Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Enrique Chagoya, 2001 July 25-August 6

The digital preservation of this interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Enrique Chagoya on July 25, July 26 and August 5, 2001. The interview was conducted in San Francisco, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Kara Maria is also present. Funding for the interview is from the Smithsonian Institution Latino Initiative.

Interview

EC: Enrique Chagoya
KM: Kara Maria
PK: Paul Karlstrom

SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A, 25 JULY 2001
PK: So, starting this interview, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, it'll be a two session interview with San Francisco artist, Bay Area artist, Enrique Chagoya. The interview is part of the Smithsonian Latino Initiative Documentation Project. The date is July 25, 2001. Interview is being conducted for the Archives by Paul Karlstrom. This is tape one, side A.

Enrique, here we are, the introduction is out of the way. I just want to say that I'm looking forward to this, because I've admired your work. Just to give some context to this — it seems to me, over recent years you've been getting more and more prominence, with many exhibitions. And you are currently on the faculty at Stanford University. I don't know, how long has that been?

EC: I've been there five years, I believe.

PK: Five years.

EC: Yes. So I'm going to, hopefully, obtain tenure. But I don't want to count on it yet. It's hard.

PK: So are you in painting?

EC: Yes, painting and printmaking, basically.

PK: Oh, printmaking, too.

EC: And graduate seminars.

PK: At any rate, I guess one could say, very well established here in the community. And so naturally, I'm interested on behalf of everybody else who's going to want to listen to this or read it, to find out more about you and your background, and, well, your own story, but then of course, very much to the point where the art imagery and interests come from.

EC: Well, I was born in Mexico City in 1953. And my father studied painting. He actually had a degree in art. But he never made a living as an artist. He became a fire fighter, and then eventually, he got a very interesting job in the Central Bank working as an internal intelligence for the bank. He had a museum of crime in his office, and he used to bring me to it when I was a kid. But he never quit painting. He was painting at home at night, in the evenings, during his vacation time. And he gave me my first lessons in drawing and painting when I was about seven years old. He even taught me

color theory, how to sketch. And I loved it. I never quit after that. I began to do all kinds of drawings, cartoons with my friends and my teachers. Even though through my educational years I went to architecture first, then anthropology, then social sciences… I ended up studying political economy for four years.

PK: Where was that?

EC: In the Universidad Nacional Autonòma de Mexico, or the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

PK: That's the big one, right?

EC: Yes. At the time, it was big, too. It was about a quarter of a million students. Right now, it serves about a million students. Unfortunately, the university's quality of education is going down, as far as I know, just hearing from students who have quit that school. But when I went there, back in the seventies, it was, perhaps the best school I could go to study. I really loved it. There were a lot of political refugees from Latin America teaching at the university, a lot of intellectuals who fled from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Central Americans, as well as Spanish refugees, some of them were already old, but from the Spanish Civil War, and a lot of really good Mexican intellectuals, as well.

PK: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but it sounds very much like the late thirties, but especially with the advent of Nazism, with the terrific influx into the U.S., particularly New York, of the refugees from Europe, the Jewish refugees. It sounds like a similar situation.

EC: Oh, yes, and it was very active in the national politics. Also, it was right after the wave of 1968. I remember my mother one day arrived crying from work. She saw a police shooting an eleven year old kid, and she was very upset. And this was 1968. This was before the massacre of October 2nd, which was the end of the movement. October 2nd was a few weeks before the Olympic Games started.

PK: Yes, I remember.

EC: So, but there were demonstrations all over before the massacre, for the whole year, basically. And one of those demonstrations got bloody, and my mother was totally upset. By the way, my mother had a very good influence on me, too. She was very sincere about her beliefs, in terms of what's right or wrong. She was not politically savvy or anything like that. She was just a very good hearted person. She used to run a micro-sweat shop in the back of the house, although she paid her workers very well. She had only eight seamstresses. My mom had a very small business, and she actually sat with them and worked with them, and they loved her. They used to have a New Year's celebration, and they would bring food to my mom, and things like that. She had a very personal relationship with them. I used to help her as a kid and that granted me any unconditional support from my mom in anything I wanted to do. So I had very supportive parents in that sense.

PK: They were educated people.

EC: Not, at the college level. My dad's art career was more into graphic design, for instance.

PK: It sounds as if he knew, color theory and so forth, he must have had some training.

EC: Yes, he did. He finished his career. But my mom didn't go beyond secondary school. At the time, her parents didn't want her to study. It was believed that women should not go to school; they should just get ready to get married and a family.

PK: And have babies.

EC: And have babies, so that, unfortunately for my mother, was not the best scenario. But she was just very aware of what was just and what was not. I remember when she came back from work that day, she was delivering some merchandise in downtown, and came back so upset. And I didn't understand why that was happening and neither did she. And I have had a curiosity for social problems since then.

PK: You did?

EC: Yes. I mean, that's part of that curiosity. And even though I didn't participate in the students' movement in '68, I was only about fourteen years old, something like that. I was a little too young then I participated in the next wave of the student movement, which was 1971. I joined them and we organized the first demonstration in 1971, just to improve our school curriculum. Somehow, the demonstration expanded to workers, some workers' rights, and unions joined. But the demonstrations were forbidden by the government since 1968. This was the very first demonstration and it was forbidden, but we did it anyway. And there was another very bad massacre. See, in '68, about 500 people were killed. And in '71, we don't know, but somewhere between 70 and a hundred people were killed. And I had to run for my life in that one. There was a point when we got confronted by paramilitary groups that had bamboo sticks with knives at the end of the bamboo. And they were just coming at us. I remember behind me, there was a group of kids from a high school in Coyoacàn. They were the children of the intellectuals of Coyoacàn. I was in a different high school in the south of the city, in Coapa, which was less political and…

PK: How do you spell that place?

EC: It's C-O-A-P-A. And it was a huge campus, a beautiful campus. But it was very violent, too. There were a lot of paramilitary gangs, these guys, students…

PK: You mean they allied themselves with the state, with the government. But they weren't official, police.

EC: No, they pretended to be students, but they looked like, to us, twice as our age. And sometimes they smuggled drugs into the school, or they will actually clean your money; when you enter the school, there will be a little bunch of them, and they will go through your pockets. And if you didn't let them, they'll beat you up. I mean, it was just… And the teachers, nobody did anything. If they called the police, they would not do anything, and… So it was…

Anyway, this group was something we wanted to get rid of and, the demonstration was one of those things we were trying to call attention to these kind of problems. That was happening in all the high schools, not only ours, even in Coyoacàn.

So anyway, the kids from Coyoacàn were behind us in this demonstration, and they were all screaming, "Don't run, don't run!" And we were ready to confront these people, with their bamboo sticks. And then I just turned to see how many people altogether we were, see if we were enough to fight with these people. And there was nobody behind me. There were two friends of mine and myself, and I said, "Just run!" So we ran. We barely escaped, because we were waiting for them to confront us, but we were left alone. We escaped into this little store where the gate was closing down. And I flew, like a cat. I don't know, ten feet in the air. I just remember it was to close, and it was my only hope. I just jump rolled inside and immediately these metallic gates rolled down. A friend of mine did the same thing. The two of us just rolled underneath the big curtain, before it shut

down. Right there were all the people who said, “Don’t run.” They were inside, totally terrified. I mean, outside there were shootings and people screaming. And everybody was very quiet inside, and we waited for three or four hours, until everything was quiet outside. Then we began to leave, two at a time. That’s how we escaped that massacre. But that left a big imprint in my mind. It was a life changing experience, perhaps.

When I arrived home, there was nothing in the news except saying that there was a fight among students, and that there were about four people killed. You knew that the reality was a different reality. That was my first lesson in how society works, and how the politics of the state — at least in Mexico — works. So some of my friends quit getting involved in any politics, it was so scary. And other friends went even more radical than me. But you cannot escape thinking about it.

After that, I went to college, and I began to explore different possibilities.

PK: So this was all in high school.

EC: I was still in high school. I was maybe seventeen years old. I was lucky to have really good, curious friends. And we were reading everything that was forbidden, maybe. I began to read a lot of Marx, a lot of Mao Tse-tung, a lot of Che Guevara.

PK: What did your parents think of this? You said they weren’t particularly political or ideological.

EC: Right. They actually didn’t forbid me to do anything. And as I said, my mom, the only thing she was afraid of was of me being killed.

PK: You’re being hurt, of course.

EC: Right. My dad didn’t quite have any opinion about it. My mom was just nervous. But she was not happy with the government either. But my mother will not go to a demonstration.

PK: I think I’m getting a feeling for this, that even though your father was somewhat neutral, it sounds to me that there was an environment which would make it easy for you to recognize the right and the wrong, and to not accept the situation and the way the government, the state, was dealing with the…

EC: Also, when you are a teenager, you are so rebellious, in a way. Luckily, I had friends. One had a library that his brother had. His brother was studying social sciences and he had a library, [with] two rooms, wall-to-wall full of books. We were borrowing books from him. We read anything, from all these Marxist theories, and a lot of really good literature. We were reading anything from Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, all these books. Who else? We read Aldous Huxley, all the Latin American writers, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Carlos Fuentes.

PK: So you were running around with a group of young intellectuals.

EC: We loved to create trouble in the classroom to the teachers. That’s why we did it. We loved to argue with our teachers. It was a kind of youthful energy that you had, but luckily, well channeled, rather than being rebellious for no cause. We began to read a lot of poetry; also, theater; we went to see a lot of Latin American films. Somehow we got some social consciousness at a very early age. Then all of my friends went to study social sciences. I was also taking some art classes on the side. I was taking some woodcut workshops that were given for no credit by the university, as well.

PK: You mean there was no sort of major or program in art?

EC: Oh, yes, there was, but I guess my father was the wrong role model for me. I thought: I will never make a living as an artist. So I tried architecture as an alternative. And I hated the math and engineering aspects of it. The only classes I liked were some landscape drawing that we had to do, and another class which was more liberal, with Mathias Goeritz, who was a German who immigrated to Mexico.

PK: This was the teacher?

EC: Yes, one of my teachers. He did the towers, these big, huge towers, in colors, and satellites. He did it with Barragán.

PK: So they met in Mexico.

EC: In Mexico City.

PK: Yes. What's his name again?

EC: It's Mathias Goeritz. G-O-E-R-I-T-Z Goeritz, Mattias Goeritz.

PK: But he was your teacher of architecture?

EC: Yes. I didn't last more than one semester. But that was one of my favorite classes.

PK: So by this time, even though you didn't acknowledge it openly, it sounds to me as if you're already being drawn to what you really wanted to do.

EC: Right.

PK: Become some sort of an artist.

EC: Yes and not, the rest was more the emphasis of how many chances you wanted to take in whatever decision you did. And well, since I thought I will not make a living as an artist I tried architecture; as I say, I didn't last more than six months. Then I went to study anthropology, social anthropology. It's a really good school. At the time, it was a great school in Mexico, right on top of the Museum of Anthropology.

PK: So then it just opened up?

EC: I think they have a new campus now somewhere else.

PK: But I mean the museum opened in the early sixties, didn't it?

EC: Yes, in the sixties, late sixties. Right. I think so.

PK: Yes, my wife, Ann, and I saw it not too long after we were married, which was in about '64. I guess it was practically brand new. We must've gone in '68. Is that possible?

EC: Yes, I think it might have been opened… No, I think you're right. I think it might have been opened in the early sixties. Pedro Ramirez Vasquez was one of the architects.

PK: It was a fabulous museum. Well, let's pause a moment and talk about this. Because my sense is that the existence of that institution and you studying social anthropology must have been formative.

EC: Yes, that was a good effect. I loved it. It was great going there. The only thing was that the focus of a lot of the issues was being done through the history of economics. At some point, I decided to just go straight to study history of economics and political economy. So I switched careers in a year, basically; I was studying political economy at the National Autonomous University. And I loved it. It was so great to go there. We criticized everything. Even Marx got criticized. He got chopped to pieces in our classes and not necessarily from the right. But just to give you an example — we criticized the fact that he was so Euro-centric. And he even had some racist comments, believe it or not. There are some essays regarding the war between U.S. and Mexico that he wrote for a newspaper in New York, and he said, “Well, the Mexicans are just bullies, like the Spaniards, but worse, more primitive,” something like that. Thanks, Marx. And there we were reading anything, from his affairs with, his maids. We were reading in detail the lives of all of these people, Lenin’s biography by his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya. And it’s funny to read that Lenin could not sleep when he was thinking that he did something totally wrong. He was not sure he did the right thing, and he just could not sleep.

PK: He was so anxious.

EC: Either that or he had a big ego, he could not make mistakes.

PK: This is really interesting, because you’re self-describing a part of the student movement of those days that was very powerful, very potent, and there was a big attraction — at least in France — to Chairman Mao, which I have to admit, I thought was a bit wrong-headed, and now almost everybody agrees with that. I don’t like the Cultural Revolution, but the French especially could look the other way

EC: Alright. I mean, there was a tradition…

PK: I’m just wondering how you and your friends were on some of these issues. How you would describe your position, in terms of ideology and the world events.

EC: It was very out of any boxes. I mean, we criticized the Communist Party as being infallible, making mistakes because everything the Communist Party did was wrong from the beginning. I think that was the influence of the school. The school was great, because a lot of refugees that have dealt with many problems with all the Communist Parties in Latin America, or with just bureaucracies, even with the left, had a very critical perspective. They were not necessarily right wingers, either, but more real scientists, in a way. For instance, one of my favorite teachers of philosophy, he studied in the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow with dissident teachers, who were not right wingers, either. Because these Russian intellectuals were so critical of their government, they works were never translated into any language, so our teacher had books published by some of his teachers in Russian. And he would be translating from Russian to Spanish in the middle of the class, and we were just taking notes and discussing the philosophy. That was just one class.

In another class, we studied Das Kapital for four semesters, at least, if not more. And we started by just dissecting the letters. We criticized his overly Darwinist approach, because what he’s saying was: Whatever happened in England is going to happen in the rest of the world; therefore, I don’t have to study the rest of the world, is what he was saying. He got criticized for not writing more in depth of India or Asia, when a lot of events were happening there, or Latin America. He would say something, in Latin. “I’m talking about your own story” [De tu fibula narrator.].

PK: Right, right.

EC: But that was his Darwinism, because the reality was way more complex. Actually, Lenin had a really good phrase for that. "The tree of theory is gray always, while the tree of life is green."

And somehow, we were studying in this school all the history of economic thinking, from the Greeks all the way to neo-liberal economy, at the time, was beginning to be shaped. This is the economy that rules the world today.

PK: Global economy.

EC: Right. Even, we were studying, anywhere from Aristotelian theories of value of merchandise, all the way through Marx, Keynes, John Kenneth Galbraith, Milton Friedman, the Chicago boys, all that. And it always was with a critical perspective. There was so much discussion at the university. Teachers also were arguing against each other, passionately. So people were screaming at each other in the auditoriums for a particular discussion on what political project will be good for South America, or a lot of things like that.

PK: Well, this sounds most interesting. Also, extremely relevant to how I imagine your own career interests develop at this critical perspective is not necessarily typical of the left, because the left historically being dogmatic and doctrinaire, not that the right isn't.

EC: No.

PK: There was an ability to turn away from the realities. If you just looked at something objectively, you could see the injustice there and the mistaken. But if it fit within the ideology, the left, Marxist ideology, you and your group within that situation weren't what you would call absolutely focused and loyal Marxists in your thinking.

EC: Yes, we were not really Marxists because we were mostly trying to get information from anywhere, especially the things that were forbidden and somehow we were more curious about it. So I would say the development of the ideas was a very rough process. I mean, there were some points when you want to believe that there is a new future for the world, where everybody's going to be equal; that the revolution's around the corner and you are very idealistic about it. How can I say it? The dogmatisms of some of the leftist groups are in the hopes that that will be changed in the future.

PK: And the ends justify the means.

EC: No, but then we learned that when the means are inhuman, it means the ends somehow are also, inhuman.

PK: This is fascinating. We don't need to carry, on too long, but you must've been very interested in Castro and what was going on in Cuba.

EC: In Cuba, right.

PK: That's pretty close at hand. That must've been a real study or topic of conversation for you.

EC: No, Cuba…

PK: The relationship to the Soviet Union.

EC: Yes, Cuba was a big influence in all of intellectuals. Not only Mexico but throughout Latin

America, even the U.S., especially in the early sixties. There was hardly any intellectual that was not supportive of the Cuban Revolution, especially because Mexico came out of another revolution, and Cuba was the second revolution in the continent in the 20th century. But that was the beginning of a very complex relationship with a place like Cuba. I went to Cuba in 1990. And it was a very shocking disappointment for me.

PK: Shocking reality.

EC: Well, yes, I mean, it's a country in a political crisis, and an economic crisis, as well. And not everything could be blamed to the U.S. blockade because they somehow managed to open up all their markets through Mexico or through Europe. But what is a little disconcerting was the heavy presence of bureaucracy that doesn't really care for social changes or for the social well being of the country.

SESSION 1, TAPE ONE, SIDE B

EC: It's the corruption of the Cuban bureaucracy. And I think, it is not different than most bureaucracies all over the world. Now, Mexico has a terrible bureaucracy. I lived in France, in Paris, for eight months, and the bureaucracy there was horrible even as bad as Cuba. But the thing about Cuba was that it was a hope for Latin America that collapsed. And even people who were very supportive of Fidel in Mexico, people like Eduardo del Rio Ruis, who is a very famous cartoonist in Mexico, he did a lot of books, like Cuba for Beginners, Che for Beginners, things like that, he recently did a book about Cuba, and criticizing Fidel heavily, so even the left in Mexico has been critical of Fidel. But again, it's a very complex problem. Any revolution that needs a leader for more than a few years is doomed, because when that leader is gone, so is the revolution, basically. It's in the hands of pretty terrible bureaucrats and doesn't last very long. There's no alternative yet to what to do with bureaucracies.

And the other thing is that it's a problem of the Cubans, very much, that the Cubans need to resolve. And in that sense, even though, there are things that are hard to change, it's not a problem for the U.S. to resolve, or for Mexico to resolve, but Cuba or for any other country to resolve. As I see it, it's more a problem of the Cubans. And perhaps that might be what I believe. Whatever problems a society has within itself have to be resolved by that society, otherwise, it becomes a problem of intervention. It's like when we had the crisis with Bill Clinton. What if a more powerful country invaded us and said, "You don't know how to deal with your crisis."

PK: What do you mean, Monica?

EC: Right, Monica. Or let's say when Richard Nixon had to be forced out-of-office, suddenly the Soviet Union is invading this country saying, "Hey, we're going to bring you some democracy, less corruption to your country."

PK: Gore and Bush.

EC: Or the elections. The last elections, right. They're still investigating the elections.

PK: Well, of course, you're talking about issues of power and spheres of influence. But, I appreciate what you're saying, especially in terms of, trying to establish where you are, in terms of your own social views, which I gather are fundamental to your art, that these were brought in. Well, so we took this nice long digression about the politics and all and I think it's really useful. Let's jump back to the university. We're still in university.

EC: So, well, then I finished studying economics. I was about to start writing my thesis, when I got a job as an economist in the countryside and at the same time working different social projects. I started working as an artistic director for publications in a literacy campaign in the poorest neighborhood outside of Mexico City, which was Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl.

PK: Can you spell that?

EC: Nezahualcoyotl? Yes, it's easy. It's N-E-Z as in zebra, A-H-U-A-L-C-O-Y-O-T as in Tom, L. Nezahualcoyotl. That's the name of a king, Aztec king, who…

PK: What is it now?

EC: It means the hungry coyote. And he was a peaceful king.

PK: And this is a town.

EC: And it's a town where the poorest people live outside of Mexico City. But Aztec King Nezahualcoyotl created the biggest library in the continent. It was burned by the Spaniards, unfortunately. But he was also against the sacrifices, the human sacrifice. He didn't believe in them. And he created his own version of what God is like. He built a pyramid.

PK: Where is this place?

EC: Right in the east side of Mexico, Mexico City.

PK: Oh. I mean, near Vera Cruz?

EC: No, just right outside of Mexico City. It was part of the Aztec empire. The Aztec empire was divided in three kingdoms, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, which is where Neza was, and Tiatelolco. So there were three kingdoms. It was like a triangle in the valley of Mexico.

PK: Where was Tenochtitlan?

EC: Tenochtitlan is about fifty miles to the east of Mexico City. This town (Neza) had a lot of people from the countryside coming in with no education, and basically taking over land that had no services, no water, no running water; no train, no public transportation, not paved. It was a very dusty town, with a lot of sicknesses. The infant mortality was about 50% below four years. So it was a rough place. That's where I began to do some illustrations for books. The publishing company was in the heart of this town. So I had to go there all the time and stay; make my drawings based on what I saw in the town.

There was a time when we went to visit the town. It was like an image from hell, these huge places full of trash from Mexico City. It was all the way to the horizon. And we went in a small car, four friends of mine, in a little Bug, little VW. We had to close the windows because there were so many flies. It was like a rain on the car. When you were driving through the flies, you could hear the noise of the flies in the car. But beyond the cloud of flies, we saw people with families all the way from the little two-year old to the grandmother, going through the trash. That was one of the illustrations I did for one of the books. We were using the methodology of Paolo Freire, who was a Brazilian pedagogist, whose theories of literacy were used in Cuba first, and then they were used in places like Mexico, and then later were used in Nicaragua for the really quick teaching of reading and writing. Within a month or six weeks, you could teach somebody how to read and write.

PK: What was the system?

EC: It's a system developed with generating words.This was designed by Paolo Freire. It's a Brazilian pedagogist, Paolo Freire, F-R-E-I-R-E. So I had to illustrate about twenty words with images. One was illustrating the trash. One word was transportation. Sweat shops was another word, et cetera. Things like that.

PK: So who was the publisher of these? …

EC: It was a group of Jesuits.

PK: Now, it was aside from your job as an economist.

EC: Right, I was still a student of economics, so I was working part time in this place. When I finished school, I began to work in the countryside using the method of Paolo Freire with peasants in a rural development program. There I was in charge of a team of about eight people. And that's when I first married an American. She was a sociologist, who was involved with this group. We both lived in the countryside of Vera Cruz for a couple of years, where we were both worked with all kinds of economic projects to develop in the country.

PK: Excuse me, but what was she doing there?

EC: She was coming from a Christian group in the U.S.

PK: So she was almost like a missionary.

EC: Yes. She was trying to do some work with immigrant workers in California. She was from Berkeley.

PK: Oh, that explains it. What was her name?

EC: Jeanine. Jeanine Kramer.

PK: Jeanine.

EC: Right.

PK: Now she's in the Smithsonian.

EC: She wanted to stay in Mexico and live in Mexico, but she didn't have papers, so I married her. But we fell in love and we stayed together for twelve years.

PK: Twelve years.

EC: For the first two years of that marriage, we were living in Vera Cruz, in the countryside, and she got really sick from parasites. The doctors didn't know what kind of amoebas. It's very difficult to attack the amoebas if you don't know what kind you have. They tortured her for about a year until she got appendicitis and ended up in the emergency room of a hospital in Mexico City. I didn't have any insurance, so I sold my car to pay for the expenses of that.

PK: The VW?

EC: No, it was a different one. It was a little Renault. Luckily she survived. But she was scared of

living in Mexico after that, so she wanted to move back to the States. And that's how we ended up here.

PK: What year was that?

EC: This was in the late seventies, 1977. Then she came here by herself first in '78, and then I joined her in '79. We had a small period of time exploring Texas, as well, in 1977. And we didn't like it, so I went back to Mexico City, and then she went to Berkeley, and I joined her.

PK: So you were doing a little back and forth then.

EC: Yes, we were exploring what place would be interesting for us. I finished pretty much with my school in '75. I never finished my thesis, unfortunately, and because of that I didn't get my degree in economics. That was the only thing I needed, and when we came here in'79, I wanted to continue my studies in economics. But when I checked the curriculum of the schools around the Bay Area, they were focusing on everything we criticized in Mexico. All the neo-liberal theories were the main focus of the schools. And I didn't want to get into fights with my advisors or teachers or anything like that.

PK: Were you in Berkeley at this time?

EC: Yes.

PK: Okay, so she had returned to where she had come from.

EC: I joined her.

PK: Yes. And she and you had a little house?

EC: We rented a small place in Berkeley. And we were very, very happy there. Berkeley, for me, was wonderful. I mean especially after staying in Texas. We were in Texas, in McAllen for a while. And that area of the border in Texas is so conservative, so segregated, that it was a place I never lived before. It was just scary, in a way, for me. So the contrast between Texas and Berkeley was enormous. Berkeley was a different country.

PK: How long were you in Texas?

EC: Just about eight months in '77. Six to eight months.

PK: Okay, this was your first visit to the U.S.?

EC: No, I came as a tourist when I was in high school, actually, to Los Angeles. I went to see some of the museums, and I bought a lot of art supplies and books, and went back to Mexico.

PK: You went to Flax?

EC: Something like that.

PK: Well, what I think is an important issue, the reality of what kind of information you had coming in, especially on this time when you left Texas. But there is the propaganda ideal, which is, the land of freedom and equality; and then, as we know, there's the reality. I'm just curious as to your own experience. When you were in Texas, which was very conservative, and not exactly welcoming to Mexicans, how was that experience? You said, "Whoa, wait a minute, this is not so good."

EC: Well, it was worse than I thought, compared to Los Angeles. Yes, McAllen. There were a lot of farm workers, but it was really segregated. We didn't make a friend, because the Mexican side didn't trust my wife, she was a little taller than me and totally blonde. And then the other side, the white Americans just didn't like to visit us at all. So we didn't make any friends. And after six or eight months, with the hellish weather — either freezing in the winter or super hot in the summer — we just said, "That's it. Let's get out of here." So we escaped. But moving to Berkeley was something else. At the time, there was Gus Newport, who was a socialist mayor. He, at some point, even hung up one of my posters in his office. I did some posters in support of the literacy campaign of Nicaragua, things like that.

PK: So you mean when you were in the U.S., you were still doing those kinds of jobs, or was this something you did earlier in Mexico, the poster?

EC: Yes. See, one thing I didn't mention, in Mexico, when I was a student of economics, I was also doing a lot of cartooning for newspapers.

PK: Oh, that's important.

EC: I was doing a lot of cartooning for union newspapers and for student newspapers, as well, on and off designing posters. When I came here, in Berkeley especially, I met a lot of musicians. My ex-wife was friends with jazz musicians and painters here, so I just loved it. Who wants to go back to Texas? Not that there're some good artists in Texas, too, in other places than the border, but the border was just really bad at the time.

PK: What did you do there? You must have supported yourself.

EC: We were trying to see if we could work because we were working with peasants in Vera Cruz. We were trying to see if we could work, maybe, with a union in Texas, but the union was not doing anything with the peasants. The experience was not very fruitful at all. So we got totally frustrated.

PK: Well, there was no niche for you.

EC: I was also a tourist and I didn't like being as a tourist in a different country, and getting all of the politics. So I went back to Mexico and applied for a permanent residency. It still took a year before I was able to get all the papers, to get all the permits. You have to have somebody endorsing you here, offering you a job and things like that, so it was a little difficult. But we did it anyway. And by '79 I got my residency, and I moved to Berkeley. And that's when a lot of things were happening in Nicaragua and in Central America, so there were a lot of activists in Berkeley. I began to do posters for them. It was quite a different town. Then, when I was exploring schools, I was a little disappointed with the programs in the economic schools, so that's when I switched to art. That's when I decided to take chances of becoming an artist.

PK: If you had found a really good econ program in the Bay Area, you wouldn't be an artist.

EC: Probably not.

PK: Aren't you glad that the programs weren't so good in econ here?

EC: Yes, I always wanted to be an artist, in a way, so now I found a pretext. And of course, my ex-wife thought I was crazy.

PK: She was not supportive.

EC: She was not happy about it at all. She didn't think I would be able to do something like that. That's why we're not together now. That was the beginning of the conflict I had with her. But that's more of a different story. I began to check art schools in the Bay Area and then I was able to go to the San Francisco Art Institute. And I loved it. The minute I got into the Art Institute, I don't know how to describe it, but I felt I was able to express my ideas without being afraid of being killed, for the first time. Even in studying economics, one of my teachers got killed, at some point, by the police in a confrontation. You were in danger of expressing your ideas in Mexico in the seventies. And then here, suddenly, I felt I could do political cartooning. I got involved with an exhibition that Lucy Lippard in New York was organizing. It was a campaign against intervention in Central America. That was my last year at the San Francisco Art Institute. That's when I first did my first charcoal drawings that were cartoons, big cartoons. I did one of Ronald Reagan as Mickey Mouse and it changed my artwork forever.

PK: How so?

EC: Before in Mexico, when I was doing art I had a friend who was an artist, who I met in one of these art workshops I was taking for no credit. And he invited me to work in his studio. It was about a 2,000 square foot studio. So he shared that with me. I didn't have to pay rent.

PK: That's in Berkeley?

EC: This was in Mexico, now.

PK: Oh, this is back in Mexico.

EC: Yes, Javier Kutz, that's his name. He had a brother who had a whole floor in a fancy building on Reforma Avenue. And we have a view, with glass on one whole side, and we had a view of the Angel of Independence in Mexico, right in front of it. The rest of the room was walls, huge walls. I was doing big paintings then, nonrepresentational, because I was reading a lot of constructivist theories and Kandinsky.

PK: Sort of geometric abstraction, minimalist type?

EC: In fact, I used one of those from El Lizzitsky in my painting, The Uprising of the Spirit, which kind of mimics the form of the whole picture. I was active painting in Mexico, even though I was not expecting anything, not even a show. When I moved to the States, I gave away all of my paintings. I didn't come with any of them. I lost touch with the friends I had then. The only thing I have left is a tiny, little abstract woodcut that I have somewhere in my files. But that's it.

Then at the Art Institute, suddenly I had this switch to figurative painting. When I did this cartoon of Ronald Reagan as Mickey Mouse, I was still influenced a little bit by constructivist ideas, so I did it in black and red. It looked funny and scary at the same time. It was a really big drawing, seven by seven feet. I got a kick out of it. At the time, I didn't want to make art, I was thinking about making a statement, or making a cartoon for an editorial. I was just trying to save money. I'd look for the cheapest materials, paper and charcoal. I didn't want to make a fancy painting. It was to me a political cartoon.

PK: Oh, what is the term? I mean, the statement was more than just making a political statement, it seems to me. It was perhaps even making a statement about what art is and what art can be.

EC: So I discovered a niche somehow. I opened up a door for my own work, for me to express my ideas. And I thought that that was going to be sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy, that I will not make a

living as an artist. But I was getting ready to think of surviving as a waiter or driving a taxi-cab, if I had to.

PK: Did you still have the same wife at this time?

EC: Yes, we split a bit later. At the time I finished the Art Institute, and I went to study at Berkeley.

PK: Oh, you had enrolled at Berkeley?

EC: For my masters degree, my MFA. And that's when we divorced. So that was a big time of changes for me, my artwork changed; my personal life changed. I began to work in art related projects after showing these political cartoons that I thought they're just going to put me away from making any money as an artist. I got a job teaching at the San Francisco County Jail. And it was great. It was just great. I was suddenly teaching, petty criminals. These are not the biggest criminals. These were people, who in most of the cases do what they have to do to survive, just the difficult economic situations. So they were men and women, who were arrested for being prostitutes, or drug abusers, shop lifters, whatever. They usually spend one to two years there. And it was just a great experience for me. It changed my view of the Bay Area and all this country, as well. It was a little bit of a Kafkaian experience, condemned by Kafka. It's a story of a penal colony, which I always remember. Just going in and out, through so many locks in the prison system, and then dealing with the inmates suddenly as art students, and they quit being inmates for you; they become your students. And then some of them were actually really talented. It makes you think about what society is, why these things happen. There were only a few of the inmates who took any classes, but there were many other classes besides art. There were gardening, computer programming, all kinds of things. Some of these people who took those classes never went back to prison. The rest of the population had a big rate of coming back. So for me, there was an interesting experience, seeing how education actually helps to reduce crime, in this case, rather than the prison. Anyhow, this is about the mid-eighties I'm talking about.

PK: When were you at Berkeley?

EC: The San Francisco Art Institute, I went from '81 through '84. And you will see that in my resume. And to Berkeley, I went from 1985 through '87. So that year, I was invited to direct the artistic program at Galería de la Raza in San Francisco. And that was the most exciting thing. At the time, I could not believe it. I was involved before with the Galería by helping first as a volunteer. Eventually, they saw my artwork; they began to invite me to participate even closer to them.

PK: Who was the director?

EC: Two of the founders were Rene Yanez and Ralph Maradiaga. Ralph and Rene were very supportive of many local artists. It was a great program. And they invited me to be part of their board of directors, so I joined them. Soon after that, Ralph passed away; he died from a heart attack when he was in his early fifties. That was a big loss for the Galería. After his death, a few years later, there were some internal differences among people who were running the gallery. And the director, the artistic director, Rene Yanez, resigned. So it was sort of like an emergency situation. They invited me to be an interim artistic director, so I accepted it. I organized a few shows after that, and I did some shows that were mostly political. Well, my first show there was actually an exhibition of my students from the San Francisco County Jail. And I managed to bring the inmates to the reception. They came with cops. They came in their inmates' uniform. The San Francisco Sheriff came to the opening, Sheriff Mike Hennessey, who was a very progressive sheriff, I have to say. He's very supportive of the art programs.

PK: He was the one that said it was okay that the inmates go?

EC: The inmates could come, yes. He's a really cool guy.

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing the interview with Enrique Chagoya. This is session one, on 25 July, 2001, tape two, side A. And let's see if I can get us back to where we were. We were talking about La Galería. And you had become an interim artistic director. You put on exhibitions. One question, before you go back to that wonderful reception, when the inmates came. I've interviewed Carmen Lomas Garza and Rupert Garcia, both of whom were involved with the Galería, both of whom spoke about it. But I'm not so good on the time and the overlap. And I just wondered if either of them were involved at the time you were.

EC: No. No, both of them were gone from the Galería at the time I started. The Galería de la Raza, it's very interesting; it's a small, tiny gallery. It has expanded recently. They switched rooms between the store and the gallery, they switched rooms. But it's a small space. Somehow, it made a big impact on a lot of the Chicano and Latino artists in the Bay Area, and also in Southern California, as well, because it brought a lot of artists from L.A., San Diego, the border, Fresno, and from different parts of the state. And it was one of the earliest Chicano galleries in the country. It started back in the late sixties, '69, with a group of artists trying to put together an exhibition space, since Chicano artists didn't have many venues to show their work. It was created in 1970, with about a dozen of artists. Only one woman, who was involved in the beginning, was Graciela Carrillo. And then if I recall all of the names of the original founders were Rupert Garcia, Rene Yanez, Ralph Maradiaga, Rolando Castellon was another one of the founders, and Peter Rodriguez, who later founded the Mexican Museum. Graciela Carrillo, as I mentioned, was the only woman in the group, other women joined later, like Carmen Lomas Garza, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Yolanda Lopez, briefly. The Galería de la Raza has a long history. It was also very instrumental in developing mural programs and mural projects in San Francisco throughout the seventies. Also it nurtured a lot of muralists in the city — people like Mike Rios or Ray Patlan and Eduardo Pineda even Las Mujeres Muralistas were somehow sponsored by Galería de la Raza. Later, they made their own organization. So a lot of things went through Galería de la Raza. The Day of the Dead was first organized by Galería de la Raza in San Francisco. Back in the mid-seventies, they began to do their first processions and celebrations. By the time I was in the Galería, we had processions that were about 5,000 people. It looked more like a demonstration. It has been a very vital institution for Chicano artists and everybody who had an experience through the Galería, love it. There are always some bitter stories, but in general, it has been a wonderful influence in the local arts. I worked in the Galería from 1987 through 1990. My second show was an exhibition of other prisoners. It was co-curated with Sal Garcia, who's another Chicano artist, one of my best friends, too. The two of us were working there and we co-curated this show of Puerto Rican political prisoners. We had an exhibition of paintings by Elisam Escobar and Delsia Pagan. A lot of these people are out now. At the time, they had three life sentences.

PK: They must have been on very good, good behavior.

EC: Well, some of them had their Ph.D.s, and they were, very articulate. Many of them were doing nothing different than George Washington and Jefferson did in this country when they fought for their independence against England. So they basically were more like a group of nationalist Puerto Ricans. But they were not considered political prisoners. So we had this exhibition, and then that called the attention of groups that were involved in supporting the prisoners, the lawyers, people like that came to the opening. Somehow, somebody managed to bring the same show that we had

to some space in the U.N. And a year or two later, they granted the status of political prisoners to the same prisoners. Most of them were released from prison, during Clinton, so… (Background voices) Anyhow, let me stop here for a second.

(Tape stops, re-starts)

EC: So anyhow, this exhibition of Puerto Rican political prisoners that made art was one of our shows. And then we did a lot of other shows that were very exciting for me. I had a very good team to work with. Sal would help me to design the exhibitions; and there was the other director, which was more the administrative director, who was a Puerto Rican, Umberto Cintron, who was a good fund raiser. He was sort of my Aladdin's lamp. Umberto didn't want to deal with art at all. He just wanted to do the fund raising. He told me, "You tell me what you want, I'll get the money." So I said, "Gee, this is my Aladdin's lamp. Great." We did have a good team. We had many shows. Among other things we brought a lot of artists from Mexico City. Some of them were Graciela Iturbide, who's one of my favorite photographers. We had a solo show of her. Also, during my three years, I had meetings with the board of directors and people like Carmen, who had a history of maybe being neglected by Galería de la Raza. Galería de la Raza didn't have many women's exhibitions. So during my three years, the only solo shows we had were for women artists. Just to make a balance, because in the previous years — I mean, twenty years before — the Galería de la Raza had mostly men's solo shows or group shows that were mixed, men and women.

PK: I'm not positive, but I think that Carmen mentioned this in the interview, that there was this imbalance in the early days.

EC: Right. So I was just very open to that, and made the decision that the only solo shows for a while were going to be mostly women. The first solo show was Ester Hernandez, mostly prints that she did. And it was very good. We had two-person show with Juana Alicia and Barbara Carrasco. There was solo show with a Puerto Rican artist, Christina Emmanuel. Then we had a show of Yolanda Lopez. All the things she didn't want to tell her son about being Mexican. That was the title of one of her pieces. She had all kinds of stereotypes about Mexicans hanging on the wall. We didn't do one with Carmen, because she needed more than a year notice.

PK: Well, Hadn't she had some show there before?

EC: Yes, she had shown her work in the past at the Galería. Anyway, we did other shows. My favorite ones were Day of the Dead, because I wanted to do a lot of experimental exhibitions, mixing it with traditional. That was not something I started that's something that the previous director, Rene Yanez, started. He was pretty much into looking for experimental artists. But at some point, I brought people from Mexico City to participate in Day of the Dead. I had Eugenia Vargas, who's a Chilean artist who used to live in Mexico City. Now I think she lives in Miami.

PK: How do you spell her first name?

EC: Eugenia is E-U-G-E-N-I-A. She did a performance art. She basically got naked on top of soil on the floor and had neon lights around her body. We put it together with very, very traditional alters for Day of the Dead, things that you will see in anthropology museums. We had this mixture of artists, some very contemporary. We had another artist who was very much influenced by John Cage's theories. He was coming out of the art school in Mills College. He was a composer, whose name is Manuel Rocha. He's essentially one of the Graciela Iturbide's children. He was living here for a while. So I invited him to do an altar for one of the Mambo Kings, Perez Prado, when he died in in 1989, or 1990, I believe. We did this exhibition with this sound altar. He had an old record, one of

those records that you run at 80, at that speed that is 88 revolutions per minute or something.

PK: Thirty three and a third, or 78s.

EC: Or 78. We used to play with the old fashioned. What do you call those? We call them Vitrolas in Mexico. It has a cone shape, and you hit them with a crane. So the Perez Prado music sounded from beyond; music from hell or something like that. But then these friends took the microphones outside of the Galería and put distortion sounds, and the buses and people talking that were passing by the Galería created a sound that was from beyond. But inside of the gallery, the sound was projected. So we had a naked Chilean artist in one room, and this other guy is doing this totally abstract…

PK: When was that?

EC: This was 1990. It was really fun. And we had people, like some of the curators of SFMOMA were coming to the opening. The one that used to come all the time was the curator of photography, Sandra Phillips. And Paule Anglim used to come to the openings. So at the time, it was great.

PK: Paule is your dealer, right?

EC: Yes. She's been wonderful, I have to say.

PK: That's great. She takes her artists very seriously.

EC: Yes. I mean, she believes in the art she shows.

PK: Can I just jump in with a question, because I don't want to forget it. There's another artist she represents here in San Francisco, and I think has shown him for a long time, that's Llyn Foulkes. And it's very interesting. I think of you two as having some similar interests. You don't seem quite as strange as Llyn. Do know him at all?

EC: I know his work; I never met him personally.

PK: Yes, I actually like him a lot. He has these political, social comments and he feels very strongly about corporate America, the commercialization of everything. He calls it the Disneyification. And he thinks Walt Disney is terrible. And so he hates Mickey Mouse. But he uses him. He calls him Mickey Rat sometimes. And not that we reduce art to something that simple, but some of the same images that seem to be… He did Ronald Reagan, Mickey Mouse.

EC: Right. Well, there was a book we read in economics at school, and it was called How To Read Donald Duck, by a couple of Chilean writers, Armando Mattellart and Ariel Dorfman. Anyway, Shifra Goldman mentions this book in an essay about my work in the Nevada Museum catalogue. I grew up with Mickey Mouse and Superman and all the comics. All the American programs from the sixties and seventies were translated into Spanish. You can name it, and I saw it, all the way from Rin Tin Tin, Zorro, The Lone Ranger. I used to read comics, Batman, Superman, Mickey Mouse, Little Lulu, The Archies. All of those were translated into Spanish. These were the first notions I was having about the American culture.

PK: This is what I'm interested in. Kind of the media images that you get of the U.S. outside of the U.S. Do you know Masami's work?

EC: Masami Teraoka? Yes. I like it a lot.

PK: It just comes to my mind that to the extent I understand the story, in his earlier years, before he ever came to study art in L.A., some of these same images had a big influence on him. It's no big discovery, but I just find it remarkable how these kinds of images, the comic books and these exports went out, and this is how so many young people think about the U.S. That was the case with you, apparently.

EC: This country is probably the country that exports more culture to the world than any other country. I think that that could be fair to say, regardless of just calling it imperialistic cultural influence or colonialism. But there's also empathy on the other hand. Who doesn't like jazz or rock and roll? I grew up with Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. I love them. The interesting thing was that at the same time, I was having these parallel experiences with just going to the ancient ruins in Mexico. We used to go for picnics to the pyramids of Teotihuacan. Actually, my dad's family is from Teotihuacan. And we used to visit uncles who lived there, and that's where my dad used to love to drink pulque and he used to play guitar. There were times when people had Sunday parties that were outside of Teotihuacan. But before that, we went to the pyramids. I used to go up and down the pyramids with my cousins and sisters.

PK: You thought that was fun?

EC: Yes, for me; it was Sunday. Let's go to the pyramids. And then we were going to church. My parents used to take us to the Sunday church. We were exposed to all this American popular culture or corporate culture, if you want to call it that way, and then at the other side of the experience, I was going to some of these ancient places. I even had a nanny. My nanny was a Nahua Indian. So there's this influence. My dad looked very indigenous himself. I had this kind of closeness to the pre-Columbian culture that to me, I felt, that's where I'm coming from. There was no question about it for me as a kid. My mom was more white looking. I asked her once, "Are we Indians or Spaniards, Mom?" And she said, "No, we are all Indians." That's what she would tell me. So somehow going to the pyramids was my ancient past, which it was, indeed. I used to hallucinate about cities with people. I used to sit on the pyramids and I'd try to imagine how it was. If I could travel back in time and talk to people and tell them what will happen in the future. I used to sit on top of one of the pyramids and just imagine that all the people wandering around the pyramids were dressed differently and were more indigenous people. It was my favorite thing to do. I used to project these images in my head, almost anywhere I went because the same thing happened to me in the churches. Usually, we went to baroque churches in downtown Mexico City and all the way from the cathedral to the local church, there were decorations all over with sayings and paintings. There were huge buildings with really high ceilings. I used to imagine all kinds of things in church. One of my first experiences of trompe l'oeil, happened when I was in a church. I remember admiring some sculptures one day, and the next day I was underneath the sculptures and I was afraid of them falling on me, so I look up and there was nothing. I was shocked to realize that it was a painting. Wow, somebody did a good job with that one. So the baroque churches played another influence in my childhood. Anyway, coming back to San Francisco and the Galería de la Raza was perhaps one of the greatest experiences I had here. I felt I belonged to a community. Although that feeling of belonging began for me with the exhibition I talked to you earlier about, Artists Call Against Intervention in Central America, which was organized by Lucy Lippard in New York back in '84. And that's when I began to do these charcoal drawings. At the time, I met so many artists from San Francisco; I felt for the first time I was not isolated. But then the Galería de la Raza put it even more into context for me. I felt even more nurtured by San Francisco when I began to get to know some Chicano artists and made some new friends in the community.

Then I began to organize exchanges with Mexico City. I brought other artists here. One of these exhibitions I organized, I invited some more conceptual artists from Mexico, Gabriel Orozco. It was

’89, when I met him. He was just beginning his career and hardly anybody knew him here. So I had an installation with a bouncing ball that makes a mark on the wall by Gabriel. Then I invited another artist, who I actually met in Mexico when I was taking one of these workshops, whose name is Sylvia Gruner. And she does video art. She was doing very interesting pieces with tiny little writing on her back, and there was a camera reading the writing on her back moving around, all the photographers that I mentioned, like Graciela Iturbe. But there was another person who knew a lot of Mexican photographers, filmmaker, Gustavo Vázquez. At some point, we did an exhibition of Mexican photography.

Actually, the Smithsonian in Washington invited us to submit a project for the experimental gallery. It was a project that just opened at the time. The administrative director, Umberto, asked me if I had any idea for a project, and I said, “Yes, why don’t we do a Day of the Dead for the Smithsonian.” They have a program for a challenge in curatorial visions. So I said, “I guess Day of the Dead might be our best bet,” because we’re having very contemporary artists together with very traditional. We’re doing a cross section of ethnic groups, all the way from different minorities to white artists. Everybody was included in those shows. And we had all the slides together, so Umberto sent it. And we got it accepted. Unfortunately, that was the year I quit the Galería, because I got an offer for a teaching job at UC Berkeley.

PK: Now, what year was that?

EC: 1990. I still was ready to put together this exhibition for the Smithsonian. But the board of directors and also Amalia, who was part of the board of directors, Amalia Mesa Bains, decided that that should be a way to attract a new curator and the next curator should put together. Unfortunately, they didn’t bring a curator for the next three or four years. That was when Amalia got really sick, too. She had some problems with her lungs. I think she got exposed to spray paint in one of her installations. She didn’t wear a respirator. One installation she did, she painted everything in gold. She ended up in the hospital for a week or so, and then she couldn’t do much. Unfortunately, this project for the Smithsonian collapsed. Also unfortunately, they never called me to do it. I would have done it. So that’s the only thing I resent of the Galería; they didn’t call me to do this show. I would have. We had it all ready set. We just needed to make a few phone calls to bring the artists to Washington. They were going to have a catalogue.

I had to leave the Galería just because I didn’t have time to do my art. At the same time I was directing the Galería, I was having more and more shows. I was doing my charcoal drawings; and somehow my exhibitions were snowballing. And at the same time, the work in the Galería was growing enormously. And I finally arrived to a point that I gave up being a curator and I also had been invited to work with Sandra Phillips at the museum. I said, “No, I want to keep going into the art.” I was forced, in a way, to make a decision. I left the Galería sadly, because I really loved the Galería. I was sad to leave the Galería, but happy that I would have more time to do my work. I still will do a few projects on and off with the Galería de la Raza, but teaching will take only half of my time. I still curate on and off. Later, I co-curated a show with Larry Rinder for The Drawing Center in New York.

SESSION 1, TAPE TWO, SIDE B

PK: Session one, tape two, side B. And according to our chronology, you just were hired by Berkeley, which brings to mind the question that I wanted to go into a little bit earlier that has to do with your own experience of differences between studying at the Art Institute, and then going to Cal for your MFA, and how those two places seemed to you at that time; and maybe to the extent that they were emphasizing one direction or another, what the difference some of the people you studied

with.

EC: At Berkeley, when I was a student there during my MFA program, I was lucky to study with people like Joan Brown, who is one of my favorite artists. Also I had some advisors for my masters that were really good. All the way from the Art Institute were people like Richard Shaw. He was great. Also at the Art Institute were Carlos Villa and Michi Itami, who was the person I studied etching. She was great. She lives in New York now. Then in Berkeley, besides Joan Brown, I'm trying to remember all the faculty. Some of my advisors were from Chris Brown, Boyd Allen, Ann Healy, Mary O'Neal and… Who else was there? Gee, right now the names escape me. I'm terrible with names

PK: Was Elmer teaching then, Elmer Bischoff?

EC: Elmer Bischoff was already retired, unfortunately; he was a really good painter. Who else was teaching at the time? Sylvia Lark was a really good teacher. She died from cancer back in the early nineties. In a way I was very much in my own direction already, since I had that experience from the Art Institute, drawing these Ronald Reagan type of cartoons. So when I was in Berkeley, I did just more of those drawings. I also did a whole series of etchings based on Goya after the Disasters of War. I did the very first of those etchings when I was at the San Francisco Art Institute. I did eight more at UC Berkeley, and then one more later, after I finished. Altogether, I did ten. They are being republished because I never really published them; I was doing my own editions, very uneven, but they are being republished. They were re-etched, aquatint, a little richer by Segura Publishing in Phoenix, or in Mesa.

So anyway, later, when I went as a teacher, it was a very different experience. I don't know if I got invited just because I made some noise criticizing the department at some point. Sometimes the squeeky wheel gets the oil as they say. So when I was the director of Galería de la Raza, there was a process of hiring two new tenure track faculty members. They hired Wendy Sussman and Katherine Sherwood. And there was a big demonstration, led by African-American artists, because they felt left out, due to the fact that there were also a couple of finalists that were African-American. There were two African-American male artists and these other artists who ended up getting the tenure track positions. So when the political decision would have been one and one, the most politically balanced, if you want to call it that way.

PK: That would be smart.

EC: Because at that level, they went through a hundred applicants. But when you end up with four equally good [candidates], the decision is very subjective, so just to be safe, you could always just do one and one. That would have been what I would have done, but they didn't do it. And on top of that, they told me that there were no Latino applicants in the whole thing. So I wrote a letter to Chris Brown and to the dean of humanities at Berkeley saying that that was kind of sad to know that there was not much of an outreach in the Latino community, given the fact that at the time — this is 1989, there were many Latino shows all over. There was the exhibition of Hispanic Art in the U.S.A. traveling. There was an exhibition that Rolando Castellon curated in the Bay Area; it was called Mano a Mano. It was a dialogue between abstraction and figurative work among Chicano artists. And there were many people there, nationally known Latino artists. What else was happening? There was CARA at The Museum of Modern Art that had the Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation. So in my letter, I said, "I cannot believe there was not a single qualified Latino artist to apply for this position. And certainly, we get a lot of applications for teaching at universities that are coming from all over the country that we receive at Galería de la Raza, and I have never received one from UC Berkeley." And I said, "I'm sorry to say I'm ashamed of my alma mater. I wish

you had had a better outreach." And I said, "I don't know why you didn't hire one and one. That would have been the right thing to do." There was nothing wrong with these other two artists, because I actually ended up being friends with them later, when I was teaching there. They were wonderful. Unfortunately, Wendy Sussman, actually, just died from cancer. That was this year. That was very sad.

But anyhow, going back to 1989, I sent this letter, and the next thing I knew, somebody got a copy of the letter, and made it into a flier. And all these artists who were picketing the UC Berkeley art department were handing out my letter. I was like: Gee, I didn't mean it to do that. How did that happen? And then I got a very nice response from Chris Brown saying that it was just a little bit out of hand process.

PK: Oh, that the process got out of hand?

EC: A little bit. So he was kind of apologetic and the next thing they call me and see if I wanted to teach. The thing was going to be an appointment for a year; it was not a permanent job. And when I took it, I decided to take chances. I thought: Well, I'm going to have a job for a year, and after that, I don't know. But I began to have more calls from other people to teach more. So I ended up staying. I began to teach at Cal State University, Hayward. Then I was asked to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute. Suddenly, I managed to make a living just teaching.

PK: You're an itinerate teacher.

EC: Then eventually, they called me from Stanford, when I was in a tenure track position at Cal State, Hayward. I was very happy there. It was like a community college, they don't give a masters degree, but that means you work less hours with the students. The students were really great. I had students from all ethnic backgrounds and from all ages in the same class. I used to have students who were 19, 20 years old in the same class that I had another student that was 82 years old.

I remember one of my favorite students, Eva. She was a survivor of concentration camps, a Jewish artist. And one day she was doing these abstractions of figures. And I asked her, "These are beautiful paintings. Do you have any narrative behind it, or is it just abstractions of figures?" And she said, "No, to me, these are people from concentration camps." It blew my mind. And then I asked her, "You survived through those?" She said, "Yes, I did. I survived through them." And I told her, "Have you seen the work of Leon Golub or Sue Coe? You don't want to be very graphic?" And she said, "No. No, I can't. I cannot see it again. So they have to be this subtle." And she taught me a lesson. This is what my student was teaching me that the artists who tend to be very graphic about violence in politics, most of them have never really experienced it first hand. And artists who have gone through torture or really saw it don't want to remember that. They express themselves in different ways. And people like Eva wouldn't be able to be graphic. So I apologized to her. "Oh, I'm sorry, Eva, I think you have a really strong point." And it really changed my perspective about artists with political consciousness. They don't have to be graphic. In general, she made me rethink all of my ideas about art and creating some kind of social consciousness through your art. In a way, it made me have fewer expectations about art. In other words, I don't think that you change society through art. I mean, it would be too arrogant to think or too naïve to say the least. At the most, you create some thought provoking situations, and that's as far as you could go. I think artists who have a political mind change society as citizens. Voting or as activists, whatever, the society changes so slow that you're not going to change anybody's mind with a painting or a drawing. You might irritate somebody, that's maybe something that you could do.

Somehow, these kinds of students, like the students I had in Hayward, made me think about my work. And that's when I got a call to start teaching at Stanford. And I turned them down. David Hannah, who is the chair of the MFA program there, he called me. This was at the time I was having my show at the deYoung Museum. He called me and he told me that they have an opening for a tenure track position, if I wanted to apply. And I said that I was not looking for a job at the time. I was very thankful to him for thinking of me, but I will not apply. Thank you. A week or two later, I was thinking it was little dumb not to ask what they offer. So I called him back and even though it was after the deadline, David told me I still could apply. So I thought, I have nothing to lose; why not? So I applied. And what made me apply more was that I saw the huge studio space. I thought: I will never live in San Francisco, it's so expensive, the rent here. Forget it. And the space, it's about 2,000 square feet, with, like, 18 feet high walls. I'm downstairs basically with the MFA students, with the grad students. Actually, Christina Branch and other faculty had studios there, too. The most recent faculty is Paul de Marinis. He has his studio there. He does art with lasers. No complaints. I just love it there. Actually, I like the interaction with the grad students, and I feel more at home.

I applied and then they told me I was their main candidate. And I was thinking: Oh, no. I'm going to have to quit. I didn't want to quit Hayward. I was so totally embarrassed that I had to confess, as my Catholic feelings. I had to go confess, with the "chair of the department," that I applied to Stanford, and a good chance that I will get it, and they might call him to ask him about me. Then he told me not to worry, that he would have done the same thing if he was in my shoes. He gave me a very good recommendation and I sadly left Hayward because I really liked the students.

The students at Stanford are also very diverse. Stanford never quit affirmative action, so they give a lot of scholarships to all kinds of students. The only difference is that I don't have elder students anymore.

PK: By the way, I went to Stanford as an undergraduate. My wife and I did; that's where we met. But that was a long time ago. I took art classes from Keith Boyle and then the famous Daniel Mendelowitz, who was one of their famous watercolor teachers. But that was before Stanford had really put the kind of resources and emphasis into the art program.

EC: Right. That's before Frank Lobdell and Nathan Oliveira.

PK: Here's a question about the experience, though. I've interviewed Nathan several times, and I interviewed him like in the seventies. You raise an interesting question, or issue, and that was, for some artists, the difficulty of getting too comfortable in an academic situation. Apparently, he had a little bit of time when this was the case. It was just too nice, too comfortable, and a place like Stanford, that's so high end. Now, you talk about affirmative action, and recruiting students with scholarship aid and so forth. So you're pleased with the mix.

EC: Yes, so far, it's really good. The students are great, very dedicated students. It's just a different situation than a community college. But it's better than I thought. I've been having really good experiences at Stanford. A year ago, or two years ago, I got an award from the dean. I went through a midterm review for my tenure. I was not expecting anything. If anything, I was nervous. That's when they kick your butt. You have three years to quit. Luckily, I received an award. It was year sabbatical leave before my time, with full salary. So that's when I went to Paris for eight months. That was in '99. The thing is, it's [Stanford] been very supportive, a very supportive place for me. And I'm trying to bring my best to school, too. It's a really nice exchange with the program.

PK: This kind of a situation, you don't feel that this affects your own work or growth of ideas in any kind of negative way at all.

EC: No. No, and I still don't feel like I'm totally safe at Stanford, either. They still could kick my butt if they wanted because I'm still going through my tenure review at the end of next year. The odds are 50:50 percent for everybody across the campus for tenure. It's like throwing a coin in the air.

PK: Let me ask you something, and I don't want to sound rude at all. But I have to ask this question. Stanford has come a long way from the old days, when it didn't pay very much attention to these kinds of issues, like multiculturalism or diversity, affirmative action, or anything. It used to be called the country club when I went there.

EC: The farm.

PK: The farm. It's a changed place in many respects. I don't know if you've even given this any thought at all, but in terms of your chance for tenure, I would say that you have a very strong one, based on the fact that you're Latino and this would be an unwise move, aside from the fact that you're a very prominent artist, and have had all kinds of success. Is this something that ever comes to your mind in considering, for instance, the tenure decision?

EC: Not really. How can I put it? I would like to see that the decision is not based on my ethnicity because I think one of the things that has backlashed affirmative action was people were hiring anybody just for their ethnic background. I think that's one of the worst mistakes anybody could make because then you have somebody performing poorly, and somebody who's against affirmative action will use that as an example. So I don't want to be an example for anybody. I don't want to be picked just because I'm a minority. Well, now in California, I'm not, everybody's Latin American.

PK: But in your case that clearly wouldn't be the issue. But I'm just thinking in a broader sense, that you're valuable to Stanford in several different ways. And I would think that you're very much aware of issues of race and ethnicity and culture. And I know this anyway, before I met you. And so it just strikes me as interesting. It's not something that I would need to think about; I'm a Swede. And although we're a huge minority, it hasn't actually come into discussion. I guess I'm especially interested where somebody is so successful in terms of his profession and work and the reception that you've had over the years, that there's this other element that works one way or the other.

EC: Yes. Well, to tell you the truth, I guess, institutions that are as big as Stanford, or many other universities are beyond your individual interaction with the same institutions. They have a life of their own a kind of an anonymous body that you live in. Somehow you have some kind of exchange constantly, it's an ongoing exchange. The more you get, the more you have to give. So, the higher your ranking is, the more commitments you're going to be asked to get involved with at different levels — administrative, political, et cetera. And those things are totally unpredictable. I don't even know what I'm going to be doing five years from now. It's just a very nebulous place. The reason why I don't take my tenure for granted is that the politics of the university change every year, all the time, from one president to another, from one dean to another. You don't know if the department's going to have more support or little support in the next dean, or for the next change. If somebody arrives and doesn't want to support the art department, it doesn't matter how good I am, they're just not going to give money for the department to grow, and they'll make it harder, if anything. So all those kind of things, I see them as unpredictable; and whatever happens, will happen, but, on the other hand, I don't worry too much about it, since luckily, I've been having an equal supportive base just with my art, outside of Stanford. So at some point it could be a mixed blessing for me not to be there, because then I will have to focus a hundred percent in my work, and that's something I actually would like to do.

PK: Whichever way it goes. Now, it might hurt your feelings.

EC: Right, it might hurt my ego. I really don't worry about it. I think I'm confident in the kind of things I have done, even this year, that will be well received by the school. But still, I don't say that's going to pass. I like Stanford. I will hate not being there. I like teaching, that's one of the things I really like.

PK: Well, I'm sure that shows, too and that's something that they look at.

EC: Yes. Luckily, I've been having good evaluations from my students. I like the interaction with the students, because perhaps it's from dealing with all these literacy campaigns in Mexico and studying all these other pedagogical theories, that were very progressive and where you deal with your students as equal not as an authority that gives you a really great freedom to interact with them. I've ended up being friends with many of my students; some of them, I still see on and off. But I like it. It's something that I like so much I don't feel like I'm working. I'm just glad to express ideas, listen to other ideas from the students. I feel really good when some of the students get totally encouraged to do their work. And that's sometimes when I develop friendships with some of them not every student I deal with is going to be an artist.

PK: Right, of course.

EC: Since I have a lot of students that come from other careers, and they just have to take art classes. Once in a while, you find this other kind of student, who is totally into their art. I have my best interaction with them. So I like that the best. Also, [I like] dealing with graduate students. When I'm in charge of the seminar, I really enjoy that. Also, co-teaching classes with other people in other departments. I have been involved with teaching with Elliot Eisner, who's an education professor. Our class is called The Work of Art and the Creation of Mind. And it's just very philosophical about how the art relates to anyone's life. We go through dance, music, drama, and visual arts. I'm working with different teachers and that's one of my favorite classes. I get involved with that class every other year. One year is David Hannah or another faculty in it. But anyhow, teaching is something I really enjoy. I don't think I could do any other job as happily as I do my teaching.

Also, on the other hand, I do a lot of collaborations with other faculty. Wow! I'm involved with a Foundation grant that was given to Stanford to develop a project on ethnicity, as well. So I'm involved with that kind of a project through Stanford. We're going to launch that program this year. Those are the things that are extracurricular, and those are the things that I hope won't take much more of my time. But as I see it, part of my time might be more and more absorbed by commitments with the university. I just hope I still will find the balance to do my art. My best role model in that sense, maybe, is Nathan Oliveira. He went through the whole tenure and he's such a great artist. Luckily, it didn't affect negatively on his career.

PK: Well, no, it didn't. Isn't it interesting, though, that he, in an interview raised that [same] issue that I put to you, about the possibility of a kind of distraction from the work. But, everybody's an individual. It sounds to me that your art practice is really fed and nurtured by your teaching experience.

EC: Yes, I think everything you do somehow will be reflected in your work. From my students, I have learned even techniques. Some of my transfer techniques, I learned them from my students.

PK: Don't confess that.

EC: I don't have any problem with that. Your ideas are what make your art more than the technique,

and sharing all this technical knowledge. You don't know it all.

SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A, 26 July, 2001

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, this is session two with Enrique Chagoya, July 26, 2001, at the artist's Bixby Street residence. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape one, side A. Before we started taping, you mentioned that you remembered the name of an artist; was this one of the artists in one of the exhibitions?

EC: Yes, one of the exhibitions I organized for Galería de la Raza was with Juana Alicia, who's a muralist, and Barbara Carrasco from Los Angeles, who's also been a muralist, as well. Carrasco, C-A-double R.

PK: Did they have a show together, then, or what?

EC: Yes. It was a two person show. That was just one of the shows I mentioned to you, when the Galería de la Raza was trying to even up its history of not showing enough women artists, solo shows. There were women's shows, but they were usuallygroup shows. There was a show called Women by Women, but the only solo shows in about eighteen years of history of the Galería de la Raza were given to men. So in the three years I was there, we did Christina Emmanuel, Barbara Carrasco and Juana Alicia was a two person show, also, Yolanda Lopez and Ester Hernandez. We showed mostly group shows at the Galería de la Raza, mostly themed, social and politically oriented. Once a year, we had the Day of the Dead, which was a major event for the Galería. So that was the only space I forgot yesterday that I wanted to fill in for the Galería.

PK: So you were attempting to correct a gender imbalance. How did that come about? I've noticed in talking with many artists, Chicano, Latino, and just looking back at the sixties, and the political social movements, that, women very often, even in the most progressive organizations, tended to have their place. And it wasn't equal. How did it come about that this was recognized that it was needed to correct this?

EC: I think it was an evaluation of the Galería's performance, when both of the original founders, who were the directors of the Galería, left. Well, actually, Ralph Maradiaga, as I mentioned died, and Rene Yanez resigned. They were the last of the original founders of the Galería who were involved. So when I got in there was some sense of renovation for the whole project and an evaluation from the board of directors. Also, I organized an exhibitions committee, so I wouldn't be the one making all the decisions.

PK: So they couldn't blame you.

EC: Yes, they wouldn't shoot me. So I invited people like community artists, people who work in other Chicano institutions, and people from universities. I invited Moira Roth, Rene Castro, who was a Chilean artist working at the Mission Cultural Center, Sal Garcia, and Carmen Lomas Garza. It was a group of about six or seven people. Every year, I changed it. I didn't have the same clique of artists making decisions. Once in a while, we'd have a guest curator, like Amalia Mesa Bains or myself, who might organize a show if I had something in mind. Sal and I co-curated shows like a Day of the Dead in New York. It was the first Day of the Dead in New York. We did it at the Alternative Museum. This was back in 1989, I believe. And there was a catalogue. I think there was a parallel organization who did another Day of the Dead in New York City. Somebody mentioned that to me later. But we were not aware of it.

So, the Galería was a project that was just kind of a departure for a lot of artists, and as an institution. It branched out to many other places, other Chicano organizations, as well as non-Chicano organizations. There were some cross-cultural exchanges. For instance, there were exhibitions with political themes, like Art Against Apartheid that branched out with many other alternative spaces in San Francisco. It was some of those times when the Galería opened its doors to everybody, not just Chicano or Latino artists. So there were many, many cases like that one, when the Galería was more of a community space than just a Latino or Chicano space. There were always all these possibilities.

PK: Well, again, going back to the role of women in the Galería, or rather in the exhibitions and so forth. I'm under the impression that one of the extra struggles they had as Chicanas was dealing with the machismo from the basic culture. And how sometimes it made it difficult to align completely on the one issue where they were supposed to be struggling and backing up the men, when they felt that they weren't, indeed getting the same kind of equal attention. What are your thoughts about that? Is this something you noticed when you came?

EC: Well, first, I was not very involved with the Galería in its earlier years. This was before my times living here. The only thing I know is that there was only one woman, Graciela Carrillo, who was one of the original founders. Unfortunately, Graciela had a very, very rough life. She was a victim of machismo. She was in an abusive relationship. Eventually, she had more than one nervous breakdown at some point, and she ended up in mental institutions. She used to get pregnant, without remembering who the father was, things like that. She went down hill really bad.

PK: So maybe she drank a lot.

EC: That was one problem, too. It's sad to know that she was the only woman involved with the origins of the Galería, and she didn't last many years.

Anyway, so there was a lot of resentment from a lot of Chicana women artists for the lack of participation in the projects that the Galería had. It was not until the mid-seventies or late seventies that more women joined in. People like Carmen Lomas Garza or Yolanda Lopez. Amalia Mesa Bains actually played a very important role in the Galería. So that's when the Galería began to be a little more inclusive for women. That was around the time when they had the exhibition Women by Women. And all of this is before my time here. So that's when I arrived, and that's the kind of place I began to be curious about. I began to visit the Galería, began to talk to the people there.

PK: That was probably about '80.

EC: That was about 1980. But I think what happens with places like the Galería de la Raza, it's such a small institution, there's so much need from outside, not only from women artists, but all kinds of artists, who don't have a place to show their work. There's so little you could do in a space that was maybe 800 square feet. We were able to do about eight exhibitions a year and only one solo show. And to include more artists, we had team shows, with participating artists who were from all kinds of backgrounds. But we always had people complaining. You cannot please everybody. There was a lot of bitterness sometimes. You would have artists from other countries in Latin America saying that we were very sectarian, that we were only Chicanos, and why, if the Mission had a lot of people from El Salvador, from Chile, or whatever? And we said, "We are not closing the doors to any of you." This was a Chicano project. It was started by Chicano artists, but it's not exclusive to Chicano. There is a need for more spaces. Let's just make more spaces, if possible. That's right many, many artists did that. I think the Mujeres Muralistas eventually organized

themselves as a group. Then Prescita Eyes opened. So there were all these other organizations that focused on certain aspects.

PK: Who opened Prescita Eyes? Was that Susan Cervantes?

EC: Yes. I don't know who else was in Prescita Eyes. I don't know if Patricia Rodriguez was. No, Patricia was with the Mujeres Muralistas. Anyway a lot of these historical aspects of the Galería were before my time, so I only know what people have told me. Sometimes I just hear the version of one group of people, because there were a lot of discussions, differences of opinion. Some people, like Peter Rodriguez, wanted to make more of a museum, not just a little gallery in El Barrio, but rather, something a little bigger. So he moved on and opened the Mexican Museum. Other artists developed their careers and didn't have time to stay in the Galería, like Rupert Garcia. Others opened community spaces. So it was just a departure point for a lot of people. It supported emerging artists that eventually moved on to other things.

PK: So I can see the logic in having more group shows. At least they get some exposure, and you get more (inaudible)

EC: I will say the Galería was somehow making a lot of noise beyond San Francisco, which was the important aspect of it. Perhaps the noisiest exhibitions the Galería ever did, besides Day of the Dead, were the exhibitions on Frida Kahlo. There was at some point, when hardly anybody knew Frida Kahlo, back in the late seventies. They did an exhibition as a tribute to Frida Kahlo. They invited artists to make work in relationship to Frida Kahlo. That exhibition made so many waves that people like Hayden Herrera, before she wrote her book, came to the Galería de la Raza, and Maria Pinedo, who was also the director of the store at the Galería. One of the women that got involved with the project wanted to publish a book on Frida Kahlo, when there were no books about Frida Kahlo in English. She talked to Hayden Herrera, and they have a lot of photographic materials. The Galería knew people who could lend photographs of Frida. Ralph Maradiaga and Rene Yanez somehow were able to meet people like Diego Rivera's assistant, the Russian guy, what's his name?

PK: Arnantoff.

EC: Yes, and his wife.

PK: Victor Arnantoff was the father.

EC: Emmy Lou Packard lent some work.

PK: Emmy Lou and Arnantoff.

EC: Unfortunately, the Galería was never able to get the funding for a book, but luckily, people like Hayden Herrera developed it right away. And then when Hayden published her book, it was a best seller, pretty much. And that somehow sparked more attention on Frida Kahlo. And then about ten years later, the Galería did another exhibition with photographs of Frida Kahlo taken by friends of hers, or relatives. That's when Emmy Lou Packard lent some of her work. Also, there was this couple that worked with Diego Rivera on the murals in San Francisco.

PK: Oh, it's Lucienne Bloch…

EC: Lucienne Bloch.

PK: And Phillip Dimitrov.

EC: Yes, so they got involved with the show, too.

PK: Did you know Juana Alicia, I think actually studied with them at one point.

EC: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

PK: Yes, I believe that's right.

EC: Yes, because that's one of Alicia's specialties, the fresco.

PK: Well, it moves us a bit into a slightly different subject because Frida Kahlo is such a symbol, not just for Chicanos, but for feminists. And we were talking about the fate of women, earlier in the Galería, before you came. I'm interested in your observations on this changing situation within the broader movement with the Chicano movement and some of the politics, not just as feminism, but in other respects, as well. How would you characterize that sort of evolving situation?

EC: Well, through the Galería, I think it was an ongoing process of struggle that the Galería had. It has been more rough than not. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes a lot of bitter discussions about why certain artists are shown more than others, and on the other hand, I cannot talk as a feminist, because I also have to educate myself more in the history of feminism, luckily.

PK: You got to be careful.

EC: Or try to be as fair as I can, when I have the chance to do that. So I act based on whatever capabilities I have, when I was the artistic director of the Galería. In terms of the history of the women's perspective on Chicano art, as I see it from my limited male perspective, it's still an ongoing struggle. It's not something of the past. I think sometimes the Latino men tend to fall into a stereotype, the stereotype of the macho. In fact, we provided this word to the English language, you know? Machismo. It's a sad contribution. But it, in a way, is not different than anywhere else in the world. I guess Latino males are no different than Japanese males, in terms of their machismo.

PK: Or insecurity.

EC: Right, or African-American males, or European-American males. Every culture has somehow a history of sexism. Women's vote was a big issue around the beginning of the 20th century. And today, it's the issue of their bodies and the issues of abortion. It's, most of the times, male power that is creating all of these conflicts somehow. The Chicano women somehow have the stigma of being a minority, on top of the whole thing. So there is a tendency, in my opinion, to be even more sensitive about any kind of unfair interaction. It's extra-sensitive, the whole issue. It's still going to take many years before things will really even up to the point that you don't need alternative spaces for artists. As soon as artists have more access to mainstream and women, too, then you don't need Galería de la Raza, or you don't need feminist organizations. If suddenly everybody has access to everything, I think the political organizations are mostly your safeguard.

PK: Like a labor union.

EC: It's, in a way, a better struggle when you have friends than when you are doing it by yourself. Right now, Galería de la Raza is directed by Carolina Ponce de Leon, who's a great curator from Colombia. And she was working in New York with the Museo del Barrio at some point, and she has organized international exhibitions with Latin American artists, together with other great curators,

like this Cuban curator. Gerardo Mosquera. Carolina Ponce de Leon is very aware of contemporary art. And it's the first time the Galería has an artistic director that is a woman. I think Amalia Mesa Bains played a role temporarily. She was more involved with the board of directors at the Galería, but she was never officially the artistic director. Carolina Ponce de Leon has been there for about two or three years. She's been doing a really good job.

PK: Well, not to put you in a position of having to give sort of a history of feminism within the Chicano movement, but it does occur to me, sort of personalizing it back to you, that you arrived on the scene a bit late, in terms of these kinds of phenomena. Because it was really of a sixties, seventies business, I think, for the most part a lot of trouble became recognized as a problem within a number of different movements, militant organizations. I'm wondering if you coming from Mexico, despite all the machismo talk, if you came with sort of a fresh vision on these kinds of issues. Do you think that maybe this was more American or U.S. women that were more sensitive and activist or militant on such issues, as women, as feminists, than perhaps in Mexico?

EC: I think it depends on the groups you talk about. In the university groups, I was involved with student organizations many of them were run by women or directed by women. So when we have a structure, sometimes I have to report to the coordinator of a group; and it usually was a woman who had a very clear political vision, very articulate. We used to have study sessions, where we were discussing books, theory, whatever; and it usually was a woman directing the group. And the directorship was very mixed, men and women, in Mexico. But these were people who had been reading people like Rosa Luxembourg or Nadezhda Krupskaya. They were familiar with Susan Sontag, admirers of Angela Davis, you know? So there was also a great respect for the American feminist movement.

PK: So, there was an awareness.

EC: Yes. And there was a feminist movement in Mexico, too, in the sixties. There was a magazine, it was called Fem. I don't think it lasted more than ten years, but it was still a very, very visible magazine. So there was that awareness. Then there was just the regular population, the middle class, usually very traditional, male-oriented families. My own family, I have three sisters and myself. I didn't have to do any cleaning in the house, or dish washing, or anything like that. That was up to my sisters. My mom wouldn't let me do my laundry. When I first married Jeanine, my first wife, we were doing everything together. I had to go through a personal revolution myself. For the first time, I had to wash dishes, I had to do my laundry. Otherwise, it will be trouble. Luckily for me, it was an easy transition. I was still in my early twenties; it was not too difficult to change. If that had happened to me now, I don't know how hard it would have been. But in my early twenties, it was not a problem. I already had friends of mine who were living by themselves. They were doing their laundry, they were doing the dishes. So it was not an issue for me. But my mother, once she saw me in the laundromat on the corner of my house. I moved out of my parents' house, but they came to visit me. They were driving by and saw me washing my clothes. My mom cried. She thought I was probably neglected or something, I don't know. So, that's that contrast. Then there is another Mexico that's very different from these middle class traditional families. That is the indigenous world, the ancient cultures, which tend to be more matriarchal. The best example is Juchitán. Juchitán is a town in the mountains of Oaxaca, where the women run the economy, the local economy, the marketplace. Gay men are accepted and they are in the power with the women.

PK: Because they're more like the women.

EC: Yeah, exactly. And the women are big and strong. The men are tiny. In fact, one of the exhibitions I organized for the Galería de la Raza was the photography by Graciela Iturbide, who is

a terrific photographer. Graciela spent a lot of time in Juchitán, and made a whole series of photographs with these women from Juchitán. The women are the ones who go and fight with the cops. They have been like that for centuries, since before the Spaniards arrived. It's a Mixtec town. Mixtec-Zapotec town.
PK: What's the name of the town again?

EC: Juchitán is J-U-C-H-I-T-A-N with an accent on the A.

PK: Where did you say it was?

EC: It's in Oaxaca up in the mountains. It's in the narrowest area of Mexico, the isthmus of Tehuantepec.

PK: I never heard of that. I would think there would be all kinds of anthropologists …

EC: Oh, yes. Everybody goes there. Sergei Eisentein went there to make footage for his film, Viva Mexico. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera used to go there all the time. Cartier-Bresson visited the town because it is the home town of Francisco Toledo, who's a really great Mexican artist. We organized this exhibition. It was after Graciela Iturbide's show, one of the solo shows for a woman artist. It was called Juchitán of the Women. That was the title of a book and that was the title of the show, as well. It made waves. In fact, Graciela Iturbide had a show at the Museum of Modern Art six months later. And the curator at the time, Diana Dupont, who is now the curator at the Santa Barbara Museum, asked me to be a translator for Graciela, because she was having her show in the museum a few months later. When I arrived at the museum, she was working with Sandra Phillips and was a little upset with me, because we were having Graciela's show before the museum. And she said, "I can't believe you're having this show with Graciela Iturbide." The thing that she didn't know was that it was not the first time we ever showed Graciela Iturbide. Galería de la Raza had had photography shows before where they included Graciela Iturbide's photographs.

SESSION 2, TAPE ONE, SIDE B

PK: This is session two, tape one, side B. You were talking about the most interesting stories. I guess we were actually getting on to this sort of a comparative culture thing, in a way. I was asking you about your own thoughts on what your experiences in Mexico, how it prepared you to come here, and then engage some of these issues. We were talking about feminism and so forth, but I was real interested to hear about the complexity of these different societies or cultures in Mexico.

EC: Well, Mexico, it's really many countries. So I think the perception that people have here, it's very different than when you live in Mexico and you grow up in Mexico. So it's like when these two worlds kind of collide at some point. And as I was mentioning with Diana Dupont, the former curator at SFMOMA for photography, it was actually a very good thing to happen, because then, when she told me, "I can't believe you are having a show of Graciela Iturbide right before we're having her show." And I told her, "I can't believe you haven't seen our shows. You would have seen that we have shown Graciela Iturbide at least twice." Then Graciela was just smiling, looking at us; she didn't know what we were talking about. And then I translated to Graciela. And Graciela laughed. She said, "This is not like a movie, is it? This is photography." Actually Diana kind of felt bad when I was translating to Graciela, and then later, she apologized. We became very good friends, Diana Dupont and I. They began to come to the openings at the Galería de la Raza. That was a really good relationship that we developed through the museum.

But thanks to Graciela's photographs, we were talking about this other side of Mexico. Because she

was giving her talks about her visits. In fact, Tina Modotti spent a lot of time in Juchitán, as well. A lot of the photographs of Tina Modotti are from Juchitán. So it's a very interesting town. It has a lot of history, and a lot of involvement with artists. It was the only town in Mexico that defeated the ruling party, back in the early eighties. And they voted for the Communist Party. And it was led by women.

PK: It's really remarkable. I mean, this is a fascinating town.

EC: It was more a vote against the government, if anything. The Communist Party in Mexico was very weak, and it eventually disappeared. It doesn't exist anymore.

PK: Well, speaking of that, though, speaking of the Communist Party and leftist politics and so forth, I want to make sure that we have a chance to talk a little bit about your marvelous ancestor, artistic ancestor, or ancestors, and that's of course, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, because, well, we make a great deal out of Rivera, and more recently, Kahlo, but at one time, it was almost all Diego. Because it's from our perspective, you see. He came up here and had such a big impact. And especially in San Francisco and he started his U.S. career in San Francisco, and finished it with the two big mural projects. The Art Institute one, and then the Pan American Unity, that was done on Treasure Island and is now at City College.

EC: Yes, I've seen it.

PK: He had a huge role, a huge influence in the U.S. as did Siqueiros and Orozco. So from our point of view, it's like Rivera was Mexican art, Mexican modernism. I don't want to make this question too long, because I'd like to draw you out on this a little bit -- have you kind of reflect on these two people, who are so well known in the United States. When you were younger and were becoming interested in art and so forth, did they loom as kind of heroes? For many Chicano artists, they're great heroes.

EC: This is a very interesting point, because there is a difference in terms of the political experience that artists that are coming from Mexico have and Chicano artists who grew up here have, it's two different experiences. In Mexico, I grew up, just like many other friends of mine, taking our culture for granted. We would rather hear Jimi Hendrix than ranchero music. We grew up with that; we didn't want to hear it anymore. The same thing happened with muralism. We had it in our textbooks from elementary school. This is in the early sixties, and seventies. Muralism was death at the time. It had been absorbed by the government. So for people from my generation, muralism was synonymous with the Mexican government, and we didn't like it that much. We respected people like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, or Orozco, some of the most prominent figures, because they were very much critical thinkers and they were actually creating a historic movement, which is arguable that, it was a movement, because every muralist hated each other. So it's hard to think that they had a movement. It was just a coincidence of events. I loved to read about their writings. I read a lot of their personal statements and I think the first time I was aware of them was when my father took us to the Castillo de Chapultepec or Chapultepec Castle, which is full of murals. That was the first time I could not stop staring at a painting, it was so complex it took me a while to understand what was happening in the painting. I was totally fascinated by it. I was probably ten years old, eleven years old, when that first happened. That got etched in my head, especially some murals by Orozco. They seemed so complex to me, in my child's mind.

PK: And this is in Chapultepec?

EC: In Chapultepec Park, the Chapultepec Castle. Then my dad took us to Frida Kahlo's house in

Coyoacan at some point. I loved her house. It was like visiting family. I felt like Frida Kahlo was there. I kept going back all the time with friends of mine from high school, with some of my girlfriends. We used to go there and sit in the garden. It was just a perfect place to hide away from anybody. I think it's more popular now, but this is in the seventies when I was a teenager. So it was a great, great place. Then when I began to read more about art theory and I was more interested in what happened between revolutions and artists, I began to read a lot of constructivism, I began to read a lot of muralism, surrealist manifestos, all of these. I was glad to do that, because I was able to understand what happened with the Mexican muralism in a way that gave me a perspective, in terms of what they were trying to do. I think the main effect came from the Mexican Revolution, which was a very pro-indigenous revolution. It was done by Zapata and Villa, mainly peasants, who defeated all of the armies led by the ruling classes; armies that were well trained in Europe. It was a caste army where the ruling class was basically the army. They studied in the U.S., in France, in England, in some cases, and they were very well trained militarily. So to be defeated by peasants, who never went to any military academy, was very humiliating. It created an impact in terms of the politics. There were a lot of anarchist groups that joined the peasants. At the time, there was no Communist Party. Even people like Lenin were sending letters to Zapata, saying that he had wished the peasants in Russia were as revolutionary as Zapata. Zapata said, "We have the same goals of the proletariat of the world; we want to defeat the rich." That was written probably with the help of the brothers, Flores Magon, who were very close to Zapata, and they were pure anarchists, the Flores Magons. They made a big impact in the ideology of the revolution. There was this attempt to break away from any European cultural dominance. So the art academy in Mexico had been very close to the Renaissance and then to the French Impressionist schools and all the French academy was a major impact in the art of Mexico in the 19th century. With the revolution, there was a breakup from there and there was an attempt to do an Americanist art, for the first time, rather than following the European trends. That's when Diego Rivera breaks with Cubism, around 1920, '24, something like that. So there was this ideal that was expressed by Siqueiros of unifying painting, architecture, and sculpture. And that idea came from the Constructivists, too, because the Constructivists wanted the same thing; but also, it's inspired by Renaissance art, in which all the arts are together — architecture, painting, and sculpture are the same thing. In Mexico, we had examples of the same thing in the ancient cultures; they also integrated painting, sculpture, and architecture in the same structure. It's also the ancient Egyptians. So this is a history of cultures, where art and life is the same thing. The muralists were perhaps the last attempt in Mexico, and maybe in the Americas, to try to unify all of the art forms in single structures, hosted by architecture. Unfortunately, that got corrupted and never really succeeded.

I was very excited to read about the differences. I remember reading the autobiography of Orozco, and when he had a criticism from Diego Rivera. Diego said that Orozco was not a muralist, that he was a cartoonist. He just enlarged his cartoons. In response, Orozco said that Diego Rivera was not a muralist either; in Spanish, we say muralista. And then he said, this is diffcult to translate into English, but he said, "Diego Rivera's a nalgista" And nalga, in Spanish, is butt. When he had to paint his own nalgas, he puts 'em in the center of the mural, like at the San Francisco Art Institute. It's true. So Orozco drew a little cartoon, and he calls Diego Rivera the pig. He puts a little arrow: Here's the pig's butt, in the middle of the mural; then some capitalist patrons of the pig on the bottom had to be included in the mural, just all this nasty, really nasty criticism, but Diego Rivera was equally nasty, and not to mention Siqueiros. Siqueiros was the most Stalinist of all of them. He staged an attempt of trying to kill Trotsky and even got arrested for that. So was perhaps the most dogmatic of all the muralists, if anything.

My favorite character, to tell the truth, is Orozco, because he never got aligned with any party, and I feel totally identified with him.

PK: Do you?

EC: Yes, in that sense.

PK: He's a powerful artist.

EC: It's incredible.

PK: I mean, in some ways — not that my opinion's important to this, but I've said this before, and certainly feel it — that in some ways, Orozco seems more genuinely enraged.

EC: Oh, yes.

PK: Don't you think?

EC: Yes, he had this rage in his art that was so historic. It was like historic rage that he just expressed, no matter who he was criticizing. He even made paintings criticizing the pre-Columbian cultures. So he has paintings where he paints really nasty portraits of indigenous characters. He's making fun of them. Nothing escapes him. He made fun of the other muralists, he was a complete anarchist in his paintings, but very sincere. Very, very sincere, in terms of what was wrong with society in Mexico at the time.

PK: Excuse me, but is that the part, then, the quality that you personally identify with? You said that he's the one of Los Tres Grandes that you identify with most.

EC: Yes, he was the one that had the least pretensions from the other artists. Siqueiros had this idea of being the world's revolutionary leader in the arts. Diego Rivera was about the same. They made this, I don't know what words to describe it, manifestos [that] are pretty arrogant, in a way. It's my way of making art, and everything else sucks. Everything else is wrong. So Siqueiros did a lot of manifestos that, in one, he called— there is no other way but our way. Diego Rivera did the one with Andre Breton, the manifesto for all of these things. And they were always saying, "Our way is the only way." And Orozco was the only who said, "I don't care about any of those theories, I'm just going to criticize the rich, and even the poor if I have to." He, Orozco, had paintings or drawings where the rich and the poor are happy with each other; so he paints the poor totally rough and funky and filthy, and the rich totally clean and pure. The rich are carrying the poor on their shoulders; everybody's kissing each other. So it's the impossible coexistence. When Orozco paints that, it's so ridiculous that you just don't believe it. But the way he does it is so free in style, like he doesn't care, and it's just great.

So anyhow, I think there were more muralists than the so-called three grandes. There were, I don't know, people like Juan O'Gorman, Pablo O'Higgins, who was an American, actually, who moved to Mexico, or a Canadian? I think he was American.

PK: [Jean] Charlot.

EC: Charlot, yes, Charlot, as well. There were also artists who went to Mexico in the forties, escaping the war in Europe, people like Remedios Varo, who was a Spanish refugee and she created a big influence on Mexico, and the same thing with Leonora Carrington. That was a different wave of artists. That was more like at the time when muralism was going down, there was this other wave or artists that created a different wave of rebellious artists who didn't want to follow muralism, people like Cuevas. For as much as Cuevas could be an arrogant, he came from that school. People like Wolfgang Paalen, who was a surrealist, created an influence, as well.

Suddenly there was Mexican surrealism taking off in the fifties.

PK: Then he came up to the Bay Area. He was married to Luchita Hurtado, who then married Lee Mullican, who was tied at UCLA, but he was young up here, and they had that Dynaton movement.

EC: Right. And then he committed suicide, when he was caught smuggling pre-Columbian art from Mexico. That's what Paule Anglim told me; I don't know.

PK: Maybe he was sad, too, because Lee Mullican took away his wife.

EC: Oh, that's another thing. He probably was totally depressed, maybe a combination of events.

PK: But, this is really interesting to me, because you're an artist who knows your history. And I don't mean just your history as a Mexican, but art history. You're one of the people who has been deeply involved in one way or another with the Chicano activities and the art world in this country. You were fully formed by your Mexican experience, and then you come here. I guess a couple questions. One is what you brought with you, a sense of art history, certainly, awareness of artists, and seeing some of the same artists in a slightly different way, but an awareness of different artists as well, than what the Mexican-Americans, the Chicano artists could possibly have.

EC: Yes. As I mentioned, it's a very different experience for me. For my generation, muralism, that's something we didn't want to do anymore. We were sick of it. When I came here that was the main thing for Chicano artists to do. The difference was that here, there was a struggle for people from Mexican origins to hold onto any identity, and it was a necessity out of the context, because some people were punished if they spoke Spanish in their schools. There was no information about their own culture when they were going to school. So there was this thirsty feeling for whatever was coming out of Mexico — anywhere from the Virgin of Guadalupe to Zapata and Villa. The muralists were perhaps the most distinctive artists from the 20th century coming out of Mexico. So it was a little difficult for me to understand in the beginning, even growing up in Mexico, even the Virgin of Guadalupe was something we didn't care much about. I quit being religious when I was fifteen years old, and all of my friends were the same way. So coming here, and people making paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe seemed reactionary to me. Kind of like: Why? Then I understood. It's the only cultural icon that you could hold on, and for most of the people, who even have religious feelings, it's their own personal projection in the religious image. That's very important for any culture, not just for Chicano or Latino. Every single culture projects itself into a religious icon. You could see it in the pictures of Christ from anywhere in the world, from any culture, you'd see a picture of Christ from Africa, from Ethiopia, it's very African, very black. If you see a picture of Christ from a European-American background, then you see a blonde, blue eyed Christ. You go to a Mexican Indian village, it's an indigenous Christ. There's a Japanese Christ that looks totally Japanese; there is a Chinese Christ that looks completely Chinese. Then there are feminist Christs, with women crucified. I've seen Rastafarian Christs. This was one of the paintings I'm working on. This was something I saw once, published by Life Magazine, all these pictures of Christ. And the question was, who was he? And was he the people who believe in it, as projected into it.

PK: Or was he a she? So, you're doing a painting on that theme right now?

EC: Yes, that's a subject I'm very interested in. All this to say is that the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes the self-portrait of a culture, in that sense. I didn't see that when I was living in Mexico. To me, it was my oppressive symbol, the thing I have to go and worship, and then I rebel against.

PK: Well, this brings us much closer to you and your own experience, as reflected in your art,

because quite clearly, at least in the works of yours that I've seen, all of this experience of yours that you described yesterday, too, sitting up on the Teotihuacan or someplace, that pyramid and looking out and seeing all these people projected way back into pre-Columbian times, right?

EC: Right.

PK: You were, in your imagination, attracted to all of this. And it sure as heck comes in your art, when you look at, like the wonderful art work down in the L.A. County show. There it is lots of questions here, but one at a time. I suppose the first question would be your identification, or your attraction to the pre-Columbian and to the indigenous, which certainly is what Diego Rivera was supposedly up to. She'd dress up in Aztec skulls around her neck and all. You were not attracted to the Virgin of Guadalupe. But it seems to me you would go back further in time for some kind of identity. Is that similar, or somehow fundamentally different, from the situation that you found here?

EC: I think the context here made me to reevaluate my own experience of growing up in Mexico. Icons like the Virgin of Guadalupe became somehow important in my own work at some point. Then I began to make the connections with the pre-Columbian religious beliefs. As Carlos Fuentes put it once, we are children of two fundamentalist cultures, the Catholic and the pre-Columbian. They were totally religious, both of them. So we got a double whammy, in that sense. But on the other hand, the collapse of the pre-Columbian cultures during the conquest was one of the biggest tragedies in history. I mean, not just in Mexico, but throughout the continent, and the holocaust of the conquest, basically. It's hard to measure, because it lasted centuries. Because the indigenous population went down — and this is according to U. N. statistics — just in Mexico alone, went from approximately 16 million indigenous inhabitants in Mexico to 1.6 million, just a hundred years later. To 1.6, exactly 90% of the population was wiped out within the first hundred years. In the Caribbean, the Taino and Arawak population was extinct around 50 years after the encounter with Columbus. In North America, it's very close to 90% extinction, as well. And I don't know about South America and other places. I think other places got totally extinct. Not just for the war, but also due to the new contagious diseases brought by the Europeans, such as the chicken pox was one of the major elements. War and labor exploitation over the next hundred years was also equally heavy on the load. Parallel to that — and I don't know if this could be even more of a tragic loss — was the loss of the books, I think I would like to go back to talk about Nezahualcoyotl. He was the king who created this enormous library on this continent.

At the time, there were historians among indigenous cultures, who wrote books. Unfortunately, one person didn't write any book, but he recounted a lot of the information to priests. He was interviewed by priests. He was baptized, Fernando de Alba Ixtlilxochitl. He was a witness of what happened in the destruction. He described the library of Texcoco, the kingdom of Nezahualcoyotl, the library as a huge building full of huge rooms, filled up with books. And the books were divided into calendarial. There were books that were describing what happened every century in the indigenous calendar. And the centuries were made of 52 years. And then they had double centuries of 104 years. There were books that described what happened year-by-year; there were books that described what happened month-by-month; and then books that described what happened day-by-day. So there were a lot. Then there were books of astronomy. Do you know how they calculated the eclipses, all kinds of calculations? The calendar was more precise than the Gregorian calendar of the Europeans at the time. So there were books about that. They were very mathematical, in that sense. Then there were books of medicine. There was a very strong herbivorian medicine. There were books of history, where they came from, and where the cultures from around came from. So he describes that at some point, the priests and the soldiers pile up thousands of books and burn them.

SESSION 2, TAPE TWO, SIDE A

PK: Continuing the second session interview with Enrique Chagoya. This is tape two, side A, and the date, July 26. We left off in the midst of an important discussion of your awareness of your understanding, appreciation of the indigenous culture of Mexico for a number of reasons, particularly what attracted you. Everybody who knows your work knows that then it was carried with you back up to the U.S., and how it became incorporated in your worldview.

EC: I think anybody who leaves their own country of origin creates a mental distance, from it. I created a distance of myself with my own history and in a way, not too different than what some scientists have to do to distance themselves from what they see. Hopefully, I'm not trying to idealize certain things of my own culture. On the other hand, I also feel a distance to this country, so you become a citizen of both countries, or of no country. Sort of like a citizen of a borderless country, in which you find fellow citizens of borderless countries, everywhere. Somehow, where you grow up leaves a mark on you, no matter where you're coming from, and that made that kind of an effect on me. When I left Mexico, I began to reevaluate my experience there, even though I was aware of the burning of the books, and a lot of the tragedies of the conquest, for the first time, I began to focus in detail on what happened. The history of the burning of the books was a major, major history for me, when you study Mexican anthropology, there is a limit as to how far can you go into the past and that limit is the information that you get from the ancient sites, the pyramids, also the information you get from the few surviving books. Only 22 pre-Columbian books survive. There is about 50 or 60 other codices that were done right immediately after the conquest; but their style is already influenced by the Renaissance. And some of the stories also are influenced by the kind of questions the priests had. So they are more focused on more of a European question about their history.

But the pre-Columbian books that survived are dispersed all over the world. There are some in Europe, and there's one or two in Mexico. There are some in this country. And they are still hard to read. People are just beginning to make sense out of it. The Mayan books have been perhaps the most decoded lately. There have been a lot of studies on the Mayan code. Some of the other books are hard to read because the style of writing was in combination with oral history, and we have lost a lot of the oral history. So even though you have the symbols, you don't have the cultural background to read the symbols. It's really, really hard to read. It's not an alphabetical writing, or verbal; it's more of a visual language that is equally precise, but you need to have the cultural information to read them. Sort of not too different than the signs you see in airports. If somebody from a thousand years ago saw the symbols from an airport, they would not know what it means. Today we see the symbols in an airport and we all know what it means. You see the same thing with traffic signs. They're culturally based on a context, time and place. There have been discussions among linguists about whether or not this counts as literacy, and there were a lot of evolutionary linguists that discarded the pre-Columbian books as real books. They said those are pre-alphabetic, and they don't really count as literacy. Luckily, there were other waves of linguists attacking that kind of branding for these ancient books. People like Elizabeth Hill Boone, who argues that today we have a lot of non-alphabetic writing; that it's actually better if it's not alphabetical. She puts examples, like mathematical writing or musical writing, that are much better off if they are non-alphabetic. Imagine if you had to read a Beethoven symphony in an alphabetical writing. It will take volumes and volumes just to have a small movement in the symphony. She gives other examples, traffic signs, airports, maps, in which there is language that is written language, but it's secondary to the visual element. So by the same token, the pre-Columbian books were very much visually designed. They were actually meant to be performed not read by either the priests or the kings or whoever was going to be reading it to a group of people. They will have to be

performed with oral memories and the symbols will recall certain histories.

PK: Keys that unlock.

EC: Sort of like the mathematical symbols of today. You know what it means. If you are not familiar with them, you are lost. But at some point, you could read them across cultures. Anybody in China could read if they learned the writing. They could read European musical sounds, or mathematical language goes across countries. You don't have to speak another language to understand a mathematical writing. At some point, even the Mayans went back from being more abstract into more visual. So that challenges the idea of evolution, all the writing goes up to being alphabetical. A lot of these linguists have been criticized for being, not just Eurocentric, but also overly evolutionist, in a kind of a dogmatic way because evolution happens in more complex ways than just linear. These are kind of visions that I have of the ancient books and one of the things I feel is that there are not enough books. It's only 22 books from which we have gotten a lot of mileage already. I always fantasize what would have happened if most of the books had survived? There are only three Mayan books. There are no Aztec books. There are a lot of Nahua books, which are a part of the culture that the Aztecs were coming from. Most of the books are from Oaxaca region, from Mixtec-Zapotec origins. I always wondered what would have happened if we had the books of medicine, astronomy, the books of their histories. I can't help myself but to fantasize again when I was sitting on top of the pyramids. I feel this kind of need to see more of those books. That's when I began to do my own versions of them following just visual symbolism. Now from the cultures I encountered, which are not only pre-Columbian, but also comic books, American comic books, Mexican comic books, religious iconography, the Virgin of Guadalupe or other Catholic bloody things. All of that somehow makes a context for me for having some kind of a visual narrative in the books that is very abstract for me. I cannot even read one of my books as a …

PK: As a narrative.

EC: As a linear narrative, that is a story that it goes and ends here. I think anybody's interpretation might be as good as mine — just if you could read the symbols I'm putting together. Of course, there is some kind of critical perspective, but it's so abstract. I think it might hit you in a different way than just an essay. Perhaps the only exception to the rule is the collaboration I did with Guillermo Gomez-Pena, which is the only book that has a lot of text and that's due to the fact that he uses performance. The text from his performances made a duet with my images, so that's perhaps the only book I have done with text. The interesting thing for this collaboration is that he's a performing artist. If the pre-Columbian books were meant to be performed, I think this is something that maybe Guillermo should do, perform a book. I should sell this idea to him.

PK: Let me just ask you a question that came to mind. Is it with your books, the codices, that you're sort of reestablishing a kind of continuity?

EC: It's basically another of my fantasies. Kind of imagining what would have happened if some of the book artists from the past survived to the present. Atlaquilo, was the name of the book artist. And on the other hand, I've been thinking or re-imagining a different perspective, too, like science fiction, but going backwards in time rather than in the future. I always imagine what would have happened if Europe still would have been Europe and the Americas will be still here. I always think of all of these things. The ancient cultures were also equally militaristic, they had wars.

PK: So you don't romanticize. It's not like a utopia that's a lost Eden.

EC: No. The Aztecs burned books, too, of all the cultures they conquered. What the Spaniards did

to them was not too different than what they did to others. So the religious beliefs were also imposed upon other cultures, as well. Humans are the same everywhere in the world. We are the same— actually the same species, as we have learned not too long ago. There is always a violent history. We are perhaps the most violent species ever in the world. We're probably worse than the dinosaurs.

PK: Oh, probably.

EC: We're perfectly capable of destroying the whole world hundreds of times. I don't think there is any other species that is equally violent with the destructive potential, as well as the constructive potential that we have, because we are both. So when I imagine the pre-Columbian time, I'm trying to imagine what would have happened. Maybe the Aztec empire would have expanded and collided against the Peruvian empire. Probably Central America would have ended up being a sandwich culture. It was already becoming a sandwich culture. What about the North American cultures? There was a time when there were pyramids in North America, too. It's just always a mystery for me, if the Aztec empire would have expanded north. On the other hand, what if the Aztecs would have conquered Europe, going the other way around? That has influenced some of my artwork, because then I have images of European art, but conquered by Aztecs. Somewhere I have a reproduction of a German girl praying in the middle of a forest. In the original engraving, she's praying to a crucifix on top of a tomb. She's praying to her mother or a relative who died, whatever. Instead, I painted on top of it an Aztec goddess, Coatlicue, the main goddess in the Aztec pantheon. I put feathers on the German girl. Which is something that's happening in Germany; there are all these Germans who love Native American cultures, and they're really hardcore, in terms of how they dress. They live in tipis or whatever. So this German girl has her Aztec feathers, she's praying to an Aztec goddess.

PK: She's blonde.

EC: And she's blonde. She's one of my pictures. That's one of the things I've been doing. So based on this idea, I began to develop the idea of some kind of reverse anthropology. It's kind of studying the Europeans as the subject, since anthropology, in its origins, came from England when England was trying to conquer. So anthropology was pretty much created by the English to understand their colonies better, somehow anthropology has this history of colonial control. I've been lately trying to even that up, by reversing it. I think some of my books, my codices are an attempt to do this kind of reverse anthropology, as if an Aztec scientist was studying the European cultures. At some point, he has to write it in a way that's more like a pre-Columbian style, with not much alphabetical wording, and mostly visual characters interacting with each other.

Recently, I opened up another branch, which is more into art history, and it's more like reverse modernism.

PK: Oh, now, I want to hear about this.

EC: Reverse modernism is doing the exact opposite of what Picasso did with African masks. When he appropriated the African masks to develop his cubist paintings, people asked him if he cared about the content, and he said, he didn't care about the content or the context of where the masks were from; he was only interested in the form. So by the same token, I'm trying to appropriate European art, pretending I'm not interested in the content of the European art or the context of it, but rather just the form. And I put all kinds of characters on top of it. So I've been doing paintings, from Giverny; with Picasso being attacked by an African sculpture at some point. This African sculpture is cannibalizing him, but it's Picasso as a self-portrait, and the African sculpture has grabbed one of his arms, and she's biting it.

PK: You're using art so that Picasso himself is incorporated into a new expression?

EC: Well, he's being killed. In this case, by the African sculpture. So I've been doing these kind of things, that are not very popular with curators, I will say.

PK: No? And dealers don't like them?

EC: Dealers like them, somehow, I don't know. Well, no, I should rephrase myself. I think they're understood by some curators. By curators, sometimes, I don't know if they are totally understood, or they seem more like violent paintings. There are people like David Kiehl from the Whitney, who loves this kind of imagery in my work, so I should rephrase myself. The thing is I'm trying to explore these ideas now and I have been appropriating different modernist artists, and also some French, even before modernism, some pre-modernist artists. Not just Monet, but I used paintings by Edouard Manet's Luncheon on the Grass. I painted on top of it indigenous characters as cannibals. So you have the people having their lunch with the naked women on the one hand and then I found these images of cannibals done by another European artist, Theodore de Bry. He has all these pictures of a mother with a baby, but she's biting into an arm, things like that. So I put a family of cannibals right on top of the …

PK: With the Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe.

EC: Exactly. As a background, I put minimalist paintings, but with the colors of flesh tones. So it went all the way from dark brown skin to light, kind of pinkish skin. They look all frames from the Louvre, all around the painting. Those are some of my most recent paintings. These are from the end of last year. I did a few of those. I got an image from the Renaissance, The Holy Family. I don't remember the name of the Renaissance artist, which is great.

PK: And you like that.

EC: I like that because it doesn't matter. I am just interested in the form. So this Renaissance artist… I'm trying to remember. I think it was Della Francesca, but I'm not totally sure right now. He has this family with the baby Jesus and his parents. Right in front of it, I put a stereotypical family, everybody in front of it is a stereotype. So there's Barbie and she just had twins. The father is a stereotype of an African guy, who I found in Paris, actually; it's a black guy with red lips, typical stereotype, and he's totally smiling and happy. He had his newborn twins, and one of them, is Ken, Barbie's friend, and the other one is a Chinese baby. It's a yellow kid crying. On the bottom are the other two children that are other two stereotypes, a Mexican bandit with beard and his hat and he's nagging on his dad, kind of almost crying. His sister is like Carmen Miranda, a Brazilian black woman, with fruit on top of her head. They're all a happy family in a very colorful background. So that's a painting I did for my last show at Paule Anglim. It's called General Merchandise, because it's everything you find in the marketplace, from a Barbie doll to these stereotypes. I found them in comic books, magazines, … In Paris, you find all this Banania brand, which is full of stereotypes of African men. They keep them now as kind of nostalgia. It's all the things you find still today in the marketplace. That's why I call it General Merchandise. So I will say, an indigenous character destroyed a Renaissance family, and then had to find it, in whatever you find in the marketplace today to put it together.

PK: So you said that this is a kind of postmodernist deconstruction, in a way?

EC: I don't know how to brand it, basically, besides just having an equal opportunity offending. It's just my way of dealing with ideas and stereotypes, of concepts that people develop, and hoping

that people might find bridges. As we were talking about how people project themselves into a religious icon, but also, people have a hard time understanding someone else's icon and making a bridge.

PK: You have an image and you say, "Okay, what does that mean?" I guess what you're doing in your work is showing the mistakes that you can make if you have to go to the marketplace and explain with your own contribution. Is this sort of it?

EC: How can I say? How can I put it? Is the marketplace so uncritical or not, or is it just a place where you find all these ideas that keep nurturing people? Not nurturing, but actually influencing people, I guess you could say that because that's not nurturing, it's the other way around. And misunderstanding is a constant in our culture. A few days ago, maybe four days ago, I remember a commentator of NPR being totally bitter about the fact that Frida Kahlo is on the U.S. Postal stamps. Who is Frida? Who is Frida? Frida Kahlo, who is she? Why do we have to put it in our American stamps?" Then he starts talking about her. So he started, not knowing who she was, and he says, "She was a Stalinist, she was terrible."

PK: So choosing the few things he learns or knows to characterize, and give meaning to the image.

EC: Right, and for him, she was just a self-obsessed lesbian. But what it was, for me, incredible to see how somebody else sees it with a different perspective. How people project themselves on images, and how somebody might not be able to relate to some icon that is coming from somewhere else. Although, in a funny way, or funny twist, it was interesting to see that Frida was still alive 50 years ago, making some bigot to be enraged. So she's still active. Frida's not resting in peace.

These things create these interactions between cultures and people. Some people are closed; they don't want to see it. And some people are more open, and they see it. I think sometimes I create similar situations with my artwork. Perhaps the most recent painting I did, with my friend, one of my best friends, Manuel Ocampo, with this version of St. Veronica's Veil. Saint Veronica put the veil on the face of Christ and that was the first, I guess, the first monotype you had in history. Too bad she didn't make an edition of thirty or something, so we still will have one copy left somewhere, with the true picture of Christ. We have this commission from the San Jose Museum, and we told them we're going to do a version of St. Veronica's Veil, with our own imagery, and that's what we told them, and they accepted the proposal. So we did it. The interesting thing is that the image got very loaded, to the eyes of the curator, she was very nervous about showing it, and was upset about it. I'm quoting her. She said, "It's a total attack on Western culture." And we took that as a compliment.

PK: Now, wait a minute. Everybody's going to know who it is. I'm looking at the San Jose newspaper.

EC: San Jose Mercury News.

PK: Yes, the San Jose Mercury News, which is a good newspaper. We have it here, because we wanted to talk about this. Here's a big article. It says, "Artist collaboration ultimately denied for show." This was Sunday, March 18th, 2001. But it quotes the curator of exhibition, Susan Landauer. Well, I mean, there're a lot of things one could say about this. But she's taken, in a way, what would not be a characteristic position for her, if she were working independently. But she's within an institution where there's baggage that's brought to your work.

EC: She had to make concessions somehow within her institution. We didn't create any trouble for her. There was a point when other artists were more upset than us about not getting included in

the show. I thought it was the curator's final call, because when I have curated shows, sometimes I find artists that I didn't include in the show because I didn't think it was part of the concept I had; and it had nothing to do with censorship. So it's just curatorial license. And I felt that Susan had her freedom as a curator. If she felt that this painting was not following her concept, that's …

SESSION 2, TAPE TWO, SIDE B

PK: This is session two, Enrique Chagoya, tape two, side B.

EC: Well, just to finish with the Susan Landauer interaction with our paintings, as I say, some artists were more upset than us. Perhaps the conflict was between the curatorial license versus the artists' license. At some point, it was the design of the show that was her job. She didn't tell us what to paint, either, or what not to paint, but it was a really gray, gray area. When we painted our images, our version of St. Veronica's Veil, we decided that we will make an image of the conquistadors projecting themselves as God. We made St. Veronica's Veil a picture of Ferdinand Cortez or Mickey Mouse, anything but a spiritual character. So in a way, it's not a portrait of Christ, but actually, a very, very different character. It's more of a portrait of a colonizing mentality, if anything. When we explained this to Susan, we told her, "This is a portrait of a colonizing mentality; that everything that is seen through his mind, it has to be just like himself." So if it is an African culture, it has to look Christian; if it looks like a cyclops, the cyclops has to look Christian somehow. Everything has to be filtered through the same perspective. Our painting was based on kind of like a nightmare. The title is really long. But it's probably in the article, it goes: I Dreamed of a Colonizing Consciousness Incapable of Conceiving How Differences In Others Can Actually Exist. For Everything Can Be Seen Only As The Self, But In Other Guises. Thank God It Was Just a Dream.

PK: So here's what it says here — that was pretty good.

EC: Right. It's close.

PK: It was close. Well, here's what you say. You've already said it. This is quoting you. "For us, it was about the colonizing mentality that wanted to see everything, including itself, as being like Christ."

EC: Right.

PK: "Chagoya says. 'She, Landauer, felt it was a total attack on Western civilization. And I thought: Great.' The painting is titled, I Dreamed of a Colonizing Consciousness Incapable of Conceiving How Differences in Others Can Actually Exist. For Everything Can Be Seen Only As The Self, But In Other Guises. Thank God It Was Only a Dream." Which I guess is your ironic ending.

EC: Yes, we were very upset that the painting was not included in the show. But we respected her decision, as I mentioned earlier, based on her curatorial license. Afterwards, she asked us if she could have the painting for the collection anyway. We just declined, we said no. We thought that it makes no sense, if you didn't put it in a subject-related work, you will not put it again in another subject-related work, and the whole thing will be just stored. Even though they paid us an honorarium, the honorarium didn't meet the sale of the painting. The honorarium was less than the actual value of the painting, the market value. So we ended up keeping the painting, at the end, and hopefully, in good terms with Susan. So that was the end of the story.

PK: We were touching on the earlier tapings, on appropriation. I was describing another artist's work, but where she is sort of excavating in art history, and taking these images, and putting them to a very definite and purposeful use. And so then you were responding about your own use of

appropriation, and ideas about it.

EC: Yes, my way of dealing with it, and perhaps the only difference between my appropriations and other artists' appropriations — which has been now a common practice — is that in my case, I need to do it, as I mentioned, by the necessity of expressing my reverse modernist ideas.

PK: Reverse modernist.

EC: Right. The opposite, not only of what Picasso did, but many artists. Modernist artists had the strategy of appropriating art from former colonies. So that there is not only Picasso, but there are people like Henry Moore, that appropriated Aztec sculptures, like the sculptures of Chac-Mool, to develop his own seated figures. Or people like Frank Lloyd Wright, who appropriated, or got influences from Mayan architecture to do the buildings in Los Angeles. Things like that. There is all this surrealist attraction towards the exotic, primitive, the primitive artists, that was supposedly pure-minded, without the evilness of Western civilization. So there was this kind of stereotype of artists that were from Africa, or indigenous artists from the Americas. What I'm trying to do is the exact opposite. Instead of me being the "noble savage," trying to be the un-noble savage. How can I say? The artist could be from Africa or from an indigenous culture anywhere else — from Asia or Latin America, or the Americas — who is appropriating Western culture, and turning it around, playing with it, pretending that I don't understand it at all. It creates a context for this kind of a primitive artist taking over and doing things the "wrong way," quote/unquote; or embracing Western culture the "wrong way." So it's perhaps a different perspective. I need to appropriate the European imagery, in order to make my own version of it. And that's what I've been doing in my most recent works. I did a portrait of Queen Elizabeth of Augsburg, Queen of France in the 1500s, in one of my last paintings. It's called Pocahontas Gets A New Passport. And I painted Queen Elizabeth in about two weeks. It was real torture to try to paint like the Renaissance, but a fast way. Then after two weeks of painting her, I decided to make a very gestural portrait of Pocahontas; kind of like an outsider artist will paint it. So I painted Pocahontas very loosely, with a lot of feathers, just very fussy, tiny little character. I did it in a half an hour. So Pocahontas was talking to me, telling me I should work faster. This is something that triggered this idea of making more art faster. The idea of making more art faster came from my publisher, Bud Shark, in Boulder, Colorado. When we were making a codex, he was talking about some experience he had in school, about how a teacher might talk. He didn't remember who told him to make art faster. And I thought that was great, because I felt that way, too, especially later, when I did this painting.

PK: A production oriented bottom line.

EC: Faster. I put these words coming out of Pocahontas, saying, "More art faster." And it goes over the face of Queen Elizabeth of Augsburg.

PK: Was this in the Paule Anglim?

EC: Yes, that was my last show at Paule Anglim. I've been doing all these things on top of European art. The next works I'm doing are over religious imagery, perhaps as a reaction from the rejection from the San Jose Museum. I felt I needed to make more of those religious statements, or religious images. I may be getting into trouble at some point, but I have pictures from very Renaissance-like paintings — even from the Mexican Renaissance— or— not Renaissance, Baroque period. Or all these pictures of Christ from different cultures in the world that I have all together already on one page, but I want to alter them; I want to paint maybe some stereotypes as Christ. I want to also do something else. That's a reaction I feel coming from myself being annoyed by religious propaganda that comes at you all the time. When you're not religious, and you get Christian, Catholic, any kind of

reactions against artists especially — people like Giuliani in New York or, Jesse Helms, when he attacked Andres Serrano or Mapplethorpe — then you feel like you also are entitled to your own non-religious mind. And because of it, how would you express your non-religious mind? Just to defend yourself from all these constant religious attacks on the arts. I am thinking of putting a mirror the other way around, as a non-religious person — with all my respect for religion and spiritual beliefs, because I'm not attacking that; I'm attacking fundamentalism. It would be equally wrong to impose non-religious minds on everybody else. There is a point when you have your freedom; and there's a point when somebody attacks your freedom, as well. So it's all this nebulous, gray area, where very taboo-like ideas collide. Hardly anybody talks about it, it just happens.

PK: Well, it also defines the culture. In fact, it's very much an issue now, with church and state issues coming up again, and W, our president, Mr. George Bush, seeming to be willing to slide a bit on this issue. It's just remarkable that in this day and age, you can read — and not just in The Nation, Katha Pollitt or somebody like that, but you read about the specter, once again, of the fundamentalists, the religious right trying to assert hegemony, trying to basically describe American culture in terms of religion, in terms of a specific religion, Protestantism, not even Catholicism or Christianity. It's just an interesting time. So this is obviously a concern of yours, it's like an equal time thing.

EC: Oh, yes, or the visit that George Bush had with the Pope just a few days ago where the Pope is pushing his political agenda on Bush about the research on stem cells. There is all this religious dominance on everybody else's life. I feel kind of cornered sometimes with that you are not totally free to express your non-religious ideas. Since I was a teenager, I developed this interest in challenging ideas constantly in my work, or with my own thinking. I cannot help myself. I enjoy contesting ideas when they are somehow suppressing the freedom of anybody else. I think there is a problem with fundamentalism, which is beyond the spiritual beliefs.

PK: You mean when it imposes particular behaviors and limits on…

EC: And it's power. I think it's the desire of power. It has nothing to do with spirituality, has nothing to do with religious beliefs. It has more to do with control. Just like the Spaniards were not just happy with conquering the land in the Americas, they were most interested in conquering the soul of the indigenous people. By the same token, modern fundamentalists — and I'm talking about not just Christian fundamentalists, it could be any religion that develops fundamentalism; it could Islamic fundamentalists, it could be leftist fundamentalists.

PK: Marx.

EC: Marxist fundamentalists, all these people. I don't know why people tend to be so outrageously tilted in one direction. It makes them pure, or purer, or something. It's a fantasy, because nothing is black or white anywhere. There is always a conflict between fundamentalism and reality that is more complex than simple, one-sided, moralistic values. Reality is just richer. In many ways, the reality of the human experience, it's completely wilder than any boundary that we could limit. So sometimes I just express my concerns, basically, with my work. I'm not trying to change anybody's mind.

PK: It sounds like a critique.

EC: Yes, once in a while, it goes into a point that might annoy somebody, or put somebody in trouble. Like, a curator might think twice before they show some work.

PK: Like Dr. Landauer.

EC: Right. I remember talking to the wife of one of my collectors, who bought one of my 19th century prints. I paint over 19th century prints. And there was a portrait of Saint Francis. The scene is that of taking Christ from the cross, or maybe Saint Anthony. I'm trying to remember who it was, one of these saints that was taking Christ from the cross. And I painted over the head of Christ the head of a pre-Columbian god, Tlaloc, who is the god of rain. He has tusks, and he looks more like a demon or a devil.

PK: Round eyes.

EC: Very round eyes. So I painted him over Christ, and you change the whole picture. Suddenly, it's the saint taking down the crucified pre-Columbian god, and on the bottom, I had footprints from a rat that was in my studio. And the rat stepped over some oil paint I had in another painting, walked over this other painting, and then it walked over this print, and left little footprints. When I saw this drawing the next day, I was totally upset; I didn't know what to do. It was oil, on top and I could not clean it up. I even tried to paint over it a little bit, and the footprints came back. So then I remembered that the rats were brought by the Spaniards to the Americas.

PK: There were no rats?

EC: There were some brown rats in the country, wild rats. But there were no black rats like the ones that spread the bubonic pest in Europe. Those were brought by the Spaniards in the galleons, the early ships, just the common black rat that we see everywhere on the streets today or the dark gray rat. I decided to make a cartoon with a ball pen of some kind of rat, similar to Rat Fink. Rat Fink is another character I really liked from the underground culture, Big Daddy Roth. And I decided to make my own version of a Mickey Mouse rat, not necessarily Rat Fink, but more like Mickey Rat. So I drew a cartoon of that character underneath. He's just totally, smiling, with his tusks and all of that. Then on another corner, I draw the logo of Pepsi-Cola, but I changed the words Pepsi for Pesty or pest in English. Then on the other facing page, there is text. I'm describing all these pictures, but hopefully, you could get a picture of it. There is an image from a codex painted right after the conquest of the Aztecs crying in the middle of the siege of the city, when the Spaniards surrounded the city for several weeks; the Indians didn't have anything to eat. Some of them actually died from not eating anything, so they were crying. Then on top of it, I had the hands of Christ, and that responds to a popular joke in Mexico. It's why Christ never used shampoo. The answer is because it kept dripping through the holes of his hands. So I have the hands of Christ on top of the crying Aztecs, and he's pouring shampoo through his hand, but the shampoo is dripping into them. I used this brand of shampoo, it's for babies, baby shampoo, that has a little drop, and it reads "No more tears."

PK: No more tears, Johnson and Johnson.

EC: Exactly. So "No more tears" is going through the hands of Christ into the crying Aztecs on the bottom. A collector in Boulder actually bought this piece. His wife was totally upset with me for messing with Christ. I told her, I did the opposite of what the Spaniards did in Mexico; they put churches on top of the pyramids. Now if you want to know about the pre-Columbian religion, you have to have some archeology dig, and then you will find the pre-Columbian religion underneath the church. I just put the pre-Columbian god on top of the European god; it's reverse anthropology, I told her. She liked the idea, and then she was happy with it.

PK: She just didn't want her friends to be upset. Now she could tell them and make it okay.

EC: At first glance, it's just a lack of…

PK: Didn't want to be disrespectful.

EC: Yes, that's what you see, perhaps, at first glance, the first time you see the work. Just like if you see the first time for this painting that Manuel and I did, might just look like a lack of respect for Christ. It's coming from a very different perspective. It's more challenging ideas than lack of respect, if anything.

That's the point where my work gets on the edge of being accepted or rejected, depending who is going to see the work. I think a lot of museums today go through some kind of marketing strategies for their shows, and they show what the audiences want to see. The more polls they ask from the audience, the more they are going to have shows like Christian Dior.

PK: Well, it's quite clear that your appropriation is with a cause, with purpose. You're like a historian. And much of what you describe is both archeology and anthropology.

EC: Right.

PK: And that it's all, to a large extent perspective, and that there's no neutrality. Does this get sort of close to the critique or the ideas that you're exploring in some of these?

EC: Yes, I think if you had to put it in a few words, my interest is perhaps into deconstructing the dominant paradigms or the dominant beliefs in the art world, or in our society as a whole. There is this kind of invisible dominant culture that brands everything, labels everything. When you talk, for instance about ethnic art, you don't think renaissance, you don't think European art; you think art maybe from Asia, Africa, the Americas.

PK: It's limited by ethnicity.

EC: The invisible ethnic group is the one that brands everything. There is a great book, called Displacing of Whiteness, organized by Ruth Frankenberg. Actually, the author borrowed one of my images for the cover. She's a professor [associate professor in American Studies] at Davis, in social history. She put together several authors in this very interesting book, where they talk about everybody's ethnicity, except the dominant group. And in terms of art, then you have similar brandings. You have the primitive art, and then you have popular art, and then you have high art. When you are talking about high art, it's always a Eurocentric notion of art. And that's what I'm trying to deconstruct with my work. It's the mirror I put in front of people to say we are all coming from the same experience. I'm not trying to point fingers, either. It's more a notion in which we all have positive and negative elements. When you reverse the positive and the negative, it still becomes the same thing. In other words, let's say if the Aztecs had conquered Europe, it would be a very similar world, in my imagination. It would be just a different ethnic group screwing everybody else.

So it's my vision of the human experience that I try to express in my own work by critiquing what it's mirroring in that experience. But by doing that, we are very much in the same boat. And it's not that some people are worse than others; it's some kind of these dualistic interactions that go through life and nature, and maybe we're just part of a whole natural evolution in the whole world that is more complex than what we could grasp. Sometimes we're just not aware of ourselves, in that sense. I don't think they're going to gain much consciousness through my art, but I feel lucky to get away with it, when I express myself in my work.

PK: Well, you have what I imagine to be a kind of consistent line that goes through the work. What we're going to do next time is to keep all of this consistent and sort of parallel, as we go backwards. Most of the art of yours we've discussed has been recent.

EC: Right.

SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE A, August 6, 2001

PK: This is session three in a series of interviews with Enrique Chagoya. The date is August 6th, 2001. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. The interview is being conducted this time in the interviewer's home in San Francisco, on Carmelita Street. Later on, we will be joined by Mr. Chagoya's wife, who's also an artist. And her name is Kara Maria Sloat. This is tape one, side A.

EC: Right, that's the last name. She doesn't use it.

PK: In our previous session, you developed your professional career pretty well, in terms of, the different teaching posts. We didn't get much into other aspects over those years, after you came to the Bay Area. We talked a lot about Galería [de la Raza], but we don't know too much about how your personal life evolved, or about any kind of travels you took. Can you pick up there and sort of fill it in, after you separated from your first wife and so forth?

EC: Yes. I think perhaps a good way to start will be something that I was just thinking, after seeing the exhibition, The Road to Aztlan

PK: At L.A. County Museum [of Art].

EC: In the L.A. County Museum, right, where I was yesterday and two days ago I gave a talk. When I saw this exhibition, I felt some kind of sense of identification with the subject, because all these ancient migrations that took place in the Americas that created this commerce between the southwest and Mesoamerican cultures, as well as the Peruvian cultures. All the exchanges that were, not only commercial, but cultural. If you think in terms of the ancient cultures, you think there's the same calendar from the southwest through Peru with the calendar year divided in months of 20 days, and so on. Myself , moving from Mexico City to the U.S., and also having other experiences outside of Mexico City within Mexico and outside Mexico, had some kind of a similar cultural exchange that has left a mark in me. I was saying in my talk in L.A. that when you move, or you leave your country of origin, it takes a while before you land wherever you move to. Let's say you can move from any country to any other country; you can move from here to China. Let's say you're going to stay for the rest of your life in China. It will take years to learn the language, if not, maybe never. You might never learn the language, but your children will. And that process of moving, or migrating, for instance, people who come from Mexico to the States, it happens in a very similar way. Some people might not even learn the language; but their children will. I was lucky to already have quite a bit of background in the American culture, since I was exposed to a lot of popular culture in my childhood and teenage years. When I moved here, it took me years before I really landed here. I think the best things that happened to me here were going to school, practicing more my English. My English was really, really rough when I first moved in, even though I have studied English since I was in elementary school, but never really practiced it. Most of my teachers were not English speaking teachers.

PK: Of course, your wife, first wife, was an American.

EC: My first wife and I actually used to speak Spanish in Mexico. And now with my second wife, we

speak English all the time. So it's a different story. After a while, my world of affections developed. Even though I went through a divorce, and later on I got married again, I also developed a lot of new friendships and, at some point, getting involved with organizing exhibitions, getting involved with places like Galería de la Raza, or other community organizations. Lately, I've been involved with the San Francisco Art Institute, on the board of trustees, or just helping community organizations whenever I can, like, Visual AIDS in San Francisco, I donate artwork to them, or I donate work to many other places. All this to say that suddenly I feel like I belong to a community of artists and people and friends, and my second wife, in a way that it will be very, very difficult to give it up and move anywhere else in the world, not just Mexico, but other places in the U.S. would be very difficult for me to move to. So I guess your place in the world is that place that you cannot leave, or you cannot really leave easily. That place for me has become the Bay Area. One way I have realized that I cannot leave the Bay Area that easily is by living in other places, like, living in Europe for a couple of times, in France, mainly. I stayed three months in a residency at Giverny, at Monet's gardens.

PK: What year was that?

EC: That was 1995. And I was there all through the summer. And at the time, it was the first time I ever lived in a different country besides the U.S. I lived outside of Mexico only in the U.S. I thought France somehow will be farther away as an experience for me, but the interesting thing was that in France, people have very similar customs to the ones we have in Mexico. People take a siesta in the middle of the day.

PK: That's a good custom.

EC: Everything closes between twelve and two o'clock in the afternoon. I don't know if people take siestas or not, but the exact same thing happens in small towns in Mexico, not in Mexico City, but in many other places. By the same token, just little things that I saw that were really much the same than in Mexico, that I thought were funny in Mexico, now I realized in another country it was happening. Like for instance, people around Giverny were taking picnics just on the side of the highway. It's something that you never see in this country. We'll never bring the tables and food and just stop the car on the side of the road and take it out, and just stay there with the children while they just run around and play next to the road. Perhaps in some places where there is not much traffic and you're far away from cars, perhaps. In Mexico, if you just go a little bit outside of Mexico City, there are a lot of really beautiful woodlands, and people just park their car a few feet away from the main road, and walk a little way, maybe 20 feet, and that's where they have their picnics. I saw the exact same thing in France. And I just felt that it was very, very familiar, especially in the countryside.

So Giverny was a wonderful experience for me. First of all, it gave me a chance to experience a different side of the European culture than the one I have imagined through reading books or novels; on the other hand, just being in a place that was so beautiful, as Giverny, affected some of my paintings. I began to paint the Giverny gardens, but through my own background, I could not help myself from making statements or cultural commentaries and contrasts that appear in my paintings. For instance, I painted the gardens of Giverny with the water lilies. I appropriated Monet's style of impressionism, and then on top if it, I just painted a Mexican canoe, with these boats that you might see in places like Xochimilco in Mexico, outside of Mexico City. So I used Xochimilco canoes with flowers on another painting by another French artist. It's The Shooting of Maximilian, by Edouard Manet. So I have the painting and on top of this boat in the gardens, and other elements appear; they have some Peloponnesian characters on the bottom. It's hard to really describe a painting if you are not seeing it, but the whole thing created a contrast of memories that were kind

of hidden. The painting is called Hidden Memories.

PK: Is this just one, or was it like a series?

EC: I did more than one painting with the background of Giverny. I have done at least three. I have used the same imagery in one of my codices, as well. So this was quite an experience for me. The French people were very friendly in this area. The gardeners used to invite us to their gardens for barbecues. We'd stop in the middle of a big buffet, a big dinner, and then everybody would stop and pool the wine and cigarettes, and half of them smoked. We were in a garden, beautiful garden of the gardeners, and then the second round of food came, more food. We usually ended up eating 'til midnight or so, when there were no more lights in the town, and you have to walk back to your studio in complete darkness. We didn't have any flashlights. We were totally in the dark.

PK: So you walk on that one road.

EC: Right, the one single road.

PK: And then you go by the church where the Monet family is buried.

EC: Exactly, a little up the hill and the studios are just across the street from where the gardener lives. I didn't know that they used to turn off the lights by eleven or so in the whole place, so at midnight or one o'clock, we're completely lost with no lamps or lights. It was amazing that we found our place. It was fun though.

PK: At any given time, is there just one artist in residence, or several?

EC: It's three at a time.

PK: Who were the other ones, do you remember?

EC: Yes, it was Christina Cardenas, an artist who moved from Mexico to Arizona, I believe she lives in Arizona, and Obaji [Nyambi], an artist from Chicago, who was a painter, as well. The three of us were painters.

PK: So how were you chosen? Was it random?

EC: It's a competition, an award, basically. You get it competing with other people who have gotten NEAs. I had gotten a couple of NEAs in the past, so I was nominated to apply. I applied, and I got it. But this experience was somehow the nicest I had in France, compared to the one of living in Paris, just a complete different experience. Paris is not as friendly. I mean, it's a beautiful city. There are a lot of beautiful things to see in Paris, but I don't know how to describe it, it's a mixture of beauty and unfriendliness that is constant, and it could be very subtle. I lived eight months there.

PK: So you were eight months in Paris. What year was that?

EC: That was 1999.

PK: That was '99, so you went… Wait a minute, you were '90…

EC: '95 in Giverny, first.

PK: Okay, so that was your first visit to France, or stay there. Was that your first visit at all to France?

EC: Yes.

PK: Had you been to Europe before?

EC: No. So that was also my first time in Europe.

PK: And then four years later, in '99, you went for eight months?

EC: Eight months. I visited Europe afterwards every year. After Giverny, I've been going to the Biennale, et cetera, as a tourist, but I visit a friend in Spain. Manuel Ocampo. He was in Spain at the time; now he lives in Berkeley. Then I got another award from the university at Stanford, from the dean. It's called "The Dean's Award in the Humanities." I had a year off with full salary. I took advantage of the fact that Stanford had a studio at The Cité Internationale des Arts, so I applied for the studio and I got it, too. It was a series of awards that I received.

PK: So they have a studio in Paris?

EC: Right, it's a very tiny studio. It's just the size of a bedroom, and you have a big wall to paint. Right next to it is your small kitchen and this very tiny bathroom, and a tiny closet; that's all you get.

PK: But you had to go there with your wife?

EC: And I went with my wife, and it's a miracle that we survived. It was great, actually. We were painting most of the time, both of us. Kara is very hard working.

PK: So you both were working in that same little studio?

EC: Same little studio.

PK: Did you have to do small works, then?

EC: Yes, also medium sized. I did a couple of pieces there. I think the smaller piece was four by four, and another piece I did was four by six feet. Kara's paintings were about four by five feet. She did four pieces. We had a great time. The two of us created more of a bond by being there. I guess it was harder for us to come back to the States later, but it was great. At least the two of us were there and have had this experience to share. It was a difficult one, because, first of all, the Cité was not giving credit to Kara at all, like, acknowledging the fact that she was staying with me.

PK: Now, who wasn't?

EC: The administration of the Cité. For instance, I will get a pass to go the museums. She wouldn't, even though we were paying rent. If you were with your spouse, you paid double. You're the only one who gets all the benefits. So at some point we did a collaboration. We did an installation. They didn't put her name on the invitations, because she was not considered a resident artist. But I told them, "This is not about residency, this is the artwork that we are doing and showing. It's not my own work; it's both of us."

PK: I can't believe that they would have the nerve to do that, because you could've hit up a friendship with somebody else entirely, and then say, "Hey, my project will be to collaborate with this random person off the street, out of some café." And then of course, the name would go there, right?

EC: And the artwork is signed by both. It's not just you. Somehow that concept wouldn't fit in the heads of the bureaucracy. This is just an example of how everything was for us in Paris, all the way from trying to get our visas to stay more than three months — which was harder for me than getting my citizenship. It's triple harder than getting a citizenship here, even though I had all the papers in the world that they needed. They ask you anything from your bank account, your credit reports, your FBI files. You name it, they want it, and translated in French by the local French translator. So it took us six months just to get the papers.

PK: But they didn't make you leave.

EC: No, they didn't, but somehow you don't know if you're going to have to leave sooner, so you never really settle until you get your permit. We started three months before we left, and we got it three months after we arrived, so for that first three months in France, it was very nebulous. It doesn't really let you relax when you are there.

PK: Tell me about your collaboration, since you brought it up, the installation piece. Was this your first collaboration?

EC: It was the second, I believe. We did another one with a print, with Bud Shark in Boulder, Colorado. Bud Shark is the one who published my codices. And besides making prints, I usually do monotypes. Kara and I did collaborations on some monotypes with him. This time in Paris, we wanted to express or experience being in Paris. One of the things that was hard — besides the roughness of the bureaucracy — was also the pollution of the city, it was very intense. We were in a very crowded area of the city, in the fourth arrondissement, which is the Marais [district]. And I thought it's wonderful, because you have everything within a walking distance of the museums.

PK: Now, which one is that?

EC: The Marais is where the Hôtel deVille is, the city hall. We were living just about two blocks from city hall, right next to the river. It's the other side of Notre Dame. It's near the Isle de Saint Louis, so it was crowded and full of cars all the time. It's one of the most crowded sections in Paris. The place where we were staying had about 600 artists living there. It was a huge building.

PK: Were they all from different countries?

EC: Most of them were from different countries. We also made some nice French friends, but they were not from Paris, they were from somewhere else. The thing is that we decided to make a portrait of what we saw in Paris. When you walk on the streets, you have to watch where you're walking, because there's a lot of dog doo, about every ten feet. I'm not exaggerating. Every ten or fifteen feet, you see one. I don't know if you want to put this in the records, but it affected our work. One day, we decided to count, on our way to the gym. We used to go to a gym a couple of times a week, or three times a week. On our way to the gym, we decided to count how many little turds we will see on the road. And how small the blocks are, it's like your block, each block is about the same, I don't know, 200 feet, 250 feet. They're not really long. We counted an average of between sixteen and twenty.

PK: Each block?

EC: Per block, on one side only. So after three or four blocks, we stopped counting; we got disgusted.

PK: I thought they had little people who go around and sweep and clean up.

EC: They have crowds of people washing off every day, every single day. It's not very efficient to do that. Then the water goes into the river, and who knows where else? Eventually, we drink that water in the city, but the thing is that was just one aspect. People also throw their trash on the streets and in the subway. I remember the subway had a strike of the trash collectors. And suddenly, all the trash cans were filled up in one day, but people kept dumping trash outside and on the floors of the subway. In three or four days, the whole place stunk, it was like dumpsters. You could not even see the floor through the papers and trash and pieces of bananas.

PK: Because we have this idea of the French being so proud of their city and so forth, that they wouldn't allow this to happen. But New York isn't that bad. Even San Francisco can be trashy, too, sometimes.

EC: In New York, people pick up the, waste from their dogs.

PK: Well, they have to; it's the law.

EC: In Paris, they just look the other way and they just walk away. So our installation was called Doggie Doo Hopscotch. Because we thought that was the way you have to walk in Paris, otherwise, you cannot afford to just look at Notre Dame, for instance, go look up and walk, because that will be the last thing you see. You could slip and get killed. Somebody said they have, about 500 accidents a year, and two or three actual deaths, from people slipping on dog doo.

PK: From the dog doo?

EC: Yes. So you don't want to be looking up; it could be really the last thing you see.

PK: This, then, was one of your major impressions of Paris that you put into this portrait of Paris.

EC: Well, we mixed it together with other things that happened. We found an old book of French art history, before color printing existed. This is a book from the thirties. And it was ready to be recycled in our building, in a corner in our studio, dusty books that were just basically considered trash. We picked up this book and we decided to recycle the book ourselves. So we painted over the pages, it was about 300 pages of French art. Then we decided to paint with acrylic on top of every page, 80 pages or so, with very sharp drawings, cartoons on top of the pieces. Then we put little grommets on the corners, and we put them all together in a cluster on a wall. In front of that, we made the Doggie Doo Hopscotch, with little turds that we did with something that's called Play-Doh. You mix all the colors of Play-Doh and it turns into brown. It's perfect. Then I had glass eyes that I bought in Mexico that you could use for saints, for instance. There's a store in Mexico where you could buy these little glass eyes, any size you wanted — big, tiny. I took them to France with me. So we put eyes on the dog turds, so they had personality. Some of them had two eyes, some of them had one eye; they looked like a Cyclops. We bought plastic flies and we put them on top; they looked like the real thing. Then you had to do your doggie doo hopscotch to get in front of the wall.

PK: So you go into the installation, and there are little turds all over.

EC: Right, right, right. Usually, kids throw something, and then jump and pick it up. So from the same store that we bought the flies, we bought rats and frogs. We left them there for people to play with. Then on the bottom, we had "Hell," and then on the top of the hopscotch, we have "Heaven."

PK: So you get to hopscotch through the turds, from hell to heaven.

EC: From hell to heaven; you have to go through that.

PK: And you might slip along the way.

EC: You had to throw either your frog or your rat, whatever. Then in front of it, we have all our paintings over French art history pages. The only problem with that was that at least half of those pages were religious art. Neither Kara nor I are religious persons, so we decided to make our own statement. At the same time, a friend of ours, David Kelso from Made in California, published some of my etchings in Oakland. He bought a house and sent us an e-mail. In the e-mail, he said that the house was so expensive that he didn't mind paying an arm and a leg, but he was really going to miss his penis. We got that statement, and laughed when we got it in the mail. We have a picture of a sculpture of Christ that only had the head and we just wrote that on top of it, just causally. That was just one of the pages. We did all kinds of things, whatever went through our heads. Sometimes we didn't do anything irreverent; we just put color frames around, or I did cartoons.

PK: Pre-Columbians.

EC: I used kind of pre-Columbian characters, anything that went through our heads. And actually, in general it looked really funny. Once you put the whole thing together, it had a sense of humor. We did our show right at the Cité Internationale. By the way, you had to pay for having permission, about 300 dollars.

PK: Is it a big gallery or something?

EC: It's a big, big gallery, many galleries in one building. You get one and we paid about 300 dollars or something to let us have permission.

PK: And so your piece was there, and other artists at the same time, had their pieces?

EC: So we just did it. The director was out of town, in China, with some political group that went there. We went through the opening, everybody loved… People laughed. We had such a great feedback from everybody. Then at the end of the show, two days before it had to be taken down, we were called from the director of the Cité, Madame Bruneau

PK: Bruneau

EC: Bruneau, right. She came. What happened was somebody put the rats on top of the frogs, kind of like having sex.

PK: Like they were copulating.

EC: On top of everything, I didn't know that Americans called the French frogs.

PK: So the rats were doing it to the French.

SESSION 3, TAPE ONE, SIDE B

PK: Continuing our interview with Enrique Chagoya. This is session three, tape one, Side B.

EC: So as I was saying, when Madame Bruneau came, if she didn't kick the rat and frog, somebody else did. When we arrived, she was waiting for us in the gallery. And the rats and the frogs were somewhere in the middle of the gallery, not where they're supposed to be. She pretended that she hadn't seen the show yet. She just went through and to see it, and suddenly, she began to say, "Ooh la la. Ooh la la. Ooh la la." And then she arrived to the Christ, where we wrote this statement

that our friend wrote after he bought the house in Berkeley, and she hit the roof. She just lost it. And she began to scream at us in French. And she was saying, “Jai suis blessé.” And I just kind of, “What is Jai suis blessé?” And Kara told me, Kara speaks better French than me, she said, “That means she’s wounded.”

PK: Wounded.

EC: Wounded. Not just hurt, but wounded. And then the director began to speak English. She speaks perfect English. She just was so upset. And then she was telling us, “Why did you do this? Why?” And then we just told her, we just painted anything that went through our heads, and we didn’t mean to offend anybody. And we don’t have control over how people will react to any works, and we don’t like to worry about it.

PK: But did that work? Did that make her feel better?

EC: No, no, she got even angrier. So she said, “You have control over what you paint, so you should never ever paint anything that might offend anybody.” And she just ran out of the gallery. She wouldn’t let us answer or say anything back to her. It’s just terrible. She was basically telling us: You’re lucky we didn’t take this show down. That was another of the last nice things she told us. But in a way, it was great that somebody reacted with such passion to this work, because it made me think that art is seen with different eyes by different people. I don’t know if we were talking about the many representations of Christ in one painting I’m going to be working on, but when you see paintings of Christ from different cultures: they are very different. If you see a Christ from Ethiopia, it looks very African. So everybody projects themselves into whatever they see. And of course, Madame Bruneau is a very conservative character. Somebody told us later she was an assistant to Charles de Gaulle.

PK: So this was a political appointment, her appointment?

EC: It is pretty much a political position.

PK: Yes, because it doesn’t sound like she was too sophisticated, in terms of what’s going on in the art world.

EC: No, she actually inherited the place, I believe, from her husband. So her husband died and she stayed as the director. But what I realized mostly was that there is this kind of explosive reaction on and off towards artists that don’t have any idea of what kind of reaction their work is going to create. I will say perhaps some artists look for it; other artists might not look for it. In our case, I swear we were not looking for it. We were thinking that we were having something with some sense of humor, and people will understand the sense of humor behind it. If we followed her advice, let’s say, don’t ever do anything that might offend anybody; you will see that there were so many artists in history that have offended somebody — beginning with Michelangelo, he offended the Pope, and even the impressionists; they were offensive. They might not offend anybody today, but the impressionists offended the academy. At the time, they were kicked out of the Salon, and they had to do their Salon des Refuses. The surrealists offended everybody. When Bunuel and Dali showed their film, The Andalusian Dog. everybody threw stuff to the screen. There was a riot in the theater. Diego Rivera offended Rockefeller. Chris Ofili offended Mayor Giuliani of New York. Salman Rushdie offended Islam. We wouldn’t have any of this art, if artists followed Madame Bruneau’s advice. We don’t compare with any of these artists. But there is all this very interesting interaction between bureaucracies that fear for their power, and artists, who suddenly are kind of outside of their control.

PK: Well, to be subversive and transgressive, to make you stop and react, and then maybe think in a different way it seems to me that that's been an important role of art for a long time, certainly, modern art.

EC: We're not pretending to make any political art, necessarily, or making any political statement, just painting differently. Somehow, it becomes threatening to structures of power. Another case was the case of Emil Nolde, who painted, perhaps some of the most interesting Christs in the German Expressionist school. He was in the Nazi Party and was kicked out of the Nazi Party. He was the one that got more paintings ridiculed in that show, the Degenerate Art show. And he was even forbidden to paint at all. He never quit being a racist. He was anti-Semitic until his last day.

PK: He was a good Nazi.

EC: He was a good artist, I will say, as s Robert Hughes put it, it's incredible that there could be Nazis who are good artists; and he was one of them.

PK: What about that? I don't want to divert you off the subject, but this seems like an important little side road to take a look at, because this is an interesting issue. Are artists somehow also responsible for political views that we perhaps come to see as reprehensible? Wagner is a big case in point; Ezra Pound; many big thinkers, Paul Demann, for instance. It turns out that they're sympathizers, or even secretly supporters; they're anti-Semitic. I mean, fascism, for instance, or anti-Semitism. I guess the question here… I mean, I'm interviewing myself right now; but the question this is leading to is, how do you feel about the artist, in terms of a responsibility when you get into important issues? Take away just the religious thing, offending people's religious finer senses. Take all that away. What about some really important social issues or ideas of equality\of race— racism as a subject, atrocities, this sort of thing? Does the artist have, in your view, a moral responsibility beyond simply the moral responsibility to make art honestly?

EC: I will say to make art honestly is the main responsibility of any artist. I think you cannot make art just trying to make any political statement. It won't come out. You might end up making really poor art. And actually, your political statements will be really poor, too; really wishy-washy. I think perhaps what happens with some of these artists — even like Emil Nolde, somehow, they are able to make some art that it's even more complex than their logical minds. And that's when you really strike something as an artist. I think that applies to any artist, including myself. When your political views are not necessarily that obvious in the work, that's something I have learned over, maybe, many years.

PK: We talked about that earlier.

EC: My earlier pieces were more in your face. I've been doing lately other things. I have done that already, so I don't want to keep doing it forever. But I realize that when you hit the unconsciousness of the viewer, the work becomes more complex, in ways that are beyond your logical control as an artist. I think when people in charge of political structures first see this kind of product, they get scared, too. Or you strike a chord in some cases, in which they don't know how to react; only if their reaction is in control. I think that happened to Emil Nolde. Even though he was a Nazi, he was totally punished by the Nazi Party.

PK: It should have taught him a lesson about the Nazis.

EC: It probably did. He didn't change his anti-Semitism, unfortunately, but it shows you how extreme it could be. You don't have to be a communist to be censored; or you don't have to be a leftist to be

censored. It's just making something outside of the acceptable rules of what should be done. I think perhaps that the essence of any great art, is that it has a life of its own, kind of independent from the artist, at some point, even though it's not. There is this kind of detachment that makes an artwork more complex than even the artist imagined or any art critic might imagine in the beginning. We all dream about making this kind of art. There are no recipes to making this kind of art. It just happens when you have some passion. You have your life experiences and you put them together somehow in a form that you were not even expecting to do. That's when you create something, or the process of creating, is a surprise to yourself. You end up in something completely unexpected. You could say a conceptual artist doesn't work that way; a conceptual artist has a concept first, and the production of the work and the final object, it's all planned, all the stages until the end. That object was the result of the creation. The creation first, just to make your concept, had to go through the same process that you don't know what you're going to end up. You start with two or three ideas, eventually you put it together, and then sometimes right before you go into the final production of the work, you make a final intuitive adjustment, and then you go for it. As a conceptual artist every step of the way, you know where you're going, and you end up with a film or a print, or a painting. Still, the creative process is very unpredictable — even for conceptual artists. So that's all I'm saying. And that is when you could be detached or the artwork takes its own life independently from your political views, from your rational explanations of aesthetics, or even the work itself that you're doing. I think that's what happens. Very often, you might not agree with the political opinions of an artist, but you love their artwork. And that happens to me from right or left.

PK: I guess it's very true — it's hard for people to accept — if they love the art, or maybe the performance or the singing… Like, a lot of people think Frank Sinatra, for instance, was not a very nice man; and I think that's true. And sometimes if you learn too much about the way he was in life, and how mean he was to some people, a bully, perhaps, it might affect your listening to his singing. But basically, these two things — I guess this is what you're saying —are separate.

EC: They have a life of their own. You cannot totally detach them, of course. But, it happens with Woody Allen. You have a lot of people who hate him for what he did, left his wife, married to his daughter or whatever. Kara and I love his films, and we'll love it no matter what he does in his personal life; we don't care.

PK: Well, that's right, because he's just being an artist. He's acting, and he's writing, and he's producing something. I don't want to stay on this subject too long; it's something that's talked about a lot in one way or another. But I was thinking of the idea, not censorship so much, but of works offending. And sometimes, like in your case, it was not your goal to offend, as you told Bruneau. Is that her name?

EC: Yes, Madame Bruneau.

PK: But in some other cases, one gets the impression that the intention of the work is indeed to elicit a response, to shock, and actually, to offend. Maybe not even to any political end, but that becomes a goal in itself. It's like you shake things up. But I was thinking, for example, Jeff Koons particularly in his sculptures and photos of when he was married to Cicciolina, the porn star in Italy, politician/porn star. I saw one in a show in New York just a few weeks ago; I was reminded of this. He has a whole huge series of photos and everything. Did you see the show at SF MOMA when Jeff Koons was there?

EC: No, I missed it. Maybe I was in Europe or something, I don't know.

PK: Well, it was Jeff Koons. There was a whole special area, where there was a little bit of a warning

for children and so forth, because it was like a little porno show, and he's the porn actor, and she's the porn actress. Okay. I have to ask you this. We went and saw it. We saw it with our daughter, because she was grown up and so, no problem. But what was interesting, the curatorial statement before you went into that special room was… It talked about Manet and Olympia, for instance, or Courbet and some of his works, pointing out that in the history of art, some of the greatest artists did things that were very offensive to morality of the day. I thought that this was pretty cheeky of them to introduce Jeff Koons as inheriting the tradition of Manet and Courbet. I'm sorry, I don't buy this. But it's an interesting notion, which I think is a little bit confused, maybe. What do you think about that? Well, just what I told you, of setting up as a raison d'etre, as something virtuous, or something valuable in art, what Courbet or Manet did, pushing it.

EC: I agree with you that these artists have no relationship to some contemporary artists, like Jeff Koons. The only similarity is that they might have created some controversy at the time. To me, Jeff Koons is very mild, in terms of the controversies he's created. He hasn't had people with a picket line in front of the museum. I will say the idea of art in which some of the central element is shock value, a different story. I think some artists are totally aware of it.

PK: You mean contemporary artists.

EC: Right, contemporary [artists], who use the strategy of shock value to make some kind of noise for themselves, a very often, those works come and go very easily. The same thing with the publicity for the artist, you get a little bit of shock waves, and that's it. You're gone. I think it's different when there is some sense of sincerity in the artist who does it, and then you get shock waves. That's what makes history. That's a little difficult to catch in the beginning, because whatever is new, it is always confusing to read. You don't know how to react to it. It's very difficult for me to define what would be the meaning of sincerity behind the work. I don't know. I really don't.

PK: Do you go around and ask each work? Now, say, "Now, are you really sincere?"

EC: "Are you really sincere? Are you honest painting this way?" I can only speak for myself. In my case, I feel frustrated with a lot of things in the world, and rather than going out and going crazy on the street, I just dump it on my artwork. That's personally what I need to do, just to feel free of expressing myself and my ideas and not carry my anxiety, and keeping it just for myself. In a way, I like to share my anxieties with the world. If anything, it makes me feel more relieved. Well, I took something off my shoulders when I make a statement of some kind. Kara and I did the same thing with this installation in Paris. We got some relief when we did this piece, and somehow we were able to relate to Paris with a lighter spirit. We were not so disgusted with the pollution. After we did that piece, we saw it now as resources for artwork. It's a very different interaction. Suddenly you start observing the city with the eyes of raw material for your art. It's totally different if we had not done it. You just keep holding onto your frustration, so there is no creative way of taking it out. I'm not saying, it's therapy, it's just how it works. You might not be able to release all of your anxieties by making art, either.

PK: But you're not saying, it's therapy?

EC: It's not. It's not, no.

PK: See, I was going to ask you, is this a kind of less expensive therapy?

EC: No. In our case, or personally in my case, it worked like therapy; but it's not a recipe for therapy at all, or to even making art. It's just how it worked for me. You could do the same thing and still be

very frustrated with whatever reality you are expressing in your work. Your work does not necessarily make you feel better. It's not a recipe for anything. In my case, I felt relief. I felt good. I'm sorry that I offended this lady, who was a nice lady. She just had her stripe of authority. The last thing I'm interested in is offending anybody. It's not the goal of the work.

PK: So you said that your experiences in France, maybe both times, actually had an important effect on your thinking, even ideas about your art, maybe even the direction that your art took.

EC: Yes.

PK: What do you mean?

EC: Before I went to Europe, most of my recent works were dealing with cultural contrasts between the U.S. and Mexico. I was dealing with a lot of border issues. After going to Europe and experiencing the culture in France; also, a different kind of interaction with the Americas, and more in tune with the history of Europe conquering the Americas, it made me shift my work. That's when I first began to kind of polish more of my ideas about what I mentioned earlier, reverse anthropology and reverse modernism. Suddenly, I was not dealing anymore with just border issues between the U.S. and Mexico, or cultural differences between both places, or in the pre-Columbian world and modern world. It made me shift into a more global way of Western culture in interaction with the rest of the world that is not considered Western culture. So in other words, for me, it made me rethink the idea of borders more into not so much geographical, but cultural and internal.

As I was saying in my talk, a couple of days ago, when you fly in an airplane, you don't see the borders between countries. The borders are in our heads, in our maps we make, but you don't see the borders from the airplane. That means the borders are harder to cross within ourselves. With my current work, I'm trying to reflect the way humankind perhaps has acted against humankind, human versus human. In other words, the history of the interaction among cultures is very violent, and in the best cases, it's very peaceful, but in general, there was a violent interaction. Just like when the Moors conquered Europe, it was a violent interaction; it was a conquest. It created a product. In a way, it helped the Renaissance to be born. It nourished it with new culture, with new ideas, the rest of Europe, so it was not all that terrible. By the same token, something similar happened with the conquest of the Americas by Europe. I don't want to be that simplistic, either, though, because there were terrible things, too. But there was a hybrid culture created. That's all I'm saying. There was a hybrid that began to happen throughout all of the Americas, from North to South America. The same thing has happened in Africa and Asia, for the better or the worse with a lot of cultural destruction, too. It has been at some expense, with holocausts taking place, many holocausts, with many redefinitions of borders. At the end, when you compare cultures, we are all the same. When I was studying the fact that the Spaniards burned all the books by the Aztecs, we also mentioned a little bit, also, the Aztecs did the same thing to other cultures they conquered; they burned the books of other cultures they were conquering. So the Aztecs were not very different than people today.

PK: It's just whoever has the power, the firepower.

EC: You have to dehumanize the enemy, basically. The Spaniards had to dehumanize the Indians, they didn't have souls. They were not up to the standards of being human. So the same thing George Bush did with Saddam Hussein. He is not human. He's a monster. They always dehumanize the other too, but not the rest of the Iraqi people, who get killed in the way. You have all these ideological wars constantly. I'm just reversing or deconstructing dominant values in art. So I'm doing the opposite of what Picasso did with African masks. I'm doing the exact opposite. I'm acting like the

"noble savage," or the not-so-noble savage, appropriating European art, and pretending I only care about form. I'm painting over European paintings, very much in that style. By the same token, I'm just putting a mirror to think: What would have happened, if the Aztecs had conquered Europe.

PK: Right, I know, I love that image.

EC: My question is probably the same, because we are the same species. The Aztecs would have oppressed Europe, in a maybe equally horrendous way than the Europeans did with the Aztecs, or the Spaniards did with the Aztecs. It's perhaps just food for thought. I don't have any answers about what would be better or what would be best. I think they're all the same. We all carry this duality of being our best friends and our worst enemies. Someday, I hope we might find a nice balance, in which we don't jeopardize the existence of the world in this kind of fight we have within ourselves.

SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE A

PK: This is session three, Enrique Chagoya, and this is tape two, side A. We've decided among the many interesting things that we could talk about is to address this specific work here. It's a codex, but it's a published one. It resembles very much a fabulous one that's on display now in the Road to Aztlan show at L.A. County Museum. Is this codex that we're looking at now as long?

EC: No, it's ten pages long.

PK: Is that all?

EC: Right.

PK: Anyway, it's very effective. One of the reasons it's so interesting and makes such a strong point is that it echoes at least one pre-Columbian codex.

EC: Yes, they have a facsimile.

PK: It's a facsimile.

EC: Right.

PK: Because there aren't very many.

EC: No. No, there's, as I mentioned earlier, only 22 left.

PK: So they could've gotten one. At any rate, it clearly refers back to something you've seen earlier in the exhibition. I'm very interested in hearing how you actually came up with these. It's basically a series of images that supposedly relate, and maybe evolve or develop as you move along the codex, I don't know. Could you talk about that?

EC: My interest in the style of the writing of the pre-Columbian codices was born out of my reading about the history of the destruction of the books. Later on, I began to study a little bit about their structures of the writing from the surviving books, and how the books were meant to be performed in front of audiences by whoever was the keeper of the books, most likely priests. But what I love about the ancient codices is the fact that they have no words. They could be very precise in their meaning. Just like today, we have, as I mentioned earlier, many, many examples of non-alphabetical kinds of text. For instance, the musical writing that Elizabeth Hill Boone gives as an example of one

of them, in her book about pre-Columbian literacy, Writing Without Words. She mentions the musical writing, as well as maps and traffic signs, et cetera. But from an artist's perspective, and for me, that's what makes sense in my work, how you convey a specific content without words, in which you might address an issue that you're concerned with. Whenever a viewer sees the work, he/she is going to be affected in a very unconscious way, because you are not using the rational side of your brain to read, but rather the other side of the brain, which is the visual side, to absorb the information. Very often, you don't know how to react to the cultural oppositions. So the fact that I put a Spiderman with the head of Columbus in front of an engraving of Fra Bartolomeo de las Casas and right next to it, a Mickey Mouse character from 500 years later, smiling into it. It creates a kind of mixture of symbolisms that could be read in many ways. And that's what I usually do in most of my codices. With Codex Espangliensis which is the one I have in front of me, that is not quite the case. That's a book, as I mentioned earlier, that has a lot of text. That's a book that I did in collaboration with Guillermo Gomez-Pena, and also the book artist who put it together, Felicia Rice. Thanks to Felicia, this book came to life, because she invited both of us to collaborate. We thought that will never happen, because she didn't have the money to get it together. She asked Guillermo if he had any money to put into the book at some point, and we thought: Well, that never is going to happen. Guillermo and I have a lot of similar subject matter in our work. He deals with performance and I deal with visual elements, but we both have a very similar content in the work. What Felicia did was put together his texts from performances and my images from my books without either one of us knowing how the text would be interacting with the images. That was not the first time we ever did something like that. There was another book we did; it's called Friendly Cannibals, published by Artspace Books in San Francisco, which is directed by Anne MacDonald. They moved to New York. She invited me and Guillermo to make a book. But neither Guillermo nor I knew what the other was going to do. It was sort of a non-collaborative collaboration. When the book was put together by Felicia Rice, it was a surprise for me and Guillermo, because the text and the images made sense, and somehow it's not illustrative of each other. Guillermo's text is not illustrating my images; my images are not illustrating his text, but we are talking about the same things. This is perhaps the interesting thing about this book it's more like a baroque duet. We are going in different directions, but there is a conductor, Felicia Rice, that puts together the two musicians playing at the same time. And that's what I really like about this book; something that happened in a very spontaneous way. There was one critic that mentioned that the book has not a linear narrative, and that was the weakest part of the book. For us, that was what we wanted to do. We didn't want to make a narrative. We didn't want to make a single line narrative: Okay, so this is the beginning, the climax, and the end. We didn't want that.

PK: Could you choose a couple pages in here that we could describe, that maybe would illustrate the point? Now, first of all, it's read from back to front, is that correct?

EC: It's in the style of some ancient books. Not all the books in ancient Mexico are read the same way. This kind of a book is like an accordion; it goes from right to left, from what will be the back of a Western book, from the back to the front. There're other books, pre-Columbian books — for instance, the annals, the every year account — that are read in a linear way, and usually from left to right. So it really depends. There are other books in Oaxaca, in the Zapotec-Mixtec cultures, which the book reads kind of like a snake. You go as a snake might crawl, from one side to the other side of the page, from bottom to the top, and then you continue on the other page the same way, like, in a serpentine way of left to right, top to bottom.

PK: How do you know how to follow that?

EC: There has been some deciphering of some pages of some of those books that makes it make total sense; it makes a story. And it's a linear story, in some of those cases. Elizabeth Hill Boone,

actually, in her book has examples of translating four or five pages of some codices, and you could read them clearly in that sense. They're mythological accounts; their wars; they're sometimes family trees, people who gets married to whom, who are their parents, who are their children; then heroes are born, sometimes a warrior; they go through adventures, misadventures, and so on. But what is interesting is that there is no alphabet to tell all these stories.

PK: Well, what's going on here, then? I mean, is this a good one to look at?

EC: Yes. I mean, in this case, this is the beginning.

PK: If it were linear.

EC: We're seeing the first two pages of the book, which are the first two pages in the back of the book. We see an engraving by Posada, a picture of hell, where the devil is sitting in the middle, some sinful souls are pushed into it, and there are all these ghosts coming in and out of it. Then Superman is dressed in a red suit, coming out of hell somehow, with a skeleton on…

PK: With a skull on his chest. Instead of a big S, he has a skull.

EC: So he's kind of a Superman from hell. He's flying into these three warriors, whose names are right above them. In the pre-Columbian codices, their names are attached somehow to the characters. You have to count how many dots are in there, and that's a number associated with the calendar, which is the birth date of the character; and that becomes their name. For instance, here we have a snake head, or a crocodile, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen dots. So this is Fifteen Crocodile. And this other character, with the skulls is one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, Eleven Skull, and there you have the names of the characters. That also means a date in the calendar, which is 20 days. Every day is a different symbol. There are 20 animal signs, one for each of the 20 months of the pre-Columbian calendar. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, Twelve Deer; so that's the name of this character.

PK: His name is Twelve Deer.

EC: Twelve Deer, right, right.

PK: And the other guy is Fifteen Crocodile.

EC: They are all confronting Superman. So just the naming of elements in history and cultures is totally different. They are all on the same page, and confronting each other somehow, creating kind of yin and yang, a thesis and antithesis, and hopefully, a synthesis, in the mind of the viewer — which is going to be different for different viewers.

Now, we have text here from Guillermo from his performances. It's a question. "What is the difference between free trade art and a free art agreement?"

PK: This is a NAFTA statement?

EC: Kind of related to that, or derivative.

PK: If you're trying to understand your images, your juxtapositions— let's call it a collage or something, of different elements — in terms of this text…

EC: Not necessarily a direct illustration: I mean, of the question.

PK: That's not going to a help you.

EC: Right. Although, if you think in terms of trade, there is a kind of an exchange somehow, so there is an exchange happening between this page and the other one.

PK: Well, that's right, that's true.

EC: Something is about to happen, but it's not about free trade. In a way, what we were talking about is how cultures commingle sometimes, or influence each other, more often than not, through violent means, and hopefully, also through peaceful means. But in this case, there is a confrontation about to happen, and nobody knows what it's going to be.

PK: Now, is Superman like a time traveler here? I'm trying to be too logical. So you've got on the right here… It's also interesting that it's a little washed in red.

EC: Right.

PK: And it looks violent, or looks like a sacrifice or something. I don't know if that's in there on purpose.

EC: Right.

PK: But at any rate, that's the Posada. Well, the Posada's an early 20th century fabulous printmaker, graphic artist. And one of the great — I don't know — almost like an origin of Mexican modernism, in a sense. So he's a very important figure. But still, 20th century and then this goes back at least to the 15th, probably 16th.

EC: Yes, before the conquest, pre-Columbian. This is from the codex Nuttal which is a codex from the Mixtec-Zapotec region. And it's based on a book about genealogies of families.

PK: So I guess my question is this. If I'm looking at this and really struggling to try to give it meaning, you say that it's okay that I do this, right?

EC: Right.

PK: I would see this as the linking element, Superman, which is a U.S. cartoon, popular culture cartoon hero, super-hero. But he's providing the link between eras, time periods, and it could be the history of Mexico; but it could be even stylistically.

EC: Yes, into this culture, you see a lot of pre-Columbian influences, right next to indigenous people, not only in Mexico, but in Latin America, wearing t-shirts with Nike or with Mickey Mouse. I don't know if you ever saw this film The Burden of Dreams, by Les Blank.

PK: No.

EC: It's about the making of the movie Fitzcarraldo by Werner Herzog. I love the documentary about the making of the movie. They are pushing this ship up the hill and Werner Herzog… It's very strange. When Les Blank asks him why he didn't share his food with the Indians, with the local population, Werner Herzog says, "They are not used to this food; I don't want to be culturally imposing on them." Because they were having airplane food with meat, ham, whatever they wanted

to eat every day, and the Indians only ate yucca, which is a local root. That was it, and water. Everybody else had good drinks and any food you might find here.

PK: They would've liked it.

EC: Right. But Werner Herzog said he wouldn't share that with everybody else because it's imposing a cultural taste. Then you see the indigenous characters pushing that ship that is going up the hill, and some of them have t-shirts with Mickey Mouse and the idea of a pure culture absolutely no longer exists, anywhere in the world. So by the same token, the American culture is a highly hybrid culture, as well. It has influence from everywhere else.

PK: But it strikes me that although you're referring back to Mexico, Mexican art, Mexican history and culture which is your background, it's a commentary, as much as anything else, on the United States and the role it has played in the world, as this hybrid, this bringing together, and then giving back these odd products that are embraced by the older places.

EC: I will say, McDonald's is not the same in Oakland than it is in Paris, or in Mexico City. It's really interesting, these kinds of things.

PK: Because they have to adjust.

EC: It's a different hybrid in Paris, as well as in Mexico City, In Paris, they are middle class, a more well to do audience that goes to these restaurants and in Mexico City, the same thing, middle class, upper middle class goes to McDonald's. Here you find people of lower income going into these restaurants. The only time I ever went to one of these restaurants was ten years ago, there were homeless people eating in McDonald's. You could find wine in the McDonald's in France, whereas here, you would not be able to ask for wine. In Mexico City, the hamburger places have hot peppers to mix with your hamburger. So it's got all these kind of different elements, and by the same token, the Mexican culture has had some influence on the food in the States, as well as in Europe. Just imagine some of pre-Columbian foods that are all over the world, beginning with chocolate. You could find chocolate everywhere. What would the world be without chocolate? Or what would the world will be like without tomatoes, or without onions? I just cannot imagine life as nice without all of these things, or without the hot peppers, or zucchini. All kinds of things somehow have influence. Today, you go to France and you could get a burrito in Paris. The burrito's going to have some kind of the French mildness, or the burritos in Tokyo, they have soy sauce, and then they still call it Mexican food. Or the burritos here, it's something we don't have in Mexico. In Mexico, there are no burritos.

PK: No?

EC: No, that is more Southwestern food, but they call it Mexican food here. All these kinds of influences take place. What you see in some of my codices is this kind of influencing of each other, but the influence happens not in the book itself, because every character, every symbolic element is very distinctive. It's not like I have a Superman with feathers or anything like that. Maybe I should. But no, Superman is still Superman in my codices; or the pre-Columbian characters or the Catholic characters, but by the interactions I make between all these very different symbolic elements, I hope I will be able to create a third element in the minds of the people. That's where the mixture of ideas and cultures, hopefully, takes place.

PK: So let's look at one more. And I realize that to pin you down is not the right thing to do; that goes against the point of the whole thing. Okay, we're not exactly in the middle, but we've moved

into the book a little bit. And I don't even know exactly how to describe this, but we have a Guadalupe. I guess that's a Guadalupe, isn't it?

EC: Right, they have this page full of women characters, except for the little angel and the snake.

PK: And what's that Quetzalcoatl or something?

EC: It's actually the Virgin of Guadalupe, no, not the Virgin of Guadalupe, some other Catholic virgins are stepping on top of the snake, as if the snake is a symbol of the devil. In this case, the snake is more like a hose throwing water into the flames of this lonely soul in purgatory. That's what this character is called. It's this woman in flames, with her chains broken. She's waiting to go to heaven. She's waiting for her turn to go to heaven, and it's called The Lonely Soul in Purgatory. I found a book from a paper making town called San Pablito that makes the amate paper, which is the paper where I print my books. Amate is paper from the bark of a tree of the same name. It's a native tree. That's the same paper ancient cultures used to paint their books on. This will be interesting, just to open a little parenthesis about the paper, the paper was forbidden to be made during the times of the colony. It's a miracle that it survived. It was suddenly popular again in the fifties and sixties, with kind of a tourist industry, when two cultures got together to make paintings on amate. One was the paper-makers of San Pablito, which is Otomi Indians. Then the painters in Guerrero, which are Nahua Indians, make these images in their books. They are ceremonial books, ritualistic books. I was lucky to find one of these books in the marketplace at some point. It has instructions for remedies, when you have spiritual needs. It gives you a whole ritual that you have to do. Cut up pieces with a paper amate and suddenly, you will be relieved from whatever pain you might be suffering.

PK: Is that what this one's about?

EC: No.

PK: This is a woman, she's all opened up in front; you can see right inside of her.

EC: On the facing page, I used an anatomical chart of a woman, whose front of her body is totally open. You can see her intestines, her lungs. And from the middle of it, there's a Wonder Woman coming out with a machine gun, and saying, "Go to hell." And she's pointing it at the Virgin of Guadalupe. From the same comic book, I cut out this text, and I put them on the Virgin of Guadalupe. She's having a dialogue with Wonder Woman. One Virgin of Guadalupe is saying, "Oh, dear, is that a neural impactor? Do they still make those?" So the Virgin of Guadalupe has all these texts coming out of her. And then other one says, "I'll advise you to try the plasma disrupter. It's smaller." Finally says, "I love you," to Wonder Woman. Hopefully, there is conciliation afterwards, but that's still open. You don't know whether Wonder Woman's going to shoot at the Virgin of Guadalupe or not.

PK: Well, what about this? Now, one of the things that unifies the composition is these red numbers and dots, and then letters.

EC: That's part of the text of Guillermo. I believe it's part of one of his performances. It's just counting backwards from ten to one. And vade retro gachisimo means, vade, it's Latinism that the priests used to say when there was a demon in front of you. There were two Latin words. One of those was Vade, and the other was retro, and it means "get back." Usually, you will say, "Vade retro Satanas," or "Back off, Satan."

PK: So that does fit with this.

EC: Somehow it happened, by coincidence, but the interaction with all the women in the text is very ambiguous. It's not necessarily about feminism, or it's not necessarily about feminist Latinas versus white feminists. It's about something more of cultural differences. Somehow, the misunderstanding of cultural differences could breed conflict, but in this case, we don't know whether that conflict is going to be resolved. It's just pointing out that there is this…

PK: The virgin is trying to make a rapport and reconciliation, right?

EC: She's saying I love you. Actually, I used the heart that you use in bumpers on cars. So she's talking popular language somehow, trying to be simple. But, when you move on, on the next page you have a portrait of Montezuma on one page, and then on the facing page, the goddess Coatlicue, which is the main goddess in the Aztec pantheon. And then the representation of the famous Skeleton Lady de Catrina or the Bourgeois Lady by Posada, with a Mickey Mouse on top of them, and Goofy on top of Coatlicue, and the complacent gaze or happy gaze of King Montezuma. Whatever is happening here is an interpretation that will be good with anybody, or for anybody, as it is for me. I really don't know what is happening. I only know that there is a different kind of skeleton interacting with these comic characters. And it goes together with existentialist, Mojado. Mojado is the undocumented worker that is an existentialist philosopher. And that could be the portrait of Montezuma, thinking about death.

SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE B

PK: Continuing this third session with Enrique Chagoya, tape two, side B. And we've been doing a critical analysis, a critical reading of this codex, the name of which I forget. What is it?

EC: Codex Espangliensis

PK: Oh. Spanish.

EC: Spanish and Spanglish.

PK: Spanglish.

EC: So it's an Espangliensis.

PK: It's by Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Enrique Chagoya, and the conductor of this duet is Felicia Rice. Anyway, we started looking at the back of it. We haven't looked at all of them, just at a couple, but you said that this last one is particularly interesting to you.

EC: It just kind of like a puzzle game. And on the right-hand page, we have the lord of the dead, Mictlantecuhtli, about to have Mickey Mouse for lunch. He's putting some salt and pepper on him, and Mickey Mouse is tied up with a rope on a plate, waiting to be eaten. And in front of Mictlantecuhtli, which is on top of his pyramid, we have a group of Aztec cannibals, munching on somebody's parts. Right on the facing page, we see Superman being killed by a skeleton of Posada. This is out of a Posada print. And in front of it a bleeding heart, an Aztec bleeding heart. The whole thing, these two pages, is a puzzle where you have also a list of names, and you have to cross whether the culture is threatened, endangered, or extinct. The first one is Aztec. What is it? Is it threatened, endangered, or extinct? I don't know. I will be saying, "Wow. Are the Aztecs gone? Or are they endangered? "

PK: Well, they're certainly gone in terms of being the rulers.

EC: Or they are threatened? The rulers, so we'll say it's extinct. Then what about Apache? Apache, are they still around? I guess. So they are just, maybe threatened.

PK: Yes.

EC: Threatened or endangered, The Seminole.

PK: They're still around.

EC: They're still around, so they are still threatened or endangered. How about the Taino? Apparently, the Taino were wiped out within the first 50 years of the encounter with Columbus. The Taino Indians and the Ottawas were some of the dominant cultures in the Caribbean, and they were mostly gone. Lately, there have been about a few people in Cuba and in Puerto Rico that claim to be Tainos. I will say they are endangered, if there is at least three or four of these Tainos, but it's pretty much extinct, I will say. Siboney, I don't know about that culture myself.

PK: I don't either.

EC: Siboney, it sounds something out of Caribbean culture. I'm sorry for my ignorance on what's that. I should ask Guillermo, because this is his, Guillermo's text. There is a song that mentions Siboney, and it's a Cuban song. So I assume it's possible, some kind of a Caribbean culture. Then let's say Lacandon. Lacandon is a culture from the north of Mexico and the Southwest. And they are endangered. They're having a really hard time just surviving, now, Chicano.

PK: Oh, not endangered.

EC: They're not endangered.

PK: They're not even threatened.

EC: Hopefully, not. So that's pretty much maybe a place that we could leave blank. Then Garifuna. I have no idea what's Garifuna. That's another question I have for Guillermo. That's going to be a question. Then you have Anglo-Saxon. Is that endangered, extinct, or threatened? [It's] Probably none of the above.

PK: Although, they think they're threatened.

EC: That's still probably blank.

PK: But they probably think they're threatened.

EC: They're threatened.

PK: Because they're becoming minorities, right?

EC: Well, in California, maybe.

PK: Threatened in California.

EC: So it could be threatened. Then we could put "threatened" on the corner. And then on the bottom, we have a Marxist.

PK: Oh, extinct.

EC: They are gone. They're the utopian that got extinct. So that's a game for the reader. But it's interesting what you think about cultures, how they emerge and how they disappear.

PK: So is one of the themes of this book, talking about it this way, ideas of loss, that which in some ways even defines a place and a time is really very vulnerable and fragile and easily lost?

EC: What is very interesting in this page for me is that you put all these questions in front of cannibals.

PK: Yes. Who are eating all of those groups?

EC: So people eating somehow, some cultures get absorbed by other cultures. In a way, this is something else we haven't talked about, and it's the issue of cannibalism in my work.

PK: Let's talk about that in a minute, can we? We were looking at this… Are those Aztec cannibals?

EC: Right.

PK: Yes. And you wanted to talk about cannibalism in your work, which is a theme.

EC: I think I should start by saying, I use the theme a lot in my work. In many occasions, I have used it. And there have been artists in the past, especially in Brazil, who have used the theme of cannibalism, especially the group by, I believe the Amaral family that used to publish this magazine. It was called Claxon, or Antropofagia, back in the 1940s and all the way through the fifties, in which they have a manifesto. And they have some kind of an Americanist intention. Their idea was to consume, to devour European culture, and digest it, and transform it into something a new product, an American product. So that was the idea of the Antropofigia. In my own case, I'm aware of that manifesto. But I don't use it with the same intention. I play the stereotypes of savages or the stereotype of the uncivilized. Which is very, very present, since, perhaps, the origins of the Greek civilization, when the Greeks divided the world between themselves and barbarism. Everything that was not Greek was barbarism. Civilization and barbarism was very distinctive in ancient times. That idea of civilization and barbarism was later on spread throughout Europe, to the point that there was the idea that there were people, hairy people with clubs living in the woods, at some point, the wild people from the forest. There were people in England. They were the Picts or the Pictos. I read about them in Spanish, so I don't know if in English it will be the same. But they were called the Pictos. They were wild inhabitants of the mountains of England that actually use to have tattoos. Theodore deBry has illustrations of this culture in some of his etchings. The Greeks have monsters living outside of Greece.

PK: Yes. If you're Ulysses, if you go off, you'll encounter them.

EC: You might encounter monsters of Cyclops, or mixtures of horses and humans, the centaurs, et cetera. That idea somehow was brought to the Americas by the Spaniards. Suddenly the Indians became the savages, the uncivilized, the monsters of the outer world. The Spaniards saw themselves as the civilizing force, the other side. What is very interesting to me is that the world is pretty much divided between civilized countries and countries on the way of becoming civilized, developed countries versus countries that are developing, or North versus South. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it's more clear that there are more issues of colonialism coming back, issues that I thought were gone forever, now they are back, former allies, like Saddam Hussein or Noriega, who were working very close. Noriega was basically an employee of the CIA, and was, in that case, working for George Bush; he eventually gets invaded by George Bush, and arrested by

George Bush. All of this just is in a world where there is the need for a new bogeyman, since communism is gone. Now the new bogeymen are former allies. Somehow, Saddam Hussein was useful in the war against Iran, many years ago. Now that the war with Iran is gone, and there is no more bogeyman, there is somehow the need to find another evil empire. In this case, it happened to be Saddam Hussein. It's not about Saddam Hussein I'm talking. I'm mostly talking about the fact that there is still this division between "uncivilized" and "civilized" cultures. And very often, you get stereotypes imposed. I'm playing with the stereotypes again, the stereotypes of the uncivilized. And as I mentioned earlier, to me, I choose to play the extreme of the stereotype, just to show how ridiculous it could be. But maybe somebody who really thinks in terms of stereotypes might think I'm just portraying the reality, I'm not saying anything critical about it. But I just wanted to give the concept as an example of absurdity. And somehow, it blends very well with the other concepts of reverse modernism or reverse anthropology, kind of like making this utopian savage taking over. It's perhaps what has inspired the production of my most recent works. My last solo exhibition was in St. Louis, at the Forum for Contemporary Arts. Actually, a catalogue is about to come out. The title of the exhibition was Utopian Cannibal: New Adventures In Reverse Anthropology. I had a series of works in which cannibalism is taking place, but against either some politician or against Picasso. Picasso, for instance, is being cannibalized by an African sculpture in one of my paintings right in the Giverny gardens. I will say, noble, or un-noble or not-so-noble savage imagining the world the other way around, in a place where the indigenous cultures are not victims, they're not being victimized. On the contrary, they are the victimizers.

PK: Fair enough.

EC: It's just a mirror of people. It's not pointing fingers at anybody, because that's never my opinion, or never my feeling of pointing fingers or making anybody feel guilty about anything. It's basically showing a mirror of ourselves by doing the opposite, making a world upside down, to understand the world when it's upside up. I hope by creating these types of situations, again, nobody gets offended, but rather think about what we are as a species. One of the last concerns I have — besides cannibalism or the worst enemy of people, or the best friends of people, depending what side of the human spirit you want to analyze just because we are on top of food chain – is the fact that by destroying ourselves, we eventually, or parallel to that destruction, we'll destroy the rest of the species, or most of them. Maybe not all of them, but most of the living world will be destroyed by us. Just the fact that we have the capability of nuclear destruction of the world and not only once, but at least 300 times, we could destroy the world over and over and over. That means the total destruction of life on the planet. I don't think there has ever been a single species in the history of evolution that has so much power in their hands.

So perhaps, all of the questioning I do with my work is about the misuse of power. How come we are so smart, and so stupid at the same time? Why don't we use the power, all the power we have, to our advantage for a better humanity's life and existence and a better interaction with nature? That sounds very utopian. That's why I called my show Utopian Cannibal and The Adventures of Reverse Anthropology, because it's just mostly a question, but it's not a direction question. I don't want to be wishy-washy; I don't have solutions for the problems of the world. Neither, I think that with my art I will change it. As I mentioned earlier, it would be too pretentious to think that art changes people's consciousness, but you could arrive to a point where your art is a departure for thinking, and the world changes through other actions. That's my only hope with my work; how could we change ourselves, when we have the power to change ourselves, and we have the possibility of having a better world. It sounds easy. I don't know if we are ever going to accomplish any major changes that will save us from destroying the world. I hope we will, for necessity. Not necessarily out of an ideological discussion, but out of necessity, because we need to survive.

Otherwise, we'll just join the dinosaurs in the list of extinct species. And then we could add another cross in the last page of my book, Human kind, extinct or endangered?

PK: As far as we know, nobody will be there, then, to answer the questions. Like we did, we went down the list, and said, "Threatened", "endangered," "extinct."

EC: Maybe ten million years from now, the roaches will be intelligent, and they will find the history of humankind. They will say, "Oh, they got killed themselves."

PK: Well, maybe that's the way to get rid of the roaches, because in your worldview, if you get too much power, you're really at risk.

EC: Of destroying yourself, right.

PK: And that's how we'll get rid of the roaches.

EC: No, the roaches might survive. That's the problem. Our own self-destruction will open the world to evolution of other species, just like the destruction of the dinosaurs opened the world for us. So, you never know; maybe the next intelligent life on earth will be the insects. They will make an insect civilization somehow, and they will dig in the history of the world, and then they will discover there was a civilization of so-called humans, who destroyed themselves for having so much power. That, maybe, should be a subject for my next artwork. I don't know.

PK: Yes, it's a good one. You could do bugs.

EC: A work with insects.

PK: What occurs to me is that despite your disclaimers… You're always saying it's pretentious to think that the art can make any kind of difference, or a change. It's something you offer out, but you don't claim too much power for it. I have to say that you obviously make art from a social conscience. Everything we've said, from the very beginning of the interview, suggested that you were concerned about these issues, you were engaged. It's an engaged art. I don't think of it as political. What interests me is about some notions of group identity and identity politics and identity art. It's very socially directed, like most Chicano art has been. It was very addressed to certain issues, and they were group issues. We keep talking about the species. You pick the big issues. Okay, hey, we're squabbling, messing around here, and there's the oppressor and the oppressed, the victimizers and the victimized, and so forth. That's almost a subtext to the big threat and the big issue. So that would be my kind of response to having had these discussions. I don't usually do this, but to me, it really is interesting that there's such an overarching social conscience that's brought to your work, where it looks postmodern in some ways. All this appropriation and so forth, and playing certain kinds of games. This sounds deadly serious. You have fun with what you do; but it's very, very serious. Is that right?

EC: I cannot escape my sense of humor, that's for sure. I think I move away, or I'm moving away from issues of identity. And in that sense, I have a difference with Chicano art. Chicano art is very much based on the need to affirm an identity that has been very much oppressed by the dominant culture. In my case, I grew up familiar with it, taking it, maybe even, for granted, when I grew up in Mexico. I've never been insecure about my own identity, in that sense, or not insecure, but I've never been denied of it. I've never been punished for speaking Spanish, like some of my Chicano friends, or I didn't have to look for Zapata or the Virgin of Guadalupe, because I grew up with them, to the point that I didn't want to see any more images of them. So it's just the opposite. So the issues of

identity, I will say, are secondary in my work, even though I have a lot of very culturally significant symbolism in the work. It is not about identity, but rather, that's the specific experience from which I depart to think about more global issues. I think that's the only way I could think of being sincere, through my own personal, specific experience.

In other words, I don't believe there is a universal culture or a universal, or way of looking at the world. You could see it through a specific experience. That applies to any culture in history. I think the Greeks are a very specific culture, through which you could find universal values. The same thing happens with the Egyptian culture, it's very specific. But then you could find very universal values, the same thing with the pre-Columbian cultures, the Nahua cultures, the Mayan, or the Incas, or et cetera. You could find a way in which there is universal understanding, but from a very specific experience. I think the same thing happens with my artwork.

In other words, everybody has fingerprints, but you have your own specific fingerprint — unless you have a clone, or a twin, but they even have some slight difference. To me, you could only arrive to a universal meaning through a specific experience. I departed from my own personal experience, my own road to Aztlan, if you want to use the word for the exhibition of the LACMA. It's the specific journey. I'm not religious, but I don't know what other word to use, but it's sort of like a spiritual journey. It's a very internal journey, in which your own sense of yourself, as well as the world, moves from one place to another, and has nothing to do with geographical shift. It has more to do with a shift within yourself. I'm arriving to a point where I'm trying to be more aware of global issues, because I know that will affect anybody, including myself or cultures I associate with, will be dramatically affected in a speed that goes faster and faster and faster as we move on in the 21st century. Changes are taking place in a faster way than ever before. I mean, we saw it in San Francisco in the last few years, how fast a place could change within a year or two. So I'm just trying to address, perhaps, my own concerns in the direction we are taking as humankind. And it could be any issue. I don't want to talk in terms of ideological terms, of reading a book and then making an artwork after that, but very much, based on how I see that from my own specific fingerprint.

PK: That's a great ending place, don't you think?

SESSION 3, TAPE 3, SIDE A

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Enrique Chagoya, and with his wife, Kara Maria, also an artist. What we thought we would do in this brief, perhaps prelude, is to just examine artists' collaboration, within a very special domestic context, marriage. I suppose what we're going to be talking about you together and separate as artists, and the different ways you can come together, and how it works out, when you are trying to make art together, trying to think together, trying to find that point of connection between your work, where you don't feel like you're having to force something to make it.

But first of all, I want to ask you, Kara, just a little bit, so we have some kind of background or context, about you and where you come from. You don't have to do your whole autobiography, in this case.

KM: Good.

PK: But just a little bit to place you, and then leading up to when you met and so forth. I am interested in that kind of thing, a relationship as well as a collaboration.

KM: Well, I arrived at painting through music. Originally, I was a musician, and I went to music school. I

thought I was going to be a clarinetist or a composer, I was studying both. I could not bear life in the conservatory, I tried two of them, I couldn't deal with it. I was dropping out of college a lot, and trying different schools, and moving around, traveling, and I ended up at UC Berkeley in 1990, I think 1990. I just decided to start studying art. I had never done that before — painting, I mean, visual art. I started painting, and it was this big transition in my life, moving out to California, because I was from upstate New York.

PK: Is that where you were going to school before?

KM: No, I went to school in Hartford, Connecticut. Then I did go to a conservatory in upstate in New York. I went to NYU, and then to the Sorbonne for a year. So I was around, all over. And UC Berkeley ended up grabbing my attention, or I was ready to finish school or something. I stayed there and started painting, and saw this transition to visual art as something of the transition of my new life in California and redefining myself, starting over. I've been painting since then.

PK: That's not very long.

KM: No, it's not. It's about twelve years, eleven years. I just really connected with it. It was great. I still have problems with music, in terms of emotional difficulties separating myself from being a musician or not being a musician. I just sold my piano. I didn't sell it, I gave it away last week. That was very traumatic, all this little sloughing off of your history from before. I've been painting since then, and I went to graduate school at Berkeley. I went back in '96. I got an MFA from there.

PK: So when did you first go to Berkeley?

KM: '90. I finished in '93, because I started as a junior. And then I worked as a graphic designer for a couple years, and then I went back to get my MFA, which I did in '98. And I've just been painting since then.

PK: Who did you study with at Cal?

KM: Well, actually, the teachers that were most influential on me were people from my undergraduate experience. There were kind of two different sets of people, because people sort of come and go there, except for Richard Shaw. I worked with him as an undergraduate and graduate student. He's still a friend of ours. Let's see. Drew Beatty was there when I was an undergraduate. He lives in New York, a painter. And Chris Brown was a teacher of mine a little bit, but he was kind of influential, and Wendy Sussman.

PK: Excuse me. You mentioned Chris Brown.

EC: Right.

PK: Somebody sort of important at one stage.

KM: Yes.

EC: He was one of my advisors when I was at Berkeley. So that's something else we have in common.

KM: Yes. Actually Enrique was the speaker at my undergraduate graduation ceremony. I didn't know him yet.

PK: Had you heard of him?

KM: No, not really, no. He was a teacher, and, he had taught printmaking when I was an undergraduate. I didn't even know what printmaking was. I never took printmaking, so I didn't meet him. And then he spoke at the graduation. I remember my parents were at the graduation, and a couple years later, my mom was visiting me. We were at SFMOMA, and I saw some of his work. And I said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's the guy who was the speaker at my graduation." It was just this weird thing, then we were next door neighbors, that's how we met.

EC: Right.

KM: We had studios next to each other in Oakland. We were not supposed to be living in our studios, but we were. There was, no bathroom, no kitchen, and no heat. No air conditioning.

PK: When was this?

EC: It was back in 1995, right after I got back from Giverny.

PK: Okay, You weren't in Giverny with him.

KM: No. No, we met right after that.

EC: Right after.

KM: But I had actually been in France during my travels, so that was another thing we had in common, but not at the same time.

EC: One day, Kara came out of her studio crying, and we opened the door at the same time and I asked her, "What's happened? Do you need help? "

KM: There were violins at this part, in the background. I think there, was music somewhere. It was, like, out of a film. It was these two doors opening, because we had these doors that opened onto each other.

EC: We came out at the same time.

KM: He thought I was somebody else.

EC: I thought somebody was knocking at my door, because it was kind of noisy, so I opened the door.

KM: Because I was moving my bike.

EC: And it was Kara crying.

PK: Why was she crying?

KM: Because I had just had this bad breakup of a relationship, which is why I was living in my studio when I was not supposed to be, and him, too.

EC: Somebody dumped me before in Giverny. Anyhow, she dumped me and then Kara was dumped. And so we just opened the doors…

PK: You were a couple of dumpees.

EC: Exactly. So I told Kara, "Welcome to the lonely heart's club." And that made her laugh. Then Kara said, "Well, you know, Carlos Villa told me to talk to you."

KM: Oh, it's true. I was applying to graduate school at the time.

EC: Kara said, "Are you Enrique Chagoya?" And I said, "Yes, but you don't need to cry about that." Somehow, I managed to make her laugh. And that was it. Then I said, "If somebody doesn't love you, no matter what you do… If you bring flowers to them, they are going to think you're corny; and if you sneeze, they are going to think you are full of bacteria and viruses; they won't even get close to you, they won't even help you get better. So there's nothing you could do. If they don't love you, they don't love you."

PK: But if they love you, all those things are…

EC: They're a plus.

PK: No matter what you do, it's wonderful.

EC: Then they feel sorry for you, whatever, they get closer to you. The next day, Kara brought me a bunch of flowers.

KM: Yes.

EC: So we became friends pretty fast. And we were just next door to each other; we were seeing each other every single day, so it was from the very beginning.

KM: So we started cooking together, and it was like we were living together from when we met, and we were actually. He had the keys, too. There was another artist in the building who he had the keys to his studio, so we would, sneak in there and use the bathroom and stuff. There was just this really disgusting shower in the hallway that everybody in the building used, so, we used this private bathroom. It was total luxury.

EC: Very soon we just got involved with each other, and we were living together from the beginning. It was not like, "Well, I'll see you next week, okay? It was fun last night, so I'll see you later." We just saw each other every day. Kara was doing a lot of painting and we were talking about each other's work.

PK: That's what I was interested in knowing.

EC: Kara is a very hard-working artist. She works harder than me, I have to confess.

KM: Well, I think it's a thing that goes back to music and music school, because that's the main thing that you learn from studying music, is the discipline and you have to practice every day, so I already knew how to do that part. That's kind of easy for me and I feel weird if I don't do it, so I just do it. I just go and work all the time.

PK: Do you talk about this separation from the music? This obviously, for a long time, was your life.

KM: Right.

PK: You saw yourself in those terms, or understood yourself, your creative self, in that way. Then

you made this kind of shift, but is it a huge difference, a huge jump, or was it just the creativity taking a different form?

KM: Yes, I think it's that more than anything. The parts that make me upset… When I get upset, it's not even the creative part, it's an emotional tie to physically producing music. It's very weird. It's getting rid of your instruments and not practicing, just separating yourself that way, but the creative part of it, which your teachers always tell you, too. Unless you're studying jazz or some improvisational kind of music, you're a re-creative artist. You're not a creative artist. Your job is to re-create this piece of music, the way it's supposed to be, or the way you see it. I did not like that at all. It just got worse and worse. I should've maybe been a jazz musician or something, but I can't swing. I'm this pathetic white girl, but I love listening to that music. Yes, I think it's more the mental problems with it. I think that music and my painting have a lot to do with how I see and listen to music, and what music I'm listening to at the time that I'm painting.

PK: Boy, you sound like a symbolist, a kind of the Wagnerian avant garde.

KM: Yes, there's a connection. I was really into Kandinsky for a while, because he wrote all those books about the connections of sound and whatever. Yes, I'm sure it's in there, but I haven't read big theory books about it. I don't think I will.

PK: Well, it's just as well.

KM: Yes, I think it's just as well.

PK: So at some point, you got married.

KM: 1997.

PK: '97. It actually interests me a great deal, because any two professional people in the art world, but not creative in the same way, not producers. You have these two careers, then you have a life together. Artists are famously selfish about their lives and their time. I know actually quite a bit about this. I have conversations all the time with artist friends, especially close ones, where they're really honest. And it's not the easiest thing in the world, because of the time. I think it's, as much as anything, it's not competition, necessarily, or anything like that, although that can be an issue, like Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. Not that I'm giving you this burden of history to deal with, but you know what I mean.

KM: No, but, the thing you're talking about is that they… I didn't really realize this until I just saw that film, Pollock. They entered, the art scene or whatever on a very even playing field. I mean, they were in a group show together, and then he ended up painting all the time, but she ended up spending a lot of her time promoting his career and getting his shit together, because he was just a complete disaster. She really helped him. But see, for us, it's different, because not that I don't help him at all, but it's that he is on this totally different playing field from me. He already had a career and a teaching job and a gallery, and I had none of that. I hadn't even gone to graduate school yet. There hasn't really been a sense of competition, because it's not someone that I can feel I can compete with, in a way. If I was with an artist that was more on my same career level, but because we're fifteen years apart in age, I think that would be a lot more difficult than the situation that we have.

EC: Yes, we don't really have a competition. I don't feel it at all. On the contrary, Kara's very supportive of my work and ideas, and I hope to be the same for her. I think if anything, there is that mutual admiration of each other's work. I like Kara's work very much.

PK: That's good. It would be really difficult.

KM: Yes, that would be bad. No, and I really like his work, too.

EC: We love to put each other's work up on our walls in our house, so it's not a problem with any of that. Also, we both have been very careful not to be associated with each other. I felt that it will be a disservice for Kara if people saw her as my partner, my wife, that's why she doesn't use my last name. It makes no sense for her to use my last name.

PK: It would be confusing.

KM: Yes.

EC: Yes. And so we've been careful in that direction. I think people are recognizing Kara very, very much, and I'm very happy for that. It's been very much from her personal achievement. I think it would have been a disservice if it were people accepting her because they knew she was associated with me. I didn't want that to happen, to start with, and neither did she. So it's been very healthy for both of us, in that sense. I think with the experiences we have had together, there's a really good interaction in our relationship, especially with what we went through in France, just dealing with very similar feelings about the French culture.

PK: Enrique talked about the difficulties you faced, with this really remarkable ignoring of you as a presence…

KM: Oh, yes. That was bad.

PK: This brings us to the collaboration. But first of all, I have to ask this question, here you've got two powerful forces going on with you; there's love and there's art. Now, these are the big things in life. Are they the same for you? Not that art is an emotional experience. Although to a certain extent it is. It's professional activity, but it's not like other jobs.

KM: No.

EC: Right.

PK: What I'm asking is, how do these two things work for two artists, one just starting out, one in mid-career?

EC: I don't know if Kara could have an opposite opinion; maybe she has. But I think in our case, they nurture each other. Not that we want to portray a fake idea of an ideal relationship. We always have discussions. Usually, any argument we have, it's actually very secondary. I used to think that art was my number one commitment, and then love was second. In our relationship, it has been the same, because somehow personally, I could not make art if I had problems in my personal life. The fact that you don't have to worry about your personal life gives you the freedom to make anything you could do with your art. I hope that's the same thing for Kara. If suddenly you have personal problems, it's really hard to be creative. It's near impossible. You don't have the mind to invent. I think it might sound sappy and corny, but I think in our case, our relationship nurtures our art to the point that it's equally important. We're just lucky to find each other. If anything, I have doubts about Kara being very young and kicking my butt in a few years.

PK: How old are you?

KM: I'm 32. So we're 15 years apart.

PK: And I figure, you get be 30, you're about grown up, so…

KM: Hey. No, I agree. And we're lucky to have the opportunity to set up our lives, so that we can function in both ways. We have the luxury of very similar schedules, we have similar commitments. A lot of our commitments are the same things, we want to go to this opening or we want to do that, whatever.

PK: Well, you're swimming in the same pond.

EC: Right

KM: Yes, exactly. It makes it a lot easier, because our schedules are pretty eccentric. One thing is we have no children and I don't know if that's a good thing or bad thing, or that might change some day. The thing is, since we have no children, we only have our own sort of schedules, that some people would call a college schedule. We can come home at ten o'clock or eleven at night. We usually eat dinner around eleven and watch The Simpsons. That's our schedule. It's not like we have to have dinner at five and go to bed at nine or something, or get up early in the morning most of the time. So it works out. It works out well.

EC: Our work, it's also different, our artwork. So that also keeps a distance from competition. Kara's work, I will describe and she could correct me or change it, but it's based on a kind of cultural criticism, too, but different than mine. In her case, it's even more abstract. It's based more on pop culture, militarism, and gender roles which makes her paintings very powerful, but that's a very different approach. I don't know if you agree with that or not.

KM: Yes. Well, part of the reason it's a different approach is because the other difference besides our ages is that we're just from such radically different backgrounds. Although, we were both raised in sort of middle class families, and our families, actually, we find out more and more, are very, very similar to each other, even though it's two different countries. But we're just coming from such a different generation and a different location, and there's no way my art definitely reflects my sort of U.S. I'm white, I'm from the United States, I grew up in the seventies. I think that's very apparent in my work, and then his is coming from a totally different place.

EC: But we give each other feedback, in terms of our work, and luckily, we don't have an ego to fight against, we have an ego, but we don't put it in between us.

KM: We try to work around that.

EC: Yes. Like now, Kara asks me questions about her work; I give my opinions to her. Sometimes she gets mad at me, and then she just…

KM: Usually when he's right, I get mad first, and then two days later, "Oh, yeah, okay."

EC: She's totally happy about it, and I'm very open when I don't know what to do about some problem I have in my work. I ask her, and she gives me good advice, so I don't get mad. Actually, that's maybe a difference.

KM: It's true. I have a worse temper.

EC: She's a little bit tough. But at the end, I think it's a very complementary role. And I think the

collaborations we have done have been very easy, in that sense.

PK: But, earlier, Kara said that there are difficulties sometimes.

KM: Oh, the collaboration? Oh, well yes, that's a whole different thing, because we usually don't collaborate. We've tried, or have successfully collaborated. But the times that we've done it, either it's been working with a master printer that Enrique's been working with, Bud Shark, in Colorado, where Enrique will work on something and then I'll work on it, and then he'll work on it, so it's not like we're collaborating at the same time, we're sort of in stages and steps. The only collaboration we've ever done right at the same time in the same room was in France. We were living in a room that was the size of this dining room, and working. It was this big, which is what, ten by twenty feet? We each had one wall, this table in the middle of the room, and the bed on the side of the table, with all our stuff. We decided to do this show together, and cut out these pages from this French art history book that we found and we were painting over them. We work so different, our practice of making art whether they're similar or not, just the way we go about working. I have to be disciplined about it: Hey, when are we going to get this done? Let's get this done. Let's do this today. And he's all about waiting until five minutes before the show and doing something then. I can't handle it. I get so stressed out. So it was just this real struggle. Plus, we were living in such a small space, I mean, if we were going to get divorced, we would have done it right then that could have been the end right there.

EC: But that's a good point. Kara's like a worker bee, she works constantly. If she has a show, she starts working from the minute she knows, and every day. She's full time on it. And I am a procrastinator. I relax. I sit down and watch TV, read comics, enjoy life, read the books, and then when I have a couple of months before my show, I panic. I don't have anything. I get an adrenaline shot, suddenly, and then I run and start painting. I work overnight, and sometimes I almost kill myself by not sleeping two or three nights in a row, but I come on time. I keep doing that over and over.

PK That's one way to do it. It's just a different way.

EC: Right.

KM: Actually, I always end up, the last couple of days panicking and working overnight and stuff, too. It's not relaxing for me to spend a whole day watching TV, if I know that I have something else to do. I just can't do it. I get really anxious. I would just rather be in my studio doing something.

EC: Yes, Kara will have her brushes stuck to her hand for hours. I cannot hold a brush for more than 20 minutes at a time.

KM: Well, I shouldn't either.

EC: I stop and walk around and read some books, even if I'm in my studio, I do that. I take a break, go buy some wine, come back to the studio and work again for another 20 minutes.

KM: That's healthier. That's why I have tendonitis and you don't.

PK: Tell me a little more about how your relationship feeds the art. It's very, very interesting because I know other artists where this was absolutely the case, like Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg. They were famous L.A. artists, post-surrealists, and both well known. They're both gone. I'm curious, this added element that can either feed the work, add to it.

KM: Takes away from it?

PK: Interferes?

KM: Yes. Well, for me, the biggest thing that's happened, [since] knowing Enrique, is that I've always been a sort of politically minded person. But I had never, until I met him, found a way to really put politics in my artwork in a way that I felt was successful. Since meeting him I've felt sort of an urgency to do that, more than I had felt before. I don't know how to explain that exactly. My work is very different from his, but the political element that's in it now, I owe a great deal to Enrique for raising my conscience to the possibility of even doing that.

EC: I think Kara sometimes emphasizes things in my work that I don't pay attention to, so we really enforce each other's work very much. I think sometimes we give suggestions for ideas, and we end up doing them. It's like having a team person.

KM: Yes, like brainstorming. If we have problems at night, we'll talk about, "Oh, I'm working on this thing; I can't figure it out. What do you think I should do?"

EC: Or sometimes I tell Kara, "Maybe you should do this painting." And I laugh, and I say, "No, that's my idea. I should do it."

PK: I really get the impression that it's not necessarily project oriented, but it's just being together and being in a kind of sync, and caring about one another, and therefore caring about one another's work.

EC: Right, and sharing ideas. That's basically it.

KM: Yes, constantly and being in a supportive environment…

EC: And part is, we are reading the same books.

KM: Right, together.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... December 2, 2004