even approached the company with the idea of painting a mural on the wall, but they had been crude and awful to me, and I kind of had expected it really. But anyway, here's these wealthy people, the chamber of commerce, wanting for me to do a mural, right? So I told them, "You know what, there's a wall here that I would like for you to see, maybe you might like to sponsor a mural there."

And so we drove off, man. [Laughs.] And the plant manager, named Mr. Baer, he welcomed me with all kinds of good feelings, right, where before he had almost ran me out of there. But now I'm with millionaire people in the chamber of commerce, so he was—we talked in a long fancy meeting table, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so we talked, and finally they agreed, almost immediately, man. And he said to me, [pantomimes Anglo accent] "I heard that you're a good *artiste*," you know, being funny. So we had the permission to paint the wall, except that my sponsors had no funds for me. They had no funds to pay me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Aren't they millionaires?

LEO TANGUMA: They were. Of course they were. But I wanted to do the mural so badly I thought, Hell, I'll raise my own money somehow. But they left it up to me to choose my subject. Of course, I chose the Chicano community. And that mural is a block long, man, 240 feet by—it's off the ground four feet up. So from four feet up, it's 18 feet, so it's an enormous wall. And after that, I didn't see them anymore. They never came by. They left me alone with all the paint that I needed, 100 gallons of paint. The only thing is that they got the wrong paint. They got enamel paint, and I needed acrylic and water-soluble paint. But anyway, they got the scaffolds, the paints, everything I needed except the fee for myself. And I never saw them again. They never came by the wall.

[02:10:06]

So here I am doing a Chicano mural, and this mural becomes known, I mean, throughout the city and the neighborhoods, because I would have visitors from the Northside—well, actually, I knew a lot of people in the Northside, I don't know where they came from, everywhere, to see our mural, especially like Saturday and Sundays, Sundays. And people began to paint with me from the neighborhood, mainly from the neighborhood, and even kids helped me. We were treated with such respect by everybody.

So one day, I'm painting with about, I don't know, five or six, maybe more, teenagers, right? And that this man stops and says that he owns a restaurant somewhere and he catered food sometimes. And he had catered some meeting somewhere, and he had a lot of food left over, could he bring it over for my kids? And I said, "Sure, man." So later on, he came up. Actually, it

might have been the next day, because he came and brought tables and food and those aluminum pots, and he had plates for everybody, and my kids were surprised but so happy, man. Here they are, eating *pollo*, you know, *arroz con pollo*, beans and *tortillas* and pop, so they were so happy. He did that two or three times after that, but he had treated us so nice. At the rededication of the mural two years ago, I met the son of that man that owned the restaurant, and now he's a judge, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, so that man had touched us so beautifully by bringing us food, by talking to the kids, and so on, saying what a great job they were doing. Mainly, they were filling in areas, because the mural was so big, it took a lot of areas to be painted, right? And my kids were real happy just painting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can you say the title of the mural, Leo?

LEO TANGUMA: I called it *The Rebirth of Our Nationality, El Renacimiento De Nuestra Nacionalidad*. Anyway, but everybody was happy with the title, with the meaning of the title, like we're being reborn, our culture is being appreciated again. The Chicano Movement taught us that, right, identify more with our culture. And to top it off, I was trying to find a poem or something to go with the mural, and so I'm doing research, and I found a book called *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* by Miguel León-Portilla. Of course, he had researched all the original sources or the primary sources of what we knew about the native people, the indigenous peoples.

And so reading through there, I found a chronicler named Don Alvarado—Fernando de Alvarado de Tezozómoc, right. So the poem reads almost word by word the way I put it on the wall: "Never will it be lost, never will it be forgotten, that which they came to do," and it goes on and on and then it says, "We shall always remember it, we shall pass it on, we shall tell it to those who are yet to live, yet to be born, the children of the Mexicans." So you can imagine such a thing in the neighborhood, in the *barrio*, the people identifying with that, it's so beautiful. All these things, and I never got paid one penny for that. I had to raise money, borrow money, and so on. Two years after that, I lost my home, we lost our home because we had been so much in debt. Such a terrible time after that.

But meanwhile, the community had gotten a gift. I mean, a real gift, that me and all my helpers had given them, something that they identified with and fought over with. We even had fights, you know, with racists. A couple of times a bunch of rednecks were kind of like baiting us. For some reason, we gave them a beating, you know. An ex-con friend of mine that was real good with kicks, man—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: —and I had had some martial arts. So we surprised those bums, and I mean they were all bloody, and they called the cops on us, imagine. So here comes a whole bunch of police cars screeching to a halt and all these cops getting out, some with batons.

[02:15:06]

And then I said, "Oh, my God, they're going to beat us up." But then one of the main—I think the main person came up to me and said, "Mr. Tanguma, I have been wanting to meet you because the people"—he said, "I pass by here and I always see you working and so on. But I've been wanting to meet you and congratulate you," and so on. And the other cops ready to beat us are standing there, What do we do now? [Laughs.] It's so funny. So anyway, so they scold those white guys, right. There's a bar where they had come from, so they go inside the bar, and there's a guy bleeding at the—because I followed the cops, right? You know, they're bleeding, three guys we hurt in seconds, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: We had that fight, and the kids had been watching this, from—the neighborhood kids, you know, on bikes, and they had seen this. And later on, I heard them talking to other people, "You should have seen Leo, man, he kicked this guy right in the face!" [They laugh.] And I kicked this guy right in the face, you know. One of my things that I had learned, and so I kicked him right in the face, the poor guy. So after that, they never bothered us. Because that bar was there, you know. It was like a redneck bar in the neighborhood. So we had that experience and

then I finished the mural.

I was called by the Hispanic Cultural Institute at Rice University. They declared me Hispanic artist of the year and gave me \$1000, so that was nice.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's good.

LEO TANGUMA: But I went on, and about a year later, I'm beginning to—I had approached the Sunbeam Bakery on Washington Avenue to let me paint their wall, which was even bigger than Canal Street. But I was excited, and it was—the Bicentennial was coming up, so I was wanting to do a mural on the Bicentennial, to show an enormous festival of peoples from all cultures, American, you know, cultures of people. So I was doing that, and I guess people had heard about it.

Anyway, so it goes on and on, now it's 1975. And some people, some priests actually, they went to the company management, and I hate to say this, but they wanted the mural to be stopped, that I should not paint that mural because I was a Marxist, okay? And sure enough, they stopped the whole project, they canceled it. At that same time, somebody burned my studio to the ground, man, too. It was, I mean, a horrible thing. Out of that studio, we were going to do murals with young people in the parks, wherever we could, right? But all that was canceled because my sponsor, the Mexican-American Education Council that was going to be—through them, we were going to have a grant to pay the kids to paint murals. So all that was canceled, and my studio was burned down. I lost paintings, drawings, equipment. I lost everything. I had a couple of things at home, right, but everything that I had, I was so proud of, I put it in my studio. I was planning my first one-man show of paintings. Everything went. And so my wife and I, the kids were shattered, you know, just shattered.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Did you ever directly talk to the priests?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, one of them—no, no, not a priest. One of company managers I ran into told me that the priests had been there to talk, and they had said that I was a Marxist. Which I never was, right. I mean, I was a socialist, but I never believed in totalitarian regimes or anything like that, that the word "Marxist" suggested, right? That if you're a Marxist, you believe in totalitarian communism, but I did not believe that. I didn't espouse it. I was a socialist. I've always been a socialist, I think. Anyway, so they canceled the project and my studio burns down, and so we are devastated, my family.

[02:20:06]

JEANNE TANGUMA: If I could add, because I was an activist during the '70s, and many of us, that's what they would do. Whatever we were opposing or didn't like us or didn't—wanted to attack us, they would red-bait us and do this—call us a communist or whatever so that they didn't have to deal with the issues for the community that we were espousing. And so this was within—I'm putting it in context because this was very typical of the times. If you didn't like an activist and you were, you know, a white supremacist or a Klan member, you would call them a communist. And so that was a way that they attacked Leo.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, it's interesting that it was priests. They must have said it was somehow religious—

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —too.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: That feeling in Catholicism, I think, in those days especially, were very anti-struggle. Those days actually in Latin America, there began that movement of liberation theology.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: I think we had—at McAshan, I had met a priest, along with some other people that came to see my murals, who was from South America and told me all about liberation theology, how they believed that Christianity should be at the service of the oppressed and that

the Bible teaches you that. And of course I agreed. I had always believed similar ideas in my mind.

But anyway, so here's somebody who put it to work and canceled out my murals, somebody burned my studio, which—and I remembered somebody having told me, a very wealthy man, he told me once, because I did not want to take a piece to his house for the mayor to see, he had told me—when I said, "No, I can't do that, you know," he said, "You motherfucker, I'll see to it that you never paint a mural in Houston again." It's funny because the studio is burned within months after that. So I've had these suspicions. I don't know if I'm that important for anybody to do that, to try to stop me from painting, but that's what happened. So—

JEANNE TANGUMA: So the fire department said it arson? Or—

LEO TANGUMA: No, I'm the one that said it's arson.

JEANNE TANGUMA: You?

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was the official reason? Was there an investigation?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, there was, it was called accidental, right? I don't know what they mean what happened.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Where did it start?

LEO TANGUMA: It's so funny, but the fire started under my studio. See, my—I was in the second floor, right? See, there's the stairs that go up to the second floor, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But before you start the stairs, there's an open area for the ceiling, so the fire started on the ceiling under the studio.

JEANNE TANGUMA: And what was on top of that?

LEO TANGUMA: On top of my studio?

JEANNE TANGUMA: No, where the fire started.

LEO TANGUMA: We never knew what was there. It just started—

JEANNE TANGUMA: I thought you had told me there was a lot of flammable things. I don't know whether it was—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, in the studio, there was—in my studio, I—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Right above it.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. Because there's a wall that we had hoped to paint on Washington Avenue had a series of metal, like, little flaps. And for that, I had to use enamel paints. And for the enamel paints, I needed to have thinners, you know, to wash brushes with and so on. And somebody knew that that's where I had my enamel paints, thinners, and so on, because I had already gotten paints for that mural, right? There had been donated paints, some I had bought, so I had my flammable materials right where the fire started. So my studio went, you know. That was one part, then I had a larger, like a larger—two rooms practically, with my drawing tables, compressors, paints, other paints, and desks, and so on. I had a slight collection of Mexican art, prehistoric art in slides. All that went. All, everything. It was a total destruction.

[02:24:56]

And there's one last story about that. I took my kids and my wife up. We drove up to the parking lot, and I said, "Come on, I want to show you!" Because I had seen already, I had been up there along the hallway that still was there, and all that the fire had destroyed. So my wife says, "I'm not going up there." So later on, I had a dream—I'm still in shock about what has happened, right? But I had a dream that I remember pretty well, because I'm taking a white woman, like in a white outfit, blonde woman, and telling this woman all about what we're we seeing, all the

blackness that I had seen before, right? But in my dream, I was showing this woman.

Okay, and then the years passed and I'm painting in Denver. I'm painting a mural at the far end of this community hall, and by now, [laughs] I've met Jeanne. And so I'm painting and then we were going to meet for lunch, right? So she comes in the entrance, which is at the opposite end of where I'm painting, and here she comes in a real light gray suit, blonde at the time, and I said, "Oh, my God, that's the dream."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. [They laugh.] That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: And so that's what happened. That's how I married this woman, a radical, really radical I'm telling you. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: And then the fire—is the fire what—that was kind of—you moved to Denver after the fire, right? Is that right?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, no, no, not right away.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, no?

LEO TANGUMA: A few years after that—let me see, what did I do?

JEANNE TANGUMA: He moved to Denver in 1983, so the fire was in 1985, so—

LEO TANGUMA: No, it was 19—

JOSH T. FRANCO: —'75.

JEANNE TANGUMA: 1975. I said the wrong thing.

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Sorry.

LEO TANGUMA: But what happened is that I moved to Denver—no, wait, before we left Houston, I did a mural at Cuney Homes. It's the housing project in Houston's Third Ward, an African-American community. Again I was invited to a mural. So they called me in [laughs]—no, no, first, this lady from Cuney Homes comes to my home in Denver Harbor, and this is 1980, and she says they would like for me to do a mural with kids, with teenagers in Cuney Homes. And I didn't know much about Cuney Homes. I knew it was very close to Texas Southern University, where I had been a student. And so across Texas Southern is this enormous housing project called Cuney Homes. So that lady came and told me that they would like for me to paint a mural at Cuney Homes.

When they had called that this lady, Mrs. Newman, was going to come and talk to me about Cuney Homes and to do a mural—no, to be part of their art project that they had with kids—I didn't think they wanted me to do a mural at first. I thought that they wanted me to help them with designing a program or something. But when she came, she said they wanted me to do a mural. And that was real strange because in Houston, we had had the experience of having the Chicanos and the Blacks not very well supportive of each other, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Cell phone rings.] Oh, my God! I'm so sorry.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's okay.

LEO TANGUMA: Can you hear me?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: I didn't know it would do that.

LEO TANGUMA: [Laughs.] Okay. Anyway, so I designed the mural, and they liked it so much. So I showed them. It was a design for an eight-by-12 mural. So it wasn't a very big mural, but the design was kind of neat, and they liked my design [laughs] so much, and they asked me at the meeting, when I met to show them my design, they looked at my design and they said—

somebody said, "How is it that you, not being Black, can design something that says so much about the Black experience?" I said, "I don't know," you know. I don't remember what else I said, but they were really pleased with me. But [laughs] I had to paint with kids, you know. And they want me to paint with 17 kids, man, for a mural that's only eight feet by 12 feet. I can't do that, you know.

JEANNE TANGUMA: What's the title of the mural?

LEO TANGUMA: I called it—at the time, I called it *Free At Last?* Question mark. Because—let me just—

[02:30:06]

JEANNE TANGUMA: I'm sorry.

LEO TANGUMA: —explain it. So what I did is, we had extra plywood. It was built on a plywood panel, but anyway, I had a lot extra pieces of wood and other panels. But I let the kids paint different things because I cannot have 17 kids with me on a panel, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So anyway, we build the panel, the kids did help me build the panel. I used power tools and everything, the drills. And before that, the projects manager was worried about the kids using power tools, right? But I told her that I had done it before and probably the kids will be okay, so they did, they used the circular saw, the drills, everything. We did a real good job, then we textured it, and the director there was surprised at how well the kids had done. But one other thing is that those kids had never been told or allowed to use tools or to build things, right. Here, we built a panel, a large panel it seemed to them, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: A big old panel, then we textured it, primed it, and began to draw it. I let a lot of the kids or some of the kids do some drawings from the master drawing on the panel itself, although I did a lot of corrections, but they felt good, right, being trusted to do something.

So finally, we began to paint, and the whole community was so pleased, man. I treasure those times, you know, when people are moved by something I've painted or tried to paint, but they were real happy, yeah. My—

JEANNE TANGUMA: What was the mural about?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, my design was a young man that is brought before a mirror. And so it's an elderly woman that's rising from the ground to show this young man a mirror. And we can see the reflection of the mirror, it's him that's looking at himself in the mirror. He's a young Black guy, a handsome young Black guy. On one side, there was somebody pulling this ugly, stereotypical racist mask off of him. That's a kid from neighborhood named John Broussard. Now, the other person in between the mirror and the young man is Rosa Parks, and she's like pointing at him like saying something like, "This is the real you, not that mask," right? So in telling that story over and over, you know, like you had to explain it like once a day sometimes to people from the neighborhood, right, from the projects, until it became such a presence, right in the midst. Now, by this time, my wife—

JEANNE TANGUMA: If I could interject? Cuney Homes, if you remember, is where George Floyd grew up and his family in Houston. It's the housing project that they lived in. And when we think of 1980 and look at George Floyd's age, he probably was about six years old, we estimate. So he probably was running around with many of the kids, and maybe some of his family were involved, we don't know particularly. But because of the tragedy of George Floyd's murder, it even makes the mural stand out even more at this time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, they mentioned that, three times they mentioned Cuney Homes, where—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Right. Where the family—and some of them still live there. I think they've mentioned them in press conferences.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, that's interesting because we also interviewed Cadex Herrera, who was the muralist of the George Floyd mural in Minneapolis.

LEO TANGUMA: Really?! Wow.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Wonderful!

JOSH T. FRANCO: So that's a very nice connection.

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: So we had that mural that we did. It was such an experience again for me. So what I began to do—because I wanted to take the kids places, like to go fishing or to go crabbing, we would go to La Porte, which is not far from Houston, or Galveston.

But one day, we went through Pasadena—well, that's the way we normally would go, or I would go, but this time I've got about 10 kids in the van with me. We're going, and then on the left, there's a big white building that has got a sign across the whole length of it: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. That was so, so blatant in those days, right? The Klan was so secure in itself. Like they are now, I think.

[02:35:05]

But anyway, so my kids, you know, I don't know if they knew what it was, but they got frightened. More so because I drove into the parking lot with 15 kids, Black kids. But I used it to tell them a bit of history that I was familiar with about the Klan and the South, the oppression of Black people. And I told them, "You see, people have struggled so much to make things better for you, for us. You kids should be conscious of this. There's people that hate you, like these people here, the Klan, KKK." So anyway, so we took off, and the kids were kind of—you know, like, they felt that, I could feel it, you know. So we went crabbing that day. We brought some five-gallon buckets with crabs, and the moms cooked them, and it was so funny.

I took them in another time through another park to La Porte, so the kids—it's about 10 o'clock already, we were going a little late in the day. But anyway, so it's hot, and so we went and stopped to get some pop or ice cream or something. And so we saw Dairy Queen, and we stopped at Dairy Queen. So I walked in with all these kids again, and all the whites there left right way, like in a panic, you know, real silly. They all left like in a huff, you know. So the kids again felt that. Anyway, so I told them again, within the van, right, I tell them a little bit more about what I'm familiar with, about Black history, and to be proud of who you are, you know you're a human being, you have a right to life. And so we're driving away, and I heard somebody says, "Hey, I'm Black and I'm proud!" You know? I heard that. Some kid had heard that somewhere I think, but then some of the other ones began to say the same thing. And I drove off happily this time because the kids were rejecting, I think, what had just happened by those folks there. So we went crabbing again. [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: We came back with the buckets. It's so funny. They loved to crab, you know. So did I. We lived near a creek back in Baytown, my family, you know. But anyways, the kids were so happy. One time—a couple of times actually, they took me to meet their folks inside the little apartments. And the places that I went, I think it was this way everywhere, but had no air conditioner. It was hot and stifling in there, but, you know, they made me Kool-Aid and cookies. They gave me Kool-Aid and cookies. So I was getting to know folks.

One time—my wife now has cancer, okay, and it's advanced by now. So I had a phone call from a nurse or a doctor about my wife's condition, and I was beginning to give up, you know. I was trying not to show my wife that. But anyway, that day, at Cuney Homes, I get the phone call, and I talked to them and then I put the phone down. And somebody sees me from the door, right? One of the kids, I mean, sees me angry, so we go and sit down, and I think we're having a pop. And the kids were wondering what's happening, and one of them says, "Mister Leo"—they used to call me Mister Leo, right? So he [laughs] says, "Mister Leo, is there somebody you would like for us to waste?" And, you know, real humble like that. I said, "No, what's wrong with you? [They laugh.] I don't want to waste anybody, you know, I don't want to kill somebody, what's the matter with you guys? I've been talking to you about Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi,

[laughs] and then you want to waste somebody?" It was so funny. [They laugh.] "No, I don't want you to waste anybody for me." And then I told them, "My wife is real ill, and it's terminal now, so you know, I know she's not going to survive this, you know?" And then the next couple of days, the kids were sad.

It's so funny, you know, but—so anyway, so—oh, we did another mural outdoors, kind of not a very nice mural. Actually, the kids did most of the painting on the other mural because I wanted them to have something, you know, besides the indoor mural.

JEANNE TANGUMA: This is at Cuney Homes?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, also, and that mural is still there actually, the one they—oh, they're both still there.

[02:40:00]

You saw the one at the main office. Now they have a new center at Cuney Homes. So as you walk in the door, and there's this mural by a Mexican, [laughs] right, in the Black neighborhood, but they loved it. But—

JEANNE TANGUMA: They all wanted pictures of Leo next to the mural.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: This was in 20—

LEO TANGUMA: Eighteen.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —18. They all—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JEANNE TANGUMA: They were so excited that Leo was there. They loved the mural. We had to take so many pictures with Leo and them and the mural.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's cool, that's great.

JEANNE TANGUMA: It was very special.

LEO TANGUMA: So we did a second mural outdoors by the main street that goes by there, right? So people go back and forth, walking to school or wherever they're going. But anyway, we had a lot of passersby on the second mural. So we have some scaffolds because we're painting like images that are about 19 feet from the ground or so. So my kids were on the scaffolds, and I'm just directing them. They're painting and I'm just not doing much. But when there's girl, a teenage girl coming by, they would want to run down and tell them about the mural. And I heard them a couple of times say, "You want me to tell you about our mural?" Our mural, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And the girls would say, you know, "Yes, I guess."

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: And so they would tell them about our mural. [They laugh.] It's so funny, you know. So I'm just watching all these things, you know.

And one time—well, a number of times, I took them downtown, some of them downtown, especially the younger ones. One time, I took two kids with me: one of my workers, 14 years old, and his little brother. No, it was three kids: his little brother and another kid, younger, all of them like 7 or 8, maybe 10 years old, and the older one. So I was going to take them to Woolworths, right, to get ice cream or something, but somebody says, "Let's ride the elevators!" You know, in the big buildings. "Ah, that's a good idea," you know. So we got on, and the elevators went up and down, and then we went to another building, the same thing. And then on one of those, we got on the elevator, and then this real pretty, black-haired, real attractive young lady gets on the elevator with us, right? And so the kids are now all shy, [laughs] you know, acting up like—

anyway, they didn't want her to see them seeing her, you know, I guess. But this beautiful girl, when she got off, she turned back and blew them a kiss. [They laugh.] And that drove those kids mad. "She blew me the kiss!" "No, me!"

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's funny.

LEO TANGUMA: [Laughs.] So, yeah, anyway, so those experiences with those kids were magical sometimes. You know, anyway, so—

JEANNE TANGUMA: So, Leo, you said the children talked about the mural as their mural.

LEO TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEANNE TANGUMA: So I just wanted to point out that many times, you've worked in schools or various places or the Cuney Homes, where the children learned about the history and the people in the mural, and they help with it. They help build it, they help paint it, and it becomes a part of them. And when somebody comes to see the mural, they can explain it just like you do, and it becomes a part of them. And in the case of the Cuney Homes mural, it especially gives the idea of Black is Beautiful, which we fought so hard for in the various movements, civil rights movements that I was involved in. Or, you know, in that one, it was about Black Americans, African Americans, so it was Black is Beautiful, and so they internalized. While they were learning about art and painting and learning about tools, they internalized this idea, and could talk about the mural.

So the whole mural process is really an important learning experience for those children involved and gives them a sense of pride in themselves and culture. Just like the mural on Canal Street, which is all brown people. It's a whole block of brown people. Now, where do you see a mural in the United States that is a whole block of people of color? And so, as an example of what I'm talking about, it gave people in the neighborhood tremendous pride. It wasn't a Van Gogh of him and a white person—I love Van Gogh—but, you know, it was a whole block of brown people and then the culture and the history, something to be proud of.

[02:45:07]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEANNE TANGUMA: So murals are such a good educational experience for those who work on it and then they can educate the community. I just wanted to add that. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's great. That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: Well, yeah, that experience, it's not like I planned it that way. I never thought, "I'm going to tell these kids something that is going to make them"—you know, not like that—I don't know—

JEANNE TANGUMA: It just came from your heart. I understand it.

LEO TANGUMA: It was just like—I was real naïve. One time, one of the kids—I had kids from 17 to, I don't know how young, but supposed to be like 14, but I think there were some younger ones painting with me. But one kid told me, "You Mexicans haven't had it so bad like Black folks." And I don't know what struck me, I said, "Are you kidding?" [They laugh.]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, really?! [They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, it doesn't really do any good to keep score that way anyway.

JEANNE TANGUMA: No.

LEO TANGUMA: I don't believe so. So I told them stories, back in Beeville, you know. And so I used to make them laugh, you know, telling them sad stories about us Mexicans. "You ought to—I could tell you stories, and I could make you cry." You know, I was kidding with them. They were always kidding and laughing also. And I think they liked to see a Mexican with them, you know. Actually one of the kids told me, "I was walking down the street, and this carload of Mexicans told me, 'You nigger, you're so Black, we can't see you in the dark.'" So they had said that to him, and he told me that in front of a bunch of other Black kids there. And so I was really—I had to tell him, "You know, I don't know, man. I think the system does that to us to make us be angry at each other and make us see each other in a bad light," whatever.

But I had the opportunity to talk to kids and without even thinking or planning it. It was like a conversation, you know, in the kids. "When I was a kid," I told them, "we lived in a Black community and Chicano community in Beeville." There was a Black family that lived across the street from us and a Black family to the other side. But the Black family in front of us had a boy named Leroy. And Leroy—I think there were his grandparents and, I don't know, there were two or three Black grandparents there, and sometimes my grandfather stayed with us in—I don't know if I mentioned, but in my family we were almost all the family Protestant. So my grandfather would come over and then have coffee. And we had coffee. Actually in those days, the kids drank coffee, you know, so we drank coffee with them, Leroy and him, and we would be sitting there listening to them. They were singing hymns! In English, of course, but my grandfather gets there and says, "Oh, I know that one in Spanish." In his bad English, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: "*Oh, sí, yo lo sé en español, hombre!*" And so, "Well, sing it!" And so my grandfather would sing a little hymn. "Oh, that's nice!" So we listened to all these things, Leroy and me.

And so I told my kids at Cuney Homes how I had, you know, grown up like that, and so they were really curious about my community. And they tell me about some of their problems sometimes.

But anyway, so that was Cuney Homes. I wanted to make sure that I told you about that place.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And that's the early 1980s, right?

LEO TANGUMA: That's 1980, 1981.

So anyway, later on the following year, I began—actually, the following year, Dr. Biggers at Texas Southern, who had been my professor at Texas Southern, who was a wonderful mural painter and professor—so he called me and says, "Tanguma, I want you to come over here, I want to talk to you about something." [Laughs.] So I went there, and he said, "Last night, I was at a board meeting of the Houston Council on the Arts and Humanities, and they put forth a resolution that should Leo Tanguma apply for any funding in the Arts Council, he would not receive any, any such fund from the Arts Council." And he said, "Now, I want to challenge that decision, whatever, and I would like for you to submit an application to the Arts Council for a project. We're going to test this," he said.

[02:50:13]

He said, "Do you have anything planned, or any idea?" I said, "Why, you know what, I have an architectural model in my car of something I would like to paint. Can I show it to you?" So I went to the car and brought these models about this wide, you know, and it's real, I don't know, dynamic I think. And when I showed him that, Dr. Biggers was so amazed and pleased. He said, "Wow!" He said, "This is what you have to do, right?" So I drew out some more sketches of the actual images to go inside my forms.

So I applied for a grant, and I applied for a grant for \$17,500, which in those days was a lot of money, right? So Dr. Biggers was so pleased, so I applied, and I got exactly that: \$17,500. Because they were afraid not to fund me, because they knew that I had a friend in the Arts Council, Dr. Biggers.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: And so they gave me the whole thing, man. So I constructed that with a little help from some people—not too many helped, actually—because I was in a church, in an Anglo Methodist church. Not in the community, not in the Chicano community. So anyway, I constructed these panels, and some people knew about it who would come by and it was—

JEANNE TANGUMA: What was the theme of the mural?

LEO TANGUMA: I called it *Humanity in Harmony with Nature*. So I had two wings about 50-feet wide, each of them, and then a 31-tall by about 40-feet—no, not—maybe like 25-by-30-feet-tall panel. So the panel sits like three-quarters of a diamond, right? You see diamonds together here, then one diamond here, but there's one missing. So I suggested that that will be the beak or the head of a bird with its wings widespread, about to take off in flight. The reason for that, as I explained it, was that our consciousness was about to rise up like an enormous, beautiful bird

with his wings outspread, which is suggesting our appreciating of the environment, like our consciousness is taking off in flight. In the center, I painted three people: an African American, Mexican American, and Anglo. Together they're coming to plant a little seedling into the soil. And behind them—it's a very happy scene in the middle, okay, in the center part of the head of the bird, but on the wings, I showed the destruction of the environment. And I painted not only the destruction of our physical environment, but I tried to show the destruction of our moral environment.

And so this, too, were things that I know were a little strange for people—for some people. Because where I was painting the mural was an enormous meeting hall at the church, Bering Memorial United Methodist Church, so I was really lucky to have the space, but our meetings took place in there. And one of the regular groups that met there was the Sierra Club. And never once did they talk to me or did they ask me about the murals. Sometimes I was painting while the meetings are going on. They felt, like, alienated from a Chicano that's, I think, painting about their subject, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LEO TANGUMA: But in any case, so the mural I think is one of my best murals. But I'll tell you what happened.

JEANNE TANGUMA: But you mentioned the shape, so was this a sculptural mural?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, that's what I call sculptural mural. In those days, I was—I had met Siqueiros some years earlier, and he had completed or was still working on what he called *The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos*. That's what he called it, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, I'm sorry, can I pause for one minute? I need to run to the restroom. I'll be one minute.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, sure.

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'll be right back. [Laughs.]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Of course.

[Side conversation; not transcribed.] [02:54:52] - [02:57:17]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

LEO TANGUMA: Well, I was going to say that that mural, I called sculptural mural because of the shapes that I tried to use. But the idea originally came because of a discussion I had with Siqueiros when he tells me, "You Chicanos ought to do what we did." And he was talking about what he called the fourth stage of Mexican muralism. I don't know if there had been a third stage, but anyway, in his mind, what he was doing was the fourth stage of Mexican muralism. And that meant the incorporation of sculpture, relief into the murals that you do, right?

And he said—in conjunction with the architects and so on, in an architectural building, right? And so he told me, "You ought to be doing that." I told him, "Maestro, we don't have any funds. We can't get funds to do simple murals. How are we going to do"—what he called—"*sculpto-pintura*?" He said, "*Ah, tienes razón*," you know? Because what he did cost a lot of money. I know that when he painted el Polyforum—you remember that?—the big auditorium with the big vaults in the outdoors and the indoors completely painted with murals—that cost millions, right, to do that, that whole auditorium that they called Polyforum Siqueiros. So I told him, "We can't do those things. Simply, we cannot do that, or at least not Chicanos that I know."

But anyway, so when I came home, that—what had happened? I know that they had painted over my mural at the University of Houston. But I was thinking how in the world could I do—I can't do *sculpto-pintura*, but I thought, I can do a structure that can be moved anywhere I want, and it won't be covered over, right? Thus, one reason that I did the one on the environment, thinking that it could be placed in a park but moved if you had to, right.

But anyway, so I painted that, and I was painting it when—and my wife's very ill in those days, okay, still very ill. So let me see, what happened the next? Oh, yeah—

JEANNE TANGUMA: About the funding.

LEO TANGUMA: So they canceled the mural. The Houston Council cancels the mural.

[03:00:04]

I remember I went to the Arts Council meeting. Dr. Biggers is no longer there. I think that's why they felt unafraid to cancel me, right, because they had never liked me anyway. And I never liked them either [laughs] actually. But anyway, so they canceled the mural, and I went up there to the Arts Council to appeal to them to release my funds, you know. And then at one point, I said, "You know, it's real difficult for me and my family right now because my wife is terminally ill, and I need my funds," you know? I'm appealing to their humanity, I think. And then what I did is—they didn't listen to me, right? So I thought, What can I do?

But there was a new member of the Arts Council, a guy named Ed Blair, and he was an art teacher in a high school, right? So they had incorporated an African American into the council, but not a progressive one like Dr. Biggers was. Anyway, I wanted to appeal to somebody. We were pretty desperate, man, in those days. So I went to see Ed Blair at the high school, and I told him what had happened and so on. He said, "Okay, well, you come to the next meeting," and so on. So I went to the meeting with Ed knowing that I had a friend there or thinking I had a friend in the Arts Council. So I entered the room, right, and Ed Blair stands up and wants to introduce me, you know, like real fancy. But then he says, "Leo says his wife is dying," you know, like that. Just like that, man. "And so he wants us to release his funds because his wife is dying." You know, real cynical. And of course, they did not give me my funds. They did not believe me.

What happened later, I was at an art gallery somewhere, and one of the board members named Robinson, he came from behind me and puts his hand like this on me, and he said, "So, Leo, is your wife much recovered?" Just like that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Awful.

JEANNE TANGUMA: No empathy.

LEO TANGUMA: I said, "My wife died." He said, "Oh! I didn't know, Leo." So he thought that I had been lying like all the other board members had thought I had been lying. So now he finds out that I was not lying, and so he's real surprised, and I walk away.

But at the same time that I'm doing that, I started to do a mural on police brutality in Houston, and this was, I think, a very exciting mural, a sculptural mural. Because in Houston, there had been a number of instances. Like one Chicano guy named Ramirez, beaten to death, I think—yeah, I think beaten to death. And a white kid that had been caught and also nearly beaten to death, right? And then of course, the case of Joe Campos Torres, who was a Vietnam War veteran that was on Harrisburg Avenue in a bar, being noisy and raising hell. So they called the cops on him, and the police come, pick him up. Three policemen, okay? I don't know how many cars they had, but three policemen, and they took him to a secluded spot near the downtown area actually, and beat him half to death, right? But they were joined by another three policemen, so there's six policemen beating up this young man. And so they take him to the jail, and the jailer said, "You have to take him to the hospital! This man is hurt." So they took him to the—I mean, they didn't take him to the hospital. They took him back to that same secluded spot, and they beat him some more. I don't know how much more they could have beat him, but they beat him more, and then they dumped him into the bayou like 20 feet below from that area. And he drowns, of course. People say that he was still handcuffed when they threw him, but I don't know, I don't think so. So anyway, they find his body and then there are protests in the community. And finally, they police were brought to trial by a state judge.

[03:05:02]

And the state judge finds them guilty, or the jury finds them guilty, finds the police guilty, and he sentenced them to one year in prison. Of course, they never served not even that year, but the community is again in a rage, you know. So they are the same three policemen or—not the six policemen—not the six, but just those three initial ones, I think—but now they are tried by a federal judge. And the federal judge finds them guilty also, and he sentenced them to one year and one day in jail to be served concurrently, which means that they had to serve one extra day in jail because the one-year sentence will be served along with the state sentence at the same time, right?

So that's what I was feeling in 1982, you know, when I began this mural. It was going to be a sculptural mural on police brutality in Houston. It was real poignant, I think, to put it mildly. And what I showed is a policeman growling almost, over a Chicano that's laid down, bloody, and he's got a gun in his hand or a baton.

JEANNE TANGUMA: A baton.

LEO TANGUMA: Baton. And he's looking straight at the viewer, man, this guy is looking at you. So that's just part of the mural. And so I had it in sections around this community center called Aztlan Center in the near east side of Houston. Now, my wife is also, you know, getting pretty bad, and she passed away April 11, 1983. So in the months prior to that, I had not been going to the murals, neither mural on the environment nor the one on police brutality, as much as I should have, because my wife needed me.

So I went—after the funeral, I went to work on my mural on police brutality, and it was not there. You know, all the panels that I had around in a certain part of the buildings were not there. So I asked what had happened, "Where are my murals?" And this lady named Zapata said, "Maybe the police took them, Leo." And so that was a possibility because, you know, they were really directly accusing the Denver Police Department of being—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Houston.

LEO TANGUMA: —brutal—I mean, Houston. So I kind of believed that for many, many years. And later on, one time, I had already been in Denver for a while, I had already met my wife, we were married. And went to this gathering where I—it was the SEIU union meeting, right? So one of the people attending there had been a board member of the Aztlan community center where my mural had been disappeared, and he told me that the board of directors had gotten rid of the mural, or some members of the board of directors had gotten rid of the mural. So it had not been the police department nor racists nor white supremacists but my own community, some of my own community. So that was like the last straw for me in Denver—I mean, in Houston.

JEANNE TANGUMA: And why do you think they did that, the people at the Aztlan center?

LEO TANGUMA: I think they did it because they were beginning to feel pressure from the establishment again, like they had done at the University of Houston years earlier. And I was real vulnerable. I think I might have said that: I work by myself. I drew people sometimes into the projects I was doing, but I didn't have any defense, you know, and they knew it. Because I wasn't in Houston that much because I drive to Houston to paint on my murals. I would go to the hospital first to see my wife and then I would drive to Houston to paint either—

JEANNE TANGUMA: From Baytown?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, I would drive from Baytown to Galveston where my wife was in the hospital, then I would drive to Houston to paint, and I would drive back to Baytown in the evening, and then go to the hospital in the morning, sometimes even staying overnight at the hospital. And these were recurrent visits to the hospital with my wife. So I wasn't seeing too many people in Denver. They didn't even know that I was still—

[03:10:03]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Houston.

LEO TANGUMA: In Houston. Because I was in Houston painting, and I would leave and go back and forth: Baytown, Galveston, and Houston. So they didn't see me with much support, I guess. I was alone painting and going away, painting and going away. And so after the cancelation of the mural on the environment and the disappearance of my mural on police brutality and the death of my wife, I just couldn't stay in Houston anymore, so that's when we—my kids and I came to Denver.

So you want to stop there until tomorrow?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I'm going to—and tomorrow, I want to start with Siqueiros and hear that story and then we can talk about Denver.

LEO TANGUMA: That's right. Okay.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Also, yeah, you should talk a little—did you talk enough about *Rebirth*? I

guess you did. Okay. And then later—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, that's why we do this in two days, so that on the next day, we can—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Because things will occur to you tonight, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah, and also the—I guess I was thinking the recreation of *Rebirth* comes later, and there's things to say about how that happened—

LEO TANGUMA: Absolutely.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Great!

LEO TANGUMA: Thank you. Thank you for listening to me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you. I mean, you know, this is very—well, I'll stop recording and then we can debrief for a second.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. Oh, wait, I don't want to end. Stop recording.

[END OF TRACK tangum21_1of 2_digaud_r.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Hey, this is Josh T. Franco in my office at the Archives of American Art in Washington, DC, and I am interviewing, via Zoom, Leo Tanguma, who is with Jeanne Tanguma at their home in Arvada, Colorado—I almost said California—and it is April 23, 2021.

So, Leo, it was great talking yesterday. We covered a lot, all of early Texas into the early '80s, and the next thing is to enter Denver. But before we do that, I do want to go back a little bit and talk about your experience with David Alfaro Siqueiros and your time in Mexico. So can you tell us when that was and then tell us about it?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, this is—what is it?—1972 and then '73, both—I went twice. In any case, I had wanted to meet Siqueiros like many other Chicano artists in those years of the Chicano Movement beginning in the mid-'60s and then through the early '70s. A lot of Chicanos had become aware of Siqueiros and really admired him more than the other great Mexican artists. But I had no way to contact him, I had no idea.

One night, a number of actors from the Mascarones group, a political theatrical group, were staying at my home. Like, I don't know how many men, it must have been like 10 or 12. And so they're all sleeping on my living floor, which was in those days a large living room. And so after the kids had gone to sleep, I was talking to the director of the group, and I asked him, "Do you have any way that—any connections that I could meet Siqueiros?" And the man says, "That's his grandson sleeping right there." So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow!

LEO TANGUMA: —God, I wanted to wake up that kid. [Laughs.] But anyway in the morning, I asked him, will he take me to his see his grandpa? And he said, "Sure, he's in Cuernavaca, but I'll take you," you know. So within a couple of weeks, I had saved money to pay for the airfare and then to go visit Siqueiros. So that young man must have been 19 or 20, you know. So anyway, it was exciting to meet the kid and the other actors.

So we went to Cuernavaca by taxi, which I don't know how far that is from Mexico City. It must be like 30, 40 miles. But anyway, so when we arrived at the complex, it was a large studio with a large fence around it and a home also where he lived at times. And so we looked over, and there's Siqueiros [laughs] looking over the fence like that, "Hey, Martín!" You know, his grandson. So we went in there, and he was real pleasant with me. I have been told that he used to be real uppity, you know, with people catering to him in all ways, but I didn't see that at all. He had an assistant there, a French assistant, and he was real real friendly and just walking

around, just—he took me on a tour of his studio, which was a large, like a tall warehouse, with panels on rollers that could go to the sides all around the place, that large kind of like warehouse.

And so he explained to me what he was painting at that moment, which was a continuation, he said, of the *March of Humanity* that he had painted at the Polyforum in Mexico City. So anyway, so it was a continuation, he said, of that idea of humanity marching on, on Earth and towards the cosmos, he called it. So it was such a pleasant time with him.

So after seeing what he was painting and looking at his studio and his compressors and buckets of paint and just a fantastic array of equipment of a master, so I was really impressed with the man—but shortly thereafter, he said, "Well, let's go inside and talk," right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So we went inside and just talked, I don't know, for a long time. And then I told him I would like to interview him for a newspaper in Houston. It was a community newspaper, but anyway, it was going to be a big issue for the paper, you know, to have an interview with the master. So before the interview, he talked to me about all kinds of matters of the Mexican mural renaissance and how he had been with a small group at the Academy of San Carlos in 1911. And how they were organizing against the use of classical teaching methods at the university and that they wanted—that the students wanted outdoor sessions. And they also asked for free food. [They laugh.]

[00:05:30]

But also, he said, "What really caused a great"—like, he said—"a great guffaw in the country was that they demanded the nationalization of the railroads." And here, these were just young students at the academy. But anyway, he went on saying how they protested and they were on the streets and so on. Then he mentioned that some of the students in his group you know, were captured by the police and were never seen again. His little friends, right? He was only 15 at the time.

But anyway, he said that later on when the revolution really came on in force, some of them scattered around to join different armies of the revolution. There were some that were with Miguel Dieguez, I think he said, a division in the north, and that he went to join them, and other art students went out to other groups. I'm not sure if Zapata was very active in those initial days of the revolution. This is 1911, he said. But in any case, he joined the M. Dieguez division of the north, I think he called it. And so he was active in the fighting and so on. And then he said that during one of those charges, he fell off the horse and he broke his left hand, I think it was, and he showed us his hand, which was a little deformed.

But anyway, so he talked about the revolution and then how when they came back, they had been transformed, Mexican artists had been transformed into another kind of being. What is that? He said that, "What could they paint?" now that they had been in such a different world of violence and fighting, and that they began to talk about what to do, and they admired a professor that was named Murillo Atl, but his name was Gerardo Murillo. So they admired that man, and that man spoke about Mexican artists doing public art, right, murals. And so, let me see now, what happened here exactly?

Well, actually, let me go back a little bit. He said that before the revolution, there had been an exhibit of Spanish art to commemorate Mexico's bicentennial or centennial of the Mexican fight for independence led by Hidalgo. So he said that at that time, the artists began to question what's wrong with our culture that we cannot exhibit our own art, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So they went on with those feelings, so when they came back from the revolution, they had those ideas in mind that they could no longer paint easel works. I don't know if that's an exaggeration, but I'm sure everybody painted easel works, right?

But at least some of them began to paint murals, and they painted initially at the Academy of San Carlos. I found this out later, and I'm not sure in what order he told me, but he talked about—he and another artists began to paint murals, and he did mention the Academy of San Carlos where they began their first murals after the revolution. He mentioned Rivera coming back from Europe. Orozco had also been part of the fight and the revolution, but not an active participant,

he said, in the revolution.

[00:09:50]

Oh, and he told me how in those days, Tamayo was also an up-and-coming artist. And he painted, he said, figuratively, Tamayo did, initially. But in any case, he said that he and Tamayo had a fight at the—a fistfight at the museum of fine arts—I mean at the institute of fine arts, whatever you call it, el Palacio de Bellas Artes. He said that they were on the top stairs, and they fell down the stairs fighting. Anyway, so after that, he said, "Tamayo was not a good artist, [they laugh] you know, *no vale el vato*." He was so funny.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's funny.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, he went on talking about—and it was like a little magical for me, right, a Chicano artist that I had never been in the place. I had never had great contact with other Chicano artists, very little. But anyway, here I'm talking to the master, and he's revealing to me so much, it was fantastic.

So he noticed that I had my tape recorder. In those days, you know, a heavy old thing. And he kept looking at it, and I said, "*Maestro, lo quiero entrevistar*" and so on. And he said, "*Oh, sí, ¿cómo no?*" [They laugh.] He was ready. But he had already told me so much, I should have recorded all that. Anyway, so we started the interview, and I asked him a number of questions. I had not prepared myself actually, but I asked what I could remember, and he repeated some of what he had just told me. But we went on and on, and finally, I wanted him to comment about Chicanos, what did he think about Chicanos and what we were doing. And he talked a little bit, but he wanted to ask me, like, "But you're a Chicano, why don't you"—he didn't say it in those words but he meant, "You're a Chicano, so what are you doing?"

And I had brought some large photographs of my mural on Canal Street, a gigantic mural, which was just beginning. And I showed him the thing, [laughs] it was so long, a block long, and I said, "Woo, man." And so I told him what we were planning to do and the ideas that some of us had about public art, and that's when he told me that "You ought to do what we did," right, *sculpto-pintura* that he had done at the Polyforum. He had executed his ideas about *sculpto-pintura*, he said, a concept that he had had for many, many years, the fourth stage of Mexican muralism, he called it.

Anyway, so he told me, "You all ought to do this," right? And I told him, "No, no, no, we can't do that, we don't have any funds, you know, for—they don't fund us Chicanos," right? Because they viewed us as a bunch of, I don't know, morons painting on the street, right? We did not have that quality like established artists had, so we were given very little importance. So anyway, I told him that, and he said, oh, he understood.

In any case, I came back to the Houston, so impressed with him but also with Mexican muralism. And so I came back to work on the Canal Street mural again, and now, I'm painting with a lot more energy and enthusiasm than before. Now, I felt that my mural was part of something great happening in the United States. It was—the art, almost a release of pent-up feelings against racism and exploitation that we had endured on my community. And so I knew now that we were part of something happening nationwide among Chicano painters and artists of all kinds, right, but in my case with mural painting. So about a year later—by now the mural—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Can I interrupt just a minute? What did Siqueiros advise you to paint about?

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did he advise you to paint the classic Mexican history or—

LEO TANGUMA: No, he said that we Chicanos didn't have to repeat what the Mexicans had painted. That we ought to paint our issues in the United States, the issues that we're confronted and our culture here. And I had noticed that a lot of the other art that I had seen by Chicano artists featured the pyramids, an Aztec warrior, Zapata, and so on, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But we were beginning to realize that we had our own heroes like Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and the things that had happened in the United States, some of us began to read our own history.

[00:15:01]

One thing that I discovered—I read a book, I forgot the name of the author, but anyway, it's called *Among the Valiant*. And this was about the American and Mexican soldiers in World War II and Korea that had been awarded a number of Medals of Honor, that is the highest recognition in the United States, for heroism and so on in the wars. So I had discovered matters such as that for example about the land grant movements in New Mexico and the Raza Unida Party in South Texas, and those kinds of—and in Colorado, the Crusade for Justice. We were becoming aware of all these matters that are happening all around us, nationwide, right?

So the following year, I organized a trip of nine Chicano artists and myself, 10 of us, to go see Siqueiros again and to—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you remember who the artists were, Leo?

LEO TANGUMA: I do. One of them you may know. Joe Rodriguez went in that group. It was Lupe Aguirre, an ex-con, real real good painter. There was Mariana Molina, who was a student at the University of Houston and had a secret article in their university newspaper every month, I think, that she printed. She stayed anonymous, and it was always in secret. No one knew who this writer was. Anyway, she was really interesting.

JEANNE TANGUMA: A ghostwriter.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah. And let me see who else. Lupe Aguirre. Well, my wife was one of them actually, my wife Ruby. And I'm trying to remember who—oh, yeah, there was a young man, I forget his name, but his brother I had met was an ex-con that had just gotten out of prison. And so this poor guy, this young man, I can't remember his name *pero* let's say Arturo. Oh, there was Benito Reyna, a crazy Chicano artist that let us all down actually because he got arrested for drugs while we're in Mexico City and ruined our trip.

But anyway, before that with Reyna, the 10 of us went to—earlier, in my earlier trip, I had met Fanny Rabel, a woman muralist who had painted with Diego Rivera and Siqueiros as an assistant, so she was really well-respected and known in Mexico City. So when the 10 of us went to her house—I'm not sure if that was her house, but it was a nice nice place, you know. So she had arranged for us to meet a number of Mexican artists, some mural painters like Adolfo Mexiac and one guy named Cenicerros, and so on, and other Mexican artists. But we immediately—all of us Chicanos felt like, out of place, man. That was a wealthy-looking home. And some of the Mexican artists were wearing scarves up here—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: —smoking thin cigarettes, you know, the ladies had miniskirts and talked about the galleries that they showing at. And the poor maid serving us, this poor Indian maid woman just attending to us, and we—I felt real bad.

So somebody in the Mexican group said, "*Nosotros tenemos tanto en común con ustedes,*" you know? But my friend Lupe Aguirre, the ex-con, said, "*Nosotros tenemos más en común con su criada que con ustedes.*" "We have more in common with your maid than with you." Because all of us worked in the street or mainly in the street with community people, and these people are talking bigtime about galleries and so on. And so the Mexicans quieted down a little bit after that. Fanny Rabel tried to connect us more and more because Lupe had put a stone between us, man. You know, between the Mexicans who had seen that they had so much with in common with us. And we almost immediately considered them as being tools of the Mexican elite and so on. So we felt very very bad about that, and they felt worse.

[00:20:02]

And poor Fanny Rabel was trying to tell me, "*Mire usted, en México tener criada es muy común,*" you know? It's just a common thing in Mexico to have maids, you know. I wondered what the maids thought about that, right?

In any case, so we went on with our tour of Mexican murals painted. The first murals painted at the Academy of San Carlos, we were able to see, and we went into other places that had been painted during those years in the 1920s. We saw some of Tamayo's murals that were real figuratively realistic, right, no abstract at all. So I think from that he evolved to something else. We saw paintings by Roberto Montenegro, another early muralist. And other muralists, I forget

their names. But there was—we saw Rivera's painting, and I'm not sure that it was at the Academy, but we saw Siqueiros's mural *The Elements*, and we saw Orozco's paintings. All these are paintings being done, like, in the 1920s, and many of these were sponsored by the Ministry of Education under the direction of José Vasconcelos, a very progressive, you know, wonderful man, as I've read about him. He took Rivera on a tour around Mexico's—among the Indians and so much that—that transformed Rivera, I think. Of course, he kept up with what was happening in the revolution, but he was in Paris all that time. In any case, he became the most prolific artist, right, of all the Mexican muralists.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Vasconcelos is the author of *La raza cósmica*.

LEO TANGUMA: That's right, he is. Yeah, a wonderful, wonderful man. In any case, so we saw the progression of Mexican murals at the Academy of San Carlos, the Ministry of Education—oh, and also Rivera's murals at the Palacio de Gobierno in Mexico City's downtown area. Fantastic monumental works by Rivera. So we followed the murals around Mexico City, the mural sites, so this was an education for me and for the younger artists.

Let me see, what else happened then? Oh, yeah, and during that trip, of course, we went to see Siqueiros, and he was again he was so welcoming and so at ease, you know, with all of us. And he took us on a tour [laughs] of his studio, a gigantic tour, and some of the art students were grabbing things that were—like an old brush, "Can we have this, maestro?" "Sí, ¿cómo no?" [They laugh.] "Take them!" And so they were grabbing little things as mementos, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So [laughs] when we came back, they all had some kind of little item from Siqueiros's studio.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's generous.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, it's so funny. But anyway, again, he told us about the revolution and all that he had done that he had just completed, the Polyforum and so on.

Well, we got back to Mexico City and some of us went to eat at a little restaurant called El Buen Menudo, right next to our hotel. But one of our artists, Benito Reyna, had been in the restaurant a little bit earlier than we had. And we didn't know, but he had been arrested by police in plainclothes for having drugs on him. But what had really happened—well, anyway, so we went to the restaurant, and the manager came out and said that one of our young men in our group had just been arrested for drug possession by anti-narcotics officers.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Was it marijuana?

LEO TANGUMA: It was just marijuana, right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Just marijuana.

LEO TANGUMA: But what had happened is one of the agents that Benito had met the night before, I believe, had told Benito, "Hey, man, hold this, put it away, I don't have any pockets," just like that. And Benito, you know, just puts it in pocket. Then the police turned around and arrest him for drug possession, right? Man, what a—he had been set up so cruelly, you know? And taken away. So then some of us began to look in the jails for Benito, and no one had—no jail admitted that Benito was in there.

[00:25:06]

So after days of looking, you know, we just had to come back. And about a month later, Benito is released from jail. His parents, it just so happened, had friends in the ministry of the interior. And I don't know if the police were a part of that, but the police got arrested, and Benito was released.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, good.

LEO TANGUMA: But when he came back, he told us about being beaten and tortured and just a horrible experience for him.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Why was he targeted in the first place? Did they think he had money? Or—

LEO TANGUMA: Right, they assumed, I guess, that he—maybe in the meetings that he had had before, the night before with those young guys, young policemen, maybe Benito had told them about his family back in Houston and so on. But in any case, I think they wanted \$20,000, right? And of course, that was a whole lot of money, but those young policemen thought that Benito would have that, or his family. In any case, they were put in jail, and Benito was released. So anyway, we came back to the mural on Canal Street.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Can I interject really quickly?

LEO TANGUMA: Alright.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So when I was a student in Mexico City at the Universidad de las Américas in 1966, we went downtown the Academia de San Carlos, and Pete Seeger performed. And it was in a courtyard looking down on Pete with his guitar, and he was singing revolutionary songs. It was very meaningful for me as a student, 18 years old, to see Pete Seeger there and then of course all the artwork. And then during my year in Mexico City, besides learning Spanish and the culture and everything, I was in the park one day with a friend, a boyfriend, and the police arrested us, and they took—this is an example of what you were saying about the police. They took us to, in Chapultepec Park, this building with a dirt floor, put us in separate rooms, and were trying to extort money for nothing. Just because I was fair and an American, they figured I had lots of money. Of course, I was a student on a very little allowance [laughs] to get by each week and so I gave them, you know, five bucks or something, that's all I had, and then after three or four hours they let me out. But I was afraid. I was really afraid what those policemen would do to me as an 18-year-old young woman. So Leo's story about the police setting up this young man, that was—things like that were common for—police wanted *propina*? They wanted—or, no, there's another word.

LEO TANGUMA: *Propina*.

JOSH T. FRANCO: *Plata*?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes—for people, so I just wanted to—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, no, that—I mean, it's a very complicated exchange back and forth, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm curious about that, Leo, visually. So when you came back to the mural on Canal Street, can you point to forms, how you painted that changed because of your exchange with Siqueiros and the muralists?

LEO TANGUMA: I think the basic forms were already drawn, or we were already painting those images. What I had learned about Siqueiros was through books and imagery, but I had that influence already of having the movement, the movement of people inclined, you know, in the direction that they're going, and so that mural on Canal Street has got that element of Siqueiros. But when I came back, I—of course, I continued with that kind of thinking. But I think what that meeting did is it made me more vocal than before, right? I felt more secure in myself. And so I went on with numerous discussions in front of the mural like we had been doing. Also other people working with me had that tendency to talk to spectators that gathered or that passed by. So we were conveying to the community the idea that this art belonged to them, right? And we had gotten that simple idea from Siqueiros. But I know that we worked more with the community than Siqueiros or the other Mexican masters did. I'm saying the masters, right?

[00:30:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: Because many other artists did work in villages and communities. But we had no experience with elevated concepts, philosophical concepts. We were—or at least I had evolved very very simply, you know, with, I guess, a meager education. But Siqueiros did influence all of us, especially me, I think. And let me see, what happened?

After that—it's 1970. After that I designed an idea for the Bicentennial because I thought that this was a time where we could convey social-political ideas on a larger scale in a more central area of the city, right? I felt that we should address not only Mexican-American issues but

American issues and matters, right, political matters. So I designed this sculpture mural for the Bicentennial, and of course, it did not get accepted. At the same time, we were also planning a large mural on the west side of Houston for the Bicentennial. We already had drawings, and we already had the approval of the company, we were waiting for funds. We had some funds already, but in any case, I was planning this mural. With other artists, right?

At that time, we were also doing murals with young people in the parks. We had one special mural done by girls, man, just really a nice, big panel in the park about women's liberation. They were all teenagers, these kids, I mean, that are talking about women's liberation. Anyway, so that one got done. Those girls, they didn't want any help from the males, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: Okay, I don't know what we're going to do, you know. And then they came a little embarrassed, they said, "Could you help us build that billboard?" [They laugh.] It was a giant billboard, man, about 36 feet in width, about eight feet high off the ground, on poles, on creosote poles. "Can we help build the panels?" [Laughs.] So we did, man, we let them help us, you know, but we build the panel, a gigantic panel, and so they painted that.

Meanwhile, back at our mural studio, we're operating out of this bank building, old bank building named the Old Heights Bank Building. And about that time, my studio got burned along with the whole studio and half the building. But I was just so angry when I realized that somebody had set that fire on purpose, under—somebody knew exactly where my paints were. I don't know if I mentioned it yesterday, but part of that wall was—I had metal, like, partitions on a large panel of that wall. So I had gotten enamel paints, and also I had thinners, you know, for brush-cleaning and for mixing and so on, for that particular part of the wall. But the stairwell downstairs was underneath my room up above, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So the fire started under my studio. That's what the fireman said, and of course, you could see it also, after everything had been burned, I looked and looked. And so I suspected that it had been set on purpose. And that was not such an unusual thought, right, because I had had encounters, you know, with police, with the right-wingers actually in VISTA. When I was in VISTA, I had recruited a young man who was a Klansman, and I didn't know it, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: He was just a white kid, you know. So then, of course, the owners of the building on which the mural was going to be painted canceled out, right? I lost everything in that fire, man, everything that I had. Everything. I had some items at home, but everything was there. I had been saving paintings and drawings, and I hoped someday to have a one-man show somewhere. But all that was gone, right. So I retreated back to my home, man. I didn't do much for a couple of years, right?

[00:35:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: I just was really, really devastated, like my wife and kids, right. We didn't have an income anymore. What little we had had, now we didn't have it.

So let me see else, what else did I do in '74, '75?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, we went through most of it, especially Houston, yesterday. I just wanted to get the Mexico part.

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, that's right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So we got to the early 1980s and moving to Colorado.

LEO TANGUMA: We already talked about that, I am so sorry.

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, no, that bridged it perfectly. So now we can skip back to where we ended yesterday to early 1980s.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, yeah, I'm so sorry, I got carried away. You know, it's hard to have a sharp

memory anymore.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's not your job to guide it, it's my job. So you just go, I'll tell you where to go.

LEO TANGUMA: I'm so sorry, yeah. Please, if I repeat myself, please tell me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So let's pick up when you moved to Colorado.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. So we—my kids and I came in August 1984.

JEANNE TANGUMA: '83.

LEO TANGUMA: '83, I'm sorry. Right away, I had been told by Shifra Goldman to contact this woman in Denver named Mary Meadows, who had been a student of hers and wrote about progressive issues in arts, right. So I met Mary and her husband, Bill, and that began a long relationship where she documented the arts in Denver especially by Latino, Chicano, and Black artists. But I think she took a special interest in what I was doing. I think I was doing the more political and social art, and that was part of her own ideas and interests.

But after that, we got settled in, my kids and I. And of course, there was great attention and concern about gang violence in Denver. So I decided I need to do a mural about gang violence, to attract young people to come to the mural, where I would be able to converse with them and to advise them and so on. So I did a movable structural sculptural mural that I called *Caminemos juntos* or *Let Us Walk Together*. And we constructed this and began to paint it at Our Lady of Guadalupe Community Meeting Hall, which is a nice, large area. So I began to paint the mural, I constructed it there and began to paint it with a little help, not much help.

But it was highly visible to community that met at that place, had celebrations, weddings, everything. But also, it began to attract young people, right. I was really pleased with that, right, because that was the exact intention that I had. But then, it also began to attract gang kids. And on two occasions, I had a real interesting experience, right? Here's about six or seven young men coming in at the far end of the meeting hall, I was at the other end, and so these kids come swaggering in there, real cool, you know, talking stuff. And they come up to me, and the mural is big, about 12 feet tall by about 25 feet wide, these forms, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And [laughs] so one kid says, "Say, man, what's up?" [Laughs.] You know, talking to me, an older person, in that fashion, right? I wasn't used to that. So anyway, I explained the mural to them and how it was just such a disaster for ourselves and the community to see ourselves killing each other. And so they began to take interest, man, to pay attention more closely in that. So we talked, and we went around the mural, and I spent, I don't know, more than an hour, at least an hour, talking to them. Then when it was time for them to go, they come by, every one of them shaking my hand, "*Sí, señor*," you know. Now, something about the mural had affected them to the point that they became more respectful, man. And so —"*Muchas gracias, señor*," you know. [Laughs.] They all spoke Spanish, man, they were all *barrio* kids, right. I didn't see any, like, high school kids in there.

[00:39:54]

But back to the beginning of this project, what had happened in northwest Denver that attracted my attention and made me want to do this mural all the more for that incident—what happened is that there were a number of Mexican kids, Mexican national kids, having a party in a large home there somewhere in the neighborhood. And so here comes members of this gang, and they go into the grounds there at the party, and they're telling the Mexican kids to speak English. So they had a big confrontation, and they killed one of the Mexican kids, a Chicano guy stabbed numerous times, right. Now, the leaders in the Mexican-American community tried not to have that exposed in the news very much, and I think they succeeded. Because there was a small article, a very small little article, in the back page of the newspaper talking about an incident in the northwest part of Denver. But that is one thing that had pushed me to do a mural that would address gang violence directly.

So I had other visits by kids, high school kids. But then I had a second visit by another gang, not the same gang. And so again, we had that discussion where I'm expressing to them what happened. I asked the gang kids, "Why is it that we Chicanos, who are not a great part of the population here"—I think it must have been like 15 percent of the population, but the population

of Mexican-American, Chicano kids, Mexican kids, in the jails were like 20, 21 percent of the inmates in there. And I told them, "How is it, you guys? I mean, are we just bad people or are we low scum or what? What is it that we are?" You know. So I posed all kinds of questions to them.

And in the mural, there's a scene where there's a kid dressed in gang garb, right, black jacket, black boots, big boots, and a headband. And this kid in the mural is stabbing, his hand is extended, where—this is one panel, right, a sculptural panel, and then there's another panel where a kid is falling, right? But this knife is killing that other kid. But behind the kid with a knife is a series of faces. Like, I told the kids, "This is peer pressure that you're feeling," right? And I explained that to the kids, "This is what each other want each of you to do, right, to be tough, to do drugs, to kill people, to have fights, to be violent," you know. So all these are explanations that I'm giving to the kids, not only to gang kids but to all the kids that came by. And to adults, you know.

What I was trying to do, now more aware of what I'm doing, is to raise consciousness. In Mexico they called it *crear conciencia*, you know, or *conciencia social*, right? So that's what I was trying to do. And at about that time—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did you, in that mural, show the positive side, or just the negative—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yes, of course.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —side?

LEO TANGUMA: Right. So on one side, I show all this violence and so on, but on the opposite side of these structures, I paint positive images of people coming together, of young people coming together. So that was also explained, of what we can be, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So in that part of the mural, I've got some gang kids, one of them has a shovel and another one is planting the seedling into the soil, right, and visible under the top of this mound are images of gang violence, drugs, violence, I mean, knives, guns. All kinds of elements about gang violence are being buried, right, by these two smiling young kids. One of them looks real real *chuco*, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And the other one is a young lady looking at the viewer, smiling as she drops the seedling. And from that seedling emerges a rainbow that goes on and on and goes off into one of the arms of the structure, going off into the distance, becomes a rainbow, right?

[00:45:08]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But some of the images helping the rainbow along are three females that are kind of like uplifting the rainbow. And that's my wife's favorite part of the mural, and in fact I have that part still. We kept that part after the mural was destroyed. So we kept that part of the mural. So we had all this interchange with young people.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So the women who were involved, which I love, were they all one race?

LEO TANGUMA: [Laughs.] No, even though it was a Chicano mural, the three women uplifting the rainbow along were a Chicana, Anglo, and African American, So anyway, so it was a time also to tell the kids, you know, we're part of a greater humanity, we're just part of a beautiful, beautiful species, you know. So it went on and on.

And then two teachers from North High School in northwest Denver approached me to do a mural. They were impressed with the mural with young gang members and the gang issue, but these teachers wanted to address issues of education, right? So they asked me to do a mural, right, and they were a little embarrassed of this, but they had gotten a grant, a \$500 grant, to do a mural, right. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: A tiny mural? [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: They said that they were going to continue looking for grants, but would I be

interested in doing a mural? And, of course, I was about finished now with the one on gang violence, so I said, "Sure." And so I constructed this shape with about five kids, more or less, right, and it's two forms that have an opening in between them, and they go across this way. And so I called that *Passageway of Values*, where on one of those upright panels, I had the conditions about ignoring education, assuming another posture of meanness and abandonment in young people, while the books of education are leaning on them. The books say "Education for Liberation." So there are some interesting little images there. So on all those images, all figures of the young people are showing masks of toughness and meanness being brought away from the real, the real young person that is always shown handsome and beautiful while the ugliness is being taken away from them so that they can pursue education and values, right?

On the opposite panel, you know, across that opening, I show Chicano kids and all other kids having cast all those masks down, and they're now trampling on those masks, the puppet-like masks. And there's a big book that's opened up, and I don't remember what it says on the book, but then from those pages emerges the mestizo face of many many skin colors just moving on, and those mestizo images again begin being transformed into a rainbow that goes on and on.

And now, there's a teacher—on the opposite panel, the bad panel, I have a kid shown with chains all over his head, and he's blindfolded, and he just real real cool, you know, with books leaning on him. And there's a time glass that's also showing, you know, time going on and you're not taking advantage of it. But on this other positive panel, we have the same kid with the chains on his mind, on his head, being torn off by a Chicano teacher, high school teacher. And she has something in her hands about "Education for Liberation" also, I think. There's a Black kid showing with a scroll that says "Ethnic studies," and it goes on. It's a very beautiful little panel. So everybody was real pleased with that, and the kids were real proud to explain, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: One of the issues that people—I don't know if I'm getting boring. Am I?

[00:50:02]

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, but Leo, can I ask you? I don't want to forget. You mentioned very briefly Shifra Goldman. Can you talk about how you met Shifra?

LEO TANGUMA: Right. Let me see. Shifra came to Houston for some meeting or so, and so I met her. And when I knew she was coming over, I arranged a little gathering with some other artists, and we had a nice little gathering near the mural that I was working on at the church on gang violence. So that's the first time I met her, and she liked what I was doing and spent some time with me.

And after that, let me see, I met her another couple of times. And we communicated by telephone mainly. You know, I never wrote to her or went to see her in any place, but that's my connection with her. A couple of times, maybe two or three times, I met her in Texas, in Houston actually. Let me see, and then she came to Denver later on, and she spoke at the dedication of my mural that I'll tell you about in a little bit. She wrote about my work also.

But I had that connection with that wonderful historian, and I'll always remember her. She was a—she had been the professor of Mary Meadows that I had met here in Denver when I first arrived here. But those are my connections with Shifra. She was very very good to me, actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: Anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So far, we've talked about two murals in Denver, correct? Yeah, and where are we now like 1984, '85?

LEO TANGUMA: In 1986, I think.

JOSH T. FRANCO: '86.

LEO TANGUMA: So let me see. By that time, I met Jeanne, okay, my wife here.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: And we were attending—I met her at a meeting of the Colorado Peace Council, a group of activists against the war in Central America and so on. I met this woman, man, she's so so beautiful, the way she was and still is, politically and emotionally and romantically. Just a fantastic person, just an incredible revolutionary. Wow.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Thank you, Leo. [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I said that in a newspaper interview, that I had married a revolutionary young woman, right. And so she's uplifted my thinking and my art, I think, in so many ways, you know. So when I talk in Denver about my murals, you'll see the influence of somebody, always, always, you know, seeing that my thinking is clear, or clearer, I guess I could say. So for me, that was a lifechanging event. I had come from Houston heartbroken and devastated from the loss of my home, the studio, the burning of my studio, the loss of our home, the disappearance of a mural on police brutality, the death of my wife. I had come here broken, broken, really broken. And so I meet this angel, you know? So it's a fantastic, fantastic story and it's—

JEANNE TANGUMA: He showed slides at the U.S. Peace Council, and we were working on freeing Nelson Mandela and so many things nationally. Eddie Carthan, various struggles. Leo showed his slides and I was—I couldn't sleep after that. I kept seeing the images go through my mind. I didn't sleep, I went to work at a hospital where I was an administrator and told everybody about it, [laughs] you know? So it was kind of meant to be because I was a Spanish major and studied Latin American history in high school, had been in Mexico City. We had so much in common, and it was very—it was meant to be.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Love at first sight.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes! It was love at first sight.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: Actually, I had had a—after the destruction of my mural in Houston—of my studio, I should say—I had been inside the building after it had been destroyed, right, and had seen the devastation. All black, man, all black down the hallway, just everything is destroyed, man. And especially in my studio is what I was looking at. But then some night, I had a dream that—I don't know if I mentioned this—

[00:55:01]

JEANNE TANGUMA: You did.

LEO TANGUMA: —earlier.

JEANNE TANGUMA: You did.

LEO TANGUMA: But I'm telling this woman, this white woman with a white gown—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, right, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: You told that story.

LEO TANGUMA: And so I'm telling her this and so when Jeanne comes in when I'm painting this mural on gang violence down at the other end of the hallway, I remembered the dream, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So, yeah, a fantastic, fantastic story that we were living, Jeanne and I.

Wait, so can I get back?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, I have questions too about—so Denver, you know, there's a lot of activity in Denver, there are other muralists there. I don't know if the Museo de las Americas was operating in the '80s yet?

LEO TANGUMA: Not then.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But did you connect with other artists in Denver? Other practicing—

LEO TANGUMA: I did, I did, and I was so disappointed, man. Because I invited myself to the Chicano Humanities and Arts Council, which was the main Chicano arts organization, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

LEO TANGUMA: So again, I showed slides, of course, of my Houston murals, police brutality, the environment, and my mural on Canal Street, those kinds of murals that I had done in the Black community. And somebody among all those—and they were not really asking questions or they were not interested, and one of them gets up and says, "You don't paint those kind of murals in Denver!" Just like that, man.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What kind of murals were you—I mean—

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know what he meant.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: But then after that, he said—and so I went on with my presentation and said my hellos, nobody hung around talking to me. There were one or two artists who talked to me, and then that was my encounter with Chicano artists in Denver immediately—not immediately, but in the months after I had arrived. So I was really not welcomed by Chicano artists.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Except Carlos Sandoval?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, there was—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

LEO TANGUMA: He was not at that meeting, I don't believe.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: In any case, later on, I met Carlos Sandoval and a couple of others. Jerry Jaramillo.

JEANNE TANGUMA: And Manuel.

LEO TANGUMA: No, I didn't meet Manuel Martinez yet.

But anyway, those were two artists that that I did appreciate: Carlos Sandoval, Jerry Jaramillo, and I think later on Carlota Espinoza. But actually, I did not feel welcomed by Chicano artists. So when I'm doing my mural on gang violence, I didn't want any of those guys working with me, okay? I wanted the young students to work with me, or the young people. Because I didn't want to have any confrontations like I had had in Houston with the destruction of my mural at the University of Houston. I didn't like those kinds of confrontations anymore, so I just proceeded on my own, and I was more comfortable actually in that way. I was comfortable with people being part, just regular people or regular young people.

So in any case, where was I ?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You did the mural at the high school with the \$500 grant. [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: But that came out real good. That mural took a little bit of haggling with the principal, right? The teachers were all for the mural, and they were real happy that I had agreed to it, but the principal didn't want it done, and the principal's name was Lino Gonzalez. And Lino, the kids hated him, and they threw things at him, it's so funny. One time, somebody threw a football at him. [They laugh.] Anyway, one time I was walking with the principal in—underneath this upper stairwell, right, and somebody threw a metal trashcan at him—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, no.

LEO TANGUMA: —and they almost hit him, man! And I was with him, right? So I was [laughs] beginning to get worried, I don't want to hang around this guy too closely. But in any case, he resisted and resisted, and one day, I went to his office, and I tell him, "What's the matter, Lino? I mean, it's all set to go, I've got the design and everything." And the guy said, "Leo, I have to

cover my ass!" [Laughs.] Just like that, man. What? Well, how in the world that could have affected him? We did a mural on education inside a high school with the young people.

So anyway, we proceeded, right? But still we didn't have any funds except that little money. And I had already started to build the panels actually, but then the vice principal invited me to his office, right? The man says, "I know you're looking for funds, Leo, but let me ask you, would you accept money from the Cayetano family?" That's the *mafioso* family in Denver.

[01:00:12]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Cayetano.

LEO TANGUMA: Cayetano, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

LEO TANGUMA: And I thought, "No, I would not." [Laughs.] And he said, "That's okay, that's okay. I understand, I understand." Like that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Why was it on the table in the first place?

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know. We were looking for funds to do the mural, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And the Cayetano family had a restaurant in that area near the high school, not too far from the high school. Anyway, they were known, they had had drug dealings, they were connected with mafiosos in other parts of the country. But anyway, would I accept money from the Cayetano family? And it was like accepting money from the mafia, right? And I told him, "No, I would not," you know. So he was a little embarrassed, but anyway.

But let me go back to that mural that I called *Passageway of Values*. There were a number of times that I met young people that left me moved, I have to tell you. One time, these girls were talking and I heard one say that "He beats me, but he loves me," she said, something like that. So later on, I did a large painting about a real skinny, goofy-looking guy with a leash holding a girl on her knees, and the girl was saying, "He beats me"—and she's smiling at the viewer, right? And she says with a big smile, "He beats me because he loves me," right? So in any case, I had that, and I tried to tell the girls, "You know, don't"—I advised them the best I could, and one of those girls stopped me and said, "You admire your wife, don't you?" [Laughs.] Just like that. I said, "Yes, I do."

And so anyway, it went on in other ways also. These kids come and tell me—one kid and then some other kids with them—that there's going to be a big fight after school, right, that this guy here is going to fight someone outside, man. "It's going to be a big deal, you've got to come," right? And I told them, "No." You know, I advised them the best I could. And so I told them, "Please don't do that," right? But I didn't plan to go see the fight, right? In fact, I had forgotten about it after a while. And I was [laughs] painting later on by myself, and I glanced over, and there's that kid that was going to have a fight, he's sitting right there.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, good.

LEO TANGUMA: I was so glad that he hadn't gone, you know, but I hoped my little advice might have helped him a little bit.

In any case, as time went on, I remembered that I had promised this Salvadoran actress that I had met in Houston—this young group were performing a play on the Salvadoran struggle back in El Salvador, right? So they had asked me after the play, after the—I had built a stage sets for them, but after the play, some of that group asked me, would I paint a mural about the struggle in El Salvador by the people? I had met some of those people that had been abused by the army. So I told them, "I can't do it because I'm leaving now, I'm moving to Denver." And I had been thinking about what I had promised those young people, that when I got to Denver I would do a mural about the struggle in El Salvador.

So after doing those two murals with young people, I thought it was time to do the mural on El Salvador, so I designed an enormous jagged cross, 33 feet in height, and it was real dramatic mural that I did. It was shown in downtown Denver, and I was thinking, Wow, this is Denver, not Houston, right? The opportunities that had come my way, right? So this mural is just so

spectacular, I think, people going back and forth. And it was at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, a big area, and it got a canopy over it, very beautiful. So there is my mural condemning American imperialism, right, and of course supporting dictators in Central America.

Well, one day, somebody calls me, and this is Martín that called me, but also there were two other people that came by. But in any case, these young people said—I took them to see the mural, right, because we agreed to meet by the mural, and they said, "You promised us you would do this, and you did it!" Right?

[01:05:05]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yay.

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I did it, right?

So anyway, let me see what I did after that. I want to hurry up a little bit because I have a lot I want to tell you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure.

LEO TANGUMA: Okay, let me see.

JEANNE TANGUMA: While he's looking—the cross had the Central American people crucified on this giant cross.

JOSH T. FRANCO: On their own flags, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: On their own flags. And then protestors, including me, [laughs] on the bottom, and—yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, that just reminds me of a question that I—probably quick to answer, Leo, but just for the record: Did you use the kids directly as models in the murals?

LEO TANGUMA: Not yet. Later on at the—let me see—

JEANNE TANGUMA: At the air—

LEO TANGUMA: I'm about to tell you, at a place where I did paint—

JEANNE TANGUMA: The airport.

LEO TANGUMA: —real, real people. Huh?

JEANNE TANGUMA: At the airport?

LEO TANGUMA: No before that, it was *The Torch of Quetzalcoatl*. Well, when I'm doing the mural on Central America, some people from the Denver Art Museum came to ask me, would I paint a mural inside the museum? And, you know, from past experience, I was worried that they might say, "You can paint in there, but be careful what you say," right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But they never said that. I met with the curator of the contemporary arts, right, and also another person, and the director of the museum, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Dianne Vanderlip.

LEO TANGUMA: Dianne Vanderlip and [inaudible] Lewis [Sharpe -LT].

JEANNE TANGUMA: And [Deborah -JT] Jordy.

LEO TANGUMA: I forgot her name, Jordy [ph] something. So I met with these people, and I think at some point I asked them, "Well, do you care [laughs] what I paint?" But they had no guidelines at all, "Just do whatever you want," and it's a large gallery, right, as part of this first floor of the museum. In those days, right? Now, there's a new museum. But design this figure, almost like a bird with its wings outstretched, the panels. The wings are the panels leading onto the center where there's another spiraling form.

And so later on, at the dedication, Shifra Goldman came and spoke at the dedication. And it was such a pleasure, such an honor to have her. But she said, "Leo Tanguma sometimes paints from archetypal imagery. For example," she said, "the wings of the mural suggest the wings of a bird or an eagle," right, with the central part being a spiral with a point that extends up from the mural about three feet. And then there's another arching form in the middle of the space between the two wings that arches on—it's like a 23-foot-long panel, right, I mean, image form. She said, "These are the wings of the eagle, and this is the serpent: the image for Mexico, right, the Mexican symbol." And she said, "I don't think Leo ever thought about it that way." [Laughs.] And it's true. Dr. Biggers, back in Houston, my professor at Texas Southern, he also told students at one time, "Mr. Tanguma doesn't know it sometimes, [they laugh] but what he's painting are archetypal images." And I thought—you know, I'm beginning to wonder, Where is my mind when I do these things?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Tapping in. You're plugging into something.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, I didn't realize, and I think it was that kind of naiveté that I've always had even to this day. You know, I don't know what I'm doing half of the time. [They laugh.]

But anyway, at the Denver Art Museum, we had this fantastic experience, right, with this form, and it was something new in Denver to everybody. Even in Houston, I know it was something that had not occurred to many people. And I do not know whether I innovated the idea or not, but I've used it more than anybody. So there I am at the museum, just painting daily, right, and I do this purposely, to paint daily in front of people, and I involve people in discussions about whatever I'm painting. And everything was so positive, so beautiful. But there were—I counted them—12 incidents of racism, attacks, right? And like, one of those was when this man and a woman are looking at it and they say to me—I mean, the woman says—because I'm talking about Chicano history and so on, and she said, "Well, why, all the Mexicans I've ever known are dirty people." Just like that, man, just like that, in front of my face.

[01:10:21]

Another one I remember saying, "I'm sick and tired of hearing you people piss and moan," right? And okay, so it went on and on. One of them that I finally had to confront in a discussion, right, said to me, "All the Hispanic people I have ever known did not amount to anything." I said, "Wait a minute." And this is on a Wednesday night. It's called Wednesday Night at the Museum. On the first level, there was like a party going on, people walking around with cocktail glasses, there was music, it was a big big deal in those days. So anyway, it's on a Wednesday night, there's people around looking at the mural, and I'm there painting, right, and I'm talking to the spectators all the while, right, and this man comes and says that to me.

And so I tell him, "Look at this, some of these are real important heroes in our history," right. And I even showed him a portrait that I had done of—what's his name—Martinez. He was a young soldier from Ault not too far from Denver, north from here. A town named Ault, and he was Joe P. Martinez, and he had won the Medal of Honor. And I told him, "You see this kid here? He fought for the United States, and he was killed in action for this, so he amounted to something, don't you think?" And he just went like that, so I showed him all the figures, Cesar Chavez and others. And then I told him, "And you know what? And I was a farmworker, dropped out of school, went to night school, got my GED, went into the service, both in the Marine Corps briefly and the Army, and I did all those things, man, I went to night school and college, and so on, and I amounted to something." The guy said—he extended his hand and said, "You have changed my perspective." [Laughs.] So those are the kind of—and other encounters that I had with people, and so many beautiful, positive moments.

They brought kids from the schools, to the museum in general, I think, but they were brought into my area. And so I spoke a lot about the central figure of that mural, which is a mestizo. In fact, it's that when—I see right there. That's the central part of the joint mural that I called *The Torch of Quetzalcoatl*. In any case, the wings of the structure extend outwards like that, so there's room for a lot of young people to sit around and listen to my discussions. And one of the images of the central area on this spiraling form coming outwards is *la Llorona* finding her children, right. So I told the kids, "Who has heard about *la Llorona*," right? And a lot of little hands go up, you know, they all know *la Llorona*, and I'll ask them, "So tell me the story of *la Llorona*." And then they would say, "I know where she lives, over there, under the bridge," right? [They laugh.] It was so beautiful. But in any case, I tell them, "And what about her? Why is she out there crying?" And they will say—sometimes they will say, "Because she drowned her kids." "But why?" You know, "Why did she do that?" And sometimes they say, "Because her husband

left her," or different explanations, but it's always that she killed her children, and she wanders forever around the world looking for her kids, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And so I tell the kids, "I don't like that story," right? "I want us to have beautiful stories about ourselves. So in my painting, you see here, *la Llorona* finds her children." [Laughs.] Fantastic. And some of the kids I glanced over—it's so beautiful [cries] and I would see kids with tears in their eyes. *La Llorona* finding her children. I'm so sorry, excuse me.

JEANNE TANGUMA: It's okay, it's okay. It's very emotional.

LEO TANGUMA: So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, is that mural the first time you created that mestizo face? The three—

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, man, I had used that so many times before, but this time—

[01:15:04]

JEANNE TANGUMA: When was the first time that you used it?

LEO TANGUMA: [Laughs.] I used it in 1965 in Arlington, Texas, at a place called Lulac Village. That's when I did my first Chicano mural, actually. So I did the mestizo in that mural, and through the years, I had painted it in other settings. I think we did a poster of it, even. So I had already used that figure, except my mestizo later on assumed a more universal image, because I began to think this mestizo applies to all the people in the United States merging together in a cosmic mestizo, right? And that's the kind of mestizo I used at the Denver Art Museum mural.

So I would also explain that to the kids: "You see, some of us, some of us are dark, some of us are lighter in the Chicano community, in our Mexican-American community, why is that?" I would ask them. They would say, "I don't know." [They laugh.] So I say, "Because we are a mixture of the Spanish with the Indians. The Spanish were usually white people, and the Indians were dark like me, right, or you. And when they mixed together, they formed what we are. We are mestizos," right? They had never heard of that word. Even high school kids had never heard of that, and many college students hadn't thought of that. So it was an educational symbol and an item that I was sure to talk about always. But when I talked about *la Llorona*, I saw those little girls, mainly girls, with little tears in their eyes.

At one time—I'm told, I wasn't there—but Corky Gonzales, who was the head of the—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Crusade for Justice.

LEO TANGUMA: Crusade for Justice. I'm told that when he was explaining that concept, that he had tears in his eyes. So even now, these murals had an impact in the community. So that on weekends sometimes—now, I had talked to students during the week, right? And sometimes, though—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Busloads of students. [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: Well, during the week, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: During the week.

LEO TANGUMA: But on weekend sometimes, some of these kids brought their parents, sometimes their grandparents, so I could explain the mural to them in Spanish, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And I worked like seven days a week, man. It was such an exciting time and moment for me and the community, right, because they were getting a glimpse of ourselves. Along the length of the mural, which is 72 feet, I painted a dark area, I built a large long area all along the mural panels all the way to the ends of the panels. And on those darkened areas, I painted the symbols of oppression and racism that we had overcome or were overcoming, right, and that was part of my explanation also. One of the images on that dark area is a young man looking in the mirror, holding—what is it?—holding a wife with a leash on her.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, right.

LEO TANGUMA: So, you know, I had those kinds of—and I think that Jeanne influenced me very much when I did those designs. So those were the kind of images along the bottom area. And another image that I had in that area was a big bow with human hearts and blots on the sides of the bow. And then I have an image of a mirror, the mirror of Tezcatlipoca, the smoking mirror, the deity of the men that you must sacrifice.

So when college students would get around—one time, I'm explaining the mural and I talk about human sacrifice in ancient Mexico, and this professor stopped me. He said, "Wait a minute!" You know, "You cannot be saying that in front of white people. Because everybody will think bad of us. I mean, you know, we don't want to talk about that. Besides, they didn't do this out of meanness, right, out of evil. These were sacrifices to their gods," right? And I had to tell the guy, "No, no, no. Those human sacrifices were a brutality, were instances of crimes committed against the poor in Mexico, among the poor people. Even though some volunteered for that, I've read, but I'm not going to be shy about showing our beautiful culture but also our faults, right? I'm not going to do that for you, man. You know, whether you like it or not, I am going to do it," right?

[01:20:08]

So he was a little pissed at me. But the students, I noticed—I noticed the students liked what I was saying. So it was this kind of a super-nationalist, cultural nationalist among us, that I thought were misguiding the community. In Houston, there was a poster that said something about "We don't ask anything of nobody, *no le pedimos nada a nadie*," right? "We are descendants of noble Spanish lords and something-something Indian lords, Aztec lords," right? Wow, the lords in Spain were cruel to their own people; the lords in Mexico were super cruel to their people. I read about the dedication of the temple of the—the temple or pyramid to the Aztec ruler—I forgot his name, though—where thousands of people were lined up in long lines approaching the pyramid where they climbed up the stairs, were sacrificed, and the bodies thrown down the stairs to be collected and taken out somewhere. Those are—Ahuitzotl, I think the name was, of the emperor. So I told about those things that I had read, and I had seen the pyramids in Mexico City, and I was familiar with that and I was not going to be shy.

In Houston also, somebody had told me—because I showed a woman that had been beaten or abused, and she's crying like that, and her little son is pointing towards this part of the mural—any case, so I explained that to some females, and they also told me, "You cannot be saying those things, right, because it makes us look bad." You see, those self-confused attitudes I think somebody should address, right, where our culture and history has not been, you know, super beautiful or our culture is not all beauty, you know, there's also cruelty and death and so on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, Leo, how long did the mural stay up at the Denver Art Museum, and what did the curator think when it was done?

LEO TANGUMA: They were totally pleased, and it lasted almost four months. So it was a good, good time. They—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Over 90,000 people, or 88,000—there's different—saw it.

LEO TANGUMA: I don't believe that amount.

JEANNE TANGUMA: That's what they told us.

LEO TANGUMA: No, I mean, they told us that, but it could not have been. Because it was only four months there, right, more or less. That would—

JEANNE TANGUMA: They looked at the attendance—

LEO TANGUMA: That would've meant like 20,000 people each month. No, no, no.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I think they meant something less than that, it could not be, so I've never accepted that. But in any case, it was a super successful event for the museum, right? And they told me so, they told me so.

JEANNE TANGUMA: It attracted a lot of people who normally wouldn't go to the Denver Art

Museum, like the parents and the grandparents of Chicano, *mexicano*, children, who came on the weekends.

LEO TANGUMA: It also attracted Nazis, remember?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes, I wanted you to tell that. [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I had a few encounters with supremacists, man. So, so awful. One time, this man and a woman are going around the mural taking notes, right, and I thought, "How nice," you know. [They laugh.] I was thinking they were going to write an article or do something, and so I approached the man and I said, "Excuse me, but I'm the artist here, can I explain anything? Can I tell you anything about it?" He said, "No, we are patriotic Americans," right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: Like, wow. So he said, "I can see how you paint like you hate America," things like that he said to me. I said, "No, no, no. What I'm trying to do"—and I told them the purpose of the mural. And he went on and on saying that they were patriotic Irish Americans and he didn't like what I was painting, how I showed America and so on. I mean, I hardly painted America. It was all Chicanos. So anyway, so he left me there [laughs] wondering what had just happened, right?

So anyway, there was another group that really, really impressed me. This was a group of elderly church ladies that are walking around, looking at the mural, and I'm telling them a little bit about the mural.

[01:25:03]

And then this woman says, "What do you people want?!" Just like that. And so I told her the best I could, you know, about how our people is trying to find its own identity after feeling bad about ourselves, after having complexes about this color of our skin, about our speech, and so on. I told her as best I could, and then the lady said, "Well, that is so biblical," right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Biblical?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, biblical.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What did she mean by that?

LEO TANGUMA: I'm not sure, but something having to do with religion, maybe about kindness or love, I don't know what she meant by that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And did it—did she mean that you had changed her mind? Or—

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, that she had been thinking something negative about our community or what I was painting, to something that was in her subconsciousness about love and kindness and decency. I think that's where it went to, from seeing something evil to seeing something decent and worthy. And, of course, I've had those encounters all through, all through my life in the paintings that I did. In front of the murals. And also in many presentations that I've made, I always use slides, right, so I can refer to something. I cannot speak abstractly, right? "This mural means this and that, I painted it this way." But if I'm in front of the mural, I feel more inspired than when I'm away from it, so that's the way it's been. That's the way it's been all along, right?

In the Denver Art Museum, I painted a number of heroes on the top part of these wing-like things, and some of those are real, actually community people, and also among the groups of people down below that represents the community, not the heroes but just the community. There I also painted real people from the community.

And let me see, where else could we go? Oh, yes, after this, we took the mural to Greeley, Colorado, north of Denver. And there, I had also some wonderful wonderful experiences with the community being so pleased with the mural. But I also had a few crazies, right? [Laughs.] And some of these were my community, right? These two young ladies asked me, "Say, man, let's go get high," you know? Something to that effect, "Let's go get high." "Well, no, I don't do that, you know, and you shouldn't either," you know. So—"Oh, we thought you did," you know, just like that. "No, no, no. I don't do that, and you shouldn't either." That type.

And then there were others, some real real funny. This drunk trio, one woman and two men in

the morning, man, about ten o'clock, they come in there, they're already drunk—drunk, I think—and they said, "What is this about?!" You know. [Laughs.] So imagine talking to drunks [they laugh] about—but anyway, there were others, it's so funny.

JEANNE TANGUMA: What about when the mural went to the museum of—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, my God. Yeah—

JEANNE TANGUMA: In Santa Fe? New Mexico Museum of Art?

LEO TANGUMA: So they invited us there also, the Museum of Art—

JEANNE TANGUMA: New Mexico Museum of Art.

LEO TANGUMA: Right, it's got like two names, right? The Museum of Art and then the Museum of New Mexico.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, so we took the mural there, and we had a nice large gallery for that, so that could accommodate quite a few people that came. And that museum is a real popular place, I'm telling you. So we had those same kinds of discussions always with people. A Native American young man helped me paint for a while, but I don't think anybody else did aside from that. But let me see, what happened there that was kind of different?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Well, they had a wonderful reception with the community, and that was nice.

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, my God, yes, there were two receptions. The museum had a reception with wine and cheese, right, real fancy. And all these people came and some of them dressed in western, Santa Fe-style dress, the women, and they were a fancy group. I was really uncomfortable. [Laughs.] Then, people from the neighborhood organized their own reception, man, and this was—a couple of hundred people went in there, it was so beautiful. And they brought their pots of beans, rice, and I don't know what else, tortillas. They're sitting all around there. And so we had a great time. I was glad to talk to those folks; I felt right at home, right?

[01:30:16]

But then somebody comes and tells me, "Hey, Leo, there's Pedro out there. He wants to come in." And Pedro was really adamant about the museum having brought an artist from out of town, a Chicano artist from out of town. And he had raised hell with the museum director and I don't know who else, man, but he was really, really giving me a hard time. So Pedro—I forget his last name.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Romero.

LEO TANGUMA: Romero, and he's planning to come into the museum, and these Chicanos from Santa Fe are not letting him in because they know about the controversies. And then he said, "*¿Quieres que le demos una chinga?*, Do you want us to give him a good beating?" I said, "No, no, no. Please don't do that." So he never came in, but the beautiful event of people bringing their own food, bringing their own, themselves, and you know, not fancy dressed at all. So that's the kind of people that I think the mural was—that I know the mural was intended. That's what I had intended for the community, to see itself. So we've had all these wonderful experiences.

JEANNE TANGUMA: And, Leo—

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was the—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, sorry, go ahead.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What was the—you know, New Mexico, you have the very strong *hispano* context, and Chicano kind of means something different in New Mexico, within that context. Did that come up?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, I think I brought it up, saying that I know that New Mexico has a long history of *hispanos* being there since 1598, I think it was, where the settlements were first established there, near Santa Fe, right? And the history goes back to 1610 more or less, and then before that—1610 is when Santa Fe is established, right, and some churches were built and

so on. And I told them that these were Spanish people that had come all the way to Santa Fe and Southern Colorado, escaping the conditions that the Jewish people were in in New Mexico even then, right? They came to settle, and these were called crypto-Jews. So I told about those things the best I could remember. And that the Chicanos arrived later, *mexicanos*, you know, that we began to call ourselves Mexican Americans, Chicanos, but there's a difference, I said, by those people. And it's true, sometimes you would see it with the green-eyed, light-skinned, brown hair, not black hair or dark brown hair. *Hispanos*, right? We met some of those folks, and they're real real nice. But I explained that there was a kind of a difference.

And, you know, the history of Mexican Americans, the *hispanos* being so—sometimes revolutionary, man. Like, they killed the governor of New Mexico, and, you know, they had their own confrontations. So they had the Gorras Blancas, the White Caps that revolted against the land seizures that were taking place, and it's got a beautiful history with Reies Lopez Tijerina and so on, with the land grant movement. So I explained those kinds of things the best I could to Chicanos, and sometimes there were *hispanos* in the groups, right, that called themselves *hispanos*. That's very rarely used, though, nowadays, I believe, the term *hispanos*. It's become mainly Mexican American or Chicanos in some cases.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Or Latinx.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I never heard that.

JEANNE TANGUMA: He doesn't like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, Leo, that's a total aside, but I think relevant. Do you have a thought about Latinx?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I have a neutral thought about it. I don't like it, right? The reason is that I never liked the way the term "Hispanic" was applied to us from the establishment. "I see, we're just going to call you Hispanic from now on," right? So now, they're saying, "Okay, now you were Hispanic for a while, now you're going to be Latinx," right? I didn't like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: So you see that as something imposed from above?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, imposed on us, and I do not like it because all of us have got a different culture and history. Like Puerto Ricans have got a different history, we Chicanos have a history, and so on, Argentina, whatever. We cannot be lumped by someone from above, right?

[01:35:10]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: I don't like that. But let me get back to—

JEANNE TANGUMA: But just so people don't get the wrong impression, how do you feel about LGBT rights of people?

LEO TANGUMA: They all have rights. We all have rights. Equally, equally, so I'm not talking about that, I'm—

JEANNE TANGUMA: So he's not referring to that when he's opposed to the Latin-"x" at the end, but some people like it because it includes all genders.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, I see, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: But his—and really, that also Latinx is not that different from Hispanic because it comes from Europe [laughs] and from Spain.

LEO TANGUMA: In any case, I've done the best I could with my own attitudes. I think I've been faithful to my ideas all the way. But anyway, so later on, I had the opportunity to paint at the airport.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. So what year was the airport? Because that's a big moment in your

career.

LEO TANGUMA: Right, it was in 1993, really, when the construction was beginning and so on. There was a call for entries of artists, and I submitted my own application and slides, right? And they was only one little controversy during my presentation, because the committee—one committee that was examining all the entries was a committee from people in different parts of the country; I was a little surprised. But anyway, so I was making my presentation and showing my slides, again a very small number of slides, and this Black man in a suit said to me, "Why do you paint like this?" [They laugh.] The images. And I told the guy, "You know, I studied with an African-American master, Dr. John Biggers at Texas Southern. A Southerner, right, that had done murals in North Carolina and in the South but then he came to Houston and continued doing murals. He painted about the Civil Rights Movement, about the history of slavery, and that's where I learned how to paint like this."

I didn't mention Siqueiros because Siqueiros gave me a distant example, and Dr. Biggers gave me a present example. And his teaching of Black students at Texas Southern—the hallways at Texas Southern, many of them are covered with murals done by students over the years, right, that had been done and so on. So I told that man, "That's why I paint like this." But everybody else in that committee was so accepting, and they liked my work, except for that guy. And I don't know where in the world he came from. I don't think he was from Denver.

JEANNE TANGUMA: The panel was from across the United States and people who were involved with funding for public art.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, they were selecting something—I don't remember why, but it was made up of people from different parts of the country.

So then they took me and showed me—at the airport after I had been accepted, the panel—some of the panel took me to see the wall where they wanted a mural, and I thought, "Wow, that's great, what an incredible opportunity that I've been given, coming from Houston and having horrible memories. Here I am at the airport, right, being asked to do a mural." Anyway, I felt so grateful to Denver and, you know, all the incredible opportunities that I had here and the acceptance and so on. I thought, "I want to do more than just one mural." I didn't tell them that, right? [They laugh.] I thought to myself. I thought, "I want to do more than just one mural," right? So I designed six murals. [They laugh.] Three pairs of two murals each, right? And so when I presented that to them, they were real happy, they accepted it right away, the idea of having Leo Tanguma doing six murals, right, at DIA. And I even overheard them say that one time. I was for some reason waiting to speak to someone in that little committee, and somebody said, "Let's get all we can out of Leo Tanguma," right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: And I thought, "Well, I'm already giving"—I thought to myself, right, "I'm already giving these folks six murals. Why in the world do they want anything more?" [Laughs.] Right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: But anyway, so as time went on, we talked about the six murals, but we settled on four murals.

[01:40:04]

And then I showed them the designs on the—what I wanted to do about the environmental mural and then one about world peace, right? And they loved those ideas also. But in this case, my images were happy. There were no clashes, violence, as the people tried to preserve the environment or to do away with war. I did have a smaller panel that was 15 feet in width by almost 12 feet in height, where I painted the problems that we're facing, like the destruction of the environment. And then on another larger panel across a little doorway from the smaller panel. There's a 28-foot-wide wall, right, and on that larger wall, I painted what I called a solution to the problem, or a better situation.

So, you know, all these figures were happy figures, except of course for the negative panel. But there's like a celebration of people moving on from both sides to the center to do something. In the case of the environmental mural, I have young children, actually, in costume from many many countries. Moving on towards the center they are planting—again, like I had done in another mural—planting a seed into the ground, or some seeds, or planting a plant, actually. So

they were all happy, from many many countries, many cultures, folkloric costumes.

And on the antiwar mural, I show a devastated area with kids sleeping and dreaming of something. There, the haze begins out of their little dream moving along behind this war image, war figure, horrible figure, that's got a sword killing a white dove down at the base of the mural. But the kid's dream continues on, and on the other side of the doorway separating the two murals, the rainbow continues on and on until it becomes a reality. All of the countries of the world coming to beat their swords into plowshares. So people really loved that idea. I feel real bad about that mural, though, because I should have done more work on the rainbow. The rainbow is too blatant, you know, too much of the—

JOSH T. FRANCO: You sound like you're being a perfectionist, Leo. It sounds like.

JEANNE TANGUMA: He is a perfectionist.

LEO TANGUMA: I don't even show that slide very much, actually.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Really?

LEO TANGUMA: Because I'm a little embarrassed. But I show the bottom parts which are very very good. So on that mural on war, we're doing these murals at a place called Lakeside Mall, a block from my home in those days, and so I have the best rooms that were given to me for 300 bucks a month, an enormous studio, right, with all the light I wanted, it's just perfect. But anyway, so when we're painting this mural, somebody had heard about it, about what we were doing, and I think one reason that I attracted people even when we're painting the mural is that we kept the doors to the studio open, and we're always playing Chicano music, and people are peeking there and they see all these Chicanos painting: me, my daughter, and our friend Cheryl. And so sometimes, they would walk in and look—actually often, they walked in, people would walk in, from Shoppers in the mall, right?

But one day, somebody came, a woman, and said, would I paint her son that had been killed by gang violence in Denver in the mural? And, Wow, I thought, Of course I will, right? So we painted—I think the name of the young man was Troy Chavez, who was killed in a shooting or something. Anyway, but we painted him and—but some people heard about it, so then we had other people come in: Would I paint their daughter or son that had been killed in some kind of horrible thing? So—

JEANNE TANGUMA: And did these people tell you about their stories?

LEO TANGUMA: They always told me their stories, man. They were, like, near tears. The most moving young person that I painted up there was a four-year-old boy. The parents, young parents, were in the zoo with the little boy. And then somebody in the neighborhood is having a war, you know, shooting, and one of those bullets comes and hits the young boy in the head. It took a year for that boy to die, right?

[01:45:13]

So, when the parents approached me, they had a little picture of their son, right? And of course I painted him. And that little boy is the highest image of all the mural, on the very top center. And I wish I could remember that boy's name.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So at the airport, people see these figures now when they go?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, they see there—and there's 10 victims of gang violence that are shown up there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And just to clarify, the mural you worked on at the studio space at the mall is the mural for the airport?

LEO TANGUMA: Right, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But the studio space was at the mall? Okay.

LEO TANGUMA: Right, right.

But aside from that, other people came to ask us, "We are Iranian, so and so, will you paint my kid in our national costume?" And we always said, "Yes." Man, I don't know how long that would

have gone on until we moved to the airport. But anyway, people kept coming, and I think we painted 32 different kids in the murals, real kids in all kinds of costumes: South Africa, other parts of Africa, Asia.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But all residents of Denver?

LEO TANGUMA: All residents of Denver with their ancestors' folkloric costume. So today, people can go there—and also my two granddaughters, actually, and my niece and other families and other people we had never met before. So people can go to the airport and say, "There's you when you were little," right? Or so on and so on because that was that done, like, I don't know how many years ago, 1995?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah?

JEANNE TANGUMA: '93 to ['9]5

LEO TANGUMA: We started in 1993 to 1995.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So what were some of the reactions after it was done and you put it up?

LEO TANGUMA: There was just happiness, man. And exuberance in people that we met, you know. My wife's father was at the dedication of the first two murals on the environment, so that man was so [laughs] proud. He was so proud, man, my father-in-law. He's a Republican, or he was a Republican, a real conservative man, really intelligent, actually. And he [laughs] liked me very much. He liked my murals. And she saw—one time he told me, "I have to tell you, Leo, my daughter is so happy," you know?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: So that made me feel very good. But anyway, the murals were so beautiful. We had some experiences that are out of this world.

One time, I was painting a Scottish boy in costume, doing a jig, right? And I had decided to do a neutral tartan or costume on the boy because I knew that the clans in Scotland all had their own little ways of—you know? And so I'm painting on that little boy, and somebody, a man, a young man, comes and says—and he told me how much he liked it and so on, but then he says, "Would you paint my clan's crest in the mural?" I had never thought of that, actually, so I said, "You know what, that's a good idea." So it was the MacGregors. He brought pictures of the crest, and so I painted it, and a few days later, he came and he was real pleased.

So then another young man came later, I don't know maybe a couple of weeks later, and he said, "I see you painted the crest of those traitors." [They laugh.] I didn't know anything about clan history in Scotland.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But they brought all this to Denver? These—

LEO TANGUMA: No, these were Scottish Americans, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

LEO TANGUMA: These were young people born here, Scottish Americans.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, but they still were invested in those?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, they still had that attachment to their history, to their clans back in Scotland. But this guy said about those traitors, and I didn't know, you know, anything. But after he explained to me something that I don't remember, I said, "Sure, I'll paint your family, your clan's crest," and they were the Campbells, with the boar's head on a platter, right? Okay. So I painted that crest, and later on, he came and he was real pleased and he left.

[01:50:00]

Then another time, a third time, this man, really from Scotland, a tall man with a real neat—I don't know what you call those mustaches, curled up—upright, straight upright, like a military person. He came up to me and said that he was pleased with what I was painting, he was pleased with the crest that I had painted, and I knew he was from Scotland, this guy, because he had that beautiful accent, right? And then he talked and talked about the history of the clans in

Scotland, and then he said, "But everybody knows that the most important clan [they laugh] are the MacDonalds." [They laugh.] And he said, "Would I paint their crest? And of course I was trapped by then. I said, "Sure."

But I said that I would love to know—"Someday," I thought, "I'm going to read up about the history of clans in Scotland, the highlands," or whatever. And he said, "I just have the books for you!" [They laugh.] So he gave me these two volumes on the history of Scotland and another one about the clans in Scotland and so on. He left them for me there. And he took a long time to come back, and so by the time he came back, I had finished the crest, but I hadn't read any of the histories, so I gave him back his books and he left, right? He was real real pleased, he congratulated me. So I was so glad that he finally left, man. I thought to myself, [laughs] "No more crests!"

But then another one came by [they laugh], another Scottish American, and he said, "I see you painted all those crests, right, can you paint my family's crest?" And I told the man, "No, I'm so sorry, but I cannot do that." And he tried to insist a little bit, but I had to tell him, "No, you know, I can't do that."

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's only so big, right?

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah. And also there's not any more room.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

LEO TANGUMA: And there's a long white belt that the Scottish costume had, and I already had three crests on it, and I said that I can't do that anymore, and he left and he was real pissed, but I couldn't do it.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So, Leo, did you paint anything about the conflict in the Middle East, the Palestinians and the Israelis?

LEO TANGUMA: I did, but let me tell one other little story here.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, sorry.

LEO TANGUMA: Another time, this young boy, a young teenager, came and said to me, "Would I paint something, a costume of his people?" I said, "Wow, what people are those?" And he said, "I'm from Nepal," right? I remembered, Oh, hell, I just painted the Nepalese boy with one of those sarangi violins that they have there. It's like a two-string violin. And I had painted exactly that except I painted one string, right, and I don't know why I did that. But anyways, I said, "Let me show you," you know. I was so pleased, and I showed him the little costume of the Nepalese boy, and that kid was ecstatic also. I mean, wow, just what he had to come to ask, and there it is, right?

Another one was a guy from Poland—no, a Polish American. So he walked up and he's looking around, and he says, "Where is the goddam Polack in this?" [They laugh.] And I was able to tell him, "Wait, there it is," right? [They laugh.] It was so funny.

But then one night, I was painting, I don't know, at midnight or so, and I see—I'm on the ladder on the left side of this mural, antiwar mural, and way on the right side, there's two young men looking up at this section, and they're talking about it, and they're happy about it, right? So they come over, and they say, "Are you the artist?" Or something like that, and I said, "Yes." And then he said, "Why did you paint that? The Israeli boy and the Palestinian boy?" And so I don't even remember what I said but it was something like, "I'm tired of you people, 50 years and more, still fighting." And so I went over and explained to them the costume that I used for the Israeli boy. I don't remember the shirt or the pants that are visible, but I put a prayer shawl on him. And the next to him, I have a Palestinian girl in the beautiful Palestinian folkloric costume. Then I have an Arab boy. Three different costumes, two Arabic and then the Israeli.

[01:55:17]

So they were really happy about it, and they said, "Well, how long are you going to be here?" I said, "I don't know, but I'll been here a while," right? And they said, "Our wives are coming in from Israel, and we want to bring them here." So after an hour or maybe two hours, they came

back with two wives and, I don't know, two, three kids. And again they're lifting up their kids to see the Israeli flag, because all these folks have got their weapons wrapped in flags of their different countries bringing them to be beaten into plowshares, but the Star of David and the colors of the flag are clearly visible, right? So I remember somebody lifting up one of the younger kids to touch the Israeli flag and the cross of David. So, wow, that was a moving moment for me and so they left and saying how happy they were and so on, "Thank you for doing that."

Then, after a while, man, I'm still painting in the same area, and I see one young man over there looking at that same area, right? And after a while, about—he must have been about 30 or 35, not too old. So he comes and says, Am I the one painting that mural? And I think that meant, "Are you the artist?" or something like that. So I said, "Yes. Yes, I am." And again, he said, "But why did you paint that?" And again, I told him, "I'm familiar with the struggle in Palestine and Israel" and so on, and I went over with him to that section and I explained more, you know, of what I was familiar with. And he told me about their particular struggle, and the Palestinians of course are victims of the Israeli occupation and so on. Then he asked me, "How long will you be here?" I said, "God, I'll be here a while," you know. "Because I have a friend that I want to see this." Then after a while, I was getting a little—he took a long time actually, and I was thinking of leaving when he came with another friend. And so I came down from the ladder and I went and talked to them about—I think they were Palestinians, I'm pretty sure they were.

But anyway, so they left, but that evening had been a lesson for me, how the mural touched people, right, from all over the world, actually, that passed through Denver, that felt themselves reflected in the murals, right?

So on one of those—on the negative form mural, at the very bottom right, I wrote the poem of a Jewish boy that had died in Auschwitz. And he was part of a group of young people's artworks and poems and so on that were found in the ruins where the young people had been housed waiting to be gassed, right? This boy wrote a poem, and he says, "I would like to go away somewhere," and talks about young people living in fear of gallows, ropes, and so on, but then he says, "But I believe I only sleep today"—[cries]. Sorry.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah, that's—and it has a huge war figure looming over the sleeping child. Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And he says, "But I believe I only sleep today that I'll wake up again a child again and run and play," and so on, it's so beautiful.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So those kind of paintings have attracted people but then also the conspiracy theorists, right, that believe there was something evil about those murals, something sinister, right, that I'm hiding or that I'm meaning messages of evil that I'm projecting, right? And those people that caused me trouble getting commissions or paintings. I went to a restaurant to ask about, "Would you like me to do a mural here?" And then the man says, "You're the man who painted the airport murals, aren't you?" [Laughs.] I said, "Yes, and then he said, "Well, what does all that mean?" You know, like really suspicious. A Mexican man! And so he said, "No, we don't want any mural," and I'm looking at bare walls, man, beautiful restaurant but with bare walls. Man, anyway.

[02:00:09]

So we're going around the schools, later on to schools in this area where we live, trying to do a mural somewhere, and again somebody says that they're familiar with what I did at DIA. And so I've had those kinds of experiences. I think I've lost commissions and I've lost jobs because of those awful people. But worse than that, I got to meet some of those people. At the airport, one time there's two young men, a Chicano or a Mexican American, I think, and an Anglo guy looking at the mural. So I go up to them and say, "I'm the artist, would you like me to explain it to you?" And right away, "No, you're the one"—you know? I forgot that conversation, but it was really hostile on the part of the Mexican American, not the Anglo, who didn't say anything. And later on, I met a young lady who was looking and I tried to explain it, and she says something like, "I know what this means," you know, and she walked away.

And then I had some other people that were also looking at it, at the mural, and I was a little afraid to talk to them, but I always make it a point if I see people looking at the mural, to go talk to them and explain. And so these people also had their misconceptions, but they were ready to listen to what it really meant. And these were like a middle-aged couple and another person. So I

explained the mural and then they were convinced that the mural had beautiful meanings, not sinister meanings. So I had those opportunities to meet with some of those theorists that have been so destructive to me actually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So what do they see as sinister, and why—

LEO TANGUMA: Well, they saw—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Beyond simply thinking it sinister, why do they go to the effort to write the blogs and the articles? Because I've seen those, you know?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, one of the explanations that I had, or that I've read about, is that all these people with their swords coming to the center, they are handing these swords over to the German boy. Because there's a young boy with a hammer beating the swords into plowshare, right, and he's got a lederhosen, so they see that as a German boy, and all these people are bringing their swords to surrender to German. And they've written about this, man. It's awful. But the imagery that can be misinterpreted by them is the war figure that is killing the dove, that is a—you know, what I'm proposing, right, that this Nazi should kill, should kill peace, right?

So I've had those kind of encounters. Also on the environmental mural, there's three concrete slabs on which are sleeping three victims of environmental abuse, humans affected directly. And something has been said about those coffins also, and I don't remember exactly what. But there's been those encounters and also a lot of writing on the Internet, man. Some minister from New York calls them satanic or evil or demon. So it's been really bad, really bad. But luckily, most people don't believe that, I'm pretty sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's the kind of thing the Internet makes possible—

LEO TANGUMA: Right, yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —to spread. So what was your next big project after the airport?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, after that, we had—let me see, what happened next after that? Is that Candelaria?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: Well, after that, I was asked in Greeley, at the University of Northern Colorado, to paint a mural about this wonderful *hispano* professor that had taught there like for 40 years. A wonderful figure in the university but also in the community, a beloved man. So I said, "Sure." And I met Dr. Candelaria and I met his wife, Fay. We became real good friends. And so I designed a mural for a stairwell at the University of Northern Colorado. It's a stairwell that goes up to the second floor.

[02:05:16]

So I designed that and they liked it very much. But he passed away during those days, so he didn't get to see it. But we painted the mural, and what happened is that art students at UNC were given college credit to paint with me, so that's what happened. And I'm not sure how many altogether young students painted with me. I don't know, it must have been like 10 or 12 over the three years that I painted on the mural. One of those—not really a student, but one of the people that painted with me—was a young lady named Eleanor Yates, Eleanor Elizabeth Yates. This girl, man, real thin, small, and very beautiful, red hair. A fantastic young lady. She first went to Philadelphia to paint murals with Jane Goldman, I think her name was, another muralist painting—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Sculptor.

LEO TANGUMA: —enormous buildings, you know, with a new style of painting that they developed. So Eleanor went over there and painted enormous murals. Wait a minute, I think it was Jane Seligman [ph], I'm not sure.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Jane Golden.

LEO TANGUMA: Golden, are you sure?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Golden. Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, anyway, so from there, she went to Ireland, she was invited to do murals in Ireland in a Catholic convent or church. After that—and she stayed on and on in Ireland, in that city, through the years. But from there, she went to Africa, painted in Africa, to Italy, to Thailand, to Australia. What an incredible—and of course here in Colorado. Fantastic, colorful, beautiful, beautiful works. And I was so glad to have been part of her for a while there at UNC. She graduated and went on, and she's still out there somewhere. So, you know, those folks that you touch also touch you, you know? So that's the young lady.

So after Candelaria—

JEANNE TANGUMA: What did you paint in that mural, in the stairwell?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, it's the story of this man from childhood, moving along with his community, with his life, moving on at the university.

Before that, a little bit of the history of Dr. Candelaria. He was an *hispano* from southwestern Colorado, an area where there were a lot of *hispanos* in those days. So Dr. Candelaria and his—let's see, his brothers and three sisters, or two brothers and two sisters, became orphans when the parents—one got in an accident and then the second parent died in—I forget which way, but they were left orphans. So the family had owned some land, so the Catholic church agreed to educate and house the young orphans, but the orphans had to hand over all the land of the family. So eventually, the Candelaria family said, "No way."

But then the Presbyterian church has a high school in that area called Menaul. Menaul High School. They accepted the boys, and the girls went to a Presbyterian high school in North Carolina, I believe. But that's where all the family were educated, and they all became professionals. Dr. Candelaria's brother became a Presbyterian missionary at an established church, Presbyterian church, that's in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Oh, Menaul High School is in Albuquerque, I should say.

But anyway, so that minister went all over the place, even to a church that we used to attend in southeast Denver, I believe. And another became a teacher also in high school, and the young sisters also became teachers or professors. So it was a very wonderful, wonderful, accomplished family, Dr. Candelaria here in Greeley.

[02:10:12]

So I painted the murals, began showing an image of the Menaul School where the kids had gone through and educated themselves in high school. And along the way, following the stairwell that goes up—*amor*, it's real hard to describe that—

JEANNE TANGUMA: It's okay, but just in general—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So anyway, it was quite a large mural. We also painted the central part between the stairwell, we also painted that also. And so it went, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And so it was a wonderful experience of about two years of painting—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did you teach a course while you were there?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I did. I taught a course about Chicano history and culture. That was really—

JEANNE TANGUMA: And muralism.

LEO TANGUMA: Really?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah, you taught about—

LEO TANGUMA: Chicano murals.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mexican murals.

LEO TANGUMA: I combined Mexican and Chicano murals. That's what it was! Mexican and

Chicano mural painting. But anyway, it was really also well-attended and well-received. During that time, actually, I was invited to do murals at the Platte Valley Youth Services Center. It was the correctional—it still is there—a correctional facility for young people. So I went there and met with the director and the assistant director, who was the one who invited me: Mr. Tom Chagolla.

Oh, yeah, this was another incredible experience. Because I was assigned 30 kids, right, and I thought, "Well, I'll go ahead and meet with them, but I know most of them are going to drop out." So I wound up with 15 kids, which is still quite a large number. But what we did is we met at their library like twice a week, we began to have discussions. And so I told the kids—and this was going to be a simple rectangular mural, 16 feet by 16 feet. But what I asked the kids is to draw something that had gotten them into trouble and then something that they would like to do in the future to correct their lives, to fix up their lives. And so I asked them to do one panel, and we—I designed these irregular shapes, right, panels, and so the kids were kind of interested in that. So half of that panel was going to—the small panel was going to be their problems and then their future, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And I don't know if we did 15 pieces, but we did 12 or 13 or 14, I don't remember. But they all painted their little pieces, and all these little pieces were going to be and were arranged along the bottom of the mural like a junk pile. I told the kids, "This is what you're going to do with your life, you're going to throw away all that was wrong before into this pile of discarded objects. But from that pile comes out your liberation," right? And I show three or four kids coming out of there, and they're not very well-painted, actually. But the kids were coming out of the junk pile reaching for something better. And in the midst of all these kids going upwards, I painted like a three-faced face. To one side is an African American, dark-colored person; to the right side is an Anglo person with red hair, a young girl; and in the center, there's a Chicano with a puzzle across them. Those are faces. And the Chicano kid has got a puzzle piece putting it back, back into his face, right?

So the kids loved that mural, and then we had a dedication, man, wow! The kids invited their parents [laughs] to the facility, but the kids couldn't be close to the parents so the parents were on one side of this hallway, and then there's a long, wide hallway or passageway. And at the side of one of these passageways is that tall wall, and it got off the floor, about a foot off the floor, so it's a large piece. So the kids were on the left side of the wall and then the parents were on this side, and then the kids explained the mural.

[02:15:06]

Wait, first, we had covered the mural with black plastic bags, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And so it was all covered up, so it was a very special moment when we took off the cover. And I think the kids called it *New*—something. In any case, and then they stepped up to the mural and explained what they did, what they painted, or what the mural meant, right? And all these parents are looking on, it's a beautiful thing to see. And so I don't remember if they visited together after that little reception, but in any case, the parents came up to me also and said how happy they were about their kids doing something meaningful. One of those kids, though, told me something. Not the painters, but another kid that I met in the group, said to me that—I don't know how this starts, right, because young people would come and start telling you things. Of course, it was easy to do, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: But this kid came up and started telling me that he was getting out soon because he was going to turn 20. I shouldn't call him a kid, but anyway, he had been there a couple of years. And by the way, the ages of those kids incarcerated were from 10 years old to 20 years old.

JEANNE: Oh, dear.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oof.

LEO TANGUMA: And sometimes you would see the kids marching in the group, like in a line, and you would see the taller ones and then there's the little ones, like 12 years old. I never met

anybody 10 years old, but I met 12 years old.

And so this kid says to me, "My father used to take me to Mexico and back since I was a little little kid, and he would bring back drugs." And because he had this young boy, him, he did this for years, the father, and the boy was so in love with his father, he loved his father, but he had this against him, right? Because they finally discovered his father, and they gave him a big sentence. See, that boy didn't know what to do with his life, but he had a plan, he said. He said, "I'm going to pull off something big, and if I succeed, I'm going to be well off, but if I'm not, I'm going to die." And so that was his plan. Kind of a rough plan, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: And then once in a while later, you know, you would meet somebody and say, "Remember I met you at Platte Valley?" Right, some kid that has grown over the years, right? So that's kind of like this story. I think that's the last mural, no, that I did?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Do you think—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's the last mural you did?

LEO TANGUMA: That I did in my life, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

JEANNE TANGUMA: But you did other murals at schools, at—

LEO TANGUMA: Where else did I do something?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, in Pueblo—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —and I think one in Greeley and Estes Park and—

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yes, of course, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —Boulder. He worked in many schools working with children.

LEO TANGUMA: I did, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: And how did that affect the children when you were working in those schools, doing those murals?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, I can tell you—I don't know how much time you have.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, so what year was that, the one you thought was last?

LEO TANGUMA: That was in 2001, I believe.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, and since then you've—but you have been working in schools?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I forgot about that. We painted a mural in—a sculptural mural in Estes Park, which is a small town in—

JEANNE TANGUMA: In the mountains.

LEO TANGUMA: —Rocky Mountain National Park. It's a beautiful surrounding, man, the most spectacular mountains and beauty, you know. So I was invited to do a mural with kids there. A teacher just calls me one day and says, Could I do a mural with her kids? I thought Estes Park, man, that's about 30 miles from—no, it's about 40 miles from here. Anyway, so I agreed, and I met with the kids, and I had done this kind of mural before, that I call a composite mural. I'm sure others have done it too, but what I've done in the past is have kids do kind of like a diamond-shaped panel, divided into 16 parts, and each part is a little diamond shape also.

[02:20:00]

So what I did at Estes Park is I asked the kids to do a diamond like that, but not only a diamond on a wall, right, but a diamond within a—what do you call this?—like a shrine, like a little

building with a little roof—

JEANNE TANGUMA: An altar?

LEO TANGUMA: —and then at the bottom an altar, but within that shrine is the diamond that the kids were going to paint. And what I told the kids is draw—first, they have to prepare their drawing that's going to be on their little diamond shape, and they're sort of cut out of plywood pieces, they're all given individually to artists, maybe one or two young artists on each little panel. And the panels were about, I don't know, maybe not even a foot tall, but anyways, about this size.

Each kid or kids did a different panel, but I told the kids, "What I want you to draw and we'll paint later is what you love the most in life, right? Or maybe what you love most in the environment, let's say." Because I was thinking of the place where we were at, in mountains and so on. "What do you love most about the environment?" I forget how I put it, but the idea wound up that they were going to paint about their environment in the mountains, right?

So, man, these kids drew waterfalls—to be painted with waterfalls, the bear here and the mountain lion, the mountains, fantastic little ideas that they had. Because these kids are aware of what's all around them, right? It's just so fantastic this idea, like religious, I don't know what it is. But they all drew something about the beauty that's all around them that they loved. And I have a nice video about that, by the way.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: And so the kids were all drawing the little panels, then we put up—we built, actually with some parents that helped us build the little shrine building, a little building, with a little roof sticking out of the wall, with the little walls and with a long—actually, it's like a sitting area, but I know some people called it an altar at the base of this.

Also, some of the moms came and painted, to the sides of the shrine, flowers, wild flowers from Colorado, right, the mountains, the columbine especially. And behind the shrine, there's a light blue, like sky-blue, but it turns and goes real dark to the right up. And so one college student did stars and the moon and so on, on that part, so it was an exciting project, right. And so at the dedication, then, the kids were talking about the mural, and these were like, I don't know, seven or eight, maybe younger kids all, and I have that wonderful video. And they're all coming up to the microphone [laughs] and talking about the little mural, or the giant mural. So the mural now has been done by elementary school kids, parents, moms and dads, and teachers.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And you have these videos?

LEO TANGUMA: I have videos of that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: And let me see, I think I did another—

JEANNE TANGUMA: The one in Boulder, *Mi Querida Madre*?

LEO TANGUMA: That's right. We did another one.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Leo, how do you forget these murals? [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: How do I forget them?

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know, but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm glad Jeanne's here to remind.

LEO TANGUMA: —in my mind—but I don't know how much time you have. I would like to talk, if you don't mind, for another 30 or 40 minutes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure, well, how about two questions that will probably fill that time and gets us to the present?

LEO TANGUMA: Sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You can answer it either order, however order you want: What are you working on now today? And then I would love to hear about the recent restoration of the Houston mural.

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Oh, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think that's a good place to wrap up.

LEO TANGUMA: Well, right now, I was asked to do a design for a mural, part of a building that's going to be painted in southwest Denver. It's called La Alma Park, and there's like beautiful buildings, actually. And so there's many walls available for paintings around part of those buildings. There's more than one building, but in any case—

JEANNE TANGUMA: It's a recreation center—

LEO TANGUMA: Right, right.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —community—mm-hmm [affirmative].

JEANNE TANGUMA: Is this where Emanuel has a mural on a recreation center?

LEO TANGUMA: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That park?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes.

LEO TANGUMA: That's Alma Park.

JEANNE TANGUMA: That's the park.

LEO TANGUMA: That's where his mural is.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great.

LEO TANGUMA: And he's also one of the three mural painters: myself, Manuel, and Carlota Espinoza. And they called us the Three Oldies or something like that. [They laugh.]

[02:25:07]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah. But my design is—and I'm already working on it—is about the history of San Luis, this little southern Colorado, beautiful little town, established by *hispano* settlers from New Mexico. So I'm designing that—no, I've already designed it in pencil, but I'm doing two large panels to practice, you know, because I haven't painted large images in a long time, and my right arm is kind of bad. So I'm drawing on four-by-eight plywood panels the arrival of the *hispanos* and the reception by the *indios*, right, in that area. So that's what I'm working on right now.

Now, the mural in Houston, Canal Street mural, was redone in the last two years by a young artist from Houston, named—I forgot his first name, I think it's Mario Figueroa, but they call him Gonzo247. This is a fantastic graffiti artist, but a very very good artist in other ways too. In any case, he was hired, I recommended him actually, so he was hired to redo all that. And this is a guy that can do anything, man. Scaffolds, painting high, you know, standing on a little platform 20 feet above the ground, painting the lettering on this mural. A fantastic guy, real real friendly, and everybody loves this guy, fantastic. So he redid the whole mural, first by—I gave him photographs and slides of the whole mural, and he had prints made, of about a foot tall I think, and he put all the photographs together and did this like one photograph of the whole extended mural. And from there, he did drawings that he had on a grid pattern on paper. And then this grid pattern, because he did the wall also in a grid panel and he—from across the street, you know, with a powerful projector, he projected all the images of the whole mural on the whole thing across just—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Two hundred and forty feet.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So a very different way from when you made it, a very different method.

LEO TANGUMA: I had no grid, man, I did it from memory. I just planned out there and started drawing, I had no grid panel, I only had drawings that I wanted to do. But Gonzo did. And it had to be done this way, or otherwise it would have been like a long time and difficult to do. But the way he did it was the most practical way, the best way to do it. So the—

JOSH T. FRANCO: What did you learn about him?

LEO TANGUMA: See, first, this woman from the Harris County Engineering Department in Houston called me and said that they had gotten some funds to redo the mural, that it was in really really bad shape over the years; it was peeling, almost totally peeled off. So she said that they had funds to redo the mural, Would I like to do it? I told them, "You know, I'm not able to do it, to climb scaffolds, and so on." But she said they had a couple of names, but one that they thought might be good was Gonzo. And so I read up on him, I looked him up on the Internet, and I thought, Wow, this is the guy! So I called back, and I said, "I think Gonzo should do it." So I write a letter of recommendation, he was hired, and he got to work on this.

We agreed, though, that he would change nothing of what I had painted years ago, but on the other hand, he could use any color scheme that he wanted, right? So that's what we did. He copied the whole thing just the way we had done it originally in 1972, '73. And 40—I don't know, 40 years later, it's being redone by Gonzo. And no help. I think he had help briefly by an artist, that was it. And he redid the whole thing. He painted it. He tried to copy what I had done, I know it's different in many places, but he finally had a dedication or rededication, I guess, and they blocked off the street and they set up some temporary covers. You know, it's a very beautiful arrangement they did, these folks.

[02:30:04]

And so they had Gonzo and me talk, and talk about the mural. The one thing funny that happened, I thought, they had these little banners, you know, with the mural, the whole mural on a banner, and it said, "Leo Tanguma, Gonzo." And so they asked us to—people lined up to get us to sign our autographs on these little forms. But I don't know—but Gonzo went [demonstrates sound of rapid-fire autographing] like that.

JEANNE TANGUMA: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: Me, I was doing this beautiful, tiny, and so—[they laugh]. It's so funny. Anyway, so we got through that. And he did beautiful colors, I think.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Did you paint on the mural at all, Leo?

LEO TANGUMA: Sure, I mean, I painted the best I could with—you know, this way and down, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Because I can't mark for very long, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, that's nice you got to do some of it.

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I did, I was real real glad. When we were painting on the mural, by the way, you know, maybe—I don't know how long before the unveiling. You don't remember? I don't know six, seven months before the actual unveiling, I'm painting with Gonzo, and we're up on a movable motorized scaffold that he has. So we're up on the scaffold, I don't know, 20 feet off the ground, painting, and people began to stop by, and somebody might say to me, "Hey, Leo, remember me?!" You know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, really?

LEO TANGUMA: Years before, we painted. So people in groups, you know, like on a weekend, they would stop and say, "You know, you and me are related, right?" [Laughs.] So I began to meet people from the family back in Beeville, other people, and now we're older, and we have grandkids and so on. And so we met so many people from all over the place, people that I had known, even people that had destroyed my mural at the University of Houston—well, there were

a couple anyway. And so, I don't know, it was like going back in time, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so I'm meeting all these people. One time, there is a group of bicyclists, I don't know, it's 20 or 30 people, they stopped to look at the mural. So they want a little explanation of what it means, you know. So I don't know if Gonzo minded, but I went on and explained what we had done 40 years before and what we're still—what Gonzo was now reviving. So it was a fantastic, beautiful experience, not only for me and Gonzo but for the community, man, that came. They closed up the streets. I even saw some cops go like this to me, you know, so, I thought, "Wow, what a change from the Houston I knew."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yeah, I was going to say, doesn't it seem extraordinary for the city? You know, it wasn't even a fight, they came after you and asked to do this.

LEO TANGUMA: Right, and it was really not the city of Houston but the county, Harris County.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: And so I think they left Houston behind in this, you know? But in any case, it's located in the Second Ward area of Houston, on the far far side of the Second Ward and then there's Magnolia, these were two Chicano barrios. When I was there, they were heavily, heavily Chicano, *mexicano*, but now it's more mixed.

In any case, when we first painted the mural, and I've written about this for—there was something magical about the whole effort, man, because people are beginning to see something so enormous, right? And it's about them, right? So we had people come over even trying to give us drugs, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: I said, "No, I'm—I don't do that," you know? "How about beer?" "Yes, [laughs] I do beer," so they began to bring us six packs, right? Not only one six pack, but two or three [laughs] six packs! What am I supposed to do? [Laughs.] So we drank a lot of beer, but we never, never got drunk.

And there was one time, this boy that used to paint with us, his name is Tony Guerrero. And so on a weekend, Tony is with us and then adults come by. So one time, this tipsy lady, Dr. So-and-So, you know, a professor, wanted to paint with us. So what we did usually when people came to paint with us, especially the figures, we would say, "Well, Sparks can paint with you, you know, to help you out."

[02:35:01]

But when this lady came to us, nobody else but Tony Guerrero, so I said, "Okay, ma'am, Tony is going to help you, right, with the shading and so on." And she said, "Okay." So she climbed up on the scaffold, not too far up, thank goodness, because she fell, later she fell. But anyway, at one point, Tony came and said, "You know, that lady won't listen to me. I tried to tell her, but she said, 'No.' And I knew she was drunk already a little bit, but now she's drinking out of her purse, she's got a bottle." So Tony said, "She won't listen to me." So I went and told the lady, "You know, I'm so sorry, but we can't let you paint with us because"—oh, and she had fallen—no, no, wait, that's when she fell, when I'm talking to her. But thank goodness, there's a little bit of grass in that area, right, so she didn't get hurt. But she got up saying something about, "You stupid people," right? And she walked off. But that was a little experience we had with—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, it could've been worse.

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah, [laughs] it could have been worse. But then—

JEANNE TANGUMA: But, Leo, during the recreation of the mural, Gonzo had the outlines of the figures all up on the wall and then he wanted to start in the central portion with the flower and the Chicano couple. And no paint was on the mural, and then I was watching from the street talking to people in Spanish and English and explaining the mural, and then you got on the scaffold, the motorized scaffold. You went up there, and Gonzo gave you the paint to put up. What did you paint then? The Chicano Brown?

LEO TANGUMA: Oh, yeah.

JEANNE TANGUMA: The Chicano Brown, and I was on the street with the people, and they were practically applauding because, you know, he was painting them and their color and their pride. And it was so beautiful, from my perspective across the street talking to people, and they were saying, "They're painting us." And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JEANNE TANGUMA: —Gonzo was so sensitive and thoughtful in the way he recreated this mural, that he made sure that Leo was the first one to take the Chicano Brown—was what they called it, and it's beautiful—and paint the first bit on there. Do you remember that?

LEO TANGUMA: Yes, I do. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

LEO TANGUMA: So, you know, many years earlier, we had to paint Chicano Brown in gallons and gallons, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEO TANGUMA: So I mixed [laughs] like five-gallon bucket—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Of enamel. [Laughs.]

LEO TANGUMA: —of enamel, and I called that, "This is Chicano Brown!" [They laugh.] Whoever painted with us had to pour a little bit in their little cups that they had or cans and so everybody knew that brown to be Chicano Brown. So we had to mix it in gallons, like I said, of [laughs] Chicano Brown paints. So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, inventing that color is a great contribution to American art. [They laugh.]

LEO TANGUMA: I don't know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's like Yves Klein Blue, or—yeah—there's—yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: Anyway, so that's what happened in the dedication. See, Gonzo spray-painted that mural, right?

JEANNE TANGUMA: Some of it—

LEO TANGUMA: No, no, no—

JEANNE TANGUMA: No, no.

LEO TANGUMA: Some of it is—

JEANNE TANGUMA: Some of it, the big areas.

LEO TANGUMA: But it is painted with acrylic paint.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yes, which is wonderful.

LEO TANGUMA: And then one thing we had not done at the original mural was cover it with any kind of protective coating. Gonzo did.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Good.

LEO TANGUMA: So I'm so glad for that, because that mural faces south, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: It gets a lot of sunlight throughout the day. You know, we just couldn't afford to do it. Anyway, I didn't have the money to buy that protective coating, but Gonzo did. So Gonzo was so, so good. We became real good friends and then we—he came to Denver actually a couple of times, he and his wife Caroline.

JEANNE TANGUMA: So what did that mural mean to Gonzo as a young person when he would be there by the mural?

LEO TANGUMA: Well, he said that on his way to school, he would pass by it every day because they lived, I don't know, a couple of blocks, maybe a block away from the mural. So he said that he wanted to be an artist by looking at that mural when he was a kid. And there were other people that have told me similar things that kind of lived in Houston, maybe not in that area, but that the mural had inspired them to become artists or to paint murals.

[02:40:03]

JEANNE TANGUMA: Yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So what else about the dedication?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, I think that's just such a great full circle because—

LEO TANGUMA: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —this interview includes the full story of the original and now the restoration.

LEO TANGUMA: Right. Yeah, so—

JEANNE TANGUMA: With a happy ending.

JOSH T. FRANCO: A happy ending, yeah. It must be like a relief to know it'll last that much longer.

LEO TANGUMA: Another 40 years I hope.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

LEO TANGUMA: So, what was the other question you had?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You answered it.

So here's a final, final question if you're ready. You're ready?

LEO TANGUMA: I'm ready.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. You know, so this is Smithsonian. These things we gather, you know, they're different from interviews for magazines and things because they're for—our audience is, we imagine, in 100 years, and we say things like that. So what do you want to tell that audience? So imagine 100 years, someone's reading the Leo Tanguma oral history, what's the last thing you want to leave them with?

LEO TANGUMA: I think that not only in murals, but in all forms of art or communications, the human experience has got to be protected with all these accomplishments and possibilities from the technology and information that we now have. We consider this incredible experience, this monumental experience of human beings striving from our early beginnings through today. And like Siqueiros says, into the cosmos, right? But into the future, let's say. That our art reflects the best qualities that we have as human beings.

I would recommend this especially for murals, right, because this is in the midst of communities or can be. In airports or in the *barrio*, in the poorest areas, for us to consider that, the imagery of the past and what we see in the future, to be reflected in our creativity and our thoughts in the poetry, songs, paintings, poetry, all the forms of expression that you consider the vast human experience, and we Chicanos are part of it. Like I focus, we are part of a great humanity. And that's the way I think our arts, our expressions should be, to bear in mind always the human experience, to become familiar, to study it, and to see the wondrous things that we have been through, right? So I think in a nutshell, that's what I would say.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. Well, thank you, thank you, Jeanne, and thank you, Leo.

LEO TANGUMA: Thank you, man.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Thank you.

LEO TANGUMA: Hope for the best.

JEANNE TANGUMA: Take care.

[END OF TRACK tangum21_2of2_digaud_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]